

Five Books on Labour and Ecology

Thursday 20 July 2023, by [ASO Michitake](#), [GUAN Yiyun Tom](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2023).

Call it Anthropocene, call it Capitalocene, call it Plantationocene, our scorching planetary age results from the conjoined forces of colonial extractivism, fossil capitalism, and postcolonial developmentalism.

Introduction

Call it Anthropocene, call it Capitalocene, call it Plantationocene, our scorching planetary age results from the conjoined forces of colonial extractivism, fossil capitalism, and postcolonial developmentalism: ways of [organizing nature](#) and commodifying labour. Changing environments have already drastically altered labour conditions. Before 2050, some predict that one and a half billion people worldwide will be [displaced](#) as a result of climate change, with profound implications for our political economies and notions of citizenship.

However, to say labour agendas should prioritize climate seems incongruous, given the multiple political and social challenges faced by labour movements worldwide. Yet generations of historical and ethnographic research have shown the same ideologies that separate humans from nature underpin the exploitation of differences in class, gender, race, and environment. It is thus fruitful and necessary to think about labour and ecology alongside each other.

In the second instalment of our “Five Books on Labour” series, Asian Labour Review’s contributing writer, Tom Guan, sits down with Michitake Aso, an associate professor of the history of the global environment at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Defining “ecology” as the linkage among human relationships and non-human processes involved in the atmosphere, biosphere, and lithosphere, Aso’s award-winning first book, [Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897-1975](#), exemplifies rigorous, innovative scholarship and provides pointers for activism.

In discussing five works of history and anthropology on Southeast Asia that continue to inspire his research, Aso enunciates why understanding humanity’s entanglement with ecology, with attentiveness to its historical trajectory as well as to gender and race, should be integral for contemporary movements oriented toward labour and environmental justice.

Asian Labour Review (ALR): Please tell us about yourself. How did you become a historian of Vietnam, and how does your work present an intersected the histories of labour, the environment, and medicine?

Michitake Aso (MA): My first book is *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897-1975*. The goal was to place rubber development and, in particular, the plantation form of rubber production in Vietnam, and neighbouring Cambodia, into a long-term perspective that focuses on ecology, politics, labour, and medicine. It was an attempt to place a commodity, rubber,

in the environments of southern Vietnam and eastern Cambodia to look at the changes over time in rubber production and its effects.

I came to this project due to both personal and intellectual influences. I majored in environmental engineering as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley and was frustrated by the lack of attention to societies, history, and politics in engineering. At some point, I took an environmental history class with Carolyn Merchant and found it an eye-opening experience. So, after finishing my degree in 1998, I went to Vietnam and taught English for two years. I spent much of my time in a city called Biên Hòa in southern Vietnam, about 30 kilometres north of Ho Chi Minh City. If you go a little way up into the foothills and then the Central Highlands, you could still see rubber plantations. I had never seen a plantation before; I found it fascinating, but I didn't know what to do with this knowledge.

I decided to go to graduate school to understand what I had gone through, and I ended up in the History of Science department at the University of Wisconsin. There I studied under Gregg Mitman, Warwick Anderson, and Rick Keller, who all work at the intersections of science, medicine, and the environment. With their guidance, I sought to incorporate historical methodologies into thinking about Vietnam as a place. It struck me at the time that rubber was one of the most interesting things that I could examine.

My new book project is a history of environmental health in Vietnam during the Cold War. In this book, I analyze how Vietnamese medical doctors and scientists, both in the north and the south, sought to mitigate the worst effects of environmental warfare. The narrative arc of this story begins with the First Indochina War and an episode of alleged biological weapons use by the French, and it ends with Agent Orange. Starting from the 1960s, the U.S. military and its South Vietnamese ally dumped millions of gallons of herbicides, which are inherently toxic and were made more so by the presence of dioxin, a chemical known to cause birth defects and genetic mutations.

These herbicides were used to destroy rice crops in Communist-held areas and deny them plant cover. They were an environmental weapon that had profound consequences on health and left a long-lasting legacy for the Vietnamese and U.S. veterans exposed to them. Yet, little work has been done in English to study how the Vietnamese experts and institutions that dealt with such environmental warfare have contributed to global thinking about environmental health.

ALR: What is the ecological impact of the European style of plantations you study?

MA: Smallholder rubber production, which many Southeast Asian communities such as the Dayaks in Borneo practised in the nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries, has been incorporated quite well into preexisting swidden, or slash-and-burn, agriculture. The hevea trees that were tapped for latex in South America were socially and ecologically integrated into existing forests in Southeast Asia. But European multinational companies created plantations by clearing out and permanently destroying these forests. There's not much more you can do to destroy an ecology than to bulldoze it flat, burn it, and then replant it with rubber trees.

Once you grow rubber trees, there are different ways of managing a plantation. The ideology of colonial modernity meant that the scientific experts for these multinational companies emphasized the need to "clean weed" as a more advanced form of production, but that's worse environmentally than letting other plants grow in between. There was quicker soil erosion, for example. Moreover, the chemicals used to process latex from plantations need to be dumped somewhere. Rubber trees, too, need lots of water, jeopardizing water availability in drier areas, and these plantations have not been suitable for wildlife. What were supposed to be the most modern ways of running a plantation were actually the most untenable ecologically.

ALR: Let's delve into the first book you chose, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* by Brocheux and Hémery. Ostensibly it isn't a work of environmental or labour history, but your book cites the two authors considerably. Why is this book important to you?

MA: Pierre Brocheux, who unfortunately passed away this past year, and Daniel Hémery are both part of a labour activist tradition in France. Brocheux was Vietnamese-French, and the two historians wrote many works together on Vietnamese nationalism during the colonial period. *Indochina* gives a good, accessible overview of the processes that occurred in French Indochina, tying together cultural, intellectual, social, political, economic, and to a degree, environmental change.

In other projects, Brocheux dealt extensively with the environment. He has a book on the Mekong Delta, one of the first to not only treat it as a social and economic space but also to look at the flow of the Mekong River itself, the sediments, and why the soils and the mangrove forests matter. This aspect of his writing isn't recognized as much as I think it should be, but it's quite groundbreaking.

Brocheux also wrote about rubber plantations. He has a 1975 article that views the rubber plantation as a microcosm of global society, a precursor to the concept of plantationocene. In this approach, which adopts a racial analytic lens, the plantation has a core area that belongs to the white European manager and a peripheral area for Vietnamese subordinates and unskilled labourers, the so-called "coolies." But there's another layer outside the plantations for ethnic people, such as the Bunong and Jarai, who lived in regions of southern Vietnam and Cambodia before they became sites of plantations. This analysis of the racial makeup of plantations makes it into the synthetic work of *Indochina*.

ALR: Let's move to Ann Stoler's book, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979*.

MA: In Stoler's first major publication, originally published in 1985, she is on the ground looking at people from Java, Indonesia, who migrated to work on plantations in Sumatra, in particular the region called Deli, which is part of a broader plantation belt. Her book is interesting to me because it articulates a theoretical framework that lasted many years. People had been studying plantations for a long time, but Stoler's book marks a moment where you can see a shift to a new way of looking at them.

Specifically, she combines attention to both production and reproduction. She examines how owners attempted to recreate artificial villages on plantation peripheries in order to have an excess workforce, mostly of Javanese workers who could be then called and used as labourers. Yet, these villages also seemed like spaces that resembled cultural comfort for the Javanese, a place where they might have felt some kind of home. So, she started to pull on this thread that sees the construction of race and gender not as given entities but as strategies of control, negotiation, and tension between managers, the state, and workers. Scholars, including Stoler herself, have taken this method up and run with it to all kinds of interesting places.

She talks a little bit about the environment, too: the kind of soils and the natural processes that the plantations replaced, though she doesn't go in that direction. It's only with the ecological urgency brought about by growing awareness of climate change that scholarship has taken an environmental turn.

ALR: Do you think the kind of villages profiled by Stoler shed light on migrant workers' villages in many cities of the Global South today?

MA: It depends on where you're looking and how much the state is involved. Stoler shows that these village creations were a colonial strategy of labour control. Her relevance to me is you see exactly the same thing in French Indochina with rubber plantations. French plantation owners and managers created these fake villages and promoted them, especially to people from northern and central Vietnam, building shrines and places of ancestral worship —the colonial imagination of what a Vietnamese village looked like.

On the other hand, anthropologist Erik Harms has looked at what he calls "Saigon's [Edge](#)." He analyzes a global phenomenon where you have workers drawn in from the countryside, creating squatter villages of temporary living that attempt to reproduce something of a livable space. But this is, for the most part, not a state or company-driven process. Global capital and the state may find these living spaces useful, but neither initiated it. Such spaces are allowed to exist until they're no longer useful.

ALR: This segues well into the third book you chose, Michael Dove's *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo*, where the state does loom large, and the colonial state is shown to have altered the Dayak people's relationship to global capitalism fundamentally.

MA: This collection of essays draws on Dove's scholarly career working in the border region between Indonesia and Malaysia on Borneo. Despite its name, it is not only focused on bananas, and it does not adopt the techniques of a village study but rather looks to place the Dayak in a global context.

Dove's point is that the Dayak have been engaged in world commodity markets for centuries. He describes how often people along the coast of Borneo have valued the Dayak's role as intermediaries between ocean-going merchants, whether Chinese, South Asian, Arabian, or later European. The Dayak had a dual economy of cash crop production — rubber, resin, pepper — for trade combined with rice agriculture for subsistence. If you needed money for a marriage ceremony, for example, you could sell market-oriented commodities but didn't rely on them. Dove shows that these two forms of production and labour were in concert with each other and made Dayak's life ecologically and socially sustainable.

The boom in industrial rubber in the first half of the twentieth century prompted the Dutch and British colonial states to disrupt this balance, favouring rubber production while relying on imported rice for subsistence. This state management of the Dayak's way of life continued in New Order Indonesia and can still result in food shortages today.

Dove also provides a crucial insight into how to do environmental humanities. He takes the approach "in the tradition of [Julian] Steward, one of the founders of environmental anthropology, who always tried to tie the ecology of particular systems of production to particular systems of social organization." That is an approach that I find very fruitful — to think about the ecological and the social together. We shouldn't view these categories as given and non-changing, as they emerge out of the lived experience.

ALR: Jonathan Padwe's book, *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories: Jarai and Other Lives in the Cambodian Highlands*, brings out this tension between the ecological and the social.

MA: Padwe takes a close look at the Jarai of Cambodia, in particular villages where he spent time, and develops a vocabulary of the local language and culture. The Jarai have lived in the mid-and uplands frontier since before there was a formal border between Cambodia and Vietnam. But

recently, they have had to deal with the encroachment of so-called lowland peoples, the Khmer and the Vietnamese, and productive and reproductive forms such as the plantation.

Padwe pays particular attention to the environment and how the Jarai thinks about it. One of the things I appreciate is his emphasis on the connection between landscape and memory. Since villages move, they are defined by place and the lineages and memories that compose them. The Jarai told Padwe stories that were based on things that have gone on in the landscape, on things that existed or didn't exist anymore.

In this vein, Padwe has a beautiful chapter on the recreation of swidden gardens and rice fields through seeds that were saved during the Khmer Rouge catastrophe between 1975 and 1979. Quite materially, people carried their memories with them in the form of seeds. We all have these ways of associating memories, peoples, and places, and the mobile Jarai have developed a sophisticated way of thinking about labour and ecology.

ALR: I was fascinated by this connection among labour, ecology, and culture in your book, too, in which you demonstrate how the rubber tree was seen as a colonizer by the Vietnamese, and its imagery is prevalent in anti-colonial folk songs and poems.

MA: Dove also shows this very well: when people engage with rubber, either as smallholders or as “unskilled” workers, they express that relationship in various ways. Many of these Vietnamese poems or Dayak dream tales are stories about the rubber tree either eating rice in the Dayaks’ case or eating people in the Vietnamese case. Some of these are Communist Party propaganda. But many of them did emerge from the workers themselves, expressing their relationship to the land, to global capital, and European colonialism, and even to postcolonial forms of state rule that had placed them in an abusive relationship with the land. The landscape became a fraught place for workers, and they expressed that through these songs.

That's also relevant for today because rapidly changing environments, say greater heat during the day and less predictable rains and drought, are very much labour concerns and expose workers to increased precarity. It's important not to impose solutions to climate change, such as carbon tax schemes or going electric, without thinking about the labour involved, who will do the work, and how.

ALR: Do the cases of Vietnam and Cambodia bring out other potential frictions between labour and environmental activism?

MA: Yes: labour movements cannot ignore their environmental impact. In Vietnam, the mid-century revolutionary movements were progressive with respect to labour conditions but weren't really attentive to environmental destruction. Socialism called for industrialization to improve working conditions for labourers. That's a trade-off I don't think can be made anymore.

In Padwe's chapter on rubber in Cambodia, he details the Jarai response in 1960s Cambodia to Prince Sihanouk's vision of development. The Jarai would say, we're not against development, but if your development means taking and destroying our forests, that's not development. That's land appropriation.

ALR: Let's discuss the fifth book, Sango Mahanty's *Unsettled Frontiers: Market Formation in the Cambodia-Vietnam Borderlands*.

MA: Mahanty looks at places on either side of the Cambodia-Vietnam border, close to where Padwe spent time with the Jarai. The categorization of labour has been important to labour studies and is

sometimes intellectually useful, but it also reifies the categories: you're either a gig worker or you're not. Mahanty moves away from such questions and looks at the market as a process in which everyone can be involved in different ways at different times. Sometimes people hire themselves out as labourers, sometimes, they withdraw their labour from the market, and they are the same person. Often, migration plays a part in these decisions. This is a very interesting perspective on the people who live along the Cambodian-Vietnam border.

Mahanty's book starts with an insight from Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, namely that markets are always, to some degree, socially embedded, i.e. they arise out of social relationships and are not just abstract numerical spaces. Drawing on the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, she then qualifies this embeddedness as like a rhizome. In the context of the Vietnam-Cambodia border, markets are largely ungovernable and rupture-prone, which makes them volatile and risky for those seeking to sell their labour.

Mahanty adds an environmental aspect too. She highlights the fundamental point that market processes depend on ecological ones. She does this by looking at the different types of soils and investigating how and why border peoples choose among various agricultural products, such as cassava or rubber.

ALR: As a historian, why do you think history is essential to understanding the intersecting crises of labour and ecology today?

MA: History is a way of narrating the past that is quite powerful, and the choices you make in this narration — whether you include the environment or not — bring out different lessons from the past. For example, most Marxist histories of labour and capitalism have been less attentive to the role of landscapes and diseases. But when you look at the sources, workers were just as upset about malaria, heat, and environmental change.

In this way, reading history and excavating these labourers' embodied experiences create possibilities for understanding the present that isn't available elsewhere. They tell us that climate has left an imprint on workers for centuries, but it's not the only issue at any given time. You cannot sacrifice labour movements, democracy, and concerns about livelihoods to try to solve climate change. Without looking at history, you get caught up in sterile arguments about priorities instead of how these different problems interact.

I really appreciate Padwe's historical anthropology and its emphasis on the fragmented nature of memories of past landscapes. What he ends up doing is also powerful; stitching these memories together and narrating them in a way that can make sense of the fractured experience. Such narratives give something for people to think together with, to form a collective understanding of the past and the tensions within it.

ALR: One of your chapters is provocatively titled "Decolonizing Plantations." At a discursive level, what does it mean to decolonize plantations?

MA: That's a big question! One way to decolonize plantations, intellectually, is to tie the environment to labour. The plantation is a site of labour exploitation that has also been very ecologically destructive. Showing how these two issues became intertwined during colonial capitalism should make it clear that decolonizing plantations depends on addressing them together.

The other way, which I haven't touched on as much as I should have here, is questioning gendered forms of labour. Plantations are still very gendered places. Sometimes plantations are actually largely female, such as the tea plantations in Darjeeling. As Piya Chatterjee and Sarah Besky have

shown, the feminization of the labour force is used to sell tea globally.

However, appealing to consumers' desire for a gentle, nurturing tea belies the harsh conditions that real women (and men) labour under. Studying how consumers and producers have understood changing relationships of labour to the environment through a gendered lens is really important if you want to start to decolonize anything.

Michitake Aso is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University at Albany. In 2018, he published *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam* (UNC Press), which won the Agricultural History Society's Henry A. Wallace Award and the Forest History Society's Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Award. He regularly teaches courses on environmental, medical, and world history.

Yiyun Tom Guan is a contributing writer at ALR. He is an MA student in History at Tufts University, and his interests include South Asia, China, global decolonization, and environmental history.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Asian Labour Review

<https://labourreview.org/labour-and-ecology/>