

Larissa Hjorth, Sarah Pink, Kristen Sharp, and Linda Williams, **Screen Ecologies: Art, Media, and the Environment in the Asia-Pacific Region**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, 224 pp., \$37.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

Zhifei Mao

Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Studies of environmental communication have emerged alongside the deepening visualization of modern hazards for our ecologies; however, after decades of debate, the role that the media plays in terms of the environment remains controversial. On the one hand, there is a heroic portrait of the media and its users, from traditional gatekeepers to the digital era's citizen journalism, from critical artists to professional scientists. The relevant studies examine how these activists carry on the critique of modern industries and lifestyles at the cost of environmental pollution from media use. In light of media effects theories, for example, scholars have examined how the media has set the agenda, influences public opinion, and frames environmental issues (Anderson, 1997; Hansen, 2010), even creating a "green" public sphere that shapes political decisions in terms of ecological protections (Cox, 2012; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). On the other hand, media—especially the new media platforms and technologies—are, ironically, part of the modern industries and lifestyles that harm the environment. Critiques of this practice can be seen in the critical research of consumerism and polluting digital industries (e.g., Maxwell & Miller, 2008).



What these two directions have inevitably created are hierarchies in terms of staging important environmental issues such as climate change. A typical case is the "artist-amateur binary," in which the former refers to active and professional activists, and the latter considers members of the general public to be fence-sitters. What makes the book **Screen Ecologies: Art, Media, and the Environment in the Asia-Pacific Region** stand out among other books on the environment is the authors' attempt to move beyond this binary. The major theme of the book concerns artists' critical responses to modernization, consumerism, and climate change, which is not news to the communication researchers. What is new is how the theme is portrayed as part of what the authors call the system of "screen ecologies," in which different issues like public groups, nationalism, localities, regionalization, urban spaces, digital culture, and aesthetics are entangled. In these ecologies, artists and amateurs are not separated from each other; instead, their production and consumption of meanings become part of the climate change reality, connecting the disconnected Asia-Pacific region and creating intimate public groups—in other words, cosmopolitan risk communities regarding climate change (Beck, 2009). The authors analyzed several typical cases of this system of ecologies in the book, such as regional cooperative efforts on the environment launched by artists and other activists on digital platforms or using digital technologies. The mediation process for these artworks or art projects—that is, being a part of the environment rather than

representing it—allows room for broader, more intimate participation, blurring the binaries between artists and the general public.

The authors mention many artworks to focus on how their content relates to, versus mediates, climate change or the environment. The authors admit that tensions still exist between professional and amateur artists in terms of aesthetics. If we examine this idea, we can see that the hierarchies in aesthetics still influence the mediation process of different arts in the digital age, such as a picture about environmental protection exhibited in Paris and a photograph about a tsunami on Instagram. If the authors want to declare the existence of screen ecologies, they have to go a step further to assess (1) how these “not so digital” arts are mediated and (2) what the mediation process has to do with the digital industry and screen cultures.

Another contribution of this book is its visualization and centralization of the construction of meaning for climate change by local artists and communities in the Asia–Pacific region. Some countries in this region are regarded as victims of environmental pollution and as unable to voice their own concerns about the environment, especially to readers in Europe and the United States. These readers, as the authors point out, may be familiar with some Asian artists whose works are very politicized. The focus and interests of these artists may not be consistent with those of artists from local communities. With this in mind, I admire the authors’ efforts to conduct fieldwork in Australia, China, Japan, India, and other Asia–Pacific countries in the hope of understanding the local artists’ critiques of and struggles against the dark side of consumerism and economic development. The rich data that the authors provide, including local artists’ works and thoughts, reflect their attempt to go beyond the Global South–North binary to fill a huge gap in communication research on climate change and the environmental communication field as a whole. No other book on the market has done similar work.

In addition, these rich data help make *Screen Ecologies: Art, Media, and the Environment in the Asia-Pacific Region* very readable, not only for those in academia but also for general audiences with interests in the arts and the environment. By showing numerous paintings, images, and project photos that reflect Asia–Pacific artists’ constructions of their environments, the authors develop a visual bridge between the readers and the artists, as if the artists are telling their own stories about climate change to the readers, regardless of time and space.

References

- Anderson, A. (1997). *Media, culture and the environment*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Beck, U. (2009). *World at risk*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Cox, R. (2012). *Environmental communication and the public sphere*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Hansen, A. (2010). *Environment, media and communication*. London, UK: Routledge.

Maxwell, R., & Miller, T. (2008). Ecological ethics and media technology. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 331–353.

Yang, G., & Calhoun, C. (2007). Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China. *China Information*, 21(2), 211–236.