

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Nature, Culture, and Food in Monsoon Asia*

Ed. by Satoshi YOKOYAMA, Jun MATSUMOTO, and Hitoshi ARAKI,  
Singapore: Springer, 2020

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Asia used to be commonly referred to as “the East” and in more recent scholarship, Asia is often described through compass point names like “East Asia” or “Southeast Asia.” A new book, *Nature, Culture, and Food in Monsoon Asia* edited by Satoshi Yokoyama, Jun Matsumoto, and Hitoshi Araki trains our attention on agri-food systems in “Monsoon Asia.” They broadly define Monsoon Asia as being the regions affected by the atmospheric conditions of the Asia monsoon, a definition that encompasses vast swaths of territory across South, Southeast, and East Asia. This is a unique book that not only challenges conventional approaches to Asia, but also provides an important English-language window into Japanese scholarship and debates. The book consists of twelve empirical chapters by Japanese authors spanning human and physical geography who present a rich array of case studies across Monsoon Asia. Brief sections written by the editors help to contextualize these chapters within the edited book project. This book makes valuable theoretical, empirical, and translation contributions. I encourage libraries with an emphasis on agrarian issues in Japan and Southeast Asia to acquire a copy.

In this book review, I explore the following three aspects of the book: First, potential theoretical contributions around the ideas of Monsoon Asia and *fūdo*; second, empirical contributions from the case studies; and third, translational contributions through which Japanese scholarship and debates are made accessible to English audiences. In conclusion, I briefly reflect on how scholars might build on the contributions of this book in the future.

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## 1. Potential Theoretical Contribution

The book presents to English language audiences potential avenues for further developing the concepts of “Monsoon Asia” and “fūdo.” These concepts are emphasized at the beginning and end of the book by the editors and appear in varying degrees in the contributors’ chapters. The authors - although from a diverse range of institutions - are most closely aligned with the field of geography, and the idea of Monsoon Asia has the potential for enabling us to see new relationships between society and the environment. By introducing and exploring this idea of Monsoon Asia, the book presents an opportunity for other scholars to engage with this fluid regional conception. A recent special issue in *GeoHumanities* titled “Monsoon Assemblages Forum” highlights the growing transdisciplinary engagement with monsoons in English-language scholarship (Bremmer 2021).

This book, published in 2020, is an updated English translation of a 2012-edited book that was originally published in Japanese under the title *Food and Fūdo in Monsoon Asia* (Monsūn Ajia no Fūdo to Fūdo). The original Japanese version explored Monsoon Asia through ideas of “food” and “fūdo,” two words that are homonyms in Japanese. The English word “food” (pronounced fūdo) is used in the theoretical framing to indicate a more expansive notion of foods as being embedded within food systems. The Japanese concept of fūdo is even more important to the conceptual framing of the book. Fūdo is a Japanese word often translated into English as “climate” that in this book resonates with concepts like landscape, geography, place, and region. In the Epilogue, Hitoshi Araki explains that their use of fūdo draws from Tetsuro Watsuji (1935 [1961]). The discussion of fūdo is short, but similar to *Monsoon Asia*, the book introduces the richness of this idea to English audiences.

## 2. Empirical Contribution

The twelve chapters by different Japanese authors provide a wealth of empirical data of which I can only scratch the surface in this book review. In looking at the map of the case studies covered in the book (p. xvii), the majority of non-Japanese case studies occur along a corridor starting at the northwest in Nepal and running southeast to the southern tip of Vietnam. The chapters are grouped into three different sections that focus on “Nature and Agriculture,” “Food and Regionality,” and “Society and Culture.”

The chapters from the book provide rich empirical information on topics and regions unavailable in English language literature. For example, Satoshi Yokoyama’s chapter “Natto in Mainland Southeast Asia” provides unique insights into the distribution of “non-salted fermented soy foods” (nattō). The chapter introduces a Japanese debate on the origins of non-salted fermented soybeans in which scholars argued that it emerged and spread through “lucidophyllous” forests that stretch from Nepal to Japan. Demonstrating deep knowledge of bacterial cultures, soybean varieties, and culinary practices, Yokoyama proceeds to analyze the different practices for non-salted fermented soybeans in Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar with comparison to common practices in Japan. My former host researcher Shusaku Nakamura has a chapter on traditional seafood dishes from Miyazaki Prefecture, Japan. He delves into the diversity and distribution of these traditional and regional practices. Geographical scholarship in Japan tends to emphasize empirical findings, and each of these chapters presents rich and exciting findings to English readers.

### **3. Translational Contribution**

Another contribution of this book is that it makes Japanese geographical scholarship and debates accessible to English language speakers. As an updated translation, this book maintains the flow of ideas from the original Japanese edited book, and in so doing, it provides one of the most accurate English language translations of Japanese geographical scholarship that I have seen. Given that it takes many years of studying Japanese language before one can read a Japanese academic book, *Nature, Culture, and Food in Monsoon Asia* provides a rare window into Japanese geography for English speakers. This means that the book is especially helpful as an example of rigorous Japanese scholarship for those in geography or related fields.

With regards to the translation itself, I must commend the editors, authors, and translators on their considerable effort in creating a translated book that reads so smoothly. In terms of translation style, the book leans towards direct translation. Rather than revising to make the language sound more natural in English, the original Japanese meaning is preserved. The tendency towards direct translation will benefit those who seek through this book to better understand scholarly debates in Japan.

Most of the references cited in this book are Japanese sources, and so English readers will find themselves bereft of their familiar canon. I find this to be a positive, because it pushes the reader to see new connections and consider different approaches.

### **4. Concluding Thoughts**

The book draws attention to Monsoon Asia, and so I want to identify two aspects of Monsoon Asia that might be addressed in future works. First, future research might explore how the term “Monsoon Asia” has developed over time. The term “Monsoon Asia” has a lengthy if marginal role in English language literature (Wickizier and Bennett 1941). However, monsoons are receiving renewed interest from contemporary anglophone scholars (Bremner 2021). Since monsoons appear to be coming back into fashion for geographers, a close analysis of the development of the term “Monsoon Asia” - if this has not already been done - would help to provide a stronger foundation for the use of Monsoon Asia going forward.

Second, the majority of non-Japanese case studies from this book are located between Nepal and Vietnam. I think that in Japanese, Monsoon Asia might be used to indicate comparisons between Japan and Southeast Asia. When I read this book in English through my US-raised eyes, I noticed the omission of East Asian case studies other than Japan (here, I am not counting the cases from southwest China as part of East Asia.). The idea of Monsoon Asia can help to destabilize rigid regional understandings, but Monsoon Asia loses its dynamism if the main objective of Monsoon Asia is to enable comparisons between Japan and Southeast Asia. I hope that future research on Monsoon Asia by Japanese scholars will address this point more directly. Also, I anticipate that including research from countries like South Korea could help to add further depth to our understanding of how environments and food systems vary across this important region.

I raise these two aspects of Monsoon Asia, because the underlying idea shows significant potential to be further developed in future works. I think that many readers will find that they are pulled in and eager to better understand the English and Japanese genealogies of Monsoon Asia and *fūdo*. This book provides us with an excellent opportunity for continuing to develop our

understanding of these concepts and regions.

### **References:**

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