

Introduction: Southeast Asian Culture Countering Climate Change

What can Southeast Asian cultural heritage offer in the struggle against climate change? That was the subject of a conference at the Siam Society in January 2023.

As the prospects for averting catastrophic levels of global climate change dim, governments and international organizations convene ever more conferences, which conclude with commitments to reduce carbon emissions, explore carbon sequestration, and aid developing countries exposed to devastation from droughts, floods, heatwaves and rising seas. Solemn pledges are made, couched in turgid diplomatic prose. Results are disappointing.

At these international forums, hopes rest primarily on technological solutions which will enable countries to avoid fundamental change in their ways of life. Vested interests, domestic political constraints, and international power rivalries block any commitment to the transformative actions that are required to protect the planet.

Amongst all the technological approaches to the climate challenge, cultural heritage is overlooked. We tend to look forward to technological solutions to problems that technology itself created, but we lack the imagination to look back at indigenous and ancestral ways of living that were climate friendly, environmentally benign, and eminently sensible. This accumulated wisdom can enable us to imagine a different future that no longer accepts the inevitability of our present “take and waste” way of living that is poisoning our air, land, and water.

In recent years, however, civil society, primarily in Europe, the Americas and Africa, has pointed out lessons are at hand in the traditional knowledge and ways of life embedded in our cultural heritages, but largely forgotten. We just need to open our eyes and minds to find them.

In January 2023, the Southeast Asian Cultural Heritage Alliance (SEACHA), with the Siam Society as its secretariat, brought together a group of experts and youth leaders from the ten nations of ASEAN to explore the potential of culture and cultural heritage to supplement technological solutions to the challenge of climate change. At a three-day conference, civil society leaders and academics joined with ASEAN youth representatives passionate about cultural heritage and climate change to consider the topic of “Cultural Wisdom for Climate Action: the Southeast Asian Contribution.” Speakers demonstrated the potential value of recovering the traditional knowledge, techniques, and ways of life that allowed earlier generations of Southeast Asia to live in circular economies and in harmony with nature. This was the first time that such an approach to climate action had been considered in Southeast Asia.

Due to the importance of the subject matter and the value of the proceedings,

this volume presents the scholarly articles authored by the civil society leaders and academics, and a summary of the eloquent, insightful and passionate presentations by the youth representatives. The articles cover a wide range of topics: traditional stewardship of forests, land, and water and its role in preserving biodiversity and natural resources; traditional approaches to architecture and urban design, and their adaptation to the present day; the legacy of colonialism and the need to move beyond dominant Western approaches; and the roles of beliefs, religious systems and artistic practice in spearheading change. The youth panels present case studies on sustainable living; sustainable cultural production; the mobilization of traditional beliefs and practices; and overcoming the language barriers that inhibit traditional communities and access to their wisdom.

Three principal messages emerged from the conference.

First, traditional climate friendly methods for living in harmony with nature, which are largely ignored by policy makers, are wide-ranging in scope and available for broad use in the modern world.

Second, the age-old and eco-friendly principles of traditional architecture and urban design can be adapted to modern materials and conditions to create better homes and cities.

Third, spiritual traditions, based on historically deep beliefs, wrap nature together with humanity to form a basis for activism.

The output of the conference captured in this volume stands on its own as a contribution to the global discourse on climate action, with a perspective that is entirely new for Southeast Asia. More importantly, SEACHA and the Siam Society conceived of the conference as the start of a campaign to win recognition that the cultural heritage of Southeast Asia offers alternatives to the Western pattern of modern life that underlies the looming climate catastrophe.

SEACHA will be involved with Western civil society partners in pressing for inclusion of cultural heritage, culture and the arts in strategies for dealing with climate change. SEACHA will also work with ASEAN youth to establish a robust movement pushing for climate heritage approaches in their countries and in the region. This generation stands to suffer most from climate change, and must ultimately lead us to solutions. SEACHA will attend COP conferences and associated regional meetings to explain the role of cultural heritage as a supplement to technological solutions of a problem that technological progress caused in the first place.