

January 1 2026

Dear colleagues,

In 2026, our society will enter its third year. It is still a young organization, almost a fledgling, when compared to those much older ones. However, being young means there are more possibilities, more energy for change, and fewer burdens of conventions and restraints. It is like the field we have dedicated ourselves to, a field brimming with new frontiers and imaginings. Thanks to the founder of our society, Prof. Satoshi Murayama, the board, and the program committee of our 2025 biennial conference, for making the society dynamic from the very start.

One question that has challenged me for a long time is: what is Asia? Geographically, we share the vast Eurasian continent with Europe. Ecologically, the land and sea we call Asia nurture all types of ecosystems. Religiously, there is no single Asian religion or mindset that we all adhere to. Politically, we have never formed a unified empire or union either in history or at present. And linguistically, we speak different languages that originate from so many different sources that there is no way for us to understand each other if we stick to our own languages. But now we have an Asian Association for Environmental History!

Undoubtedly there will be many answers to that question, and most historians will argue that Asia is a modern concept crafted by Europeans. Yet, Asia has become a well-established one emphasizing diversity and inclusiveness. We historians often say that more fascinating history emerges from borderlands. Environmental history itself is also about borderlands, between nature and culture, between humanities and natural science, and between humans and non-human species, between natural environment and various individuals of different genders, races, and social groups. There are perhaps more borderlands, ecological and cultural, in Asia than in any other part of the world.

So we are fortunate to be part of Asian history, whether we are actually living here or studying it. It is an excellent place for us to explore the extensive planetary history and to examine our own position in this grand process. We will discover that, despite all the diversity and uniqueness, we fundamentally share a common evolutionary history. This society aims to serve as a community that promotes a sense of “togetherness,” a sense of living an intellectual life together with people who share a common interest in and understanding of history.

On the very first day of 2026, I received a small book, the Chinese translation of *Wild Mind, Wild Earth: Our Place in the Sixth Extinction* by David Hinton. When I saw the title, I thought it was going to be another elegy for planet Earth. However, when I started reading it, it turned out to be a completely different book from what I had imagined. Hinton cites a short Chinese poem written by the 9th- century Chinese poet Du Mu:

Egrets

Robes of snow, crests of snow, and beaks of azure jade,
they fish in shadowy streams. Then startling away into
flight, they leave emerald mountains for lit distances.
Pear blossoms, a tree-full, tumble in the evening wind.

This American writer living in the 21st century asks: How can this little Chinese poem save the planet? The vanishing shadow of the egrets transforms into the fallen pear blossoms, and eventually, there are only the distant emerald mountains standing quietly. This is a Chinese cosmic perception of the planet, in which everything is echoing everything else. The little poem certainly can't save the planet, but the kinship we share with every individual of every species, the wild - mind instinct within us all, will make us more optimistic about ourselves and the planet Earth.

Happy New Year!

Shen Hou

President of Asian Association for Environmental History
Professor of environmental History
History department, Peking University
Email: houshen@pku.edu.cn