



Shifting Ground: The Changing Agricultural Soils of China and Indonesia

Peter H. Lindert

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In this book Peter Lindert evaluates environmental concerns about soil degradation in two very large countries--China and Indonesia--where anecdotal evidence has suggested serious problems. Lindert does what no scholar before him has done: using new archival data sets, he measures changes in soil productivity over long enough periods of time to reveal the influence of human activity. China and Indonesia are good test cases because of their geography and history. China has been at the center of global concerns about desertification and water erosion, which it may have accelerated with intense agriculture. Most of Indonesia's lands were created by volcanoes and erosion, and its rapid deforestation and shifting slash-burn agriculture have been singled out for international censure. Lindert's investigation suggests that human mismanagement is not on average worsening the soil quality in China and Indonesia. Human cultivation lowers soil nitrogen and organic matter, but has offsetting positive effects. Economic development and rising incomes may even lead to better soil. Beyond the importance of Lindert's immediate findings, this book opens a new area of study--quantitative soil history--and raises the standard for debating soil trends.

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