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GAFFRIC, Gwennaël. 2019. *La* 

*Littérature à l'ère de* 

*l'Anthropocène : une étude*

*écocritique autour des*

*œuvres de l'écrivain taiwanais*

*Wu Ming-yi* (Literature in the

Anthropocene Era: An

Ecocritical Study of the Works


of Taiwanese Writer Wu

Ming-yi). Paris: L'Asiathèque.

by [Coraline, JORTAY](#) ([https://www.cefc.com.hk/pccp\\_author/coraline-jortay/](https://www.cefc.com.hk/pccp_author/coraline-jortay/))

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The recent global public health crisis has seen the emergence of a #TaiwanCanHelp campaign, aimed at highlighting Taiwan's contribution to the fight against Covid-19. But how can Taiwan help us think through the – even larger – looming environmental emergency of the Anthropocene, the current era in which humans are impacting the environment in ways entirely unprecedented in history? How can contemporary Taiwan literature and environmental action interrogate each other, help inspire new modes of *being* and *being-with* on this planet? This is an ambitious question, tackled here by Gwennaël Gaffric in the first academic monograph dedicated to the internationally acclaimed writer and “polymorph





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activist” Wu Ming-yi 吳明益 (b. 1971), who leverages his interdisciplinary corpus spanning novels, short stories, essays, and scientific monographs.

Gaffric’s double background shines

through: a leading scholar of Taiwanese literature, he is a foremost translator and editor of Taiwanese literature in France, as well as Wu Ming-yi’s own translator into French. Building on a theoretically sound bibliography in Chinese, English, and French, the book covers a wide range of little-exploited sources, including Wu’s own scientific output. The systematic inclusion of Chinese characters for important concepts as well as quotations in the Chinese original – so crucial to literary scholarship but unfortunately getting rarer in academic monographs – are a testament to the keen eye of the author for the importance of language. Gaffric offers up the figure of the Man with the Compound Eyes – one of Wu’s most evanescent characters – as a metaphor for the writer (p. 269), “the only one able to see and make seen a certain event through multiple narrations and perspectives.” It also fittingly characterises the scholar-translator. Broaching, beyond Taiwan studies, disciplines as different as environmental history, philosophy, and science fiction studies, the book unravels the multiplicity of viewpoints present in Wu’s literary ecosystem – without trying to water down possible contradictions as they arise.



Chapter One evokes the plurality of Natures in the literary history of Taiwan, before and after the advent of “nature writing” (*ziran xiezu* 自然寫作 or *ziran shuxie* 自然書寫). Chapter Two sketches skywalks connecting Wu Ming-yi to this genealogy while progressing away from anthropocentrism towards an ecopoetics dissolving the binary between the (human) writing subject and the (natural) written object. The migratory patterns of butterflies or the Chunghua market (“an ecosystem as complex as a coral reef,” p. 139) call attention to nature not as a fixed, coherent, delineated object, but as a gallery of subjectivities, a heterogeneous, collective, and dynamic whole that calls into question the human/non-human delimitation. Boundaries are further undone in Chapter Three where water takes centre stage in poetical and political dimensions. Historically conceived as frontiers, rivers are envisioned as metaphors for instability and temporality in flooding and sedimentation. They become places where ethnic and social identities become blurred, without erasing their historical role in Taiwan’s indigenous and colonial history. Wu takes aim at the continent-centric vision of the island as a prison or a refuge, centring water as a shared characteristic of all living beings and what “unites the shores of places often imagined separate from one another” (p. 167), including our own bodies as infinitesimal but tangible oceans. Water pollution and capitalist logic come next, highlighting Taiwan’s environmental history since 1949 and Wu’s activist stance within the ecological movement. Moving from nativist to post-nativist, to postcolonial literature, then to Wu’s own articulation of Taiwan’s postcolonial heritage, Chapter Four offers a pluralistic, oneiric variation on the traditional historical novel foregrounding the spatial impact of history on the multitude of living beings, rather than the history of any specific people. Chapter Five turns to species and taxonomy as an anthropocentric velleity to *possess* rather than *meet* other living beings. Through ambivalent use of scientific vocabulary and transfigurations of humans, animals, and plants morphing into one another, Wu’s writing helps articulate how classifications – born out of industrial dreams of rationalising nature scientifically – fail to grasp the complexity of the living world. Chapter Six takes the theme of ecological



destruction to its paroxysm, putting into perspective sudden cataclysmic catastrophes, and the no-less-cataclysmic, slow, ineluctable, almost mundane, ecological destruction of everyday life. Finally, Chapter Seven explores ecotopias and heterotopias as possible responses to the accelerating contraction of space and time of the Anthropocene.

Beyond the richness of topics broached, the main strength of the book is perhaps the threefold audience it manages to address: Taiwan studies specialists, but also students of Sinophone literatures who find a handy reference for the history of literary movements and a steppingstone transitioning to independent research. A third audience, scholars of ecocriticism beyond Taiwan studies, will find rich material for cross-pollination in empirical and theoretical perspectives. In this matter, Gaffric's masterful critique of a supposedly homogenous "Chinese" philosophical relationship to nature, posited by some as intrinsically different from "the West's" and somehow more harmonious, should be required reading for scholars and students alike in its thorough deconstruction of the essentialising binaries that characterise certain conceptions of an "ecological Other," while demonstrating through Wu Ming-yi the richness of opening up the ecocritical canon to non-anglophone, non-Western writers. In this, the question of waste, to which Gaffric devotes some space in relation to water pollution or the Pacific trash vortex, would have perhaps deserved a more comprehensive treatment in dialogue with waste studies, insofar as the pages are teeming with briefly-mentioned metaphors that have much potential for ecocritical theory: The *sanwen* 散文 as a "residual genre," intratextuality and characters being "recycled," or – shall I suggest – waste come to life through the goldfish of the Chunghua market morphing from tree to paper-object to fish, or elaborating further the idea of waste underpinning the liminal space of the market in "A Story of Toilets," which takes "human waste" to an even more literal, bodily sense.



So, can Taiwan help? Rather than being presented as an

isolated island (geopolitically, cognitively, geographically), Gaffric's reading of Wu Ming-yi extends a compound prism for grasping multiple ways for literature and environmental action to interrogate one another in today's Anthropocene – insights translatable indeed far beyond Taiwan's shores. Even more strikingly, Gaffric offers what I would call a “multiscalar ecopoetics”: crisscrossing spatial scales (the island re-envisioned as interface and the ocean as route), timescales (compressed in the capitalist logics of the Anthropocene or slowed down by Wu), bodily scales (infinitesimal oceans, or the shared scales of Wu's butterflies, mineral sedimentation, and the wounds of our own human skins), and musical scales (moving away, once again, from anthropocentrism and allowing a multiplicity of human and non-human voices to coexist).

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