

Hsiu-lien Tu
National Chung-Hsing University, Taiwan
tu1121@gmail.com

Book Review: Chia-ju Chang and Scott Slovic, eds., *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 238 pp.



In the West, ecocriticism has been well-established for more than two decades. In Asia, on the other hand, it only began to attract wider attention during the late 1990s, producing a growing body of scholarship which addresses environmental issues in the region. *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts*, is the first English language book in the field which focuses on Taiwan. Located on westernmost edge of the Pacific Rim, this small island country is characterized by considerable ecological diversity and a varied geography. It was these features that led the Portuguese, the first Europeans to discover the island, to name it “Ilha Formosa”—beautiful island. However, this beauty has been fast disappearing since the island entered a period of a rapid industrialization and economic growth in the 1960s. Like many developing countries, Taiwan chose to sacrifice the integrity of its ecological environment in order to pursue an “economic miracle,” as people referred to the subsequent decades until the turn of the millennium. It is this experience of an extraordinarily fast transformation from a traditional agricultural society into a modern, industrialized country which distinguishes Taiwan from most Western nations. It also lent a distinct cast to the way in which environmental issues play out, which is reflected in ecocritical scholarship.

Ecocriticism in Taiwan collects fifteen essays covering a wide range of issues, and grouped into three sections. The first of these is called “Island Identities, Eco-Postcolonial Historiography, and Alter(native) Strategies,” and contains five essays which focus on the complex colonial history of Taiwan, the environmental legacy of this history, and how these are linked to issues of identity formation. The island’s aboriginal inhabitants are Austronesian peoples, who probably arrived thousands of years BCE. The continuing importance of their culture is the subject of Ming-tu Yang’s essay “Going Back into a Future of Simplicity,” which discusses how Taiwanese indigenous people utilize natural resources and maintain sustainable life styles from generation to generation, as well as of “(W)ri(gh)ting Climate Change in Neqou Soqluman’s Work,” in which Hsinya Huang analyzes a flood myth of the Bunun tribe in relation to climate change, showing how it provides an alternative to apocalyptic or romanticized perceptions of the latter.

The island’s first European colonizers were the Dutch, who in the mid-seventeenth century began to bring in Han settlers from China as agricultural

laborers, only to be displaced by the Qing Empire at the century's close. From 1895 to 1945, Taiwan was the most important colony of Japan, supplying its imperial overlords with important raw materials such as timber and coal. During this period, the Japanese laid train tracks into the mountains to develop the logging industry, built dams, and generally opened the natural resources of the island for economic development. After the arrival of the Chinese nationalist government in 1945, the rapid growth of industrial manufacturing further polluted the rivers. It is during this phase that a new literature of nature arose in Taiwan which was driven by concern for a disappearing nature, and stands in sharp contrast to the image of nature in traditional Chinese literature. Peter Huang's essay "Taiwanese Mountain and River Literature from a Postcolonial Perspective" focuses on this development, building largely on Ming-Yi Wu's seminal (and thus far untranslated) monograph *Taiwanese Nature Writing*. Following Wu, Huang argues that the traumatic experience of environmental destruction, and the transition from a colonial extractive economy to a neo-colonial industrial one, are central features of Taiwan's post-colonial condition. The process of Taiwanese identity formation and its relationship to ecological issues are also the subject of Shu-fen Tsai's essay, "Taiwan Is a Whale", which focuses on Wang Chia-hsiang's 2005 historical novel *Daofeng neihai* (Dao-feng Inland Sea), and of Hannes Bergthaller's "Agrarian Origin Stories, National Imaginaries, and the Ironies of Modern Environmentalism: On Chi Po-lin's *Kanjian Taiwan*."

The second section of the book, titled "Slow Violence, Creative Activism, and Environmental Movements," includes six essays which take up contemporary issues of environmental justice and activism. Robin Chen-hsing Tsai's "Toxic Objects, Slow Violence, and the Ethics of Transcorporeality in Chi Wen-Chang's *Zhebi de tiankong* (The Poisoned Sky)" addresses the hidden costs of thermal power generation as they are discussed in Chi's 2009 documentary film. Both Rose Hsiu-li Juan and Kathryn Yalan Chang focus on the 2013 novel *Fuyan ren* (The Man with the Compound Eyes) by the already mentioned Ming-yi Wu. Juan's "Imagining the Pacific Trash Vortex and the Spectacle of Environmental Disaster" analyzes the novel's take on oceanic pollution. Chang, on the other hand, interprets Wu's works from an ecofeminist perspective. Huei-chu Chu's "After the Catastrophe" considers another kind of human-made disaster: her essay examines the representation of a fictional accident in one of Taiwan's three operating nuclear plants in Egoyan Zheng's novel *Ling didian* (*Ground Zero*, also published in 2013). In "Pre-Texts for Tree-Texts, Deforestation in Taiwan, and *The Rain in the Trees*," Iris Ralph emphasizes the connections of Eastern and Western ecocritical work by bringing insights from W. S. Merwin's poetry to bear on local environmental issues. In the last essay of this section, "The Wild Hunt," Shiu-huah Serena Chou takes up the recent trend of urban foraging.

The third section is titled "Animal Fiction, Avant-garde Art, and Posthumanist Ecoaesthetics" and extends the purview beyond literary fiction and film. The first essay in this section, Iping Liang's "What's in a Plant?," examines

Ola Pehrson's 1999 art installation "Yucca Invest Trading Plant" in the light of Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality. As the title suggests, Yu-lin Lee's "Becoming-Animal" takes Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming animal" as its theoretical starting point for his discussion of the bird novels of Kexiang Liu, one of the most prominent contemporary Taiwanese nature writers, arguing that Liu's mixture of fictional and factual elements, based on empirical observation, demonstrates his ethical concern for animals and extends the structure of the real. Dean Anthony Brink's "Aesthetic Configurations and Qualia in Environmental Consciousness in Contemporary Taiwanese Poetry and Installation Art" turns to the work of Taiwanese visual artists and poets, while Joy Shih-yi Huang's "Utopia in Theatre" analyses the recent avant-garde play "Mulian Rescues Mother Earth" (2014), which reformulates a traditional Buddhist tale (Mulian Rescues his Mother) in accordance with contemporary environmental concerns.

All in all, *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts* demonstrates not only the vibrancy of the island's ecocritical community, but also the importance of a transnational, hybrid perspective in ecocriticism more broadly. It will be of value not only to those with an express interest in Taiwan or East Asia, but to all ecocritical scholars who recognize that we must grasp environmental issues from a global perspective if we are to understand them properly. Taiwan's political situation and geographical location make it not only unique, but also exemplary for how ecological problems are inextricably entangled with issues of modernization, indigeneity, colonialism, and cultural diversity.