

Ecocriticism in Taiwan

Peter Huang

Tamkang University, Tamsui, Taipei, Taiwan

More than a decade ago, Professor Lin Yaofu started to teach courses about ecological literature in the graduate program of the English Department at Tamkang University. Yang Ming-tu, Robin Tsai, Ted Yang and Ted Chen attended his ecological classes. Ecological study was first introduced into the curriculum of the graduate program of Tamkang's English Department. Throughout the ten years, it has developed into one of the main focuses of the graduate program of the English Department of TKU.

In 2000, the First Tamkang International Ecological Conference was held in October on Tamkang campus. More than 200 scholars from Taiwan and abroad attended the two days' conference. Many prominent ecocritics were invited to present papers such as Leo Marx, Baird Callicott, Scott Slovic, Terry Gifford, Patrick Murphy, Ariel Salleh, and Louise Westling. Local scholars included Lin Yaofu, Yang Ming-tu, Chen Yufeng, Lin Yiren, Ayo Cheng, and Zhong Dingmao. Selected papers of the proceedings were published in *Tamkang Review*. The successful conference drew international attention to the emergence of ecological study in Taiwan.

The Second Tamkang International Conference on Ecocriticism was held in December 2003. In 2005 and 2008, the 3rd and 4th International Ecological conferences were consecutively held. Prominent eco-scholars who were invited to attend included Scott Slovic, Patrick Murphy, Ursula Heise, Axel Goodbody, Deborah Rose, Catherine Rigby, S. Murali, Shin Yamashiro, Nirmal Selvamony, Robyn Eckersley, Joni Adamson, Serenella Iovino, Christa Grewe-Volpp, Masami Yuki, Agnes Yeow, Michael Zimmerman, Nicholas Kaldis, Lili Song, and Chia-ju Chang. The 5th Tamkang International Conference on Ecocriticism is scheduled to be held in December 2010. It plans to seek a closer cooperation with eco-scholars from neighboring countries with a special focus on an Asian forum.

Apart from holding international conferences, the English Department of TKU has been publishing a bilingual journal *Ecohumanism*, the only scholarly journal devoted to ecological study in Taiwan. Until now, three issues have been published. The 4th issue is scheduled to come out in May 2010. Several special issues of *Tamkang Review* are also devoted to the publication of articles on ecocriticism as well.

Ursula Heise, Christa Grewe-Volpp, and Greta Gaard have been invited to teach the PhD summer seminars at TKU's English Department. Their seminars have attracted teachers and graduate students from other universities as well as PhD students at TKU. Such renowned ecocritics were also invited to speak at other universities during their stay in Taiwan. The influence exerted by their teaching on ecological education and research in major universities in Taiwan has been quite significant for the past several years. Benefited from their instruction, several TKU's PhD students have gone on to write dissertations on ecological literature and ecocriticism.

Providence University is another university which is devoted to ecological study in Taiwan. In December 1991, the "Taiwan Ecological Research Center" was established at Providence University. In 2003, the "Taiwan Ecological Society" was officially founded. Currently, Professor Dingmao Chung serves as its president. 2001 saw the establishment of the MA program in ecological study at Providence University. The Department of Ecological Study was formally established in 2003. While TKU's English Department graduate program is devoted to the introduction of western ecological theories and literature, the Department of Ecological Study at Providence University pays more attention to environmental activism and local environmental concerns.

More recently, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of National Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung has been actively engaged in promoting ecocriticism and Native American studies. The Native North American Study Group, organized by the dynamic former chair Professor Hsinya Huang, is one of the most active study groups in Taiwan. They meet regularly and invite famous international scholars to speak on ecocriticism and Native American literatures and research. An anthology of Native North American literatures studies, their most recent publication, was published in 2009.

Impressed with the efforts made by TKU's English Department in promoting ecological education and study for the past decade, Scott Slovic encouraged Peter Huang to found ASLE-Taiwan when Peter was elected department chair in 2007. With the enthusiastic support and assistance of Yang Ming-tu, Emerald Ku, Hsinya Huang and Serena Chou, Peter Huang succeeded in recruiting more than 50 scholars and graduate students who are interested in ecocriticism and applied to the Interior Ministry of Taiwan Government for the founding of ASLE-Taiwan. The Interior Ministry approved the application in June 2008 and ASLE-Taiwan was officially founded in March 2009. Prof. Lin Yaofu was elected the first president. Peter Huang announced the establishment of ASLE-Taiwan at the ASLE Conference in Victoria, Canada in June 2009.

Currently, the eco-scholars in Taiwan are divided into two groups—some who are devoted to academic study and research such as Lin Yaofu, Yang Ming-tu, Peter Huang, Robin Tsai, Ted Chen, who are teaching at TKU, Hsinya Huang and Senera Chou teaching at National Sun Yat-sen University, and the Native North American Study Group, including Iping Liang, Emerald Ku, Rose Ruan, and Ming-shiou Huang. Others who are more concerned with environmental activism and local environmental issues include Lin Yi-ren and Dingmao Chung and scholars of the Taiwan Ecological Study Society who are teaching at Providence University.

Like any other developed country, Taiwan is confronted with the impact of globalization. Nostalgic with the economic miracle it created in the 1980s, Taiwan is still obsessed with the myth of endless development. Vandana Shiva is correct to point out in her article “The Impoverishment of the Environment: Women and Children Last” that development is believed to bring promise of well-being and affluence for all in the Third World, but “for most regions and people, it has instead brought environmental degradation and poverty” (178). Patrick Murphy also agrees that such “development at all costs” actually turns the natural world ceaselessly into “a commodity for processing and profit” (123).

Especially in the wake of the tragic disaster caused by Typhoon Morakot in August 2009, many eco-scholars here in Taiwan call attention to the devastating effects of the long-time pursuit of a market economy. The public is called on to heed Shiva’s warning about environmental degradation and dispossession caused by “maldevelopment.” A sustainable economy is suggested as an alternative to a market economy. Thus, environmental justice plays a more important role in ecocriticism in Taiwan right now. For example, a news report about an environmental disaster caused by an industrial zone in central Taiwan won the news report award recently. When Liu-qing Industrial Zone was established in a small fishing village in central Taiwan, it promised a booming economy and more employment opportunities. But after 10 years, the environmental hazards of the petroleum industry were exposed, including the rise of cancer rates in neighboring counties. This area is referred to as “Cancer Alley.” Primary school students have to wear masks to school to fight against a noxious sour smell every day. With the development in the village, one resident ironically said, “The only thing we can do is become the lowest income, the highest cancer rate place in Taiwan.”

Works Cited

Murphy, Patrick. *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Lexington Books, 2009.

Shiva, Vandana. "The Impoverishment of the Environment: Women and Children Last." *Environmental Philosophy: from Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. 4th ed. Ed. Michael E. Zimmerman, et. al. New York: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005.