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Negotiating Agrarian Futures in China

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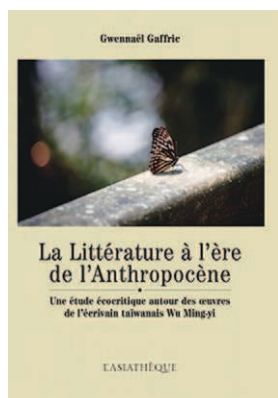
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# Book Reviews



**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.

## CORALINE JORTAY

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 activist” Wu Ming-yi 吳明益 (b. 1971), who leverages a 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

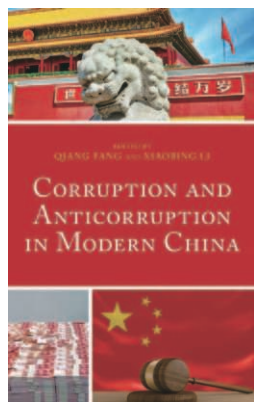
Ming-yi to this genealogy while progressing away from anthropocentrism towards an eco-poetics dissolving the binary between the (human) writing subject and the (natural) written object. The migratory patterns of butterflies or the Chunghua market (“an ecosystem as complex as a coral reef,” p. 139) call 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 eco-poetics”: 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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FANG, Qiang, and Xiaobing Li  
(eds). 2019.

*Corruption and Anticorruption in  
Modern China.*

Lanham: Lexington Books.

## CAROLIN KAUTZ

Since Xi Jinping launched a major anticorruption campaign after coming to power in late 2012, corruption and efforts at combatting it have become a prominent topic in China-related scholarship. A growing number of publications on Xi’s campaign largely fall into two main directions. In the first one, authors analyse the campaign as a power struggle and a means to increase Xi’s personal power. In the other one, scholars see it as a way of dealing with a threat to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is reinventing itself and strengthening its governing capabilities. This edited volume by Fang Qiang and Li Xiaobing

contributes to the growing academic debate on corruption in China, while also diverging from these two main directions in the literature.

This edited volume consists of 15 chapters (including the Introduction and Conclusion) and is organised into four parts. Of these four parts, only the last one, entitled “New century, new struggle,” deals with developments directly related to Xi Jinping’s anticorruption campaign. The other three parts, “Centralized power and authoritarianism,” “Political parties and legitimacy,” and “Government, individuals, and conflicting interests” contain chapters that are loosely subsumed under these headlines, presenting case studies from a number of different periods of Chinese history. The historical diversity of case studies ranges from the Han and Tang Dynasties (Chapter Ten) and the Qing Dynasty (Chapter One) to the Republican period (Chapters Two, Three, and Four), the Maoist People’s Republic (Chapter Five), and post-Mao China (Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen). This approach of covering an extensive historical period and discussing corruption throughout Chinese history distinguishes this edited volume from most other publications, which usually concentrate on a specific period. Discussions on corruption in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) quite often only focus on the post-Mao era without considering earlier developments in Maoist China. This is particularly the case for recent publications that have appeared in the wake of Xi’s anticorruption campaign. The editors of this volume argue instead that: “corruption as an illicit or abnormal activity has a long history in China and many rulers from at least the Han Dynasty till the PRC have launched numerous anticorruption campaigns” (p. xii).

Other ways in which they contribute to current academic debates include the fact that some chapters are based on newly released primary material, for instance Chapter Two, which relies on Yuan Shikai’s diaries to analyse his contributions to anticorruption work in early Republican China. Additionally, the authors claim that their personal cultural and family backgrounds closely connecting them to China place them in a better position to study corruption in China. The editors argue that “such kind of cross-cultural national sentiment can rarely be found among scholars who study China simply as a career or interest” (p. xvii). However, it remains unclear throughout the book how this different perspective distinguishes their work from that of other scholars. Finally, the editors claim that the fourth original contribution of the book is the embedding of Chinese debates on corruption into global developments. They do this – albeit briefly – in the concluding chapter, where they compare corruption in China and the United States. They conclude that while corruption is a global issue, a democratic state under the rule of law is better equipped for dealing with it. Hence, they recommend political and legal reforms for China to deal with corruption more successfully.

Considering the overall contributions of the volume to current debates on corruption in China, two aspects stand out. The first one is indeed the broad historic approach of analysing corruption in very different periods of Chinese history. Such a comparative approach is important, as it allows for overcoming normative arguments based on assumed cultural incomparability. The second strength of the volume is its very specific case studies that focus, for example, on the role of corruption in the demise of the Guomindang 國民黨 on the Mainland (Chapters Three and Four), early corruption cases in the PRC (Chapter Five), or the way corruption becomes visible in popular rhymes (*minyao* 民謠) circulated among the Chinese public (Chapter Nine). Such diverse case studies can provide interesting new evidence on corruption and anticorruption during different historical periods.