
Compound Eyes and Limited Visions: Wu Ming-Yi's “Weak Anthropocentric” Gaze for World Literature

Dingru Huang

Abstract

Inspired by Pheng Cheah's insights on the overlooked temporal dimension of post-colonial world literature, this article will explore Wu Ming-Yi's "worlding" process by delving into the heterotemporalities in his works. Focusing on Wu Ming-Yi's 2015 novel *The Stolen Bicycle*, I propose to read Wu's works as self-referential and allegorical critiques of world literature, which foreground fissures in translation, ever-ongoing yet incomplete knowledge production, and the encounters with the nonhuman other. I argue that through the heterotemporalities on both the formal and narrative levels, Wu Ming-Yi offers an alternative way of seeing and worlding Taiwanese literature, a self-critical position which he himself terms "weak anthropocentrism" and which points to an ecological time beyond the totalizing teleology of globalization.

KEYWORDS Wu Ming-Yi, *The Stolen Bicycle*, heterotemporality, weak anthropocentrism

Ex-position, Issue No. 41, June 2019 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201906_(41).0004

Dingru HUANG, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, USA

Ex-position
June
2019

Three episodes in Wu Ming-Yi's first novel *Shuimian de hangxian* (*Routes of the Dream*) are narrated from the perspective of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, or, more precisely, the bodhisattva's East Asian variant Guanshiyin, literally meaning "perceiving the world's sounds" in Chinese. In this novel, Guanshiyin's capability of "seeing" his believers' pains by listening to their prayers is intriguingly acquired through the believers' (mis)translation of his name from Sanskrit to Chinese and the inscription and circulation of their varied imagination. Despite his omniscience and mercy, however, Wu Ming-Yi's Guanshiyin cannot offer any redemption to his followers. On the contrary, he finds himself enmeshed in numerous prayers with conflicting interests and ends up taking no action. All he can do is to create an infinite Borgean library in his mind, where he archives all the prayers conveyed in all languages.

We may say that the Guanshiyin portrayed by Wu is both an ever-growing text and a superior reader of world literature. He perceives different worlds in all temporalities and deciphers words with infinite empathy. Of course, such a perfectly unbiased reader does not exist in reality. The problem of world literature lies precisely in the uneven visibility of literary works in circulation, and in the difficulty of identifying a normative force that can encompass competing visions of world-making—a problem even the bodhisattva fails to solve.

How, then, does Wu Ming-Yi himself negotiate the disproportionate topography of world literature? Some critics praise him for enriching environmental world literature from a previously underrepresented localized position. Some accuse him of unwittingly exoticizing the "alterity" of local experience in order to participate in an eco-cosmopolitan discursive sphere. In dialogue with previous scholarship on Wu Ming-Yi and world literature, this article will delve into the heterotemporalities in Wu Ming-Yi's 2015 novel *Danche shiqieji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*). I argue that through the heterotemporalities on both the formal and narrative levels, Wu Ming-Yi offers an alternative way of worlding Taiwanese literature. His "weak anthropocentric" point of view, a self-reflexive position, complicates the politics of visibility that is conspicuous in the spatio-geopolitical model of world literature.

Kuei-fen Chiu addresses the issue of visibility from the perspective of international reception in her recent article, "'Worlding' World Literature from the Literary Periphery: Four Taiwanese Models," which takes Wu Ming-Yi as one of the representative models. In this article, Chiu proposes a scheme of "international recognition indicators" to quantitatively measure the effective life of Taiwanese literature in the global market.¹ To place Wu Ming-Yi in the scene of world literature, Chiu

¹ The "international recognition indicators" defined by Chiu include the number of languages into which a

traces the rise of his 2011 novel, *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with the Compound Eyes*), to international success, which involves the marketing strategy of the novel's publishers as well as the Taiwanese government's effort to promote the author as a representative national writer. Chiu is aware of the risk of evaluating a literary work merely by the scale of circulation and the appraisal by prestigious institutions in the West. To supplement the paradigm of studying world literature as "a mode of circulation," Chiu proposes to understand it as a "mode of reading." She analyzes online readers' comments on the novel's English translation, and attributes its popularity to its appeal to the science fiction readership and the "planetary vision" of ecology. Chiu argues that Wu's case represents a "globalization model" that "demonstrates how the strategic integration of national and international resources, as well as the blurring between serious and popular literature, carves a niche for writers from the literary periphery" (14).

While Chiu's observation is valid, the "mode of reading" approach to world literature nevertheless circles back to the mode of circulation—the blurring of genres and the planetary concern eventually translate into the novel's market value and the symbolic capital for a peripheral writer who has to compete for visibility in the global market. Shiu-huah Serena Chou finds this mode of reading problematic in her discussion of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and the worlding of environmental literature. In response to the eco-cosmopolitan discourse and indigenous movement evoked in the scholarship revolving around the novel, Chou argues that celebrating this novel as "world literature" may risk overlooking its transnational dimension and hence reducing it to an exotic "alternative": "as in the concepts and contexts of world literature, ecocriticism's global turn reveals the interest in a new theoretical model that, while embodying the complexities of a shared universal experience of post-national modernity, offers local (regional/ethnic) traditions as alternatives" (Chou 7).

Chou's timely reflection reveals the unsolved tension between the local and the global in the establishment of world literature. Pheng Cheah also addresses this issue in *What Is a World?*, and attributes it to a spatial imagination that reduces the world to the "globe." In his proposal of a temporalization of world literature, Pheng Cheah resorts to Dipesh Chakrabarty and Nestor Garcia Canclini's post-colonial theories of "heterotemporality." According to Cheah, while Chakrabarty

writer's works are translated; international awards the writer has received; the inclusion of the writer's works in anthologies by international publishers or literary websites by institutions/organizations other than Chinese communities; book reviews or special reports in international publications; adaptation of the writer's works in any form; scholarly publications on the writer in languages other than Chinese; or "writer-in-residence" invitations offered by institutions outside Taiwan (Chiu 15-17).

Ex-position
June
2019

highlights the interruption of the homogenous time of modernity by nonsecular temporalities of the subaltern, Canclini emphasizes the “intensification of an already existing heterogeneity by the forces of hybridization generated by global capital flows” (Cheah 207). His quote of Canclini’s comment on the postcolonial coexistence of heterotemporalities is particularly illuminating:

The problem lies not in our countries having badly and belatedly fulfilled a model of modernization that was impeccably achieved in Europe; nor does it consist in reactively seeking how to invent some alternative and independent paradigm with traditions that have already been transformed by the worldwide expansion of capitalism. Especially in the most recent period, when the transnationalization of the economy and culture makes us “contemporaries of all people” (Paz), and nevertheless does not eliminate national traditions, choosing exclusively between dependency and nationalism, between modernization or local traditionalism, is an untenable simplification. (qtd. in Cheah 207-08)

Canclini’s insight resonates with Chou’s critique of the consumption of non-Western literatures as unique “alternatives,” as well as her observation of the overlooked transnational dimension of environmental world literature in a post-colonial context.

Drawing on the aforementioned discourses of heterotemporality, Cheah nevertheless also takes issue with them by arguing that their “reworlding” promises, once reduced to a strategy of a social subject or a critical intellectual, are inevitably undermined by “global and national capitalist calculations” (208). He even points out “a nostalgia for a pure past” in the postcolonial argument for alternative subaltern temporalities, and instead proposes that in literature, heterotemporalities can only be sustained “by conjuring with the incalculable and inhuman gift of time as the original opening of a world” (14). That is to say, compared with the socio-historical significance of world literature, Cheah places more emphasis on the capacity of literature to inspire imagination beyond the lived world depicted in the literary works.

This is where my approach to “heterotemporality” differs from Cheah’s. I will engage with both the socio-historical significance and the poetic momentum manifest in the “heterotemporalities” provided by Wu Ming-Yi’s works. The “worlds” in Wu’s writings are often measured by scales different from those that are often found in works by Cheah and other world literature scholars, namely, the totalizing force of globalization and the subaltern communities striving for autonomy. On a micro scale, Wu is fascinated with individuals’ archeological

endeavors that disclose and reconstruct forgotten lived spaces and temporalities, spaces and temporalities that cannot be subsumed by either nationalism or cosmopolitanism. On a macro scale, Wu sheds light on neglected ecological histories that are intertwined with, affected by, and yet also resist being incorporated by, human history. The coexistence of these different ways of worlding highlights the heterotemporalities in Wu's works on both the formal and narrative levels as an ethico-political engagement with the past and as a regenerative literary force of becoming.

In *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, Wu provides heterotemporalities in both the literary and the geopolitical sense. Not only does he envision a future world where individuals from different cultural backgrounds jointly respond to globalization's slow violence on the ecology, he also demonstrates how the weight of its consequence falls upon them unevenly with time differences. In her critique of eco-cosmopolitanism, Shiuuhuah Chou also takes issue with the ecological holism embodied by the titular character, "the man with the compound eyes," which, Chou contends, "hastily closes Wu's ambitious take on global/local conflicts (which include questions of dream/history, authenticity/hybridity, and translation/untranslatability) that he sets out to explore" (7). While the aesthetic and ecocritical value of "the man with the compound eyes" remains open to debate, I argue that *The Stolen Bicycle* takes up where *The Man with the Compound Eyes* left off by exploring the "global/local conflicts" embedded in a transnational colonial history through limited individual visions.

What makes *The Stolen Bicycle* stand out among Wu's works is the absence of an omniscient and semi-divine figure found in his earlier works, such as the aforementioned bodhisattva from *Routes of the Dream*, the titular magician from *Tianqiaoshang de moshushi* (*The Magician on the Skywalk*), and the man with the compound eyes in the eponymous story and the novel. What remains consistent with his previous works is the shifting, limited point of view and a modernist pastiche. In what follows, I will demonstrate how heterotemporalities are enacted by untranslatability, storytelling, and the nonhuman other in *The Stolen Bicycle*.

***Cofkoyacifeoh*: The (Un)translatability of Heterotemporalities**

The untranslatability of heterotemporalities is manifested in an anecdote Wu mentions in his 2014 photograph essay collection, *Fuguang* (*Above Flame*). Weaving together contemplations on photography and autobiographical fragments, *Above Flame* is essentially a book on the ways of seeing and remembering. One focal site featured in this book, which Wu has sought to revisit in his fictional and

Ex-position
June
2019

non-fictional works, is the Chinese Plaza in downtown Taipei in the 1970s-1980s, which has been destroyed as a result of economic development and urban renewal. Wu Ming-Yi reconstructs the vanished space for the reader by quoting its old residents' words: "People in the plaza used to call the side close to the Zhonghua Road 'thâu-tsing tsuā' (the front side) whereas the side close to the rail track was called 'āu-piah tsuā' (the back side). The word 'tsuā' sometimes means something similar to 'round' or 'time' in Chinese. In Taiwanese, we say a 'tsuā' as we say 'a time' or a 'round' in Chinese. It can also be used to indicate something rectangular in shape or a thin and long seam, or as 'line' in Chinese. I like to write this word as '逝,' as if when you walk to the end, there will be something gone missing" (108). The last sentence would make little sense in this literal translation without the explanation that the Taiwanese word *tsuā* in the original is transcribed with the Chinese character 逝 (*shi*), which means being gone or flowing away. Wu Ming-Yi is playing with the rupture and the connection between Taiwanese Hokkien and Mandarin Chinese. It is common to find Taiwanese expressions in Wu's writings, represented by Chinese characters and sometimes with Romanization, rendering their meanings and sounds accessible to his Sinophone readers within and beyond Taiwan. Some of the polysemic expressions do not have a fixed origin in literary Chinese, and hence allow the writer the liberty to transcribe them with Chinese characters of his choice that generate certain cultural associations and poetic effects. Wu Ming-Yi evokes the poetic ambiguity of the word *tsuā* with both spatial and temporal connotations as he casts a nostalgic gaze on his childhood in the plaza, and creatively paints the word with a melancholy touch via the Chinese character. The lived space is hence marked by a unique temporality, a "tsuā" that only belongs to its residents. Translation is always an ongoing process: from space to time, from the past memory to the present view, and from Taiwanese Hokkien to Mandarin Chinese. It is precisely the unfixed nature of his "translation" that paradoxically allows a personal connection to the vanished site and an intimacy with his native tongue.

In an interview following the publication of the English translation of *The Stolen Bicycle* in 2017, Wu talks about the "untranslatability" of his languages, and explains how the Japanese colonial education and the authoritarian discipline of the Nationalist government in the post-war era shaped the multi-lingual landscape in his works:

There's a different kind of poetry that you can't convey in English, because it's particular to the languages that I speak and that my parents spoke. My parents grew up at the end of the Japanese era, so they would have learnt Japanese. So

there's a particular poetic beauty of Japanese that was in their consciousness. It entered their consciousness and shaped them somehow, was formative. My mother tongue is Taiwanese. The kind of Fujianese that's spoken on Taiwan wasn't respected to put it mildly. The government did everything it could to prevent people from speaking the language. When I went to school, if you were caught speaking Taiwanese, they'd punish you, make you wear tags. Even though it wasn't respected by Taiwanese, it has its own aesthetics. It's in my consciousness and was formative for me and I wanted to express the poetry of Taiwanese in the novel. (Snoekstra)

Wu Ming-Yi's
"Weak
Anthropocentric"
Gaze

Although Wu Ming-Yi emphasizes the specific aesthetics and historical contexts of the languages deployed in his works, he is not essentializing the purity of his mother tongue(s). In his fictional works, the characters of his parents' generation often speak a Japanese-inflected Taiwanese, whereas the semi-autobiographical narrators often speak a mix of Mandarin and Taiwanese. The vitality of the languages comes exactly from their hybridity. Instead of reducing the hybridity for succinctness, Wu chooses to foreground the difficulty of fully grasping the everyday languages in Taiwan by juxtaposing their various textures, foregrounding their disjointing effects, and making self-referential comments on word choices on the part of his characters and himself.

The narrator in *The Stolen Bicycle* claims to be a cosmopolitan "bicycle polyglot" who knows the words for bicycle in thirty-six languages. He observes that in Taiwan different names for "bicycle" are associated with people belonging to different social statuses and historical strata: the senior who received Japanese education, the Taiwanese natives, and the post-1949 immigrants from mainland China. Pondering over the word for bicycle—"iron horse" from Taiwanese Hokkien, his mother tongue—the narrator finds it a perfect example showing how lively local imagination animates the cold image of technological advancement and global circulation: "Such a beautiful expression, evoking both natural world and human endeavor! Imagine the Creator laying down seams of iron-rich rock for people to mine and cast into carbon steel in the shape of a horse" (9). The estrangement effect of his mother tongue is achieved by the narrator placing the language in the global cartography of languages and the social topography of Taiwan. For him, the mother tongue(s) cannot be taken for granted. Just like the bicycles that remain physically absent yet perceptually present for the most of the novel, languages and their intricate relationship with history are waiting to be rediscovered.

With a mixture of expressions from Mandarin, Japanese, Taiwanese Hokkien, and the indigenous language Tsou, *The Stolen Bicycle* represents the polyphonic

Ex-position
June
2019

landscape of Taiwan from the colonial to the postcolonial eras. The narrator finds himself in a position of translator when he encounters an audio recording of Pasuya, a man from the Tsou ethnic group, who served in the Japanese army during World War II. Pasuya uses a mix of Japanese and Tsou in the recording, which is in turn translated into Mandarin Chinese by the narrator. The narrator notices that “Pasuya would use Japanese to tell the story and switch to Tsou to express emotion or describe scenery” (140-41). He finds it impossible to separate the parts in Tsou from those in Japanese, because “the two languages had become one, united in the person of the storyteller” (141). Their intertwined relationship, however, is not tantamount to a natural fusion. The tension between the two languages, as well as that between their speakers, is revealed in a dialogue Pasuya recounts between him and a Japanese lieutenant:

It was the month my people call *Cofkoyacifeohu*. *Feohu* means moon. A month is also called *feohu*, but the last *feohu* of the year lasts two months, because it is the moon of recuperation. The literal meaning of *cofkoyacifeohu* is “clean moon.” But in fact, it is a ritual moon, because it is a time in the waxing and the waning of the moon when nobody dies in the village, when no accidents occur.

I told Lieutenant Fujii that it was *cofkoyacifeohu*, a time for war rituals, and a time for building houses. I don’t know why, but instead of *getsu* [the Japanese word for “month”], I said *tsuki* [the Japanese word for “moon”] by mistake.

Fujii said, “You’re right—the moon here is really clean and beautiful. The moon in my country is also beautiful, but it is a different kind of beauty. Each member of our unit rides a pair of *ginrin* [silver wheels], and when you look up you can see another *ginrin* in the night sky.

I asked him whether the moon was the same in all places.

He replied, slightly hesitant, that the moon was the same everywhere. (144)

Confusing the Japanese words for moon and month, Pasuya fails to convey the “precolonial” temporality to the Japanese lieutenant, who immediately associates the image of a clean moon with the “silver wheel” symbolizing the bicycle troop they belong to. The ritualistic time in Pasuya’s mind is forced into a time of action. Both characters are sent to the forests of North Burma for the war and share the pathos of displacement and nostalgia. However, only the colonial lieutenant gets

to define the universal “moon,” whereas the colonized Pasuya misses the chance to clarify himself. What remains unsaid by Pasuya points to a different answer to his own question: the “moon” is not the same everywhere, in terms of how it is uttered, perceived, and imagined.

The transcription of the recording unearths an alternative temporality embodied by Pasuya’s Tsou language, whose visibility on the island has been oppressed since the colonial period up to today. Darryl Sterk, the English translator of this novel, also pays special attention to Pasuya’s subaltern bilingualism: “Pasuya grew up speaking both an indigenous language and Japanese; he’s bilingual. It’s sort of interesting how sometimes elites will speak more than one language. Sophisticated people will speak French and English and other languages. In Taiwanese history, it’s often subalterns, people who have to follow order, or just ordinary people who are bilingual—like Abbas’s father Pasuya” (Snoekstra). In both the Chinese original and its English translation, the Tsou word *Cofkoyacifeohu* is Latinized, and is difficult for an ordinary Mandarin or English reader to accurately pronounce. Surrounded by Mandarin Chinese and English expressions, the word creates a disjointing effect and cannot be easily appropriated as an exotic token. *Cofkoyacifeohu* thus functions as an inappropriable other, interrupting the linear time from the precolonial and colonial periods to the postcolonial era, and stands as a marker of heterotemporality.

Pasuya’s “mistake” also makes the reader question the rest of his account, the majority of which is conveyed in Japanese. Could there be more “mistranslations” that the speaker is not aware of? After obtaining the recording, the narrator finds a Japanese expert to translate the Japanese narration and Tsou elderlies to translate the Tsou expressions. He himself, knowing neither Japanese nor Tsou, sorts through the fragments and creates a coherent narrative, feeling like a “woodworker fitting mortice and tenon together” (140). By meticulously introducing his translating process, the novel makes the reader realize the possibilities of missed messages, misunderstanding, and imposed coherence.

Instead of writing in a readily translatable language or simply essentializing the purity of the “precolonial” language, Wu Ming-Yi presents the coexistence of multiple linguistic strata in Taiwan, whose elements infiltrate each other. He even takes one step further, foregrounding the ruptures in the questionable translation and self-translation involved in the process of storytelling. By consciously maintaining the untranslatable and inappropriable moments of alterity, Wu Ming-Yi nonetheless allows his readers in other languages to be illuminated by the heterotemporality those moments generated. In this way, he echoes Emily Apter’s caution against the “celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities’” (Apter 2). In

Wu Ming-Yi’s
“Weak
Anthropocentric”
Gaze

Ex-position
June
2019

opposition to easily defined national and ethnic identities, Wu Ming-Yi represents “differences” that are not readily translatable and consumable. He creates a temporalized map for the polyphonic landscape of Taiwan, preserving the moments of communication and miscommunication when the worlding of “heterotemporalities” takes place.

Iron Horse and Butterfly Collage: Storytelling as Knowledge Production

Scholars, including Robin Chen-Hsing Tsai and Justin Prystash, have highlighted the agency of the hyperobjects in *The Man with Compound Eyes*, especially the toxic sublime garbage vortex. The presence of the hyperobjects is so overwhelming that Shiu-huah Chou questions whether the individual agency of the human characters in the novel has not been sacrificed (7). Tsai points out that all the human characters faced with the hyperobjects suffer from “the Anthropocene blues,” or what he describes as “solastalgia,” or “a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at home” (870). Prystash, on the other hand, argues that the human characters develop a “destructive plasticity,” which means the characters are becoming plastic as they are adapted to the Anthropocene eco-accidents (515). In *The Stolen Bicycle*, however, the human characters enact their agency through storytelling and opening themselves up to a multi-layered history of objects, which generate their own heterotemporalities.

In the preface to *The Stolen Bicycle*, David Der-wei Wang calls attention to the novel’s resonance with the New Objectivity movement in 1920s-30s German photography, which critically responded to both realism and expressionism by dwelling on the texture of objects (Wang 6). Wu Ming-Yi’s sensitivity towards the texture of objects derives from his training in visual media as well as years of first-hand investigation and scholarly research. Besides the formation of the polyphonic landscape in his works and its fissures, Wu Ming-Yi also foregrounds the painstaking creative labor of storytelling as a form of knowledge production and its potential failure, and hence simultaneously reaffirms and challenges the imaginary worlding Cheah advocates.

As a scholar and an author of nature writing, Wu Ming-Yi is always concerned with the connection and tension between knowledge production and fictionality. In his Ph.D. dissertation on contemporary nature writing in Taiwan (2003), he deliberately excluded fictional work, emphasizing the importance of objective knowledge based on first-hand observational research as the foundation of effective ecocriticism and activism.

Later on, inspired by the more diverse "third wave of ecocriticism"² and the concept of "nature-oriented literature" defined by Patrick Murphy,³ Wu adjusted his approach and enlarged the scope of his study, covering both fictional and nonfictional writing.⁴ The result is his three-volume book series: "Liberating Nature through Writing," which includes a revised version of his dissertation as well as more recent articles on contemporary Taiwanese nature-oriented literature. The question remains: How does fiction engage the "objective" knowledge of nature while providing its unique insights into global and indigenous ecologies and their entanglements?

Part of the answer may be found in *The Stolen Bicycle*, which reveals the physical and spiritual trauma caused by colonialism and eco-colonialism through an intricate combination of fictional narrative and scholarly research. The narrative of this novel alternates between two lines. One follows the journey of the narrator, a fanatic collector of antique bicycles, and his encounters with both human and nonhuman others, painted by legendary and sometimes surrealistic colors and interspersed by lyrical bursts. The other is the narrator's "Iron Horse Notes," mostly composed of archival knowledge of the bicycle industry and first-hand information about bicycle production and repairing, which he obtains as an amateur collector. The parallel between the two lines indicates the intertwined relationship between fictional narrative and knowledge production.

In this novel, the bicycle is an everyday object, an embodiment of modernization, as well as a nexus connecting the micro-history of the family and the macro-history of Taiwan from the colonial period to the present. The significance of the object, however, as suggested by the title, is often foregrounded as the absent, as the object for searching and inquiring. The missing bicycles stitch the urban and suburban everyday landscape in Taipei, together with the ecologies of abandoned sites with forgotten histories ranging from the deep mountains in Puli to the dark forests in wartime Burma.

The creative labor involved in tracking these bicycles and reviving their stories is paralleled with the craftsmanship, or the "kang-hu," of restoring antique bicycles. The Taiwanese Hokkien expression *kang-hu* refers to the time, labor, and skills

² Scott Slovic explicates the characteristics of this wave in his "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline." Besides a more flexible attitude towards fictionality, what is particularly interesting in his observation of the third wave of ecocriticism is the tension between "global concepts of place" and "neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales" (Slovic 7). Wu Ming-Yi's *The Stolen Bicycle* can be read as engaging with this tension through its horizon of global history and specific comprehension of local ecologies and histories.

³ See Murphy.

⁴ For Wu' own statement on this development, see his "Liantu, juexing, zhuixun, erhou qiju."

Ex-position
June
2019

invested in a specialized craft. The “kang-hu” invested in the bicycle generates an organic knowledge, which is best epitomized by the image of an experienced bicycle repairman’s hands: “Having held those tools every day as he worked over so many years, the ones in his fingers and palms fit their ridges and grooves perfectly. . . . They were a part of his body, like when a tree grows a new branch, like when an injured branch grows a burl” (42). “Kang-hu” therefore indicates an immersive and transformative way of knowledge production and storytelling, which impacts both the subject and the object. The word *kang-hu* may evoke an impression of pursuing perfection. However, the narrator also notes that the art of “iron horse” is one of “incompleteness,” or in Taiwanese Hokkien, *put-tsuân*. While bicycle fanatics would certainly dream of finding all pieces of an antique bicycle and restoring a perfect model, they are also keenly aware that bicycles belonging to the same model and the same era are often “incomplete” with some missing pieces. “Put-tsuân” thus became a way for them “to identify certain bicycles, to understand the design essentials of the models of a certain era” (243). In other words, “put-tsuân” is the wound and the marker of its time. As a character dives into the past, he or she would encounter more incomplete objects. Abbas, for instance, literally dives into the submerged basement of an abandoned building in a former Japanese airfield, which was carpet-bombed by the Americans during World War II. There he encounters a group of ghastly fish-like men who were all mutilated (90). Shifting between the historical and the fantastic, the novel reveals how the war thoroughly changed the ecology of this area, leaving behind disturbing pieces for conscientious storytellers to collect. Even though the result may be further fragmented memories, the storyteller-characters are opened up to heterotemporalities embodied by the incomplete objects.

In contrast to the collecting and restoring of bicycles, which are active efforts to piece together fragments of the past while accepting their incompleteness, the art of making butterfly collages in colonial Taiwan is represented in the novel as a way of forcing the incomplete into a pretense of completeness, covering the traces of labor and exploitation in order to achieve a perfect simulation of “nature,” which is in turn commodified for a global market. This process complies with the hegemonic time of colonization and globalization. The violence involved in this art of purification is depicted in detail from the perspective of a female worker who was tortured by repeated mechanical labor: “In the beginning, her job was to slice the wings off with a little knife. Some of the butterflies weren’t completely dead, and when she made the cut, their mouthparts thrust forward and their legs would suddenly constrict. She found it strangely fascinating, and at the moment the beautiful wings were separated from the ugly body, she seemed to touch something akin to

her soul" (118). The butterflies without wings look alienated; their "pallid, faded, lifeless and worthless" bodies are reminiscent of the mutilated bodies and psyche left behind by the war (106). The narrator reviews the history of butterfly-catching industry in colonial Taiwan, which was linked to the production and manipulation of knowledge in the Japanese empire: the Japanese businessman Asakura, who started exporting butterflies from Taiwan to Japan, deliberately tampered with a broken specimen and sold it as a new species, which misguided a Japanese scholar to publish a false report. Asakura also passed off specimens collected from other places as Taiwanese butterflies to scholars who were eager to make a name. This episode of knowledge production in colonial Taiwan exposes the imperial aspiration to conquer the land by mastering the knowledge of its indigenous species, and how this aspiration is reversely made use of by local profit-pursuers. The "natural" world of butterflies, therefore, has already been drastically altered by layers of powers and interests.

In a different context of discussing Wu's early nature writings, Shiuuhuah Chou describes Wu's view of nature as a mixture of the mythic and the scientific, which "challenges the representation of nature in developmentalist history as merely inert object for manipulations and instrumental use" (158). However, the histories of iron horses and butterfly industry presented in the novel also reject the alternative proposed by Chou, which is an "authentic and universal" perception of nature as pure and autonomous forces based on "scientific objectivism" (152). Actively engaging both scientific knowledge and mythologies, Wu is highly aware of the illusory transparency and authenticity of scientific objectivism and how easily it can be manipulated by political and economic motivations. While emphasizing the essential necessity of first-hand research, Wu recognizes its historical and ethical limits.

The writer himself is an amateur lepidopterist. However, unlike those who studies butterflies by dissecting and making them into specimens, Wu Ming-Yi consciously avoided these supposedly more "scientific" methods. Instead, he closely observes, takes photographs, draws sketches, and reflects on human life through the butterflies' life. He creates a new form of "butterfly collage" that does not involve violence and intervention. In *Die dao* (*The Dao of Butterflies*), he describes his approach as a "weak but intent gaze" (276). Wu Ming-Yi claims that his writing is always driven by his "unease and ignorance." For him, "writing novels is a way of getting to know and of thinking about human existence," a humble yet active gesture of accumulating knowledge (*The Stolen Bicycle* 368). His reflection on creative engagement with the ecology in turn sheds light on the ethics of engaging the ecology of world literature. It urges us to always read with conscious

and conscientious “unease and ignorance,” to cultivate a “weak but intent gaze” for literature, and to actively engage the global, local, and personal histories involved without petrifying them into dead specimens of commercialized identities in the global market.

Ex-position
June
2019

Becoming the Tree: Worlding Literature with Weak Anthropocentrism

In the postscript to *The Stolen Bicycle*, Wu Ming-Yi quotes the ancient Greek historian Polybius to describe his ideal of writing: “The most instructive thing is remembering other people’s calamities. To stoically accept the vagaries of fate, this is the only way” (368). However, Wu’s horizon is not limited to other *people’s* calamities, but encompasses the calamities of both human and nonhuman others. The humble gesture of observation, which he terms “weak but intent gaze,” naturally leads him to “weak anthropocentrism,” a concept he first evokes in *Mi die zhi* (*The Book of Lost Butterflies*), his first essay collection on butterflies. According to Bryan G. Norton, the ecocritic who coined the term “weak anthropocentrism,” this self-reflexive position is based on the human subject’s “considered preference” rather than merely “felt preference.” He distinguishes “considered reference” from “felt preference” as follows:

A felt preference is any desire or need of a human individual that can at least temporarily be sated by some specifiable experience of that individual. A *considered preference* is any desire or need that a human individual would express after careful deliberation, including a judgment that the desire or need is consistent with a rationally adopted world view—a world view which includes fully supported scientific theories and a metaphysical framework interpreting those theories, as well as a set of rationally supported aesthetic and moral ideals. (Norton 134)

It is important to note that “considered preference” places emphasis on the process of value formation. It is always in negotiation with the “felt preference.” Therefore, to take a weak anthropocentric position means to always be ready to take on values “formed and informed by contact with nature” and adjust one’s own. In this process, “Nature need no longer be seen as a mere satisfier of fixed and often consumptive values—it also becomes an important source of inspiration in value formation” (135). As the human subject casts a “weak but intent gaze” on the non-human other, the nonhuman other would return the gaze and in turn reshape the human subject.

In *What Is a World?*, Pheng Cheah's understanding of "heterotemporality" is exactly inspired by Jacques Derrida's concept of time as coming from the inappropriable nonhuman other, the other that paradoxically both puts time out of joint and renews it (Cheah 161-62). The imperative to act and to "world" is a response to the absolute alterity. To illustrate the "heterotemporality" in literature, Cheah analyzes a fictional conservation project in Amitave Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, in which a character resorts to a GPS device to preserve the subaltern knowledge of dolphin migration patterns. Cheah argues that the cosmopolitan environmentalism represented by this project can be "easily appropriated by global corporations as part of their rhetoric to promote ecotourism," and hence proves a failure as "the solution to the unworlding of the subaltern world" (276). What truly points to the potential of "worlding" of the subaltern, according to Cheah, is the blankness at the center of the novel's plot, especially a storm that cannot be explained by human rationality. This seemingly nonanthropocentric reading nevertheless treats the subaltern as the abstract, absolute other and risks flattening their concrete lived world depicted in the novel, leaving little room for human agency.

In a chapter titled "Limbo" in *The Stolen Bicycle*, Wu Ming-Yi conjures up an ancient age "when humans considered themselves the most insignificant of the animals, the least able to communicate with the spirit" (297). But he does not linger upon the pristine time. The reader is soon guided into the sensorium and consciousness of an elephant involved in a modern war, which turned the elephant into a war machine in Burmese jungles. Abused and wounded, this elephant is constantly troubled by nightmares about the war. It even develops the capability of "smelling" the soldiers' fragmented nightmares and understanding their wounds. There is no easy redemption offered in this mutual understanding. The soldiers and the elephant are all lingering in the "limbo" between life and death, between innocence and guilt. "The elephant acknowledged that pain and fear as its burdens to bear in this life—that the life of an elephant was a dream in which various torments had to be endured" (299). The "limbo" is inscribed with the subaltern heterotemporality of suffering and endurance shared by the elephants and the soldiers. By inviting his reader to become the elephant, Wu Ming-Yi not only reveals the ecological impact of the war but also lends his reader a pair of animal eyes to revisit the human conditions.

The Stolen Bicycle arrives at its climax in a miraculous moment, when the Tsou soldier Pasuya's son discovers that his father's military-use bicycle, the "iron horse," buried in the jungle along with his wartime memories, has been lifted above-ground by a tree, embraced by its branches and leaves, and become its integral part (357). The encounter with this tree marks a heterotemporality. The chimera

Ex-position
June
2019

combining a tree with a bicycle is at once a testimony to the open wound of the war and evidence of ecological destruction and self-healing. On the cover of the novel, designed by Wu Ming-Yi himself, not only the bicycle, but also the elephant, the chimpanzee, and the solider—all human and nonhuman characters—have become one with the tree. This image points to an ecological time that involves and transcends human history, and a world that cannot be easily subsumed by the discourse and counter-discourse of globalization.

In *The Fabulation of a New Earth*, Yu-lin Lee draws attention to Wu Ming-Yi's aesthetics and ethics of "geomacy" (63). Through bodily engaging with the ecology, Wu's work dissolves the sensorium of the writing and reading human subjects, and reassembles them with the nonhuman other, momentarily achieving the indeterminate zone of "affect." This aesthetic and ethical process is crucial for the formation of "weak anthropocentrism." In a recent talk Wu Ming-Yi gave at the Taipei Biennial 2018 exhibition "Museum of Nonhumanity," the writer also proposes a way of human life that is open up to the nonhuman: "Although clouded leopards have become extinct, we can still go to the cloud forest on Mount Beidawu, and climb up trees like clouded leopards. Perhaps a certain type of plan has become extinct, but we can take out next generation to live in the environment where the plant used to live" ("Taipei Biennial 2018"). Wu Ming-Yi even goes further and suggests that what defines Taiwan as a distinctive culture in the world should be a long-term engagement and interaction with its unique ecological system, a culture characterized by "weak anthropocentrism."

The self-reflexive position of "weak anthropocentrism" enables Wu Ming-Yi to *world* Taiwanese literature through its "heterotemporalities," which can be found in the untranslatable moments derived from the lingering trauma of colonial history, different individuals' painstaking efforts of storytelling, and the encounters with the nonhuman other. Towards the end of *The Stolen Bicycle*, we are offered the perspective of the semi-autobiographical narrator "I," who rides on a bicycle in his mother's hospital room and embarks on an imaginary and affective journey through multiple temporalities and ecologies. He sees human and nonhuman characters in the novel reappear and take on alternative destinies. In the heterotemporality of fiction, the reader, just like the narrator, claims only incomplete knowledge and limited visions, yet momentarily becomes the empathetic man with the "compound eyes."

WORKS CITED

- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Cheah, Pheng. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.
- Chiu, Kuei-fen. "'Worlding' World Literature from the Literary Periphery: Four Taiwanese Models." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 30.1 (2018): 13-41.
- Chou, Shiu-huah Serena. "Sense of Wilderness, Sense of Time: Mingyi Wu's Nature Writing and the Aesthetics of Change." *East Asian Ecocriticisms: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Simon C. Estok and Won Chung Kum. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 145-63.
- . "Wu's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and the Worlding of Environmental Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. 16.4 (2014). Web. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.
- Lee, Yu-lin. *The Fabulation of a New Earth*. Taipei: NTU P, 2015.
- Murphy, Patrick. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2000.
- Norton, Bryan G. "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." *Environmental Ethics* 6.2 (1984): 131-48.
- Prystash, Justin. "Speculative Realism, Daoist Aesthetics, and Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25.3 (2018): 510-28.
- Slovic, Scott. "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline." *European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 1.1 (2010): 4-10.
- Snoekstra, Anna. "The Art of Capturing Taiwan; the Craft of Translating It." *Lindsay* 7 Sept. 2017. Web. Accessed 13 Jan. 2019.
- Tsai, Robin Chen-Hsing. "Speculating Extinction: Eco-Accidents, Solastalgia, and Object Lessons in Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 55.4 (2018): 864-76.
- Wang, David Der-wei. "Xiaoshuo 'jiwulun': Wu Ming-Yi *Danche shiqieji ji qita*" ("Novelistic 'Objectivity': Some Reflections on Wu Ming-Yi's *The Stolen Bicycle*"). Preface. *Danche shiqieji (The Stolen Bicycle)*. By Wu Ming-Yi. Taipei: Maitian, 2016. II-XVI.
- Wu, Ming-Yi. *Die dao (The Dao of Butterflies)*. Taipei: Fish & Fish, 2003.
- . *Fuguang (Above Flame)*. Taipei: ThinKingDom, 2014.
- . "Fuyan ren." ("The Man with the Compound Eyes"). *Huye (Grandfather Tiger)*.

Wu Ming-Yi's
"Weak
Anthropocentric"
Gaze

Taipei: Chiuko, 2003.

---. *Mi die zhi (The Book of Lost Butterflies)*. Taipei: Xiari, 2010.

---. *Shuimian de hangxian (Routes of the Dream)*. Taipei: Fish & Fish, 2007.

---. *The Stolen Bicycle*. Trans. Darryl Sterk. Melbourne: Text, 2017.

---. *Tianqiaoshang de moshushi (The Magician on the Skywalk)*. Taipei: Xiari, 2011.

Ex-position
June
2019

***Manuscript received 15 Jan. 2019,
accepted for publication 3 June 2019*