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The Land of Little Rain

苦雨之地

WU, MING-YI 吳明益, 2019

Taipei, Xinjindian wenhua

256 pp., illus.;

NT \$ 340 (pb)

ISBN: 9789869689274

If Jacques Derrida's philosophy has radically changed our understanding of the relationship between human and animal subjectivity, Wu Ming-yi's literary writing goes a step further in challenging the relationship between human and non-human subjectivity in general.

Composed of six individual short stories, *The Land of Little Rain* (*ku yu zhi di*, 苦雨之地, hereafter '*The Land*') explores themes and subjects concerning non-human species in Taiwan. As an ecological writer, Wu Ming-yi is particularly interested in the question of how literature is able to configure non-humans (both animals and non-animals) and unveil their subjectivity to readers. In *The Land*, Wu pursues this objective both by developing a new mode of literary writing and by debunking our anthropocentric conception of language.

Aligning himself with the nature writing at the early stage of his career, Wu's non-fictional essay collections focus mainly on empirical observation and scientific study of the natural environment and non-human species in Taiwan. By contrast, his cli-fi (climate fiction) and his postcolonial environment novels often showcase his literary imagination, in which he anthropomorphises non-human species and dramatises climate events, historical moments, or environmental exploitation. But Wu's writing in *The Land* may take his long-term readers by surprise. It breaks with this former division, going beyond the boundary of fictional writing

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The stories presented in the collection should therefore not be read as the life journeys of the main human characters, but as stories about the non-humans. Each story begins with the author's hand-drawn picture of a wild Taiwanese animal or plant species—a Metaphire Formosae (earthworm), a black-naped Oriole (bird), Taiwan Hemlock (conifer tree), a Formosan clouded leopard, and a grey-face buzzard—in the style of eighteenth-century natural science drawing.¹ These images imitate the effects produced by a camera, representing and documenting wildlife and nature in a faithful manner close to our visual perception. To paint them in such detail, it is necessary for Wu to cultivate an insight into these non-humans. The author has to move away from his anthropocentric gaze and adopt a non-human perspective, capturing the meaning of a buzzard's glance, an earthworm's movement, or a bird's tweeting.

Whilst Wu's other fictions give more attention to our ethical consideration of non-humans, the narratives in *The Land* underline the 'becoming' of non-humans. 'The Clouds are Two Thousand Meters Up (雲在兩千米)' narrates the protagonist's search for an unfinished story written by his deceased wife, a story about the Formosan clouded leopard, an extinct species that lies at the heart of the indigenous Rukai mythology. In the story, details about the leopard's biological features, habitat, diet or hunting habits are carefully interwoven with Guan's (the protagonist) quest to pursue the unfinished story. The undertaken journey

¹ Except the fifth story, 'Eternal Mother (恆久受孕的雌性)', the picture of Pacific bluefin tunas, was drawn by another graphic artist, Wu Ya-ting (吳亞庭).

1 represents a transformational process of 'becoming'. In this meta-fictional story, the
2 'fictional' becomes the 'non-fictional (i.e. an encounter between Guan and A-bao, a character
3 invented by his wife) and the human becomes the animal (i.e. A-bao's transformation into a
4 leopard). Finally, the story ends with the sexual intercourse between Guan and a wildcat,
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38 questions raised in many of Wu's works. In his previous fictional works, the voices of non-
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41 they endure through wars and exploitation. In *The Land*, rather than assuming that non-
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49 Overall, the cross-genre writing that Wu has developed not only offers a fresh perspective on
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