

Weakness in Wu Ming-Yi's *Kuyu Zhi Di**

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the various kinds of weakness presented in Taiwanese writer Wu Ming-Yi's *Kuyu zhi di* (*The Land of Little Rain*). Before *Kuyu*, the term “weakness” has pervaded both his life and writings. In *Diedao* (*The Dao of Butterflies*), Wu confesses his visual weakness, which triggers his interest in light and color-related entities. In *Midiezhi* (*The Book of Lost Butterflies*), he endorses Bryan G. Norton's notion of weak anthropocentrism. In his literary works, including the well-acclaimed novels *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with Compound Eyes*) and *Danche shiqie ji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*), Wu articulates the weakness of nature in face of human exploitation. While various senses of weakness—including “disability,” “mildness,” and “vulnerability”—are expressed in different texts, he plays with the semantic variety and multiplicity of the word further in *Kuyu*: its six stories depict diverse types of human weakness, roles of nature, and interplays of the two in different processes of human spiritual evolution. This suggests that the novella collection features weakness both in theme and form. To clarify the importance of my approach to *Kuyu*, I will first sketch the relationship between humans and nature as reflected in Wu's writings and by the critical reception of them. Then, I will explain what I mean by “weak definition” and “weak depiction” to elucidate the significance of what I call “formal weakness.” Afterwards, I will analyze *Kuyu* in terms of its rendition of human weaknesses, the functions of nature, and the correlations of the two

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in human spiritual evolution and do so according to Wu's design (i.e., pair by pair). For the conclusion, I will discuss formal weakness or the weak annihilation of annihilation as his answer to the inquiry after "the meaning of annihilation as an essence of life" in *Kuyu*.

Keywords: Wu Ming-Yi, *Kuyu zhi di* (*The Land of Little Rain*), weakness, nature, spiritual evolution, formal weakness

In this paper, I will examine the various kinds of weakness presented in Taiwanese writer Wu Ming-Yi's *Kuyu zhi di* (*The Land of Little Rain*), a collection of six novellas published in 2019. Before *Kuyu*, the term “weakness” has pervaded both his life and writings. As Wu confesses in *Diedao* (*The Dao of Butterflies*), his second work on butterflies, he is born with visual weakness—the red-green color blindness—which triggers his interest in light and color-related entities (34-43). In his first book on butterflies, *Midiezhi* (*The Book of Lost Butterflies*), he mentions that instead of a strong anthropocentrism prioritizing the satisfaction of human needs at the cost of nature or an anti-anthropocentrism downplaying everything human, he prefers Bryan G. Norton's idea of “weak anthropocentrism” (170), which allows the human use of natural resources if it is “rationally” made (Norton 134). Wu's literary works, including the well-acclaimed novels *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with Compound Eyes*) and *Danche shiqie ji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*), articulate the weakness or vulnerability of nature in face of human exploitation. *Kuyu* is his latest work concerned with the same issue, with the spotlight now cast more on human beings.

This shift of attention is primarily shown in the afterword of the novella collection: as Wu explains, “most characters of this novel are scientists, amateur scientists, and adventurers bearing some spiritual or physical pain” (*Kuyu* 248).¹ Later, he states that “the responsibility of a novelist resides in not so much reconstructing what has been annihilated as exploring the meaning of annihilation as an essence of life” (252), implying annihilation as one of the several kinds of human weakness at issue in *Kuyu*. In the afterword Wu also writes that “with the novel as a literary form,” he tries to “envision the changes in the human-environment relationship and that between the human and other species, in order to sense the spiritual evolution of humans as a biological kind” (248). He even maintains that if “scholars of evolution talk about the physical evolution of human beings, novels are meant to deal with [their] abstract ‘spiritual’ evolution” (248). Here Wu's reference to humans' weakness, their relationship with nature, and their spiritual evolution on the same page reflects that for him, the three connect closely. In fact, this connection is delineated diversely in *Kuyu*. At times, with the help of nature, the human characters learn to, as implied by the word “evolution,” adapt to the weaknesses they face, thereby getting empowered and reborn in their spiritual evolutions.² At other times, nature becomes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations of Wu's works cited here are my own.

² I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer's reminder regarding the association of evolution and adaptation. Although Wu's “spiritual evolution” derives from Edward O. Wilson's “cultural evolution,” which contrasts with the biological evolution of humankind, the two, as Wilson observes, are connected inasmuch as a cultural evolution is also a “gene-culture coevolution” (55-56). It is therefore sensible to comprehend “evolution” in *Kuyu* in both ways.

what they should accommodate to in order to better deal with their losses and sufferings, thus earning their spiritual recoveries. At still other times, nature causes or symbolizes their weaknesses or failures of adaptation, recalling Wu's inquiry after the significance of annihilation as what inheres in life. Moreover, insofar as his phrase "spiritual evolution" recalls Edward O. Wilson's "cultural evolution," which designates the long history of human culture (Wilson 56), this term should be understood to indicate the processes of change undergone by the human characters of *Kuyū*, with these procedures structured by the variegated interplays of human weakness and nature and bearing different results. This means that each of its six novellas tells a different association of the human characters and nature regarding their weaknesses, or a particular course and conclusion of human spiritual evolution.

What this paper will explore is the various forms of human weakness, roles of nature, and procedures and endings of human spiritual evolution emerging in human-nature interactions in *Kuyū*. Resembling the aforesaid semantic variety and multiplicity of the word "weakness" in Wu's writings—it expresses disability, mildness, and vulnerability in different texts—his rendition of these terms changes from story to story. In addition, the fact that the six novellas of *Kuyū*, as Wu clarifies, "relate pairwise" (*Kuyū* 250) shows that the presentation of these keywords also varies from pair to pair. Either way, besides the thematic focus on weakness, formal weaknesses—"weak definition" and "weak depiction"—can be said to characterize the text.

To better justify weakness as my approach to *Kuyū*, I will first briefly review Wu's articulation of the human-nature relationship as seen in his writings and reflected by the critical reception of them. By this, I attempt to expound how he recasts the subject matter of weakness in the novella collection. Then, I will explain what I mean by phrases like weak definition and weak depiction, particularly what inspires these notions, so as to elucidate the significance of formal weakness. Afterwards, I will analyze the different forms of human weakness, functions of nature, processes of their interplay, and results of human spiritual evolution in *Kuyū*. I will do so according to Wu's design, i.e., pair by pair. For the conclusion, I will discuss formal weakness or the weak annihilation of annihilation as Wu's answer to his exploration of annihilation as what is innate in life in *Kuyū*.

Humans and Nature from *Midiezh* to *Kuyu*

In his oeuvre, Wu consistently deals with the relationship between humans and nature, with his articulation evolving as well. For example, his aforementioned endorsement of Norton's idea of weak anthropocentrism in *Midiezh* displays his understanding of how humans should associate with nature. In *Diedao*, Wu underscores the "subtle light" from butterflies, which "can 'enlighten' . . . the human mind" in a way the natural sciences cannot (49). In the essay "Shuxie ziran de youwei tianqi" ("Writing of the Subtle Revelation of Nature"), he calls this light from nature its "subtle revelation" and treats nature writings as carrying the same function: they likewise enable human beings to "respect . . . other living forms" and learn how to "co-exist with" them (19, 17).

However, scholar Jian-Chun Lan critiques Wu's early works for their overemphasis on the Western sciences and ignorance of other epistemological regimes, specifically those of the indigenous people in Taiwan (237-40). Also, Lan asserts that Wu's conception of nature reads as obscure, with his reference to the subtle revelation evoked by nature mystifying it (246). By contrast, Hui-Feng Shin contends that Wu's mystification of nature actually helps neutralize anthropocentrism and guarantees a more adequate interaction between humans and nature (111). Similarly going against Lan, Chuan-fen Jhuang maintains that in *Jia li shuibian name jin* (*So Much Water So Close to Home*) Wu gives "scientific studies" and "traditional ecological knowledge" (TEK) the same weight, without favoring one over the other (250).³ Shin's and Jhuang's readings are testified by what Wu says in *Jia li*, where he recounts in detail, e.g., both the scientific facts and the Amis understanding of the Meilun River, with different knowledge systems providing its different landscapes (33-39).

On the other hand, as Jhuang also points out, Wu's *Jia li* accentuates humans' damage of nature and the latter's strike back on them (Jhuang 240). This theme recurs in *Fuyan*: as Rose Hsiu-li Juan observes, the Pacific Trash Vortex portrayed in the novel constitutes "a symptom of the alienated nature of human creation" and serves as "an extravagant example" of the "environmental payback" (82, 86). Approaching the same text, Kathryn Yalan Chang adopts a different perspective: she underscores the "[m]aterial agency" of nature and "the unbroken connection between nature and culture"—i.e., Donna Haraway's "'naturecultures' continuum"—presented in the novel, as exemplified by the character Dahu, who knows how to respect nature and listen to its material voices (Chang 95-96, 103).

³ This spotlight on TEK is Wu's; he considers it "a rational mode of action" like the Western natural sciences (*Yi shuxie* 3: 25).

This human-nonhuman harmony is also captured by Lin-chin Tsai in his reading of Wu's *Danche*: the fact that the character "Pasuya even tries to learn the language of the Karen [elephant] in order to communicate with elephants" echoes the "bicycle-embracing tree" metaphor of the novel, which envisions an "eco-community" where "all members (human and non-human, as well as living and nonliving) . . . must" participate to attain "a promising and sustainable future" (41, 46).

That said, if, according to Chang's and Tsai's interpretations, both *Fuyan* and *Danche* suggest the interdependence of humans and nature, it is usually the former who need to initiate such a relationship, whereas the latter is generally depicted as susceptible to their exploitation and destruction. It is then remarkable that in *Kuyu* Wu reverses this association, mainly by highlighting human weakness. That is, with the novella collection, he does not really repeat his early renditions of nature: while nature does inspire the human characters and arouse their respect toward other forms of living, it does so more by enabling their actual empowerments or spiritual recoveries than by simply offering them some mysterious light. When nature has something to do with the transience of human rebirth and the ineluctable annihilation of human existence, this shows not so much the payback of nature as the essential weakness of humankind. And as mentioned, Wu's treatment of humans, nature, and the processes and outcomes of their interactions in relation to human weaknesses varies throughout *Kuyu*. This indicates that the work is typical of weakness both in theme and form, with what I label weak definition and weak depiction contributing to its formal weakness.

Weak Definition and Depiction

By "weak definition" I mean the flexible understanding and employment of a term: its definition is weak inasmuch as it exhibits variability and multiplicity in meaning and has no regular significance, while it also functions as the container encompassing its semantic variants. This perception is inspired by two sources: Gianni Vattimo's notion of weak thought and Wu's own phrase "jiefang" (界義). Vattimo holds that a thought is weak if it is founded on no "archai" (origin), "Gründe" (ground), "primary evidences [sic]" or "ultimate destinies," with "no new master, ground or foundation" generated "when the old one is overthrown" (43, 46). That is, a weak thought characterizes a word or phrase if its meaning constantly changes, without a fixed definition produced. In addition, in his essay collection *Yi shuxie jiefang ziran* (*Liberating Nature through*

Writing), Wu sees “*jiēyì*” as the type of definition that is “flowing,” in opposition to “*dìngyì*” (定義), which suggests a fixed signification (*Yi shuxie* 1: 24). With both perspectives in view, the definition of a term can be considered “weak” when it bears no steady sense—i.e., when it expresses different meanings in different texts and serves as the umbrella term comprising these multiple designations. What I refer to as weak definition pertains to this semantic variation, multiplicity, and agglomeration.

This design certainly structures Wu's *Kuyu*. What immediately exemplifies this is his explanation of the meaning of its title: the land he portrays is “bitter” or “*ku*” (苦) “not only because there is little rain, but also because there is too much rain” (248), which indexes the possibility of understanding the same word in different and even opposite ways. Another instance is his presentation of weakness in the novella collection. While, as mentioned, the human characters of *Kuyu* similarly have spiritual or physical pain, the kind of weakness at issue is not always the same: being weak may indicate physical abnormality, psychological disturbance, the ephemerality of human rebirth, the essential feebleness of human beings, and even the non-absolute annihilation of annihilation in different or sometimes within the same (pairs of) stories. In this logic, Wu's rendition of weakness in the text is formally “weak.”

Accompanying the weak definition of weakness in *Kuyu* is its weak depiction of the roles of nature as well as the processes and results of human spiritual evolution. Sometimes, the work tells how natural entities enlighten the human characters, guiding or mediating their empowerments and enabling them to adapt to the weaknesses they encounter. At other times, the narrative depicts their spiritual recoveries and reconciliations with their lovers, with these procedures patterned on different interplays of reality and fiction. At still other times, the text articulates nature's exposition of human characters' weaknesses, by either causing the transience of their rebirths or constituting a metaphor for the fundamental fragility of their existences, with the symbolic equivalence between human and natural entities eventually allowing Wu's employment of the character Thalassa as the epitome and embodiment of the formal weakness of *Kuyu*. In other words, in portraying the various weaknesses of its human characters, the novella collection also delineates the multiple functions of nature and different courses of human spiritual evolution, with empowerment, recovery, and annihilation marking the three general results of the human-nature interaction.

The characteristic of generality borne by *Kuyu* further suggests that this work, recalling the aforesaid meaning of weak definition, also constitutes a formal container carrying the same elements (human weakness, role of nature, etc.).

Notably, the theme of commonness as such is common in Wu's works. As Tsung-chieh Huang observes, connections can be easily spotted across his writings (e.g., the character Dahu appears in both *Fuyan* and *Kuyu*) and within *Kuyu*—the online virus *Yunduan liefeng* recurs in all of its six stories, signposting the coexistence of their characters in the same world (Huang) and, formally speaking, the co-being of the six tales in the same textual space. That said, the thematic commonness or coexistence should also be seen as treated “weakly” in *Kuyu*, namely, with variation and multiplication. An illustration of this is exactly the recurrent *Yunduan liefeng*: the virus does not affect the human characters of the story collection to the same degree; nor does it carry the same plot weight in the six stories. It is this correspondence of subject matter and formal design that clarifies how, as Wu explains in the afterword of *Kuyu*, the work is composed “as a novel” (245): at best a formally “weak” one, insofar as its key terms are defined and depicted weakly—with variability and multiplicity—while they are encompassed in the same textual container. In what follows, I will explore Wu's weak rendition of human weaknesses, the functions of nature, as well as the procedures and outcomes of human spiritual evolution in the six stories pairwise.

Weakness and Empowerment

The first two stories of *Kuyu*, “Black Night, Black Earth, Black Range” and “How the Brain Got Language?,” recount how their human characters are empowered and even reborn thanks to their weaknesses—their “spiritual or physical pain”—with their spiritual evolutions inspired or mediated by nature. The heroine of “Black Night” is Sophie Meier, a Taiwanese born with the disease of achondroplasia (whose main symptom is dwarfism) and therefore discarded by her biological mother.⁴ Though attended to and loved well by her adoptive parents, Mr. and Mrs. Meier, the misshapen Sophie still undergoes psychological weaknesses, as exhibited by her identity crisis and alienation from the world. For example, in childhood “Sophie starts to dislike herself when looking into the mirror” (15). After being knocked over by a fellow boy because “she is too small to see,” she even comes to “dislike everything that can be seen only when one looks upwards, including kites, swallows, and clouds” (16), i.e., whatever relates to light, the bright sky, and the outside world. Sophie's double weaknesses—her deformation and self-denial—linger in adulthood. Grown up, she still

⁴ For the translation of characters' names, I will adopt their corresponding form in English if there is one; if not, I will transliterate them, with their Chinese original given in parentheses.

regards herself as “defective,” like “an abnormal pea in the pod,” doubts her ability to love and reproduce, questions whether her life is worth living, and keeps distance from others (33, 25, 36).

In a sense, it is Sophie's weaknesses that make her transformation possible. After all, it is owing to others' mockery of her unusual tininess in size and her consequent disconnection from others that she turns attention to dirt digging and then discovers that “within the soil is not only” trash or waste “but also anonymous treasure,” with this “treasure” connoting earthworms or “*Regenwurm*” in German (16). And since Sophie “falls in love with *Regenwurm*” (16), she has devoted herself to the study of these dark beings living underground. Here Sophie's interest in earthworms is not accidental; it is rather meant to demonstrate their similarities. As Wu speaks through her, earthworms are usually regarded as “eerie” in that they “have no eyes, hands, or feet,” whereas these “tiny, wrinkled uglies” remain vulnerable to their natural enemies, such as “moles and sparrows” (16-17). These cases disclose that Sophie is the double of earthworms: both are treated as disfigured and despicable, while being exposed to others' scorn and violence. It is not groundless that Sophie is nicknamed “the Earthworm Girl” in the story.

Now, it is these weak, ugly beings dwelling in the dark world that enlighten her, enabling her to adapt to her weaknesses and ultimately leading her to be empowered and even reborn. If earthworms are known to have “adapted to the dark world” and to be able to “swallow the soil around and keep those invisible nutrients in their own bodies” (17), the Earthworm Girl is capable of the same: she “can similarly digest a way out of darkness” (29) and preserve the acquired “invisible nutrients”—what she learns from these animals—in herself. As a child, she has already found that these creatures “have all kinds of senses, just as all the amiable living beings do. . . . Their vitality is so intense and strong. . . . There are both childhood and adolescence in their lives. . . . They do not seem to be bothered by” their look (17). Later, as a college student, Sophie investigates the reproduction of earthworms, noticing that they can procreate with clitella and egg cocoons (25). While reflecting her talent and success as a researcher on earthworms, these passages mark how the weak creatures inspire her: no matter how tiny and ugly they look, they have the same capacities as other living beings—they are equally capable of sense perception, love, and reproduction—and are never troubled by their appearance. For the Earthworm Girl, this suggests that she can and should have the same abilities and mentalities, which she begins to acquire about the middle of the narration. As Wu describes, “looking at the distorted image of herself reflected on the surface of the glass tube, Sophie suddenly finds herself” not only as “strange and vulgar” but also “as beautiful as”

earthworms (24). The perception of her own beauty indexes the start of her self-affirmation because of these natural entities.

But this indicates only the first step of Sophie's process of transfiguration; she rather needs to undertake a journey—the walk on the Way of St. James—to be reborn, namely, to completely digest or adapt to her double weaknesses at the end of her spiritual evolution. This happens again thanks to earthworms: as Wu reveals, during the walk, “whenever she spots a place with soil where earthworms may be hidden, she will crouch close to the ground and dig with a rake” (36), then putting the collected ones in tubes. This implies that Sophie's travel is guided by the dark creatures residing underground, with her route decided by them. In the same vein, it is owing to these ugly beings that Sophie “walks through one bright burclover plain after another,” with “her soles . . . covered with seeds” and “hair grow[ing] over her shoulders the first time in many years” (36). What the images of “her soles” being “covered with seeds” and “hair growing over her shoulders” express is the advent of her ultimate change: she is about to sprout as a plant, become as vital as earthworms, and therefore get reborn. Put simply, Sophie's transformation is allowed precisely by her favorite creatures, which accompany her and direct her way throughout the journey, bringing about her rebirth as a result.

At the conclusion of “Black Night,” the Earthworm Girl walks to a beach, where “she looks at herself” and “comforts [her body] with her eyes. She never thinks of cutting them [her bodily parts] off with a sharp knife” (37). Sophie is now thoroughly transformed: never considering severing her bodily parts, she no more doubts her right to birth and the value of her life; regarding—looking at and caring for—herself, she is furnished with the ability to love, specifically herself. In other words, she has become the Earthworm Girl, though now in the sense of being capable of doing whatever earthworms can. What the episode also reflects is that her spiritual evolution concludes with empowerment: her weaknesses are now complemented, if not replaced, by self-approval and self-love. To this degree, Sophie successfully adapts to darkness—be it conceived as the earth, its dark residents, or her physical and spiritual pain.

What merits further attention here is Wu's unconventional deployment of light and darkness as symbols in “Black Night”: the former relates to weakness and the latter strength instead of the other way around. As the sentence “The light that moving has man's life for shade”—a verse by Edward Burn-Jones employed as the name of the key to Mr. Meier's cloud drive—suggests, whatever pertains to light, be it the outside world or what Sophie sees in the bright sky, helps her little in her spiritual evolution. It is instead darkness, her weaknesses as much as the dark dirt and the dark *Regenwurm* dwelling within and

feeding on it, that makes her vitalized and transfigured. This importance of darkness in Sophie's change also accounts for Wu's repeated reference to the color black in the title of the story: only through the guidance of blackness, darkness, and, by analogy, weakness can Sophie be truly enlightened in her story.

Similar to "Black Night," "The Brain" highlights the involvement of weakness and nature in the empowerment of its main character, Dizi (狄子), though his story displays a more complicated turn and twist. On the one hand, like Sophie, he is born with a congenital disease, i.e., autism. As Wu puts it, "in elementary school, Dizi is famous for timidity and silence," interacting little with classmates (40). What is worse, after receiving measles vaccination, Dizi loses the ability to speak; since then, he "has never made a sound," as if he is "dwelling on his own planet" (42, 43). Yet, in the meantime Dizi "starts to become sensitive to sounds" and exhibit his talent, being able to perfectly identify bird sounds and precisely transcribe them into musical notes even though he "does not know how to write the names of these birds" (41, 42). In this view, it is with the loss of the faculty of speech that he comes to fulfill the gift implied by his name, a homophone of "dizi" (笛子) in Chinese.

Natural entities also play a key role in Dizi's spiritual evolution: they enable him to care about others, a sign of the fact that he has walked out of the weakness of autism. An immediate example is Audubon, the pet dog of his family. When Dizi's mother—who used to take great care of him and has miraculously led him to regain the ability of speaking—is lost in the suffering of divorce, it is Audubon that "absorbs Dizi's pain" and "warms his chest" (46). Because of this, Dizi is, unlike Sophie, not disturbed by others' discrimination or his mother's neglect; he even serves as her support and cheers her in her bad days (46), which displays his capacity to love others. Dizi's empowerment is also made possible by birds, his only friends in childhood. No other entities "rest on him" and "moisturize the soil" of his world when he lives in isolation (49). In return, "Dizi never has [the birds] suffer a little more when taking their blood samples" as a graduate student in a research team on bird songs (48). This again reflects his capability of caring for others and his openness to the outside world, both of which signpost his recovery from autism.

Unfortunately, other weaknesses inflict Dizi: both Audubon and his mother die; in consequence, he falls severely ill and loses the faculty of hearing, which he never recuperates physically. That said, another natural being comes to inspire him, leading him to adapt to the physical weakness and initiating the possibility of his ultimate empowerment and rebirth at the end of his spiritual evolution. As Wu reveals, during a trip to Eastern Taiwan, he happens upon Sophie, who hands him an earthworm contained in a tube. Before this, Dizi

already knows that “human beings can live without hearing or seeing anything,” though this understanding makes him nothing but “*seemingly* reborn” (57, 56; emphasis added). By contrast, this encounter with the earthworm sparks his true transformation. Seeing this natural entity’s ability to “sense vibrations with [its] setae” and thus “hear” without any auditory organs (59), he perceives that he can do the same, i.e., hearing and communicating nonverbally. For this reason, he begins to learn sign language.

Whereas this idea does work, Dizi soon meets another weakness: the powerlessness of language in expression. As Queban (雀斑)—his mentor in the sign language class—tells him, “there is always something that no language,” verbal or nonverbal, “can express” (65). While this weakness underlying all languages obstructs Dizi’s plan to establish a bird appreciation club for deaf people, it also gives him the freedom to explore the possibility of designating birds and their songs: since no human language can communicate everything, he can develop a new and imaginative way of naming by himself. This corresponds to what Dizi learns when recalling the poetic line once recited to him by his mother: “What if there were a hidden pleasure / in calling one thing / by another’s name” (66). “For things that cannot be said directly” or literally, he can “express in a hidden”—metaphoric and poetic—“manner” (66). What results from this understanding is an original and innovative method of expressing birds’ names and songs in sign language: e.g., the black-naped oriole is now indicated by the phrase “waterweed wavering unhurriedly in the stream” (66). To this extent, Dizi shows a great power of imagination at the border of the powerlessness of language, which attests to his true empowerment and rebirth.

This transformation is further implied by the ending of “The Brain.” On the last pages of the story, Dizi tries to express his love to Xiaocui (小翠)—a club member on whom he has a crush—by the very phrase he employs in naming black-naped orioles. Here Wu does not tell directly whether his love is requited. Instead, he implies the result in the last paragraph of “The Brain,” where a black-naped oriole which “chirps [so] hard” that “even a stone hears it” (74) is described to suddenly appear. With something as insensitive as a stone hearing Dizi’s feeling, Wu hints that Xiaocui understands and even accepts his love. Communicating his feeling figuratively, Dizi exhibits not simply his successful adaptation to weaknesses—his bereavement and loss of the abilities to speak and hear—but also his competence to play with linguistic weakness, which points to his authentic change.

What is also worth mentioning is that Dizi’s empowerment as presented in the second half of “The Brain” is less guided than mediated by nature. Whereas birds, as mentioned previously, have once consoled him and shielded

him against psychological darkness, here they play a very different role. If these animals still empower Dizi in the latter part of his spiritual evolution, they do so less by showing him what to do—as earthworms in “Black Night” and the one handed by Sophie to him do—than by representing the gap between name and reality and therefore evoking for him the likelihood of a new method of designation. After all, it is in trying to name birds and their songs that Dizi comes across the impotency of language, and it is in managing to work out a solution that he invents a creative and imaginative way of designation. The mediating role assumed by birds is also manifested by the black-naped oriole at the end of “The Brain”: with its name serving as the means by which Dizi expresses his feeling, this natural being can be argued to function as a mediator rather than an instructor in his expression of love.

In fact, the contrast between the roles of nature in the spiritual evolutions of Sophie and Dizi displays that with the first two novellas of *Kuyu Wu* does not tell the same story twice. Common elements may be shared by “Black Night” and “The Brain,” but this nowhere eclipses their differences. Another example is that the former starts with its main character’s physical weakness, which brings about her psychological disorder, while the latter addresses the weaknesses that stand more between or at least cover both the physical and mental domains at the same time (as illustrated by Dizi’s autism and loss of the faculties of speech and hearing). Nor are the two characters’ empowerments the same: Sophie learns to love and affirm herself; Dizi earns the capacity to express his feeling toward others and do so creatively and figuratively. In this sense, the two novellas already demonstrate Wu’s weak—different and even opposed—rendition of the same constituents and play with formal weakness in *Kuyu*. That said, the following two tales bring greater variety and multiplicity to his treatment of weakness as both a theme and a form, mainly through the accent on the dynamics of reality and fiction.

Interplay of Reality and Fiction in Weakness and Spiritual Recovery

At first glance, the narrative structures of the third and fourth stories of *Kuyu*, “From the Ice Shield a Forest Grew” and “The Clouds Are Two Thousand Meters Up,” resemble those of their antecedents: the two novellas likewise relate how their human characters adapt to their weaknesses in their spiritual evolutions, again thanks to nature’s participation. Yet, it is remarkable that in the two texts Wu also treats the theme of weakness differently and thereby contributes more to the formal weakness of *Kuyu*, chiefly via the different

articulations of the interplay of reality and fiction. Indeed, both elements have appeared in “Black Night” and “The Brain”: Sophie studies the facts of earthworms; Dizi is imaginative in naming birds and their songs. Yet, only in the second pair of stories of *Kuyū* are reality and fiction put in a more complex and chiastic relation, with their correlation adopted as the narrative core of the two tales. In addition, a different form of human spiritual evolution is introduced: in the two novellas Wu narrates not so much the empowerments of the human characters as their spiritual recoveries, i.e., their adaptations to their traumas and reconciliations with their lovers. One weakness actually pertains to the other. Unlike the talented Sophie and Dizi, the main characters of “Ice Shield” and “The Clouds” are ordinary people or, as Wu puts it, amateurish in their research projects, being unable to digest the weaknesses they face and change them into what enables their rebirths. In other words, they are hardly empowered by nature; it rather takes an alternative manner of accommodating to weaknesses for them to be transformed in their spiritual evolutions.

“Ice Shield” addresses the importance of reality over fiction in the connection of human weakness and nature. The heroine of the story is Minmin (敏敏), who is highly traumatized after her boyfriend Axian (阿賢) falls off a giant tree right after their quarrel and becomes vegetative. Bearing a strong sense of guilt, she resorts to the therapy “Rebirth” founded by Doctor Cheng, with her consciousness set to live in a world of virtual reality where she has to struggle to survive by herself. The founding principle of the treatment is that “by knowing in advance the harmlessness and controllability of an experience and stepping into [it] autonomously, the attendants will heal emotionally” (105). For Doctor Cheng, only by repeatedly undergoing the same scenario, experiencing pain and fear, and getting near death, will people recover from their traumas (104).

The fault with the therapy is its fabricated reality, as echoed by two other cases in “Ice Shield”: the online game bearing the same name as the story and the amusement park “Fictional Forest.” Before meeting Axian, Minmin gets addicted to the game because it allows her to have imaginary powers and forget her family issues. Nevertheless, fictional empowerment compares nowhere to the real-life support offered by Axian, who constitutes “her line of life” ever since they meet (110). On the other hand, Fictional Forest is where Xiaotie (小鐵)—a tree master who later serves as a member of Axian and Minmin’s research team on trees and becomes their common friend—works. As Wu reveals, the park is built “to have people regain ‘the experience of slow living in a real forest,’” but it is in fact populated with “half-real trees,” which are furnished with “artificial leaves that will never wither” (111). And, as Xiaotie explains, these trees may appear to be “still living,” whilst they are actually “already dead” (115).

The problem underlying the half-real trees and the amusement park is clear: the nature presented there is “domesticated” and thus fake; the visitors may feel danger and fear but, in the words of its slogan, “it is definitely safe” (111-12). In any case, fiction helps little in Minmin’s spiritual evolution.

For Minmin to truly recover, it requires real weakness: being actually rather than virtually exposed to fright and death. This occurs thanks to her association with nature, specifically her plan of tree climbing together with Axian and Xiaotie. To make the idea work, she practices under the instruction of Xiaotie in Fictional Forest, where she already experiences the real danger brought by nature: although there “everything around is fake,” “the fear” is real and “insurmountable”; as Xiaotie explains, “when you are going upward, there is nothing to grasp except the ropes . . . you can only get used to this” (116). Yet, this danger is not real enough. As Xiaotie also puts it, “climbing a tree in field is different from doing that in a fictional forest”: the half-real trees “only shake but do not fall down”; by contrast, the real ones may appear healthy but “are already rotten inside” (115). It is this authentic menace from the real natural environment that is finally helpful: only after training in natural, real woodlands does Minmin “understand the fact that life is *fragile*,” a lesson she does not get when she participates in “Rebirth” or practices in Fictional Forest (116; emphasis added). More importantly, in the real forests she also “*feels more secure*” when she undergoes “*the unwellness caused by the humidity*” (116; emphasis added). In other words, real weakness matters in her spiritual evolution: it takes her real vulnerability and discomfort caused by the real nature, as embodied by the height of the trees and the humidity of the forests, to gain a sense of safety and recover spiritually. In fact, it is the real threat from the real natural world that enables her to actualize her plan and reconcile with Axian. When Xiaotie insists that she be “prepare[d] for” the real tree climbing in a forest, Minmin insists that “nothing will remain the same if it is well . . . prepared” (117). This suggests that the real exposure to the real threat to life has transformed her and equipped her with determination, paving the way for her rebirth at the end of the story.

The last pages of “Ice Shield” demonstrate how Minmin’s effort pays off: with Xiaotie’s help, Axian is pulled up onto “the top of a forty-meter giant tree in the . . . mountains,” where the three enjoy together the spectacle below and have goosebumps (120). In the penultimate section of the story, Minmin and Axian even make up, with the latter’s consciousness reviving a bit: as Wu describes, “hooking her calf onto his” and “caressing his face and cold neck,” “[s]he finds that he seems to have an erection” (121), which marks his awareness of and response to her love. In a sense, this results from Minmin’s hard

work and determination. But it also arises from the weakness she and Axian experience—the vulnerability to the real danger felt in the real natural world. This understanding is endorsed by Doctor Cheng’s explanation to Minmin that goosebumps originate from either fear or excitement (104). In the final scene of “Ice Shield,” this physical response reflects not so much either emotion as both, therefore spotlighting how real recovery and rebirth pivot on real weakness. This is also implied by the title of the story: insofar as “from ice shield grew a forest,” only from real fear does real transformation emerge.

Perhaps Axian, whose name suggests “wisdom” in Chinese, is the true wise man who grasps real weakness the best. After all, it is he who tells Minmin that, corresponding to the powerlessness of language in naming as shown in “The Brain,” “not all relations have a name” and, watching a mysterious spectacle with Xiaotie, says to him that they “are not in experience” (114-15, 119). Axian knows that besides being exposed to the real danger of death or the feelings of real fright and excitement, life is always subject to real weakness—to what one cannot know or name and has never experienced or will never comprehend. Yet, as said, neither he nor Minmin or Xiaotie is Dizi; none of them can figure out how to bridge the gap between language-knowledge and reality with creativity. The alternative left for them is openness to real weakness experienced in the real nature, as testified by the ending of Minmin’s spiritual evolution.

The next story “The Clouds” stresses more the significance of fiction—including imagination and the fictionalization of nature—in its main character’s spiritual recovery. The hero of the novella is identified only by his last name, “Guan” (關), which means “to close” in Chinese. The sense of shutting himself already dominates his life before he is traumatized by the death of his wife: as Wu narrates, “Guan’s wife,” a fiction writer, “can easily see . . . that he does not care about her creation” (136). And for her, “Guan’s life is too monotonous” to be written into stories, which instead require “daydreams, delusions, illusions, and lies” (156). Guan’s life is apparently marked by adherence to reality—what is real and certain—and indifference to the opposite—the imaginary and indefinite. This perhaps accounts for why, in contrast with his wife, he works as a lawyer.

Guan’s insistence on fact and reality does not change much after his wife’s death, even though he is once inspired by nature in the first half of the story: he is depicted to happen upon a peacock, which leads him to “build a garden around his wife’s graveyard” and feel that “there is still goodwill in the world” when “watching tiny buds . . . growing toward light” (135). However, this nowhere suffices in causing his rebirth. Both the plants and the garden function as substitutes for his wife, reiterating their relationship: “she lives in his

craftwork”; “no matter how tall the plants are, he always feels he is an overseer and a giver” (137-38). That is, Guan controls the plants and garden as he used to do his wife and their marriage. To this extent, he has not truly transformed; his old self simply persists.

Indeed, in “The Clouds” reality bears the same function it does in “Ice Shield.” As Wu describes, staying “in the misty forest at the nighttime” in search of the now extinct clouded leopards in the mountains, Guan perceives that “[o]nce the artificial lights are off, one can see nothing clearly with the naked eyes” and that in darkness, “every creature” has to “stay alert” because they are simultaneously “the hunter and the prey” (138). This shows that like Minmin, Guan experiences real weakness—specifically exposure to darkness and threat from other creatures—in the real natural environment. Nevertheless, this is not enough in initiating his transfiguration; for his spiritual rebirth to occur, it rather needs his openness to imagination and, more specifically, fictionalization of nature.

In the story, the importance of fiction is conveyed through two characters. One is Guan’s wife: writing stories, she “looks sad at times, angry at other times, and desperate at still other times . . . because [she] has merged with her characters” (145). This somewhat echoes how Xiaotie’s *ama* (father) understands story-telling: as Xiaotie tells Guan, “my *ama* used to say that story-telling benefits not so much others as the self” since “telling a story, you have to imagine yourself as another person, a tree, a boar” (150).

In “The Clouds,” the possibility of realizing—i.e., seeing and enacting—the principle of merging with others or imagining oneself as another person or being is triggered by Guan’s chance encounter with a mystical being called “the shadow.” This takes place again in his search for clouded leopards, which is spurred by his wife’s unfinished story about Abao (阿豹, which refers to “leopard”), a young Rukai man seeking these extinct animals but never finding one. During his stay in the mountains, Guan first sets up cameras and hair traps to get their traces and the factual proof of their existence, though his adherence to reality soon gives way to openness to fiction in his interaction with the shadow. In the novella, Guan meets this mystical being twice. In their first encounter, he only sees through one camera “an image looking like both a human and an animal” or “a naked, thin ‘man’ that seems to be covered in dirt, sprawling on the ground and running on ‘all fours’” (152), with both descriptions suggesting that Guan cannot make sure what he actually meets or even whether the meeting ever happens. “On the midnight of three days later,” he comes upon this uncertain being again; this time he “sees a tiny image on a tree branch outside the [tree] tent. Guan turns off the tent lights so that the shadow outside

looks clearer. It is neither a clouded leopard nor a bear, but the shadow of a human being” (153-54). What merits attention here is that in their conversation the shadow only repeats what has been said by Abao in Guan’s wife’s fiction—which only Guan knows and has read—and hence should be seen as Abao’s double. “When Guan finally makes up his mind to lift open the tree tent, he no longer sees any trace of the shadow” (160). This exhibits that his encounter with the shadow is a fictional one, born out of his fantasy, if not delusion. More importantly, their conversation is always mediated, by either the camera or the tent, while in the narration it also alternates with Guan’s recollection of his wife, specifically her complaint about the blandness of his life and the elements she regards as essential to fiction writing. What these cases demonstrate is the same: the meeting with the shadow happens only in Guan’s mind; he is enacting his wife’s writing principle unawares. Only this way is Guan’s rebirth—his recovery from his trauma and reconciliation with his wife and the fact of her death—rendered possible.

Now, this understanding clarifies the meaning of the following passage in the story. Leaving the tree tent, Guan walks to some cliff and observes alone “the sea of clouds surging in front of him . . . he once sees his wife’s face in the clouds; she then disappears gradually, as if they separate for the second time” (161). Meantime, he remembers Xiaotie’s words that clouds are actually stories—namely, fiction. This episode suggests that Guan is finally able to grasp the significance of imagination instead of remaining obsessed with what is real and certain. This new mentality is proved by his decision to finish his wife’s story, sketching Abao as someone who is so attentive to seeking clouded leopards that he “becomes” one “in his dream” and “in the forest” as well (162). Intriguingly, on the last pages of “The Clouds,” Guan also turns into Abao and, by analogy, a clouded leopard: as Wu depicts, in his dream in the mountains, Guan sees “a big cat com[ing] into his tent. . . . With courage from nowhere, he presses his forehead against its, and it presses back and struggles in love. In response, he suddenly bites into its neck, forcing it down under *the paws*” (163; emphasis added). The episode shows that in his dream-vision Guan fulfills what both his wife has performed and Xiaotie’s father has advised regarding storytelling: pressing down Abao with “paws” rather than hands, he merges with his character and turns into someone else—more precisely, a being of some other species. To this extent, Guan fictionalizes nature, opening himself toward imagination, and no more shutting himself in reality.

It is this metamorphosis that unfolds the symbolic meaning of the end of “The Clouds”: after his dream-vision, Guan “lifts open the tree tent,” as if he is “about to walk out of that chrysalis” (164), with the image of “walking out of

that chrysalis” marking nothing but his full recovery and rebirth in his spiritual evolution. This is further testified by the last section of the story: receiving Xiaotie’s video about the dark world inside a giant tree crotch, Guan remakes it in his story into an arcadia where Abao finally finds “the last clouded leopard” and “procreates” with it (165). Here the renaissance of Abao—both his reappearance in Guan’s story and his transfiguration into another creature—illuminates that of Guan. At the conclusion of his spiritual evolution, he has adapted successfully to his weaknesses, no more sticking to reality while catching the importance of imagination.

It is now lucid that the first four stories of *Kuyu* equally deal with human weakness, nature’s function, and their interplay in human spiritual evolution, with Wu’s different renditions of them manifesting his reference to weakness as both a theme and a form. However, it should not be overlooked that in the work the various and multiple depictions of nature encompass that of its ambiguity in relation to human beings. Inspiring and therapeutic it may be, nature still suggests some darkness that humans either overlook or find it difficult, if not impossible, to handle. In a sense, Wu augments this aspect of nature step by step (or story by story) in *Kuyu*: while earthworms are not given due attention by humanity, birds reflect the impotency of human language; trees bring real threat and exceed human control, whereas during the nighttime in the mountains, all living beings, human or nonhuman, become fragile. That is, despite enabling human rebirth, nature also constitutes that to which human beings remain ignorant, impotent, or simply vulnerable. In a sense, Wu’s articulation of their powerlessness and feebleness pertains to his inquiry after the conception of annihilation as an essence in life. And he gives the darkest colors to his exploration in the last two stories of *Kuyu*, “Eternal Mother” and “A Buzzard, A Carnivore, and Seven Juveniles.”

Annihilation, or Weakness of Human Rebirth and Human Existence

It is perhaps not groundless to say that of the six stories in *Kuyu*, “Eternal Mother” and “A Buzzard” read the bleakest. Whilst their predecessors address the darkness of nature (such as its incomprehensibility or dangerousness) and hence touch on the topic of annihilation, the two tales offer his gloomiest understanding of the term. Specifically, “Eternal Mother” tells of the indifference of oceans, which are ready to consume human life and obliterate the meaning, if any, of human rebirth. Employing animals as metaphors for its main character Thalassa, “A Buzzard” treats the defeat and death of its titular

animals—the buzzard(-eagle) and the carnivore (specifically, a Bengal tiger)—as symbols of the ineluctable result of human existence. Either way, annihilation designates the third kind of human weakness in relation to nature and outcome of human spiritual evolution as addressed in *Kuyu*.

Before examining the significance of weakness as annihilation, I would first sketch other kinds of weakness presented in “Eternal Mother” and “A Buzzard” to avoid oversimplifying Wu’s rendition of the term there. An immediate example is the weak purpose of the search for the extinct bluefin tuna conducted by a team of five—Thalassa, Xiaosi (小食), Lotheca, Boxido, and Martes (a yellow-throated marten)—on *Zeuglodon* (nicknamed *Zeu*): they, as Thalassa teases out, “seek bluefin tuna for not finding them” (184). In addition, being weak, recalling Juan’s reading of *Fuyan*, indicates the vulnerability of nature. This is shown by the extermination of krill or bluefin tuna due to human overconsumption and destruction of their habitats (namely, oceans) and the subjection of the Tamsui River to capitalism and consumerism (174-75, 210). Meanwhile, weakness features the boundaries of natural entities: both oceans in “Eternal Mother” and the sky in “A Buzzard” exhibit variety and multiplicity in borders (186-88, 231). Weakness understood as ambivalence is also given its extreme form when conflicting characteristics are depicted to consist in the same entities. “Oceans,” as Wu puts it in “Eternal Mother,” “can incur and cure melancholy” (177), nourishing and eliminating the creatures they encounter and therefore constituting sites of life and death, of recuperation and destruction at one blow. Likewise, the titular animals of “A Buzzard” have both moments of triumph—displaying “pride” or “majesty” (222, 238)—and loss—when they are encaged and deprived of freedom, demonstrating opposite moods in the story.

However, here I maintain that despite the light shed on the ambivalence of nature, the last two novellas of *Kuyu* are more concerned with its darkest side. This is demonstrated by Wu’s employment of nature’s erasure of human rebirth and symbolization of the fundamental fragility of human existence as the core events of the two tales; to this degree, annihilation can be seen as what inheres in life. What primarily endorses this is the two tales’ endings, which read as so negative that their previous references to nature’s revitalization of human beings and connotation of their triumphs are overshadowed. True, in “Eternal Mother,” oceans serve as, as its title suggests, the “eternal mother” feeding creatures they come across: e.g., Boxido once dives into the sea during the search, being fostered “like a baby . . . sleeping in amniotic fluids” (190). However, on the last pages of the story, an “*anito*” (demon) or a giant sea storm sustaining on the sea water is described to be coming. In response, all the members of the team on *Zeu* “decide to confront the storm” and its deadly strike together, with

these beings inspired and reborn as a result: for instance, Thalassa stops being disturbed by his unrequited love for Carol, and Lotheca recovers her faculty of smell and, by analogy, the ability to love (203-07). That said, their rebirths are soon to be made meaningless. The demonic sea storm is about to “punch the bottom of *Zeu*,” with the apocalyptic words concluding the narration—“I come, I plunder, I judge . . . the past had been gone, and the future may not come” (207)—implying that both the team and the boat will exist no more.

In other words, in “Eternal Mother” nature is not really assigned the same enlightening role as it is in the previous stories. Oceans may bring real danger to the human characters of the novella and enable their real transformations, but they also make these rebirths exist too briefly to count or mean anything. Weakness conceived as annihilation then should be treated as highlighting the destructive power of nature as well as the concomitant fragility of human beings and their rebirths, with no chance of survival or accommodation to the natural environment ever allowed. Meanwhile, it is worthwhile to pay attention to Wu’s reference to Martes, which, while earning a new life at the end of the story, cannot escape the destruction by the sea storm either. Here the nonhuman character is introduced not to foreground how natural beings outrun humans in adapting to the environment; instead, it is meant to exhibit that living entities, human or not, are equally doomed, destined to be annihilated by and buried in the eternal mother, in spite of their rebirths enabled by the latter. It is this spotlight on the weaknesses of human and nonhuman beings alike that clarifies why, as mentioned, Wu does not address nature’s payback for human damage in *Kuyu*. If, as he explains in its afterword, the novella collection “has something to do with [his] *Fuyan ren*” (*Kuyu* 250), it is because it recalls the indifference of the novel’s eponymous character, who says that he “can only observe but not intervene” (*Fuyan* 332). The same mood permeates the final scene of “Eternal Mother,” which reflects one of the darkest results of the spiritual evolutions, both human and nonhuman, delineated in the novella collection: both the lives of the voyagers on *Zeu* and their transformations are to be obliterated, without the eternal mother really caring about what happens to them.

The sense of pointlessness bearing on the annihilation of existence is reinforced at the conclusion of “A Buzzard,” predominantly through its symbolization of human beings by animals. The story is formulated as a frame narrative told by the “I” about his memories of his uncle—Thalassa in “Eternal Mother”—with its first half focusing on the similarity between Thalassa and a buzzard-eagle he has once kept. An immediate example is that being encaged, the animal looks “dejected,” mirroring the “air of melancholy” emitted by its owner (216-17). In addition, the buzzard becomes “a proud animal again”

after preying on a praying mantis; in parallel, in his prime Thalassa earns a great fortune by investment and can even afford a horse (217-18, 214). Nevertheless, underlying their existence is still weakness: just released by Thalassa, the buzzard “only limps awkwardly” rather than immediately “flies away” and asserts its freedom; likewise, Thalassa’s investment fails from time to time, and he even has to “serve as a mariner . . . to avoid creditors” (225, 214). What these instances attest to is that in “Buzzard” ambivalence or the coincidence of opposed qualities in the same being applies to both humans and nonhumans, with the latter serving as the symbols of the former. It is with this design that Wu accentuates annihilation as what life cannot escape.

What allows Wu to probe into this further and do so symbolically is another animal, the Bengal tiger which Thalassa and his friends comes across in “A Buzzard.” As the “I” recalls, his uncle meets the animal at least three times. The first time he sees it, it is no more than a cub; he and his friends fail to buy it since they, as high school students, do not have enough money for it. The second time they see the Bengal tiger, they are still unable to do so, though now because the cub “has become an adult,” with its body too large to fit into any “human dwelling” (238). Nor can Thalassa, later an adult as well, purchase the animal when he happens upon it the third and last time in that it has been “dismembered” and “is dead already” (242). It is worth mentioning that right before this episode, the narrator receives the key to his uncle’s cloud drive, entitled “The land of little rain” (239). There the “I” finds that “the last automatically uploaded file . . . records” nothing but “sounds . . . of a borderless” and “insanely heavy rain” (240), which recalls the ending of “Eternal Mother”—a sea storm is about to strike *Zeu* and kill its passengers. The “I” also finds another folder, named “Bengal Tiger,” which contains Thalassa’s poems about natural entities, though none of them speaks of any Bengal tigers (240-41).

Here Wu’s treatment of the Bengal tiger as a metaphor for Thalassa cannot be made clearer. With the poetic creation “Bengal Tiger” working as a metonymy for its creator, what befalls the titular animal (in both Thalassa’s poem collection and the last story of *Kuyū*) has to be deemed to reflect and even predict what the human counterpart will undergo. The absence of any human voices in the last recording in Thalassa’s cloud drive and that of Bengal tigers in his poem collection similarly display that he is dismembered as well, be it literally by the sea storm or figuratively by society. In the same vein, the incompatibility of the tiger with any “human dwelling” indexes symbolically the incongruence of Thalassa with the social surroundings: according to the “I,” being “glib,” unruly, and adventurous (213), his uncle has little recognition from his family (like the narrator’s mother) and by extension, the world around. Consequently, Thalassa

can merely wander around, changing from place to place and job to job. Either way, Thalassa is “already dead”: he can adapt to neither nature nor society. In this regard, among Wu’s articulations of the correlation of annihilation and life in *Kuyu*, “A Buzzard” also sounds the gloomiest: like his nonhuman avatar, Thalassa is essentially fragile and incapable of resisting the current or coming annihilation, remaining always “already dead.”

However, this is far from being Wu’s answer to his quest for the meaning of annihilation to life in *Kuyu*. It should be stressed that Thalassa also takes an extraordinary place in *Kuyu*, in particular in relation to its formal weakness. With this character, Wu offers a different understanding as regards the significance of annihilation with respect to life, which I call the weak annihilation of annihilation. To better explain this, I will move on to Wu’s interpretation of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* in the afterword of *Kuyu* before elaborating the connection of Thalassa to Wu’s inquiry into the relevancy of annihilation to life.

Weak Annihilation of Annihilation

On the third to last page of the afterword of *Kuyu*, Wu mentions what the father in *The Road* says to his son: “all things . . . have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and [dead] ashes” (qtd. in *Kuyu* 251; see also McCarthy 56).⁵ And shortly after stating that the responsibility of a novelist consists in broaching the meaning of annihilation as an essence in life, Wu returns to *The Road*, adding that in the same passage the father also tells his son that “I have you” (qtd. in *Kuyu* 253; see also McCarthy 56). For Wu, this means that “what the father says is not that hopeless”; “all things” may be born “in grief, but *not* in [dead] ashes” (252; emphasis added). Wu’s revision of what the father says in *The Road* at the very end of *Kuyu* suggests his answer to the question concerning the pertinency of annihilation to life: what is at issue now is not so much the absolute annihilation of a being—as illustrated by the extermination of the travelers by the sea storm in “Eternal Mother”—or the absolute annihilation of annihilation—the overturn of the annihilation—as the weak annihilation of

⁵ Here the quotation is cited directly from McCarthy’s *The Road*, though in *Kuyu* Wu seemingly refers to its Chinese translation by Ya-feng Mao. In the Chinese version, the latter part of the quoted passage reads “*wanwu shengjiang yu aiqi yu sihu*” (萬物生降於哀戚與死灰), with the last designation “*sihu*” composed of “dead” (“*si*”) and “ashes” (“*hui*”) (Mao 72), though its English original refers to “ashes” only (McCarthy 56). Since the nuance—the contrast between birth and death as highlighted in the translation—influences Wu’s reading of McCarthy, and his reinterpretation constitutes the title of the afterword, my following discussion will be based upon the Chinese version of *The Road*.

annihilation.

To better expound what I understand by the phrase “the weak annihilation of annihilation,” I will start with my previous discussion of commonness or co-being as what structures *Kuyu*. As said, Wu’s employment of *Yunduan liefeng* as a common event in the six stories of the work exhibits that these novellas and their characters coexist in the same textual space. The sense of co-being is similarly conveyed by the phrase “I have you,” with the verb “have” indicating not the father’s mastery or possession of his son but the company one receives from the other. It is this intertwining of companionship and coexistence embedded in the “I have you” that explicates how the “not” in being born “not in dead ashes” is possible: the co-being with others also known as the company they offer serves as the last resort one has when facing the annihilation inherent in every being. To this extent, Wu does not side with the absolute cancellation of a being.

Nor does Wu advocate the likelihood of completely annihilating this annihilation. After all, according to his reading of *The Road*, a being may not be born in “dead ashes,” but it is still born “in grief.” This is in a sense hinted by the weaknesses that remain after the main characters of the first four stories of *Kuyu* are reborn. For example, in spite of her ability to love and affirm herself, Sophie is still achondroplastic; being spiritually recovered by climbing a real tree with Axian and Xiaotie, Minmin, as the tree master suggests, can merely get used to rather than remove the menace from nature. The last two stories of the novella collection underscore more the impossibility of cancelling what weakens or even annihilates existence: Thalassa, for instance, may adapt to and even get over his weakness on *Zeu*, but he cannot escape the ineluctable one shared with other voyagers and the Bengal tiger—their death—brought by either nature or society. In other words, neither rebirth nor existence in itself matters so much so that the forthcoming obliteration can be overturned. Utter annihilation of annihilation is therefore not an option.

The remaining alternative for Wu is something in-between: the weak annihilation of annihilation or the annihilation of an annihilation without really annihilating it, this way making the existence of the concerned being waver between being annihilated and non-annihilated. What best illustrates this is the character and characterization of Thalassa. As mentioned, like the animals that serve as his avatars, he manifests ambivalence and even opposition in personality. In addition, Thalassa is characterized by variety and instability: as his nephew observes, he is “capable of all kinds of stuff,” and “it is always difficult to tell whether what he says is factual or fictional; maybe his life becomes so as a result” (213, 239). What these cases attest to is similar: with his capacity to

do everything and his life being indistinct between fact and fiction, Thalassa is a character embodying variation and multiplicity. In this sense, he constitutes the very epitome of the formal weakness found in *Kuyu*. No wonder the key to his cloud drive is named, as mentioned, “The land of little rain.”

More importantly, Thalassa's fluidity does not mean his dissolution—his death or the absolute cancellation of his being. This is shown by his poem collection “Bengal Tiger.” While the lack of reference to any Bengal tigers in his cloud drive does suggest his death, be it understood literally or figuratively, the title “Bengal Tiger” constitutes the place where he remains. That is, with the formal weakness he creates—his poetry collection functioning as a container encompassing various and multiple poems or poetic variants, in resemblance to the conception of a term as weak when it also contains its diverse meanings and renditions—Thalassa comes to claim a degree of being, however weak, that enables him to exceed the complete annihilation of his being without really annihilating this annihilation. It is this weak form of existence allowed by his weak annihilation of annihilation that sheds light on Wu's answer in *Kuyu* to his inquiry after the meaning of annihilation as an essence in life. Annihilation suggests *an* essence (rather than “the” essence) in life inasmuch as it expresses an unstable and indefinite form of being that gives an entity its possibility of existence against both its complete annihilation and recourse to the thorough overturn of this annihilation, without this likelihood and fashion of being—since it travels, as Thalassa does, between life and death, being and nonbeing, and by extension, absolute annihilation and utter non-annihilation—becoming stabilized.

Now, it is clear why weakness, especially the formal one, counts in *Kuyu*: as the character(ization) of Thalassa suggests, formal weakness accounts for how a degree of being or the weak annihilation of annihilation is possible—i.e., how a thing can be both present and absent, alive and dead, simultaneously born “in grief” and “not in dead ashes,” or neither fully annihilated nor completely non-annihilated. This weak manner of existence attained through formal weakness also reflects further why, as said previously, Wu creates *Kuyu* as a novel, specifically a weak one. In correspondence to the formal weakness Thalassa makes and embodies, the name “*Kuyu zhi di*” or “the land of little rain” is Wu's “Bengal Tiger” that allows a weak form of being also known as the coexistence of various definitions or different renditions of common elements in the same textual space, as echoed by *Kuyu*'s function as a container of six stories addressing the same issue (e.g., weakness) in various manners and therefore treating this subject weakly.

In this logic, Thalassa epitomizes Wu's treatment of “*jiyei*” as a flowing and

unstable form of definition. However, this also means that Wu's answer to the investigation of the correlation of annihilation and life as provided in *Kuyu* must be regarded as a tentative one. After all, it is likely that he will keep writing; it is thus possible that he will resume this exploration and respond to it in a different or even weaker—more diverse and multiple—way.

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吳明益《苦雨之地》中的弱

摘要

本文旨在討論臺灣作家吳明益中篇小說集《苦雨之地》所呈現的各種「弱」(weakness)。早在《苦雨》之前,「弱」一詞已在吳明益的生命與寫作裡反覆出現。譬如說,他曾於《蝶道》一書中提到,其天生便有紅綠色弱,卻因此對於光以及與色彩相關的事物充滿興趣;在《迷蝶誌》裡,他則寫到對於諾頓(Bryan G. Norton)「溫和的人類中心主義」(weak anthropocentrism)概念的認同。此外,吳明益的小說作品,如他最有名的《複眼人》與《單車失竊記》,則刻劃了面對人類的破壞時,自然所顯現的脆弱。如果說他在不同的作品裡,書寫了不同意義的「弱」——如「失能」、「溫和」與「脆弱」等——那麼到了《苦雨》,他則進一步推展「弱」在語意上的變化與多樣性:其六篇中篇小說各自訴說不同的人類之弱、自然角色,以及這兩者在小說裡人類角色的「精神演化」(spiritual evolution)中所展現的各種互動。換句話說,《苦雨》之「弱」,不僅是主題上的,同時也是形式上的。爲了要釐清「弱」作爲本文方法學的重要性,本文會先回顧吳明益作品中所呈現的人與自然之關聯,並藉由批評家對於這些文本的閱讀,來說明《苦雨》所勾勒的「弱」之轉變。再來,本文探討所謂的「形式之弱」(formal weakness),尤其是所謂的「弱定義」與「弱描述」,以此作爲閱讀《苦雨》的基礎。接著,本文依照吳明益的安排,也就是兩兩成對,分析這六篇故事所描繪的人類之弱、自然功能,以及人類精神演化中這兩者的關係。最後,本文處理吳明益在《苦雨》後記中對於「湮滅做爲一種生命的本質意義何在」的探問,並以形式之弱或是「湮滅之弱湮滅」(weak annihilation of annihilation)作爲其在該中篇小說集所留下的回應。

關鍵字: 吳明益、《苦雨之地》、弱、自然、精神演化、形式之弱

