

# The Ambivalence toward the Mythic and the Modern: Wu Mingyi's Short Stories

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## Abstract

This paper is inspired by the power of folk beliefs and ecological concerns in the works of a young Taiwanese writer Wu Mingyi and by the notion of “mythic modernity” posited by Ping-hui Liao. Both rites of nature and occult practices of folk beliefs are aligned with the mythic and the native and set opposed to colonial modernity in Wu’s works. At the same time, one can also see that Wu’s very conception of Taiwanese nature writing shows ambivalence toward both the mythic and the modern, and that such ambivalence prevails in his short stories. This leads me to consider Ping-hui Liao’s idea of “mythic modernity.” Liao develops this idea from his reading of Walter Benjamin’s theory and the history of colonial modernity in Taiwan. Although the very term “mythic modernity” is problematic, some of Liao’s insights in his theorizing nevertheless shed new light on our interpretation of the mythic in relation to colonial modernity in Taiwan. Walter Benjamin’s theory of mimesis and language proves to be especially helpful in bringing out the significance and power of the mythic in Wu’s short stories. Since he is viewed as

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one of the greatest theorists of modernity, Benjamin's interest in the mythic is often ignored; as a result, re-reading his theory of mimesis and language may help explore this eclipsed aspect of Benjamin's oeuvre. This paper intends to discuss the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in Wu's three short stories "Huyei" (Tiger God), "Cesuo de gushi" (A Tale of Men's Room), and "Fuyanren" (A Man with Compound Eyes) and look into the way it is tied to Wu's magic, nativist, and ecological vision. It is my argument that the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in Wu's short stories constitutes a rethinking of Taiwan native resistance to colonial modernity, and that in engaging a dialogue between Benjamin's theory and Wu's stories one can see that such ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern is in Benjamin as well.

**Keywords:** mythic, modernity, nativism, ecocriticism, shamanism, Wu Mingyi, Walter Benjamin, Ping-hui Liao

This paper is inspired by the power of folk beliefs and ecological concerns in the works of a young Taiwanese writer Wu Mingyi and by the notion of “mythic modernity” posited by Ping-hui Liao. While there have been a number of representations of shamanism in Taiwan literature since the turn of twentieth century, few have taken an attitude of half believing and half doubting it like Wu. Taiwan modern nature writing does not find a better practitioner than Wu, who both attacks human exploitation of nature and explores the (im)possibility of merging with and mimicking nature. Both rites of nature and occult practices of folk beliefs are aligned with the mythic and the native and set opposed to colonial modernity in Wu’s works. At the same time, one can also see that Wu’s very conception of Taiwan modern nature writing shows ambivalence toward both the mythic and the modern, and that such ambivalence prevails in his short stories. This leads me to consider Ping-hui Liao’s idea of “mythic modernity.” Liao develops this idea from his reading of Walter Benjamin’s theory and the history of colonial modernity in Taiwan. Although the very term “mythic modernity” is problematic, some of Liao’s insights in his theorizing nevertheless shed new light on our interpretation of the mythic in relation to colonial modernity in Taiwan. Walter Benjamin’s theory of mimesis and language proves to be especially helpful in bringing out the significance and power of the mythic in Wu’s short stories. Since he is viewed as one of the greatest theorists of modernity, Benjamin’s interest in the mythic is often ignored; as a result, re-reading his theory of mimesis and language may help explore this eclipsed aspect of Benjamin’s oeuvre. It is my argument in this paper that the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in Wu’s short stories constitutes a rethinking of Taiwan native resistance to colonial modernity, and that in engaging a dialogue between Benjamin’s theory and Wu’s stories one can see that such ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern is in Benjamin as well.

Walter Benjamin develops his profound theory of language and mimesis in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916), “Doctrine of the Similar” (1933), and “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933). In “On Language as Such,” he first extends “the existence of language” to all things animate and inanimate and posits magical translatability and communicability among God and humans, humans and things, God and nature; he then stresses that ideally human language serves as the medium of translation between God’s pure language and silent things. As Benjamin states, “The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge. The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed

by God.”<sup>1</sup> On condition that Adam’s naming is an echo of God’s Word, humans can communicate with things and make things speak. In “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty,” he observes that mimesis is the recognition and production of either sensuous or nonsensuous (language-based) similarities, and that, of all creatures, humans have the highest capacity for mimesis. Even children’s play manifests mimetic modes of behavior. And yet human’s “gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically.”<sup>2</sup> For ancient people, who practiced occult knowledge, the law of similarity “ruled both microcosm and macrocosm.”<sup>3</sup> With the decline of occult knowledge and the decay of the mimetic faculty, “the perceptual world [Merkwelt] of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient people.”<sup>4</sup> Benjamin is concerned with the decay of the mimetic faculty and its transformation. Both mimetic powers and mimetic objects change in the course of history.

Benjamin’s theory of language and mimesis entails a theory of civilization as well. Ping-hui Liao posits the notion of “mythic modernity” by extending and elaborating Benjamin’s ideas in “On the Mimetic Faculty.” While the first stage of civilization is the ancient time when man finds magical correspondences and similarities with the world, the second stage is the early modern period of alienation and commodity fetishism when humans and God, subject and object, God and nature are divided, with the original magical correspondences totally demystified and deconstructed. The third stage or the so-called “post-modern” period is actually entangled with the second stage, for here “post” is in the sense of “because of” rather than “later than.” At this stage, what is excluded and repressed by modernity reemerges in such magical forms as dance, rituals, and music. Liao calls the juxtaposition and interweaving of modernity and the occult “mythic modernity.”<sup>5</sup> I would argue that the notion suggests a merging of modernity and the mythic, which is not viable. It may even be misleading to the extent that it evokes Benjamin’s conception of modernity in which the mythic impulse is

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1 (1913-1926), eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 (1927-1934), eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999), 720.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 720.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 721.

<sup>5</sup> Ping-hui Liao, “Shenmi xiandai taiwan wenxui zhong de jitong ji jige canzhao de zhimin xizhu changjing” (Mythic Modernity: A Comparison between Shamans in Taiwanese Literature and Several Colonial Dramatic Scenes), in *Taiwan yu shijie wenxui de huiliu* (At the Crossroads of Taiwan and World Literature) (Taipei: Lianho Wenxui, 2006), 73-90.

reactivated through the phantasmagoria created by commodities. Instead of using Liao's term, then, I would separate the mythic from modernity by incorporating Benjamin's insight in "The Storyteller" (1936). In this article Benjamin links the pre-modern with the mythic and laments the change of modes of production in modernity which results in the dissolution of communities as well as the rise of information in place of stories, novelist in place of storyteller. I would argue that, despite his lamentation, Benjamin is aware that neither the mythic linked with the pre-modern nor our longing for stories and communities is eradicated in modernity. Noting that the need for the fairy tale is "the need created by the myth,"<sup>6</sup> Benjamin remarks that "in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale, it shows that nature not only is subservient to myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man,"<sup>7</sup> that "the liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the fairy tale presents the complicity of the mythical world of nature with modernity. The residues of pre-modernity remain in certain forms so that we often encounter the ironic, paradoxical, and complicated interplay between the mythic and the modern.

Since modernity projects were implemented through waves of colonization in twentieth-century Taiwan,<sup>9</sup> modernity was all the more consolidated through social institutions, as a result of which in the public domain core features of modern thought such as rationality and progress were privileged, while shamanism and spirit possession were ostracized as belonging to the lower class. According to Ping-hui Liao, given that short story is one modern cultural discourse, negative representations of shamanism in short stories by Yang Shoyu and Hong Xingfu are typical literary representations of such practices under Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945 and Kuomintang's rule from 1945 to 1987. Both the Japanese government and the Kuomintang government in their rule of Taiwan stressed modernization, denigrating and negating folk religion and shamanism.<sup>10</sup> Japanese colonial modernity underlined the nation-state (the Imperial Japan), capitalism, modern medicine and hygiene, technological progress, agribusiness,

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (1935-1938), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2002), 157.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Taiwan's first encounter with modernity can be traced back to the early seventeenth century when the Dutch came to southern Taiwan establishing a branch of Dutch East India Company. Under the Dutch colonial rule, Taiwan served as a trading post and a source of natural resources. One of the Dutch legacies is the conversion of some Aborigines to Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Ping-hui Liao, "Mythic Modernity," 78-84.

modern education, modern military forces, and discourses such as science, medicine, biology, and anthropology. Traditional folk beliefs, be they Aboriginal, Minnan, or Hakka, were deemed as superstitious. Although anti-Japanese on the surface, the Kuomintang (abbreviated to KMT) continued the Japanese modernity project to a great extent, with very similar emphases. One major difference is that the KMT in their assertion of the nation-state projected an imaginary unified China, whose territory covered Mainland China and Taiwan. Another major difference is that the KMT marginalized and further assimilated the Aborigines by banning their languages and destroying their cultures.<sup>11</sup> The exilic KMT, which fled to Taiwan after losing civil war to the Chinese Communists in 1949, saw Taiwan as a temporary shelter from where they would eventually launch a comeback war, defeat the Communists, and retake China. At the same time, the KMT deliberately erased any historical memories of Taiwan prior to their rule, banned the official use of Japanese, Minnan, Hakka, and Aboriginal languages, and instilled a China-centered consciousness through sociopolitical, economic, and educational systems. Under the influence of modern institutions, even nativist writers like Hong Xingfu repudiate Taiwanese folk religion and shamanism in their stories.<sup>12</sup> In his rereading of Hong, however, Liao finds an intriguing contradiction in Hong's attitudes toward the mythic: Despite that in his short stories Hong portrays practices of shamanism and spirit possession as "fake," "superstitious," and "profit-oriented," in one entry of his diaries he expresses his belief in such practices. For Liao, this not only shows how the mythic appeals to Hong's affective, spiritual, and ethical needs but indicates the entanglements of the mythic with modernity. I would argue that Liao's theorizing sums up a lot of academic rethinking in the nineties of Taiwanese folk religion and shamanism

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<sup>11</sup> Dachuan Sun, "Yuyan quanli he zhutixing de jiango yi taiwan yuanzhumin muyu wenti weili" (Language, Power, and the Construction of Subjectivity: The Example of the Issue of Taiwan Aboriginal Languages), in *Jiaofong zhong de zuqun rentong taiwan yuanzhumin de yuyan wenhua yu zhengzhi* (*The Construction of Ethnic Identities against the Odds: Taiwanese Aboriginal Languages, Cultures, and Politics*) (Taipei: Lianho wenxui, 2000), 34-47.

<sup>12</sup> By "nativism" I mean "Taiwanese consciousness," both *bentu* and *xiangtu*. In the *xiang-tu* literary debates in the late seventies, the nativist theorists attacked the growing neocolonial infiltration of Taiwan by the Americans and Japanese, calling for cultural and economic autonomy. Rather than a chauvinistic rejection of all things Western, they advocated a reevaluation and reaffirmation of native cultural tradition. Yet the very notion of "native" is problematic. Due to the dominance of Chinese consciousness at that time, only Yei Shitao ventured to promote Taiwanese consciousness by designating *xiang-tu* as Taiwanese native cultural tradition. See Shitao Yei, "Taiwan xiangtu wenxushi daolun" (An Introduction to the History of Taiwanese Nativist Literature), in Yu Tiancong, ed., *Xiangtu wenxui taolunji* (A Collection of Essays on Nativist Literature) (Taipei: Yuanjing, 1978), 72. Even so, shamanism was covertly relegated to superstition and not included in any discussions of Taiwanese native cultural tradition. It was not until the nineties that with the rise of *bentu* (or Taiwanese) consciousness shamanism was gradually seen as part of the native cultural tradition.

in relation to modernity, pointing to a reclaiming of the mythic as part of native resistance.

Taiwanese writer Wu Mingyi's fiction shares Benjamin's and Liao's insights about the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern, combining magic, nativism, and eco-centrism in his vision, although his earliest stories may not strike one as explicitly postcolonial. In his comment on Wu's first collection of short stories, *Benri gongxiu* (It Is a Holiday) (1997), Song Zelai calls him a "fourth-generation Taiwanese writer," praising him for his visual and other sensuous descriptions and his ability to present the growing up experiences of his generation. Song thinks that Wu is yet to find important social and political issues to write on.<sup>13</sup> Wu's award-winning short story "Huyei" (Tiger God) (2001) seems to mark a new turn. Li Ang points out that it "uses a quasi-anthropological approach to 'superstition,' thereby keeping alive nativist concerns in our literary field,"<sup>14</sup> that Wu's "modernist aesthetics combining his psychological portrayals, with which he explores the profound facets and depths of nativist concerns, should provide a new redemption [for nativist-themed fiction]."<sup>15</sup> Retrospectively, however, one may discern nativist themes such as satirizing the collapse of native traditions and communities in two stories in his first collection, *It Is a Holiday*. The award-winning story "Zuiho de xiyilieke" (The Last Siliq) portrays the dying out of the Aboriginal group Atayal's shamanism and occult practices, since siliqs, birds of portent that serve to communicate with the ancestral spirits for the Atayals, no longer appear. What's worse, the last shaman has neither clients who seek his medical help nor disciples to whom he can pass on his practices, since all the young people are flocking to the cities to earn their bread. The story "Qiumo de qingdu taifong" (A Late-Autumn Small-scale Typhoon) depicts the suicide of a lonely widowed old man in a rural village while his sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren live far away in Taipei. What appears as a suicide from aging and loneliness carries an undertone of lamentation at the dwindling away of traditional cultural memories as the city-wise grandson speaks only mandarin Chinese and the old man feels somewhat humiliated by being regarded as "backward" and old-fashioned.

Wu is often seen as a nature writer in his non-fictional works and a talented nativist young writer in his fiction. Seemingly different, his nativist concerns

<sup>13</sup> Zelai Song, "disidai taiwan zuojia de meili chuhang" (The Beautiful Voyage Out of a Fourth-Generatiion Taiwanese Writer: A Tentative Comment on Wu Mingyi's Stories), in *It Is a Holiday* (*benri gongxiu*), Mingyi Wu (Taipei: Jiuge, 1997), 3-10.

<sup>14</sup> Ang Li, "Xiangxiang taiwan" (Imagining Taiwan), in *Jiushinian duanpian xiaoshuoshuan* (Selected Short Stories of 2001), ed. Ang Li (Taipei: Jiuge, 2002), 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

are in fact inextricable from his ecological perspectives and vice versa; many of his fictions can be seen as nature writing. By the same token, while Wu follows some of his predecessors such as Wang Chen-ho in critiquing metropolitan modernity from the perspective of the marginal and the country, he stands out in that he presents human's mimetic faculty and retrieves the traces of the magical correspondences between humans and nature. His fiction displays a fascination with magical similarities and an awareness of the relentless forces of modernity that all but dismantle anything mythical. The most successful stories in his first two collections of short stories *Benri gongxiu* (It Is a Holiday) and *Huyei* ("Tiger God" and Other Short Stories) (2003) have such common themes as human's fall from the magical world, the mechanization and dehumanization under modern institutions such as education system and the army, the collapse of native cultural traditions, and the tenuous resurgence or transformation of occult knowledge and the native tradition in modern Taiwan. Despite that a number of his stories are set in metropolitan Taipei, he underscores the mysteries and wonders of nature and the connection between humans and nature. Animals, birds, and insects often appear in his stories to serve as counterparts of humans. His fiction is characterized by a tremendous amount of sensuous knowledge, through which his narrators may re-member collective cultural memories. Even in his more explicitly ecological fiction, there is a nativist subtext. His characters often speak in Taiwanese (or Minnan language)<sup>16</sup>, although the narration is rendered mostly in Mandarin Chinese. His fiction thus offers a vision that is of great value to postcolonial studies and postcoloniality in Taiwan. Further, his narrative strategies of combining storytelling and a deconstructive frame in many of his stories suggest an aesthetic mimicry of the interplay between the mythic and the modern, with the deconstructive frame signifying a fragmented, alienated sensibility while storytelling, which belongs to oral tradition, signaling communality. Moreover, some of his sci-fi stories show his awareness of how modern technologies such as camera and film revive or transform human beings' mimetic power, which echoes Benjamin's view and modifies Liao's theory of the third stage of civilization.

In light of Benjamin's and Liao's theories, this paper intends to discuss the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in Wu's three short stories "Huyei" (Tiger God), "Cesuo de gushi" (A Tale of Men's Room), and "Fuyanren" (The Man with Compound Eyes) and look into the way it is tied to Wu's magic, nativist, and ecological vision. I will try to answer the following questions: How does Wu present human's mimetic powers and mimetic objects in magic moments under

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance the narrator's conversation with Ping and Monkey in "Tiger God" and Little Mosquito's conversation with his family and neighbors in "A Tale of Men's Room."



modernity? How does he represent the (in)communicability between humans and animals, humans and nature, humans and gods? How does he attach nativist meaning and memory to his ecological concerns, thereby showing that his nature writing does not ignore issues of ethnicity and native resistance? The first part of the paper will delve into his depictions of shamanism and spirit possession in “Tiger God” and “A Tale of Men’s Room,” while the second part of the paper will focus on his delineations of the rites of nature in the sci-fi story “The Man with Compound Eyes.” I will argue that the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in these stories constitutes both a critique on colonial modernity and an acknowledgement of its continuing legacy. Before I start, I would like to take a detour by discussing Wu’s definition of Taiwan modern nature essay, which I think will contribute to our understanding of the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in his short stories.

## I

Wu shows his ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in his very definition of Taiwan modern nature essay. In his preface to *Taiwan ziran xiezuozuo xuan* (The Anthology of Taiwan Nature Writing),<sup>17</sup> which deals specifically with essays on nature, he upholds “modern nature writing”<sup>18</sup> as opposed to classical pastoral literature. While in classical pastoral nature is used to reflect on human condition, argues he, modern nature writing shows an interest in nature in and for itself since it recognizes the dire consequences of industrialization and urbanization and seeks to cope with them by rethinking humans’ role on earth. Modern nature writing manifests knowledge of natural sciences, biology, environmental ethics, together with a sense of beauty and lyricism.<sup>19</sup> Thus while Taiwan classical pastoral is characterized by anthropocentric sentiments, Taiwan modern nature writing is highly intellectual and seeks to move beyond anthropocentrism toward eco-centrism.<sup>20</sup> One may well say that, for Wu, Taiwan

<sup>17</sup> According to Wu, this introduction draws on his 2003 Ph. D. dissertation *Dangdai taiwan ziran xiezuozuo yanjiu* (A Study on Contemporary Taiwan Nature Writing).

<sup>18</sup> Though by definition nature writing includes fiction, poetry, and essays, this anthology includes essays only.

<sup>19</sup> “chienenyan shuxie ziran de yowei tianqi” (Preface: Writing about Nature’s Mystic Revelation), in *The Anthology of Taiwan Nature Writing* (Taiwan ziran xiezuozuo xuan), ed. Mingyi Wu (Taipei: Erya, 2003), 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11-13. Wu notes that the term “anthropomorphism” is explained differently in different frames of environmental discourses. See pp. 20-21, note 3 of the same article. For a study of the environmental discourses in Taiwan, please see *Shengtai renwen zhuyi maixiang yige ren yu ziran gongsheng gongrong de shehui* (Eco-humanism: Toward a Society where Human and Nature Can Live Together), ed. Yaofu Lin, vol. 1 (Taipei: Bookman, 2002); vol. 2 (Taipei: Bookman, 2005).

modern nature writing is both a product of and a reaction against modernity. It is a product in that, emulating early American nature writing, it uses a scientific method to observe and protect nature. It is a reaction in that, also like the early American nature writing, it attacks modernity's exploitation and misuse of nature and seeks to embrace the mythical world of nature. Rather than reasserting the values upheld by Taiwan classical nature writing, then, Wu argues that the best contemporary Taiwan nature essays attempt to present what he calls "the scientifically, ethically, and aesthetically mystical apocalypse."<sup>21</sup> This I believe amounts to a vision combining the mythic and the modern, since it endorses both scientific observation and a mythical connection between humans and nature in a more corporeal way. His widely acclaimed *Midie zhi* (Journals of Butterfly Intoxication) (2000) exemplifies how, in the modern state of alienation and division, humans retain their mimetic faculty and rediscover magical similarities in nature despite that their perceptions are to a great extent trained and conditioned by modern knowledge. As critic Liao Qihong notes, in this book Wu succeeds in weaving an "encyclopedic reading network."<sup>22</sup> For all his emphasis on the intellect and rationality in Taiwan modern nature writing, there remains a strong mythic element in his conception and practice of it.

In his preface to *The Anthology of Taiwan Nature Writing*, Wu gives an overview of the history of nature writing in English, the environmental movement in the global context, and the history of Taiwan nature writing and Taiwan's environmental movement. Noting the complicated relationship between the global and the local, he states that "contemporary Taiwan nature writers received and re-interpreted western nature texts, learned from the latter the observing and recording methods, and even tried to have a dialogue with the latter."<sup>23</sup> More importantly, he considers Taiwan modern nature writing as always already postcolonial. He remarks that the emergence of Taiwan modern nature essays in the 1980s was triggered by Taiwan's gradual marginalization in international relations. Since the United States cut diplomatic relations with the Republic of China and established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China instead in 1979, over the years the Republic of China in Taiwan has been losing its claim internationally as the "legitimate, authentic" China. The general public began to realize that the KMT government in Taiwan, which claimed to represent China, had de facto sovereignty solely over Taiwan and three small isles. The

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Qihong Liao, "Shengming jiaogan de qingjing wu mingyi de ziran shuxie" (The Poetry of the Interaction of Life: Wu Mingyi's Nature Writing), *yoshi wenyi*, 584 (August 2002), 19.

<sup>23</sup> "Preface: Writing about Nature's Mystic Revelation," 16.

Formosa Incident in 1979, which led to the imprisonment of several native intellectuals, also undermined the legitimacy of the authoritarian, China-centered rule of the KMT government. First-or second-generation immigrants from China who had fled with the KMT government to Taiwan in 1949 began to be concerned about what happens in Taiwan, rather than indulge in nostalgia for their “Mother China,” whereas descendents of early settlers who came from China to Taiwan three or four hundred years ago started to re-member their ethnic histories that had been obliterated by the KMT government.<sup>24</sup> He thus implies that Taiwan modern nature writing in the 1980s is part and parcel of the emerging Taiwan-centered discourses: the writers’ “geographical and historical identification [with Taiwan] would develop into serious concerns with the environment [of Taiwan].”<sup>25</sup> As Wu well puts it, “most of the early Taiwan [modern] nature writers started from their concerns with the local situations, with whatever exists on the land, and historical memories. Eventually they would move toward positing a new ethics. Adopting their own alternative approach, they would rediscover/reconstruct Taiwan’s land/history.”<sup>26</sup> Nativist concerns are thus combined with ecological concerns in Wu’s survey of Taiwan contemporary nature writing.

## II

For Benjamin, “Insight into the realms of the ‘similar’ is of fundamental significance for the illumination of major sectors of occult knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the mythic involves perception and reproduction of magical correspondences and similarities between cosmic order and human order. Horoscope, for instance, was developed because the ancients believed that they could imitate the processes of the sky both collectively and individually. The magic perception of similarity is experienced in a fleeting moment, like “a flashing up”<sup>28</sup>: “It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.”<sup>29</sup> In Wu’s fiction, which often deals ambivalently with the consequences of modernity in city life and military and education systems, the magic moments sometimes flash up in a ritual or dance; as the narrator of “Tiger God” says, “it may last for only ten or twenty minutes, but one can never forget it for the rest of one’s

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 (1927-1934), eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999), 694.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 695.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 695-96.

life.”<sup>30</sup> One of the most visceral mythical moments in Wu’s fiction is that of shamanism and spirit possession, which breaks down the division between self and other, between humans and gods. In his short story “Tiger God,” a case of shamanism and spirit possession is presented as at once horrific and subversive. Ordered by their superior, a group of soldiers are forced to put on the huge lion mask and costume and do lion dance for a friend of their superior’s on Chinese New Year’s Eve, a time for family reunion and rest—and this after their having done lion dance for several days already without any break. As the team approaches the statue of Tiger God, the core dancer Ping seems to be possessed by the Tiger God and refuses to dance, a refusal that suggests resistance to coercion. Undergoing an incredible physical transformation, he behaves like the legendary god. With his eyes turning as white as vomit, he is on all fours like a tiger, digging in the dirt till he bleeds. He grunts and howls, his facial expressions contorted and saliva flowing all over his cheeks. He seems capable of leaping at people and tearing their bodies apart. Whereupon red insects wriggle in his white eyes, a signal interpreted as Tiger God’s request for a raw egg. Crouching and growling threateningly, he stirs up a big wind; when someone manages to offer him a raw egg, he raises his left “paw” and flings it into his mouth. He eats the raw egg, complete with its shell, till his lips bleed, even licking the egg liquid on the ground together with the dirt. Finally he hiccups like a bullfrog and lies down falling sound asleep like a baby. This is not the only incident of shamanism and spirit possession in Wu’s fiction. In the story “A Tale of Men’s Room,” the protagonist visits a shrine with his parents to seek “spirit calling” (*shoujing*) from the guardian god Saintly Founder-King of Zhang (*kaizhang shengwang*) after he had heard the voice of a ghost in men’s room. A shaman (*jitong*) embodies the god. Despite that he neither growls nor dances, neither shakes all over nor punches the table, the shaman is still regarded as possessed by the god’s spirit. Hanging his head in meditation, he simultaneously speaks with an odd intonation and dots with a brush-pen in his hand as if he were writing in the air. After he finishes each sentence, he draws a sign on paper money. A man serves as his translator, passing on paper money to him and re-collecting it after he finishes writing. The experience fills both the protagonist and his father with awe; the latter is so moved that he bitterly repents having neglected his duties as a father. Then the shaman squints his eyes, knocks the ends of three sticks of incense lightly on the protagonist’s forehead, left shoulder, right shoulder, chest, and back, and, pointing the ends of the sticks at his mouth, asks him to exhale a mouth’s breath. Instantly the

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<sup>30</sup> Mingyi Wu, “Huyei” (Tiger God), in *Huyei* (“Tiger God” and Other Short Stories) (Taipei: Jiuge, 2003), 63.

protagonist recovers; he is himself again.

It is noteworthy that both incidents of shamanism and spirit possession are narrated retrospectively, with a more scientific hindsight, so that belief and disbelief are juxtaposed and intertwined to indicate the ironic interplay between the mythic and the modern. In "Tiger God," the narration is framed in a dialogue between the first-person narrator who had written a short story based on the event and his boyhood friend who happens to be a folklorist now. The narrator's reminiscence of the event is occasionally interrupted by their conversation. The narrator portrays the ordinary Ping as having a tattoo of Thunder God on his back. When Ping is dancing, the god seems to wield the hammers on his back; if one looks at the tattoo, one seems to hear thunderbolts somewhere. In thus building up the magic power of the tattoo, the narrator prepares us for Ping's strange behavior just prior to the event of spirit possession. Ping falls into complete silence and looks physically ill after a lion dancer holds up a front-flag in a ritual, a flag with figures of Daoist heavenly troops on it. The narrator notes that just then even the sky has turned dark, overcast with thick dark-gray clouds, and as the moon looks like a hollow disc, the clouds fly in a strangely fleeting way as if a group of giants are wielding huge dark-gray flags. Ping's possession by the spirit of Tiger God happens right after he refuses his superior's mandate that he be the drummer. The narrator's account of the relationships between the tattoo and the thunderbolts, between raising the front-flag and Ping's reaction and the clouds' movement shows magic correspondences between humans and things, humans and gods, humans and nature. Both the narrator and the folklorist display belief and disbelief in such incidents, unable to decide whether they intimate mysterious power or are a matter of sheer coincidence. "Don't believe it all, but don't disbelieve it," remarks the folklorist.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the folklorist also concurs with the narrator on the possibility that the shaman may have enacted a very close mimicry, rather than having been actually possessed by the spirit of Tiger God. He remarks that many shamans cannot call up the spirit anytime, that sometimes they have to mimic the state of spirit possession with the help of their past experience, and that mimesis under such condition involves a self-mesmerism which enables one to impersonate another being's sounds, thoughts, movements, and expressions.

It is significant that Wu, as Li Ang points out, "uses a quasi-anthropological approach to 'superstition'" in "Tiger God."<sup>32</sup> As a product of modernity, anthropology started more than one hundred years ago as a science by the Westerners

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Ang Li, "Imagining Taiwan," 9.

to study the primitives as objects, but its objectivity was questioned in the 1960s and 1970s as the epistemology and politics of established anthropology were critiqued—sometimes rather radically. This questioning has a lot to do with the decolonization movements in the 1950s and 1960s that changed the geopolitical condition. Inspired by poststructuralist theory, James Clifford even problematizes ethnographic authority by arguing that cultural anthropological writing is a literary genre, that it is interpretive and inter-subjective rather than a record of truth.<sup>33</sup> Today the anthropologist is faced with a difficult task; more than ever before he stands at the crossroads of modernity and occult practices, holding the latter in both belief and disbelief. The folklorist in “Tiger God” appears to be a semi-anthropologist, knowing all the pitfalls of fieldwork regarding the authenticity or duplicity of first-person accounts while retaining some belief in supernaturalism, hence it is his conversation with the narrator rather than the narrator’s fiction that he finds most valuable to his studies.

The event of shamanism and spirit possession in “A Tale of Men’s Room” is not so frightening in comparison; nonetheless it commands mysterious power for the protagonist. Whereas “Tiger God” is framed in a dialogue, “A Tale of Men’s Room” is presented in first-person narration. The anonymous first-person storyteller’s voice seems to be that of the adult protagonist looking back sympathetically and ironically on his younger self’s experience but it can also represent the Minnan communal voice at the Zhonghua Market (Zhonghua shangchang) where the protagonist grows up. The ironic tone vacillates between belief and disbelief. On the one hand, the possessed shaman succeeds in curing the protagonist Little Mosquito, who not only feels released and relaxed when the shaman asks him to exhale a mouth’s breath, but also senses that his forehead, shoulders, and chest seem to blaze with a soothing light after the shaman points the sticks of incense at those body parts. When he takes the shaman’s medicine, which is composed of the ashes of the burnt paper money with the god’s scrawls on them, he feels as if he is eating the characters that the embodied Saintly Founder-King of Zhang had written in the air, as if his body is digesting some mysterious thing and saving it in his bladder after it goes through his internal system. When he finally musters the courage to go to the men’s room, his urine shoots forth with hot air. Again, the magic similarities between humans and gods, humans and things are established: the shaman embodies the god, and the sticks of incense and ashes of paper money are god’s medicine to help him drive out the ghosts. On the other hand, for the storyteller to say that Little Mosquito recalls seeing the shaman in underwear just like an ordinary railroad worker is to point to the

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<sup>33</sup> James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” in *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983): 118-46.

funny and possibly fake aspect of the folk religious-medical ritual. The storyteller also records a conversation among the community women concerning the folk religious-medical practices, in which a woman claims that not every god is powerful enough to call the child's spirit, that in one case the possessed shaman had shocked the child badly rather than cure it.

Both "Tiger God" and "A Tale of Men's Room" vividly present folk belief among the lower-class native Taiwanese in everyday life, and in so doing reveal the author's nativist concerns. As I have discussed Ping-hui Liao's point earlier, both the Japanese government and the KMT government stressed modernization and denigrated Taiwanese folk religion and medical practices. Since the KMT government lost war to the Communists, they needed to claim that they represent the orthodox Chinese culture and history; thus they did everything they could to obliterate the Japanese colonial legacy and suppressed native Taiwanese culture.<sup>34</sup> Ironically, Han-Taiwanese educated class in their anti-colonial struggle against Imperial Japan also ignored or despised Han-Taiwanese folk culture, observes Wang Songxing; in so doing they anticipated KMT's call for a return to traditional Chinese culture.<sup>35</sup> I would argue that the distinction between Han-Taiwanese folk culture and traditional Chinese culture was at first based on class but gradually perceived as an ethnic difference under KMT's rule. According to Wang, it was only when the KMT government could no longer represent China internationally that some Taiwanese started to rediscover their identity in folk art, religion, language, and culture.<sup>36</sup> Although Han-Taiwanese culture came from China, it has undergone changes so that it is no longer the same as Chinese culture. As the storyteller of "A Tale of Men's Room" observes, no lower-class native Taiwanese knows the history of Saintly Founder-King of Zhang or how he became a founder-king any longer, even though their ancestors had brought the guardian god's spirit over across the Taiwan Straits. The god, then, is localized and becomes part of the communal life of the lower-class native Taiwanese.<sup>37</sup> Han-Taiwanese folk religion is different from the established religions such as Buddhism in that the former has practices of shamanism and spirit possession and believes in the magic correspondence between human and heavenly order—for which reason the KMT government and the Japanese government dismissed it as superstitious—

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<sup>34</sup> Songxing Wang, "Taiwan shi dazhonghua haishi xiaoguoguanmin" (Is Taiwan 'Big China' or a Small Country?), in *Taiwan duben* (A Taiwan Reader), eds. Kasahara Masaharu and Ueno Hiroko, trans. Wang Ping (Taipei: Qianwei, 1997), 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Mingyi Wu, "Cesuo de gushi" (A Tale of Men's Room), in *"Tiger God" and Other Short Stories* (Taipei: Juge, 2003), 117. Ping in "Tiger God" is barely literate and Little Mosquito's parents and the Minnan community at Zhonghua Market in "A Tale of Men's Room" are ill-educated lower-class people.

and in this aspect it bears some resemblance to Taiwan Aboriginal beliefs in ancestral spirit.

“Tiger God” and “A Tale of Men’s Room” re-write the genres of Taiwan military fiction and urban fiction respectively by adding nativist concerns. Conventionally, military fiction since 1949 either celebrates the discipline and loyalty of the soldiers or satirizes the abusiveness and inhumanity of the military system, with the former often serving as pro-KMT government, anti-Communist propaganda while the latter subtly criticizing the KMT government. Due to the KMT government’s authoritarian rule, the latter kind of military fiction is scant before the mid-1980s. “Tiger God” belongs to the latter kind but its critique of the military system is utterly original. Ping’s resistance to the inhumane system takes the unusual form of magic mimesis or spirit possession so that the story can almost be seen as an allegory about nativist resistance to the KMT’s modernity. With the help of the United States, to produce modern military forces through imposing strict military discipline was part of the KMT’s modernity project. Stressing that the Republic of China was a modern nation, the KMT government boasted of its military power with which it would eventually defeat the Communists and retake Mainland China. To the nativists, however, the aim of waging a comeback war with the Communists is far-fetched and not in their interest, hence compulsory military service seems not only inhumane but purposeless.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, abusers in the army tend to be old sergeants who had followed the exilic KMT government to Taiwan, who miss their homeland in China but cannot visit it until 1988 when the KMT government lifted the ban. It is no coincidence that one such sergeant is presented as perverted in “Xiangqi nage liuyaoguai” (Remember that Rookie), another military story in Wu’s “*Tiger God*” and *Other Short Stories*.

As for urban fiction since 1949, it presents city life either as modern, progressive, splendid, and colorful or as degraded, alienating, sordid, and unhappy. More importantly, since the cultural and symbolic capital was in the hands of Mainlanders and their children from 1949 to well into the 1990s,<sup>39</sup> Taipei, as the

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<sup>38</sup> Wu He’s “Taobing erge” (My Second Elder Brother is a Deserter) (1991) and “Beishang” (Sadness) (1994) are military fictions with similar implications of nativist resistance. Like “Tiger God,” they critique the inhumanity of the military system. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that nativists still find it necessary to defend their homeland, i.e. Taiwan. The way the narrator disparages a new recruit in the name of Taiwanese soldiers in Wu Mingyi’s “Xiangqi nage liuyaoguai” (Remember that Rookie), a story in “*Tiger God*” and *Other Short Stories*, conveys the vein.

<sup>39</sup> Ping-hui Liao, “chongxie taiwanshi cong ererba shibianshi shuoqi” (Re-writing Taiwan’s History: The Instance of Historiography on the 2-2-8 Incident) in *huigu xiandai boxiandai yu hozhimin luenwenji* (Looking Back on Modernity: Essays on Postmodernism and Postcolonialism)(Taipei: Maitian, 1994), 310.



political and cultural center of Taiwan, has been pre-dominantly represented as an enclave of exilic Mainlanders and their children, even though historically speaking they were in fact new immigrants—hence late-comers. Pai Hsien-yung's collection of short stories *Taipeiren* (Taipei People) (1971) conveys the message that "Taipei people" are no more than exilic Mainlanders. Gradually, some Mainlanders and their offspring would see themselves as based in Taipei, cut off from the rest of Taiwan. The heroine of Zhu Tian-wen's postmodern short story "Shijimo de huali" (The fin de siècle Splendor) (1992), a Mainlander's daughter, claims that her homeland consists of such metropolises as Taipei, Milan, Paris, London, Tokyo, and New York, and that once she goes out of Taipei southbound, she feels that she is stepping on foreign land. Such isolation and alienation from the rest of Taiwan may be a product of the KMT's China-centered policies, which ignore and disparage the soil of Taiwan. Wu Mingyi's semi-autobiographical "A Tale of Men's Room" is thus remarkable in depicting many store-keepers at Zhonghua Market as the first-generation native Taiwanese after the 1949 who had abandoned farming to become trades-people in Taipei, and who nevertheless retain love of nature, communality, and native roots. Due to changes in agricultural economy in the 1970s, these native Taiwanese came to Zhonghua Market and yet their stories were seldom written. "A Tale of Men's Room" is also remarkable in another important sense: while the men's room at Zhonghua Market used to be seen as one of the favorite haunts of cruising gay men, especially after the publication of Pai Hsien-yung's novel *Niezi* (Crystal Boys) (1977-80), Wu rewrites it as a site onto which a ten-year-old native Taiwanese projects his fan-tasies cultivated by his fascination with both the mythic and the modern. Little Mosquito imagines each of the men's rooms as a magic toilet elevator that carries people up and down, a fantasy that shows his excitement about modern machines. At the same time he also imagines that the men's rooms are haunted by *moxin'a*, or legendary elfins who snatch kids away. This fear indicates that he must have heard the native folktales about *moxin'a* from his parents. It is the fascinating mixture of both the mythic and the modern in his imagination that reveals a sensibility that is distinct from those prevalent in the genre of urban fiction in Taiwan.

By portraying the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in "Tiger God" and "A Tale of Men's Room," Wu simultaneously shows the belief and disbelief in the mythic under modernity and subtly conveys nativist resistance to colonial modernity.

### III

Wu Mingyi also depicts in his stories the similarity between humans and

animals, a magic correspondence that is central to his nature writing. This magic correspondence is superbly portrayed in the story "The Man with Compound Eyes" but is already delineated in the tale "Tiger God." Aside from Ping's mimicking of the tiger god, Ping is depicted as similar to a civet cat. Just as the civet cat escapes by playing dead in order to entice a soldier to open the cage door, so Ping evades his superior's commands by (feigning) spirit possession. Earlier the narrator had noticed, despite its apparent innocence, the cat's ferocity, wild driving force, and mysterious powers, qualities that had driven his friend to call it "Rainbow-colored thunderbolt plucky civet cat" after an animal in the native puppet show. Ping had told his friends that they should imitate the civet cat's movements if they want to become competent lion dancers. That Ping is cheered by the news that the civet cat had finally escaped further underscores the parallel between them.

Mimetic perception and reproduction are presented in "The Man with Compound Eyes," where the narrator recounts how his fascination with a rare, mysterious kind of butterfly called Common Mormon had prompted him to abandon academic life for a period of time to follow the migration of the butterfly. In his position as an entomologist, he is a scientific, objective observer who stresses the subject/object divide, whereas renouncing the role entails the gradual blurring of the boundaries between subject and object. His mimeticism happens on several levels. Firstly, as the narrator wishes to "let the butterflies tell their own stories of migration"<sup>40</sup> and to "personally walk into the butterflies' legend,"<sup>41</sup> he expresses his cravings to perceive what the butterflies perceive; he realizes that only mimetic perception and reproduction will enable him to understand them. He then experiences the Great Happening like a magic moment, in the flashing up of which he cannot help being physically involved in the butterfly's movements or one may say he has, in Benjamin's words, "the powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically."<sup>42</sup> As Michael Taussig elaborates Benjamin's theory, mimesis involves two acts: first, imitation, and the second, the perceiver's corporeal engagement with the perceived through contact.<sup>43</sup> The narrator notes that he must have screamed in the event since for a whole week after watching the Great Happening, his voice had been hoarse, and the videotapes he had made show shaky pictures. He had not screamed, he recalls, "out

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<sup>40</sup> Wu Mingyi, "Fuyanren" (The Man with Compound Eyes), in *"Tiger God" and Other Short Stories* (Taipei: Jiuge, 2003), 202.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," 721.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21.

of simple emotions such as fear, exhilaration, or excitement, but rather out of a panic from a sense of vulnerability.”<sup>44</sup> He suspects that he had had the desire to “throw himself into the rite of some mysterious kingdom.”<sup>45</sup> The intensity of his mimetic perception and reproduction had almost driven him to abandon his human identity in order to join the butterflies in their mythic rite. Although one may not say he had totally renounced his scientific perception throughout his mimesis, there had been at least some moments, which he cannot remember afterward, when he had lost his human identity and mentally become a butterfly.

Secondly, as the narrator recounts the stories of the Great Happening retrospectively, he seeks to present them indeed as some mythic rites, his very language being a mimetic reproduction of what he and his elder friend Uncle Ahai had perceived in the event. At times his astonishing accounts suggest that, rather than only the optical sense, the tactile and other senses are also involved in mimesis, through which the narrator gains unusual sensuous knowledge; and he seeks to reproduce this knowledge through his language as closely as possible:

Suddenly the sky became extremely low, so low that I almost wanted to lie on the ground. The profound dark [clouds] that flickered white stripes pushed against or avoided each other, flitting past me just less than ten centimeters above my head. . . .

Every ten seconds over one thousand Common Mormons passed, escaping to the sea as if chased by killers. Eight hundred thousand. No, at least over one million. . . .

Part of the shimmering powder on their wings fell soundlessly every time they fluttered. Fine black shimmering powder was floating in the air, like a black fog.

I chased them, riding on my motorbike. The itinerary of the butterflies flying in a group became rhythmic . . . somewhat like flying in courtship: each flying against the other (but the groups of butterflies were “thick,” spread out at different altitudes, hence looking like black clouds without any gaps), moving bizarrely slowly as if hampered by the wind. Sometimes, however, they would suddenly move fast and break apart like clouds, with apocalyptic halo spreading around their rims, and send out blinding light.<sup>46</sup>

The narrator's stories of Ahai's accounts of cutlassfish on a full-moon night are even more amazing, as his language attempts to present mimetically a mythical rite that is beyond human conception:

Just then, the fishermen heard the sound of the sea, or more precisely, the sound of another sea within the sea that wanted to break loose.

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<sup>44</sup> Mingyi Wu, “The Man with Compound Eyes,” 209.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-05.

Uncle Ahai said he had heard all kinds of sound made when the sea clashed against the sea, when the wind clashed against the sea, when the rain clashed against the sea, when the boat clashed against the sea, and when the fish clashed against the sea. But it was different this time. First it was the sound of innumerable tinsels scraping each other, which was suddenly muffled (unlike the bells whose sound subsides with the wind), and then it was the chaotic but rhythmic clashes like those in the Kung-fu series on TV, and then as one looked down, in the silver-white arcs of the lamps in the water, all kinds of lively light threads emerged, ready to break loose from the deep sea.

Hundreds of thousands cutlassfish twisted their tinselly snaky bodies in the air like ballet dancers. Time seemed to stand still at that moment of twisting. The cutlassfish were like a group of worshippers of the moon, flying out of the sea.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, paradoxically language is also mimesis at second removes; what it presents is the residue of magic powers, especially as the narrator reclaims his identity as an entomologist at the time of his narration. The similes here such as “as if chased by killers,” “like those in the Kung-fu series on TV,” “like ballet dancers” and “like a group of worshippers of the moon” connect them to the human perception, and somehow reduce the magic powers. As Benjamin points out in “On the Mimetic Faculty,” language may be seen “as the highest level of the mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, *to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.*”<sup>48</sup> Or as Beatrice Hanssen explicates, here Benjamin “posited a magical, mimetic, and corporeal phase antedating the acquisition of (verbal) language. In language’s sanctuary, this mimetic impulse was to find a new abode, but perhaps . . . at the cost of blotting out an earlier stratum of magic.”<sup>49</sup> For Benjamin, to mime is to understand. We copy the world to comprehend it, and to attain a sense of mastery, through our bodies. And yet, paradoxically once we use verbal language, an earlier stratum of magic is eradicated so that the magic is transformed. To the extent that the narrator is mostly using language to mime the activities of the butterflies, his mimetic faculties remain limited by human perception.

Thirdly, mimetic perception and reproduction reach climax in the story in the mythical presence of the man with compound eyes, whose very appearance turns the story into a sci-fi. Blurring the distinction between animal and man, the man can perceive what the butterfly perceives since he has the flicker vision

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 208-09.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 722, my emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, “Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s Work,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 56.

of the butterfly. He teaches the narrator how to perceive like a butterfly; and in a magic moment, the narrator feels as if he has suddenly put on a receiver which equips him with the flicker vision of Common Mormon flying in the Great Happening: "I discovered that the fluttering of the wings not only were not soundless, but sounded like the sound of the locusts described in the *Revelation 9.9*: 'like many chariots were racing.' Gradually some black wings fell off without any warning, so the sea became more and more immense."<sup>50</sup> Later he finds that none of the nearly six hundred cameras he had set up can capture what the butterfly perceives. Through the mysterious figure of the compound-eyed man, Wu Mingyi both implicitly critiques human manipulation of nature and shows human aspirations to be part of the eco-system. The mysterious man's questioning about the narrator's purpose of visit makes the narrator feel uneasy about his own intrusion. The man's sadness and mild warning that "everything will stop if life's perception of the world is not understood"<sup>51</sup> suggest that the natural environment is under threat from human manipulation and exploitation.

Interestingly, in this sci-fi story humans use modern technology such as camera to mime the butterfly's perception as well. Due to his knowledge of the butterflies, the narrator is hired by a transnational conservation-cum-tourism company to set up cameras in various locations in a butterfly conservation area, with a view to letting the tourist observe every movement of the butterflies from the latter's perspective. These cameras, then, mimic the compound eye of the butterfly, with the combination of the pictures serving to compose the flicker vision.<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin suggests in "The Work of Arts in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that the invention of modern mimetic machines such as camera signals the new development of mimetic powers in modern times. By arresting the flow of perception and capturing the hidden details of familiar objects, the new technologies of camera and film provide human beings with unprecedented perceptual capacity: "With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formation of the subject."<sup>53</sup> With the help of these technologies, our mimetic powers receive a new training: "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses"<sup>54</sup>; "Evidently a different nature opens itself

<sup>50</sup> "The Man with Compound Eyes," 222-23.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>52</sup> I want to thank Hung-chiung Li for pointing this out in our workshop in June 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 236.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite the new schooling for our mimetic powers provided by camera, Benjamin suggests that it is a “less magical, more scientific form of mimetic faculty” that is developing in our times.<sup>56</sup> And Wu’s story is astutely aware of how such new technologies may be misused. In the name of conservation and apparently harmless tourism, cameras are slyly set up to penetrate the mysteries of the butterflies, yet such tourism may eventually endanger the butterflies by intruding upon their lives. The conjoining of conservation and tourism is itself dubious, since it is likely to lead to commodification and consumerism rather than environmentalism. Herein lies the interplay and tension between the mythic rites of nature and modernity in the story: modernity cannot help being attracted to the mythic although it seeks to contain, repress, or dissolve it by rationality; modernity’s idea of conserving the mythic may end up jeopardizing it by not only turning it into a commodity fetish but stripping it of its magic gradually. The mild criticism from the man with compound eyes about the narrator’s intrusion is to underline the destructiveness of modernity in its ever more minute surveillance and penetration of nature.

In modern times one often learns about the mysteries of nature through scientific knowledge, yet Wu suggests such knowledge is inadequate without one’s going beyond anthropomorphism. The fact that the narrator finds later that none of the nearly six hundred cameras he had set up can capture the butterfly’s perception is probably another admonition from the man with compound eyes against his intrusion. The coda of the short story portrays how the development of science and technology had triggered overweening pride in human capability to create an utterly rational man-made world, one that opposes and rejects nature. In critiquing such anthropomorphic hubris and vanity, the coda also brings to the fore the tension between occult knowledge and modernity as the latter in its blind belief in rationality moves in the direction of seeking to exterminate nature, myth, and ritual. In the coda, the story is reframed by having a second narrator, who had just heard the stories about the butterflies and the compound-eyed man told by the first narrator, an old man now. The present time is actually the year 2020, and the world is largely dominated by technology and virtual reality. The butterfly conservation area had turned into a tourist spot, which the younger narrator used to visit. A group of Russian and American scientists are planning

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 236-37.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT P, 1989), 267.

to destroy the moon with nuclear bombs in the name of making the moon more inhabitable for humans. Blaming the moon for causing abnormal weather, plane crashes, earthquakes, hurricanes, tides, and floods, they intend to create an absolutely rational world. While the countdown for the destruction of the moon is accompanied by such television news reports as “Chronicles of the Death of the Moon” and “The History of the Moon in Retrospect,” the old man tells the stories about the mythical migration of the butterflies and fishes as well as the mysterious compound-eyed man. He tells the younger narrator that the migration is a ritual, that even though the butterflies end up dying in the sea, the ritual is their *raison d'être*: “The so-called ritual does not have an apparent reason or purpose.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, the irrational and purposelessness may be what makes life worthwhile and interesting. Enumerating the mythologies of the moon for different Indigenous peoples in the world, the younger narrator realizes that if the moon is destroyed, what he is studying now—the myths of the moon in folk literature—will be meaningless.

While the sci-fi critiques economic and technological exploitation of nature by portraying how nature is constantly misused by human intervention, the power of this story makes the reader aspire for a world in which humans are part of the eco-system rather than opposed to and alienated from it. The first narrator conveys this vision by desiring to throw himself into the mythic rites of nature through mimetic perception and reproduction. The mythic in the story can be seen as a trope for nature's viewing itself or a trope for the similarity between humans and nature. Wu is not suggesting anti-scientism, though, since paradoxically scientific observation remains one of the most important means today for humans to understand nature's perception of itself. Rather, he is intimating an environmental justice ethic that recognizes the similarity and difference between humans and nature. Since the first narrator obtains glimpses of the mythic of nature through both scientific observation and spiritual mimesis, he displays ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern.

Set in Taiwan, the story “The Man with Compound Eyes” implicitly joins environmental ethics with nativist concerns. For one thing, it portrays the compound-eyed man as having Taiwanese Aboriginal facial characteristics. His resolute but sad looks make him the embodiment of both the endangered nature and the suffering native land. For another, in the story his sensuous knowledge of nature reminds the first narrator of Atayal's meticulous categorization of leaves based on tactile differences. His sensuous knowledge is even subtler than the first narrator's scientific knowledge; yet he is in tune with nature. The first

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<sup>57</sup> “The Man with Compound Eyes,” 232.

narrator finds it necessary to learn from him environmental ethics and pass it on to the second narrator. This indicates that the Aborigines' ecological heritage may enable them to know better about and live more harmoniously with nature than Han-Taiwanese. This portrayal suggests a reconstruction of Taiwanese Aboriginal identities after the rise of the Aboriginal Movement in Taiwan in the mid-eighties. It also manifests a neo-nativist awareness since the nineties of the significant role Indigenous peoples have played in native resistance. Historically, Aborigines gradually lost their cultures and languages under Japanese and KMT's colonial modernity until the political liberalization and the rise of Taiwanese consciousness as well as the flourishing of the international movement of Indigenous peoples in the eighties provided a social space for the Aboriginal Movement. Both "The Man with Compound Eyes" and the story "The Last Siliq," which I have discussed early on, address Aboriginal issues and show Indigenous people's strong ties with the native land. As I have discussed in section I, Wu believes that the writer's "geographical and historical identification [with Taiwan] would develop into serious concerns with the environment [of Taiwan]."<sup>58</sup> Embedded in the story "The Man with Compound Eyes" is Wu's concern with issues of ethnicity and native resistance. For him ecological concerns not only cannot be separated from nativist concerns but in fact grow out of the latter.

In conclusion, Benjamin's theory of mimesis and language proves to be especially enabling in bringing out the power of Wu Mingyi's depictions of the mythic. In explicating the ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in Wu's stories, I have shown the ambivalence is in Benjamin the great theorist of modernity as well. But Wu's critique on modernity entails a critique on colonialism. The rise of Taiwanese consciousness has been important in reconstructing what Arif Dirlik calls "place-based imagination." As Dirlik explicates, "place as metaphor suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extralocal, all the way to the global. What is important about the metaphor is that it calls for a definition of what is to be included in the place from within the place . . . rather than from above. . . ."<sup>59</sup> Both folk beliefs and ecological concerns are related to "place-based imagination," since the former belong to native traditions and the latter care about the native land. Wu is original enough to explore the power of the mythic in both rites of nature and occult practices of folk religions, and to see them as constituting part of nativist resistance to colonial modernity. Nevertheless Wu is not calling for a reversion to

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<sup>58</sup> "Preface: Writing about Nature's Mystic Revelation," 15.

<sup>59</sup> Arif Dirlik, "Place-Based Imagination: Globalization and the Politics of Place" in *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization*, eds, Roxann Prazniak and Arif Dirlik (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 22.



a pure, primitive state prior to colonial modernity. Instead, by showing ambivalence toward the mythic and the modern in his stories, he implies that although nativist resistance is indispensable to constructions of the subjectivity of Taiwan and its ethnic groups, the legacies of colonial modernity continue to have impact on these constructions in Taiwan. The use of a quasi-anthropological frame in "Tiger God," the fantasy about a magic toilet elevator in "A Tale of Men's Room," and the use of camera to mimic the compound eyes of the butterfly in "The Man with Compound Eyes" have all shown the legacies of colonial modernity. To the extent that some of these legacies have been appropriated and transformed by native culture, they are incorporated into the latter and help enrich it. Thus Wu not only critiques colonial modernity, but suggests that our "place-based imagination" is informed by the ambivalence between the mythic and the modern.

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## 擺盪在神秘與現代之間： 吳明益的短篇小說

### 摘要

台灣青年作家吳明益擅於刻畫民間信仰與生態視野的懾人力量。在吳明益的作品裡，自然界的儀式和民間信仰的超自然實踐都被連結到與殖民現代性相對的神秘和鄉土。同時，我們也注意到：吳明益在論述台灣自然書寫時，擺盪在神秘與現代之間，而此一曖昧亦是他短篇故事的基調。這讓我想到廖炳惠的「神秘現代」概念。廖炳惠經由研讀班雅明的理論和台灣殖民現代性的歷史而發展出此一理論。雖然「神秘現代」一詞有其問題，廖炳惠的某些洞見卻依然提供了新的視角，有助於我們詮釋台灣的神秘之於殖民現代性的關係。班雅明有關模擬和語言的理論特別能彰顯吳明益短篇小說裡神秘的重要意義及力量。班雅明被視為探討現代性的理論大師之一，因此他對神秘的興趣常被忽視。於是，重讀他有關模擬和語言的理論也許有助於探索他的這個面向。本文將討論吳明益三篇短篇小說〈虎爺〉、〈廁所的故事〉及〈複眼人〉如何在神秘與現代之間曖昧擺盪，並檢視此一主題如何與吳明益的魔幻、鄉土、生態視野緊密結合。我認為，吳明益小說中的此一主題乃是重新思考台灣鄉土對殖民現代性的反抗之議題。而讓班雅明的理論與吳明益的小說對話，亦可發現班雅明同樣在神秘與現代之間曖昧擺盪。

**關鍵詞：**神秘，現代性，鄉土主義，生態批評，乩童，吳明益，班雅明，廖炳惠