CHAPTER 12

WU MING-YI AS AN (ENVIRONMENTAL) EDUCATOR

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Wu Ming-Yi is well known in Taiwan, and, to some extent around the world, as a nature writer and scholar of nature writing and environmental literature. One purpose of environmental literature is surely educational. The "students" who learn from environmental literature are mostly alienated from the natural environment and suffer from "nature-deficit disorder," a syndrome that environmental educators have diagnosed and treat with education.

Human beings naturally emphasize the effects of this syndrome on themselves, but the ignorance that accompanies it has a wider impact. Anthropogenic environmental crises around the world are not only consequences of our practical knowledge of nature but have arguably also resulted from modern human *ignorance* of it. The environmental impact of the transformation of ore into ornaments and all the other accoutrements of modern life is to some extent translated through the price mechanism, but the connections between source and product remain obscured for most inhabitants of industrial civilizations. Curing them of nature-deficit disorder and addressing their ignorance of nature through environmental education should help shed light on these connections, thereby turning us all into more responsible, not just happier, consumers. Consumers who can appreciate the non-artificial aspects of their surroundings might find satisfaction in observing the world more and consuming it less. Surely any democratic solution to environmental problems in the Anthropocene epoch must therefore involve some form of environmental education. A Taiwanese nature writer such as Wu Ming-Yi might play an important role in this process as an environmental educator.

It is also evident that Wu has assumed this role on his own terms. If his primary goal had been environmental education, he might have chosen any number of conventional paths: developing lesson

plans, modules, or textbooks for students of all ages; training as an educator in a museum or a national park; designing apps or producing videos (such as Ze Frank's popular nature shorts); writing or translating works of popular natural science; or compiling field guides. Instead, he chose to become a writer of widely read and highly regarded works of fiction and nonfiction in Taiwan; a scholar who interrogates how to "nature" might be "liberated" through writing; an activist who collaborated with the poet Sheng Wu on a book about the environmental impact of a refinery on a wetland along Taiwan's the west coast; and a teacher of Sinophone literatures at National Dong Hwa University in Hualian County.

Readers can engage with Wu's fiction and nonfiction directly to form their own view of him as writer, scholar, and activist. My focus here will be on Wu's role as environmental educator in his capacity as a teacher.

To develop this focus, I began with Wu's own reflections. In the introduction to *So Much Water So Close to Home* (家離湖邊那麼近)—a title borrowed from Raymond Carver without deliberate commentary on the short story—Wu recalls a day in the life of an assistant professor at Dong Hwa University. He'd just finished giving the final exam of a course in literary history. After administering a final exam on literary history, he took his students to a new audiovisual classroom and played three hours of music, from Joan Baez's "Diamonds and Rust" by Joan Baez to Led Zeppelin's "Since I've Been Loving You," to mark the end of term. Crossing the Mugua River on the way back to Taipei, however, he felt like an outsider and even a hypocrite—he had been introducing students to Hualian while barely knowing the place himself. He stopped, traced the river on foot, and confronted questions about his own readiness to educate: "Have I truly prepared myself psychologically to be an educator?" he wondered. "Can I really lead young people to learn to accept, understand, and change this broken world?" The river, he later wrote, curved into a question mark rather than offering answers.

Additional insight into Wu's teaching came from the documentary *So Much Water So Close to Home: The Peach Blossom Spring at Dong Hwa University* (*Jia li hubian name jin: Donghua Daxue de shiwai taoyuan* 家離湖邊那麼近：東華大學的世外桃源).[1] In it, Wu recalls searching for a trail through

the woods to Hwahu, the less accessible of the two campus lakes, after discovering that even his students had never been there. Leading the interviewer down the path, he identifies invasive trees that nonetheless support birds, beasts, and his beloved butterflies. He also pointed out a reed that symbolized love in classical Chinese poetry and the end of summer in a poem by Yang Mu (楊牧), then dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Dong Hwa University. Wu observed that while poets have long projected human meanings onto landscapes, writers like him have been developing a less sentimental approach to nature, one that students in both the humanities and the sciences can explore. He did not define this approach directly, except to suggest that it abnegates "standard answers" of the kind Taiwanese students are trained to provide on tests. Near the end of the film, he proposed that it entails befriending the creatures one observes without anthropomorphizing them. The perspective of the documentary is distinctly pedagogical: it frames Wu as a teacher guiding students to reimagine their relationship with nature.

As an educator myself, I believe that only students can ultimately answer questions such as the ones Wu posed to himself or the one I have posed here. To gain a student perspective on Wu Ming-Yi , I contacted him through Facebook Messenger to explain my interest and request introductions to students who had taken his classes, particularly "Nature Writing." Wu kindly introduced me by email to three of his students, Cheng Yu-Hui 鄭育慧, Hsiao Shun-En 蕭舜恩, and Chang Han-Hsiang 張瀚翔. This was never intended as a quantitative study, nor would I have wanted it to be. I sent the three students fifteen open-ended questions about Wu as an environmental educator. They responded generously, providing over fifteen hundred characters (or about a thousand words in English) per question, along with supplementary materials: syllabi, reading lists, photographs, sketches, essays, stories, radio shows, debate transcripts, summaries, and reflections. One student shared forty-eight supplementary files in nested folders. The books referenced in these materials suggest something of Wu Ming-Yi's range as a teacher: Wu Jingzi's 吳敬梓 *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史), Ni Kuang's (倪匡) *The Man with Blue Blood* (*Lanxue ren* 藍血人), Lo Yi-Chin's (駱以軍) *A Story of Abandonment* (*Qi de gushi* 棄的故事), Michel

Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, *George Saunders' Lincoln in the Bardo*, Liu Cixin's (劉慈欣) *The Three Body Problem* (*Santi* 三體), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Andrea Wulf's *The Invention of Nature*, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, Ben Fountain's *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, and Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Wu is clearly no one-trick pony as a teacher.

The same student answered several of my questions in groups, which proved so illuminating that I have tried to follow suit below. I have had to filter and organize the three students' responses (I sent this chapter to them for comment to ensure I have not misrepresented them), but I chose not to exclude material that did not directly address environmental education. For readers curious about Wu as a teacher, I trust that the following pages will satisfy at least part of that curiosity.

FIFTEEN QUESTIONS WITH THREE OF WU MING-YI'S STUDENTS

What year are you in and what's your major?

All three were Sinophone literature majors when they took classes with Wu Ming-Yi. Cheng subsequently completed her BA, while Hsiao and Chang went on to pursue their MAs.

What classes have you taken with Professor Wu?

Wu has taught at least ten courses, both undergraduate and graduate, including:

1. the literary history of the Yuan and Ming dynasties,
2. contemporary Chinese literature
3. Mandopop,
4. world literature,
5. nature writing,
6. essay writing,

7. fiction writing,
8. the theory of composition,
9. editing and publishing, and
10. digital image design.

All three students had taken five courses with Wu, though Chang repeated one—a graduate-level fiction workshop—three times (twice as an auditor).

What's your most unforgettable memory from Wu's classes? What most impressed you?

For Cheng, it was the fact that Wu took students on trips for every class, not just Nature Writing. Hsiao recalled that Wu also played popular music in every class, not just the one on Mandopop. Hsiao was impressed by Wu's ability to approach nature writing from multiple perspectives, engaging both Sinophone literature majors and students majoring in natural resources and environmental studies. Wu was also noted for being extremely well organized, hardworking, and generous—sharing notes and summaries of the texts he taught and providing feedback by email.

Chang recalled that in the course on Ming-Qing literary history, Wu asked whether Emperor Wu Zetian could be described as a feminist, a question Chang found mind-altering at the time. The answer, of course, was both yes and no. In his expositions of literary history, Wu emphasized political, intellectual, or historical contexts, and not just in China. He deliberately worked to transcend Sinocentrism; for instance, he assigned Jonathan Spence's *Treason by the Book* for a Western perspective on a particular "chapter" in Chinese history. In Nature Writing, as in Ming-Qing Literary History, Wu covered the "whole package": not only Henry David Thoreau but also Sheng Wu; not only literary writers like Annie Dillard but also scientists like Richard Dawkins, as well as politics and policies shaping both the conquest and liberation of nature.

Two memories stood out for Chang, both from Wu's classroom remarks. First, Wu explained that before the invention of cameras, naturalists like Audubon had to kill birds with slingshots in order to paint

them accurately, yet it was field guides such as Audubon's that eventually led to a reconsideration of the practice and greater awareness of human impact on the environment. Second, Wu observed that in the woods one is more likely to encounter excrement than animals—hence the existence of field guides for scat.

What was the most interesting reading that Professor Wu assigned and why?

Hsiao was enamored with Robert MacFarlane's *Mountains of the Mind*, which moves between literature, art, history, science, and philosophy on the one hand and the bodily experience of hiking on the other. Chang was electrified by Andrea Wulf's *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt*, a work that portrays Humboldt's courage in exploration and experimentation as bordering on madness. Both books were assigned for group presentations in Nature Writing. Other books Wu assigned for that purpose included *The Selfish Gene*, *The Evolution of Beauty*, *The Meme Machine*, *The Bisected Brain*, *Mind in Motion*, *Guns*, *Germs and Steel*, *Plagues and Peoples*, *The Zoo on the Other Side* (*Der Zoo der Anderen*), *A Sand County Almanac*, *The Genius of Birds*, *Seeds of Deception*, *The Virtues of the Table*, and *Love*, *Hate*, *Eat*. Wu arranged these works into the following categories: evolution, brain science, environmental history, natural history, nature literature, and ethics.

In addition to reading materials, did Professor Wu make effective use of audiovisual media?

Indeed, he did. Both Cheng and Hsiao recalled watching Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* in Nature Writing. Students were asked to share their impressions, and Wu surely shared his as well. Timothy Treadwell's saviour complex was a recurring theme, as were his misconceptions about bears, onto whom he projected human emotions, particularly love. The bears that he loved did not return that emotion—or if they did, they had a strange way of showing it, by eating him. Cinematically, Treadwell's

naiveté was underscored by a shot of a bear's "cold" eyes. Both Cheng and Hsiao were also struck by Herzog's use of Don Edwards' song "Coyotes" during the closing credits.

Did Professor Wu use the phrase "environmental education" in class? If he did, how did he define it? Is "environmental education" what he is doing? Why do you think so?

Nobody remembered Wu using the phrase, but all agreed that he is an environmental educator, and for various reasons: he took students on field trips, had them illustrate birds, shared his ecological observations, and recounted his encounters with environmentalists, conservationists, and biologists so that students could understand what troubles and motivates such people. He also discussed environmental issues, which he asked students to debate. These included:

1. The impact of the naphtha cracker at Mailiao
2. Indigenous hunting in national parks
3. The handling of stray companion animals
4. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs)
5. The black skipjack tuna fishery

Students were required to inform themselves about the relevant politics and policies before each debate.

Chang summarized Wu's approach as follows: "Professor Wu wouldn't require us to approach nature emotionally, but would constantly discuss the boundaries between human beings and nature with us. Nature is basically cruel; when species aren't eating one another they're competing for dominance. Human culture represents resistance to nature, not the law of the jungle. And if we recklessly invested nature with love, without knowing how to keep our distance, then that would only lead to the destruction of the balance and laws of nature."

What kind of outdoor teaching activities did Professor Wu organize? Where did he take you? What did he say to you during the activity? Or what did he ask you to do?

Wu took students on field trips not to exhort them to love nature, but, as Hsiao put it, "to feel the warmth of water and to gaze in the eyes of an eastern spot-billed duck." Field trips included, in order of distance from campus:

Hwahu, on campus: Wu took Cheng's class into the muddy lake, where they waded in up to their waists. Cheng and her classmates were standing there, watching duck excrement and feathers float by, when they startled a flock of several hundred ducks. The sound resembled that of a fighter jet taking off. When the ducks returned, the word "sublime" came to mind—until Wu undercut the moment by saying: "What idiots! They must think we're gone." He then accidentally dropped his glasses into the lake. To Cheng, this episode epitomized Wu's persona, which she compared to that of a "child king." In context the term suggests a fun, playful, perhaps slightly chaotic or capricious leader. Wu is clearly also a conscientious teacher. He brought a spotting scope, binoculars, and a DSLR camera for students to try out. Hsiao noted that Wu had installed a bird blind in the woods around the lake, which he invited students to use on their own time. According to Chang, Wu even slept in his blind on some nights.

Wu's "field," just off campus: Cheng recalled the field being overgrown, making it ideal for nature observation, such as watching juvenile scaly-breasted munias, whose breasts are white rather than scaly. Wu commented that his neighbors found his approach to farming frustrating, because the seeds from his wildflowers spread into their fields. Chang remembered Wu showing the class the netting he used to keep snails off his crops, "petting" the mildly toxic fuzz of a caterpillar, and handing out garden-fresh carrots.



Figure 3. A gift of a carrot from Wu's field to Chang Han-Hsiang.
Source. Chang Han-Hsiang

The mouth of the Hualian River, about 10 km off campus: Chang remembered it being a half-hour bicycle ride. When they reached the estuary, Wu described it as less visited and polluted than the famous Seven Stars Beach just north of Hualian City. In winter at dawn, you can still see people catching eel fry the traditional way, with nets.

The Hualian marina, where they went "whale watching," about 20 km off campus: The whale watchers mostly saw dolphins, which are evolutionarily more closely related to toothed whales than toothed whales are to baleen whales.

The Sanzhan River (accessed from the Truku village of Jelajah), about 30 km off campus: Wu taught students how to trace the river safely and pointed out butterflies along the way. They came across a dead snake covered with Nymphalid butterflies, commonly known as swallowtails. The class then floated down the river through a tunnel, grasping knobs along the wall to keep from being swept away—it was like rafting without a raft. Chang remembered wading through the tunnel in the opposite direction, against the current. On the other side, he and his classmates dove and swam in the river and skipped rocks. Wu also showed them a backpack that doubled as a lifejacket.



Figure 4. Braving the tunnel, by Chang Han-Hsiang.
Source: Chang Han-Hsiang

The Datong-Dali Trail, about 40 km off campus: Wu asked everyone to copy a line of poetry on the theme of mountains and to exchange the lines by lot at the historic church in the village of Huhus, the Truku name for Dali. The students kept the lines as mementos but did not read them aloud because, according to Wu, “that would be icky.”

Did you have to write a reflection about the experience?

No, but Hsiao recalled some advice Wu gave them in case they ever wrote about their experiences in the wild: to be honest, to write about the bad—the mosquitos, for instance—along with the good.

What homework did you do? If you wrote an essay, what topic did you do it on?

In the course on world literature, students were asked to discuss ten books that had made an impression or had influenced them. Wu compiled the lists into a Facebook post about a "mapless map of world literature" that included approximately three hundred authors. In the Mandopop course, students interviewed family members about songs they had grown up listening to. In Nature Writing, Cheng wrote about bird banding, and Hsiao wrote about salamander surveyors. I was especially pleased to learn that Hsiao also translated an article from *Scientific American* about Himalayan songbird plumage. Clearly, students were given a lot of latitude.

Besides writing or presenting, did you submit photos or videos? Did you draw or sketch?

Students were required to submit drawings of birds' heads, which Wu Ming-Yi compiled into a poster (the sketches, not the bird heads), as well as works of photography.



Figure 5. Common pochard by Cheng Yu-Hui.
Source. Cheng Yu-Hui



Figure 6. Ducks in the rain by Cheng Yu-Hui.
Source. Cheng Yu-Hui



Figure 7. The path leads on by Chang Han-Hsiang.
Source. Chang Han-Hsiang

According to Chang, the course on digital image design was held in the computer classroom. Wu introduced students to Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign, and cultivated their visual aesthetics. He asked them to draw an everyday object (but not a brand-name product or a work of art), create a

composite image, submit photographs—each with a theme and a particular composition—and design a poster. Wu also shared his own experience. For example, he explained how he designed the cover of *The Magician on the Skywalk* by combining a picture of a stairwell with one of a zebra, or the cover of the original Chinese-language edition of *The Man With the Compound Eyes*, using a photo of a krill eye that resembled a planet.



Figure 8. Literature competition poster designed by Chang Han-Hsiang.
Source. Chang Han-Hsiang

Have you taken other environmental education courses besides Professor Wu's? Which ones?

Cheng had taken many courses in the College of Environmental Studies, including ecology, conservation, entomology, mammalogy, and herpetology. Hsiao also took mammalogy and herpetology, as well as plant systematics. Chang took a course on animal rights with Professor Tsung-Chieh Huang, of the Department of Sinophone Literatures, who emphasized the rights of dung beetles as well as deer.

Are you in the habit of observing nature? What in particular do you like to observe? Has the way you look at nature changed after taking classes with Professor Wu? Has your attitude or viewpoint on "nature" or "the environment" changed after taking Professor Wu's classes?

Cheng was a naturalist and a nature artist as a child, but tended to objectify nature as a utopian space, unchangingly good. It was only after reading Wu's *The Butterfly Way* and *The Book of Lost Butterflies* in high school (with the book on her lap while the teacher was going on about something else) that she realized that there were other perspectives on nature besides that of the field guide. She then decided to go to Dong Hwa University to study with Wu Ming-Yi. She sums up the effect the experience has had on her view of nature as follows:

> A fieldguide or any naturalist's record almost always externalizes the observer (the I), in order to observe or describe an object in the wilderness. But the perspective I learned from Professor Wu was: We human beings are existences in the wilderness, and products of evolution. We, too, are a kind of animal. This perspective made me see 'humans' (including myself) as part of nature, part of this immense, continuously changing world system. …. All our magnificent civilizations, all our scintillating stories, and all our heroic memories are just waiting there quietly in some corner of the world, and could be destroyed in an instant, at any time [like the Sea Sage and Earth Sage and the island of Wayo Wayo at the end of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*]. From a certain perspective, Professor Wu didn't change my way of 'observing nature,' but rather 'widened my horizons as a wild animal,' so that I could develop my senses, intellect, and emotions in relation to the immense world….

Hsiao read *So Much Water So Close to Home* in high school and was envious of the Sinophone literature majors who got to study Hwahu ecology with Wu Ming-Yi. And so she became one herself. At Dong Hwa University, she joined a nature club and went from being a city girl who hated hiking to being a nature lover who looked at the environment with new eyes. Wu helped her see differently by asking: *Can you describe the appearance of a bird you supposedly know without looking at a picture (or the bird itself)?* She could not. So he encouraged her to draw it. As she did, she noticed details that she had been blind to before.

Hsiao also credits Wu with instilling in her the habit of asking questions by asking her ones that were not easy to answer, questions without a standard answer, questions that led to further inquiry. For instance, *Is a writer of a work of fiction with an animal protagonist a "nature faker" or a "romantic impersonator?* Confronted with things we find poignant, whether alive or not, what can we express besides our emotions? She sees different things when she takes such questions with her into the wild.

Chang does not enjoy outdoor activities but is interested in "cold," meaning obscure, knowledge of flora and fauna, that is, factual details that some might consider trivia. He had been skeptical of evolution—how could the scaly breast of a scaly-breasted munia possibly improve its evolutionary fitness?—but he deepened his understanding in Wu's Nature Writing class, in which he read *The Selfish Gene* and debated the legalization of GMOs. Somewhere along the way, he learned about pleiotropy, "when one gene influences two or more seemingly unrelated phenotypic traits." It turns out that traits such as the munia's breast pattern and its and immunity can be pleiotropic. Inspired by Wu's own "rigorous use of scientific knowledge" in works of fiction, Chang completed his term project in Wu's fiction workshop, which he was taking for the third time as an auditor, by writing a story about genetics and personal destiny. This story appears as the title story in a collection that he has just published, *Group Delay* (*Boqun yanchi* 波群延遲).

Which works by Professor Wu have you read? Which one is your favourite? Why?

Cheng had read nine of Wu's books. Her favorite moment comes in "Death is a Tiger Butterfly," when the sky fills with tiger butterflies. As a naturalist, artist, and adventurer, she was especially drawn to the stories in *The Land of Little Rain*.

Hsiao had read five of Wu's books—two nonfiction and three fiction. Her favorite is *The Man With the Compound Eyes*, a novel she found both meticulous in its construction and poignantly poetic. She was intrigued by its generic identity: was it fantasy or science fiction? Even within the world of the

novel, the existence of the man remained ambiguous. Ultimately, she described it as a book that "takes people places"—in her case, it took her to Dong Hwa University. She often quotes it to her elder sister. "It's clear on the ocean today," she'll say, and her sister knows what she means.

Reflections

Whether or not Wu's students fully answered his open-ended questions, their responses satisfied my curiosity about my own. What is Wu like as an (environmental) educator? Hsiao described him as a "Renaissance man," a role model who in some respects stretches the boundaries of that term. Leonardo da Vinci did not have to teach three courses a semester. As a Renaissance teacher, Wu helps his students bridge C. P. Snow's "two cultures"—the sciences and the humanities—not only to appreciate human achievement but also to think critically across domains of knowledge.

Among the many things Wu does for his students is tell them things they do not already know. It should not surprise readers of his fiction that he is a professor. His literary agent Gray Tan once described the dialogue in *The Man with the Compound Eyes*—where Alice's husband Thom listens to the eponymous man expound on Eric Richard Kandel's theory of memory—as a "data dump." On rereading, I found that the man does sound like a professor, while Thom resembles a struggling student, eager but uncertain. Yet Wu's students report that his classroom is not a place for dumping data; rather, he guides them toward responses, requiring them to inform themselves, reflect on experience, ask complex questions, debate with peers, and act—perhaps even to write. My lasting impression is Wu's faith in the power of words. Perhaps nature itself cannot be liberated by writing, but minds can—and that is a faith any professor must keep. Some of Wu's students are certain to follow him in that faith, myself among them.

This coming fall, I will be teaching a course called Ecotranslation, in which translation is a way of learning about nature. I conceived the course well after beginning my own journey toward becoming a naturalist—a journey that started, in part, when I had the good fortune to translate *The Man With the*

Compound Eyes—but a few months before I sat down to write about Wu Ming-Yi as an environmental educator. My plan for the course is to focus on the local face of the "three Fs"—flora, fauna, and funga—in and around campus; I teach at Lingnan University, in the New Territories of Hong Kong. We will begin with plants, often overlooked or blurred into the background, but which can be recognized as heroes of epic stories unfolding over lifetimes (for individual plants) or hundreds of millions of years (for species). We will then turn to birds, herpetofauna (amphibians and reptiles), insects, spiders, and snails, before concluding with mushrooms. Each week students will examine something on campus, translate a textual description of it, and situate it within historical, cultural, ecological, and geological contexts. Having completed this study of Wu Ming-yi as a teacher, I have decided to add a sketching exercise. The process has reminded me of my responsibility as an environmental educator: to pose questions about nature that do not admit of simple answers, to disseminate data without "dumping" it, and to act as a role model. To the best of my ability, and in my own way, I will model the role of environmentally responsible resident of Planet Earth.

THE TRANSLATOR'S LENS

[1] This was written by Yang Hui-Ping.