Topical Section: Ecologising Taiwan

Introduction: Ecologising Taiwan

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Abstract

Ecologising Taiwan means to think ecologically about, from, as well as by way of Taiwan. On the one hand, we ecologise Taiwan by viewing it through an ecological perspective; on the other hand, we also want to treat Taiwan itself as an agent that drives our thinking, no longer merely an object of our anthropocentric and anthropocenic gaze. Taiwan, as an island that encompasses a particularly wide range of biotopes, redefines insularity in its connectivity to other global spaces and networks: it pits its infinite potential for different encounters, relations, and comparisons against any bias of smallness and isolation. Culturally specific representations—the stories we tell about the environment and how we tell them—are important in environmental thinking. Thus ecologising Taiwan is not only about what ecological thinking can do for Taiwan but also about what Taiwan can do for ecological thought. In order to sound out the different resonances of what ecologising Taiwan might mean, this special

issue brings together six essays that explore flexible links between ecological thought and Taiwanese culture. As such, this special issue is part of the ecological chain of Taiwan studies, featuring topics (even topoi) on languages, genres, media forms, and methodologies in contestation and transformation.

Keywords

Taiwan – ecology – cultural representation – Anthropocene – anthropocentrism

Ecologising Taiwan means to think ecologically about, from, as well as by way of Taiwan. To couch 'ecology' in the form of the verb 'to ecologise' allows both transitive and intransitive uses: on the one hand, we ecologise Taiwan by viewing it through an ecological perspective and by striving for its increased sustainability and eco-awareness. On the other hand, we also want to treat Taiwan itself as the potential subject of such processes: an agent that drives our thinking and no longer merely an object of our anthropocentric and anthropocenic gaze.

Apart from a suspicious stance vis-à-vis old subject–object binaries, crafting environmentally conscious ways of thinking and imagining also involves a careful management of different levels and scales with regard to knowledge, perspective, and action. Environmental thought functions on a planetary (or even hyper-planetary, truly universal) level. It faces complex processes—what Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects—such as global warming, in which we are inextricably entangled and whose sheer intricacies exceed our epistemological horizons (Morton, 2013). Such large-scale complexity, however, makes it all the more crucial to find specific entry points that allow for meaningful understanding, engagement, and action also on different micro levels. After all, we cannot succumb to passivity and impotence in the face of an often ungraspable (hyper-)planetary scale.

Since ecological thinking thrives on diversity—of species, biotopes, and environmental processes—bio-locality, the attention to micro spaces and ecological niches, is at its core. And Taiwan, as an island that encompasses a particularly wide range of biotopes—insularly small and distinct yet internally diversified—lends itself particularly well to such an endeavour. What Ping-hui Liao and Shu-mei Shih (2015) have made clear in their volume *Comparatizing Taiwan* regarding Taiwan's cultural role, namely that its layered history, varied ethnoscapes, and cultural and linguistic diversity make it a productive node for relational thought, is also significant for ecological thinking. Taiwan redefines

insularity: it pits its infinite potential for different encounters, relations, and comparisons against any bias of smallness and isolation. From a different vantage point, our planet earth is, after all, much like Taiwan: a small island within the vast confines of space, infinitely varied, as well as complexly connected to all that surrounds it.

Ecologising Taiwan thus means to think relationally, from biotope to biotope, from small phenomena to planetary dimensions. Yet another dimension of relationality comes into play here: that between fact and fantasy, phenomena and representations. After all, how we interact with our environment, what possibilities of interaction we can even envision, depends largely on what stories we tell. And even as we attempt to let the non-human 'speak' and 'act' in order to divest from anthropocentrism, this very desire to do away with our own anthropomorphic patterns of thought is still a human desire. More importantly, ecological thinking cannot be allowed to zoom over the necessary speed bumps of cultural diversity. Even as we need to radically rethink the place of the human in the world and the universe, we cannot do away with a keen awareness of cultural specificity. As we refashion the interaction between humans and environments away from hierarchical structures, such as those of mastery–subservience or centre–context, we need to pay attention to the complex feedback loops that are constantly at work between specific cultural expressions and specific natural habitats. Ecologising Taiwan, then, is not only about what ecological thinking can do for Taiwan but also about what Taiwan can do for ecological thought.

In order to sound out the different resonances of what ecologising Taiwan might mean, this topical section brings together six essays that explore flexible links between ecological thought and Taiwanese culture. As such, this special issue is part of the ecological chain of Taiwan studies, featuring topics (even topoi) on languages, genres, media forms, and methodologies in contestation and transformation.

'Ecologising Taiwan' begins with two essays that analyse literary and filmic texts directly engaged in ecological thinking with (as well as beyond) Taiwan. Kyle Shernuk's 'The Ecology of Travel' reads *Farewell, Eagle: A Paiwan Woman's West-Tibetan Travels*, by indigenous Taiwanese writer Dadelavan Ibau, as a complex negotiation between capitalism, ethnic identity, and the environment. For Dadelavan Ibau, travelling to Tibet becomes a way of reimagining her own cultural heritage, but at the price of her complicity in the capitalist productions of cultural nostalgia. Yuwen Hsiung's essay 'Competing with Urban Verticality' analyses two films—Wei Te-sheng's *Seediq Bale* and Chi Po-lin's *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above*—as aesthetic challenges to an

urban imagination of Taiwan, especially through their formal focus on verticality in relation to landscape.

The next two essays, 'Ecologising Seediq' by Darryl Sterk and 'Filaments in Time and Space' by Mark McConaghy, use ecological thinking as a method for reimagining language and culture. Sterk reframes the Taiwanese indigenous language Seediq from the vantage point of a linguistic ecosystem. Viewing Seediq through the lens of 'language ecology' allows for a better grasp of processes of linguistic change. McConaghy's investigation of Lien Heng's *Elegant Words* provides insight into Taiwan's language debates of the 1930s around Minnan. Alongside Lien Heng's reflections, McConaghy points to the importance of understanding languages locally, even eco-locally, but also as multiply connected to other languages and locales.

The final two essays reframe the connection between literary imagination and ecological concerns, asking how literature can activate environmental consciousness and how literature can function bio-tropically. Brian Skerratt's 'Born Orphans of the Earth' analyses pastoral utopia in contemporary Taiwanese poetry in order to reflect on the role of literature in responding to environmental crisis. Rather than simply idealising nature or bemoaning language's inability to capture nature, poetry (and literature in general) can become an activity that forges a relationship between humans and nature. Finally, Carlos Rojas's essay 'A Surplus of Fish' on the recurrence of tropes related to fish in the work of Malaysian Chinese author Ng Kim Chew probes the importance of bio-tropes (and biotopes) in literature as more than mere references or figures and instead as a set of strategies that rethink relationality in friction and conflict. Ng's stories deal with ecological—and ethnic—disasters, but they are also allegories about estrangement, diaspora, and extinction in contemporary Taiwan, which otherwise celebrates cultural 'co-prosperity' and democracy.

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