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## Revisiting Taiwanese Anthro-Botanical Relationships

*Critical Plant Studies in Taiwan*

Edited by Iping Liang

Lexington Books. 270 pages. 2024.

Viewed from almost any angle, the island of Taiwan is a densely vegetated body of land. Its mountains are carpeted with Formosan alders and maples, mixed with Taiwan hemlock, spruces, and firs. Taiwanese rivers are often lined with mangrove forests, supporting abundant water species and birds. Even city parks, in Taipei and Taichung, boast Taiwanese persimmon, Formosan michelia, Chinese pistachio, camphor, stout camphor, beech, and Taiwanese yew trees. Land that's free of wild plants is put to human use growing rice, betel nuts, cocoa, coffee, mushrooms, tea, and a wide assortment of fruits and vegetables. It's no wonder that Taiwanese culture is deeply interwoven with—that is to say, inseparable from—the lives of plants.

*Critical Plant Studies in Taiwan* provides a diverse and energetic collection of scholarly studies of anthro-botanical relationships in Taiwan. The book builds upon and extends the work of earlier Taiwan- and East-Asia-focused projects in the environmental humanities, such as *East Asian Ecocriticism: A Critical Reader* (2015) and *Ecocriticism in Taiwan* (2015), neither of which dwells on plants in particular. *Critical Plant Studies in Taiwan* includes many examples of botanical ecocriticism, scrutinizing both Taiwanese writing and writing about Taiwan by non-Taiwanese authors, but it also extends widely into the realms of plant-related environmental history and cultural studies.

What quickly struck me in reading this collection is how many of the chapters, especially toward the beginning of the volume, focus on cultivated—i.e., commercial—plants rather than on endemic, wild species. The opening chapter by Theodoor Richard discusses the economics of sugarcane cultivation in Taiwan, as represented in Dutch author Joyce Bergvelt's 2018 novel *Lord of Formosa*, a topic closely related to that of the following chapter, Li-Ru Lu's economic and ecological analysis of nineteenth-century European and American travel literature and the representation of tea cultivation in Taiwan. In her introduction to the book, Iping Liang refers to the central themes in the opening section, "Western Explorations," as

“plant mercantilism” (3). The individual sections of the book are mentioned in Liang’s introduction but not clearly demarcated in the table of contents or in the text itself, so it can be somewhat difficult to follow the flow of the book’s four sections without referring repeatedly to the introduction.

Following the two chapters of the opening section, the second part of the book is devoted to “Tea and Camphor Plantations” as described and interpreted by Taiwanese writers. Many of these studies adopt postcolonial theoretical angles. Iping Liang’s chapter on Jade Chen’s 2014 novel *The Merry Leaf* uses Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing’s concept of the “plantationocene” (55) to critique the development of Taiwan’s tea-growing agriculture as an example of botanical imperialism, relying on oppression of farmworkers through forced labor and displacement of peasants from their homes. While most of the ecocritical chapters in the volume focus on prose texts, Stephen Roddy’s study of Taiwanese “tea poems” from 1820 to 1920 stands out for its delicate treatment of the use of poetry to capture “attunement” (69) to the physical environment, including human interactions with tea plants through the process of plucking tea leaves and contemplating the weather in tea-growing regions. Even these sensation-oriented poems, though, are not free from the angst of solastalgia, as the writers often note the transformations of the landscape due to urban development. Ya-Feng Wu’s “molecular reading” of Ying-Min Chang’s 2017 novel *Blood Camphor* highlights the colonial exploitation of Taiwan by multiple nations. While tea plants are native to Taiwan, Chinese tea culture was imported to Taiwan by immigrants from Fujien Province. Camphor is another endemic plant and was used by aboriginal people for medical purposes, helping with a wide variety of ailments. Later, as Wu explains, camphor products served as solvents and plasticizers. Wu’s molecular reading of *Blood Camphor* focuses on the “intertwining and intermeshing” of various physical phenomena—body fluids, tree sap, gunpowder, and so on. This extends to the cooking of human flesh, the preparation of camphor crystal, and the parallels between aboriginal facial tattoos and the bark pattern of camphor trees. The anthro-botanical intersections of the book are particularly vivid in this chapter.

The collection’s third section is devoted to “Afforestation and Conservation.” Weibon Wu begins this section with his use of trans-scalar theory to explain the importation of casuarina trees from Australia to Taiwan’s Kinmen Island and the dramatic transformative effects of the “vegetal fortress” of trees (100), which reduced erosion and sand movement and camouflaged military equipment. This chapter includes discussion of Jun-Yao Wu’s writings, which use casuarina trees as a motif. Weibon Wu makes particular use of trans-scalarity and related ideas, including the power of singularity in narrative treatments of large-scale phenomena, in such works

as Jun-Yao Wu's *Three Tree Friends* (2010), which features a single soldier caring for a single young casuarina. This is a dramatic down-scaling of the phenomenon of casuarina importation to Kinmen, which *The New York Times* estimated as involving some 78 million trees! Rose Hsiu-li Juan turns her attention to the endemic mangroves forests that characterize Taiwan's "identity as an island" (115) and contribute to the island's broader ecological well-being. Urban development in northern Taiwan has threatened mangrove forests in the mid-twentieth century, but in the 1960s the Taiwanese environmental movement advocated for the creation of national parks, protection of the seacoast, preservation of habitat for migratory birds, and restoration of mangrove wetlands. As Juan explains, one of the leading defenders of the mangroves has been author Liu Ka-Shiang, a prolific poet and nature writer whose interest in birds has led him also to pay attention to critical bird habitats. This chapter charts Liu's evolution from "a solitary bird watcher who turned his back on society to a social activist actively involved in ecological protection" (120-21).

The fourth and final section of the book emphasizes what editor Liang calls "Posthuman Vegetalities," meaning, as she puts it, "alternative plantscapes." The first chapter in this section is Pei-Wen Clio Kao's study of the rooftop garden in Zhu Tianwen's "Fin de Siècle Splendor" (1990), emphasizing Zhu's use of plant imagery to explore the female protagonist's sexual awakening and growing sense of empowerment as central aspects of her developing identity. The protagonist Mia's deep interactions with plants in her rooftop garden and at a local flower shop are evidence, argues Kao, of the intimacy between humans and plants and the healing force of plants in human lives. Rooftop gardens are common features of Taiwanese households, especially in urban contexts, and this chapter suggests that such gardens can play vital roles in the psychological lives of residents. In the next chapter, Li-hsin Hsu looks at the "vegetal Gothic" in various examples of Taiwanese mushroom poetry, arguing that Gothic representations of plants, and especially mushrooms, "expose[s] a monstrous potentiality of the intimate plant-man, vegetal-animal, plant-plastic embroilment" (157), which points to the possibility of decentering anthropocentrism through the power of the vegetal imagination. This is not a uniquely Taiwanese topic, but the literary examples used in this chapter are drawn from contemporary Taiwanese poetry. In the next chapter, Kathryn Yalan Chang explains how Timothy Morton's notion of "ambient poetics" illuminates Jessica J. Lee's efforts to engage with the intrinsic qualities—even the *language*—of the mountains, waters, and trees of Taiwan in her memoir *Two Trees Make a Forest* (2019). In emphasizing Lee's uncertainty and apprehensiveness, even the sense of hauntedness, in confronting the physical and cultural aspects of her family history in Taiwan,

Chang shows how the author complicates the ideas of home and belonging that one might expect to find in a memoir about homecoming. Ultimately, though, Chang finds that Lee’s work celebrates Taiwan’s biodiversity as a suitable habitat for both native and migratory species, including herself. Five scholars—Yih-Ren Lin, Pagung Tomi, Hsinya Huang, Chia-hua Lin, and Ysanne Chen—co-authored the next chapter on the Millet Ark Initiative, an effort to collect and preserve Indigenous knowledge about millet, a traditional crop of the native people of Taiwan. This chapter focuses, in particular, on the knowledge of the migratory Tayal people. Unlike most of the other chapters in this collection, this study is essentially an ethnographic portrait of Tayal lifeways, with a particular emphasis on traditional agricultural practices and recent efforts to preserve the biodiversity of millet varieties. In keeping with the unorthodox topics of the final section of the book, the last chapter, Chingshun J. Sheu’s application of the idea of “hyperobjects” (197) to Tao Lin’s novel *Taipei* (2013), is a critical-plant-studies analysis of a literary text that offers “a dearth of plants” (197). Sheu argues that the novel’s protagonist Paul, who has a divided identity as a Taiwanese American and a person who spends much of his life on the internet, lives in a realm where “the hyperobject of the digital is haunted by the mycorrhizal hyperobject—a return to primordial roots” (203-04).

To be honest, the final chapter seems to strain the boundaries of both Critical Plant Studies and Taiwanese studies, but it does conclude the volume in a provocative, boundary-testing way that suits the exploratory spirit of the book and demonstrates the vitality and diversity of the field in Taiwan. While the contributions to this volume, for the most part, are focused in a regional sense (Taiwan being a rather small place), the interdisciplinary approaches (including the selection of theoretical lenses), cultural texts, and discursive styles of the twelve chapters are impressively expansive. At a time when the environmental humanities are turning increasingly toward Critical Plant Studies as a subfield that can help scholars understand human relationships with our vegetal kin, this book provides an excellent model of rigorous and energetic research.

### **About the Author**

Scott Slovic served as the founding president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in the early 1990s, and from 1995 to 2020 was editor-in-chief of the central scholarly journal in the field, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. He is currently a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Idaho and a Senior Scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Oregon, USA.