

## Introduction of Taiwanese Literature

### See the World through the Compound Eyes

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“Selected Readings in Contemporary World Literature” is a course taught by Wu Ming-Yi, who teaches at the Department of Sinophone Literatures, National Dong Hwa University, in Hualien County, Taiwan. Wu, trying to strike a balance between languages, nationalities and areas, selects representative works from writers all over the world. On the reading list, there are books such as Ferit Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* (1998), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes* (1970), Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980), and John Maxwell Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) (from the syllabus of “Selected Readings in Contemporary World Literature,” edited by Wu Ming-Yi).

In each class, a book is introduced, presented and discussed. At the beginning, Wu introduces the author and the history of the country. Apart from his concise slides and informative handouts, Wu also uses mediums such as music and video. For instance, when he talks about the history of Ireland, he plays Sinead O’connor’s *This is a Rebel Song* and the trailer of Ken Loach’s *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. Following his introduction, students give presentations on the book and respond to questions brought up by classmates. Then, Wu makes remarks, shares extracts from books and summarizes the information presented for the whole class.

Wu is also a writer. His works include *The Book of Lost Butterflies* (2000), *Routes in the Dream* (2007), *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011), *The Illusionist on Skywalk* (2011), *Above Flame* (2014), *The Stolen Bicycle* (2015), etc. Among them, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is Wu’s most renowned work. The novel is mainly about the stories of Atile’i and Alice. Atile’i is a teenage boy from an imaginary Pacific island called Wayo Wayo. As a Wayo Wayoan second son, when he turns fifteen, Atile’i has to be sent out to sea with a limited amount of provisions and cannot return. Atile’i is destined to be a sacrifice for the Sea God like all second sons; however, he has a strong will to be the first to survive. Alice is a literature professor who lives on the east coast of Taiwan. Her husband and son go mountain climbing and never come

back. Overcome with grief, Alice decides to commit suicide, but she changes her mind when she finds a cat that survives after an earthquake. For Alice, raising a cat is just like having a child. The company of the cat Ohiyo lessens Alice’s sorrow and solitude, relieves her trauma and gives her hope to live.

#### The cover of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2016)



The cover of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (Wu Ming-Yi, 2016, ThinKingDom.) is designed by Wu Ming-Yi (Reprinted by permission of the author). The background is the estuary of Mugua River in Hualien. The sperm whale is the avatar of Wayo Wayoan second son’s spirit, and its head lifts the living over the surface of the ocean. On top of the head is the Sea House where Alice and Ohiyo live. In addition, there is Atile’i’s boat, which symbolizes his perseverance for life (Wu Ming-Yi, 2016, June 15).

In his novel, Wu also creates a mysterious figure, the Man with the Compound Eyes. His compound eyes are a combination of all kinds of scenes. The character Dahu's narration gives us a clearer picture. "I discovered his eyes weren't like human eyes. They were more like compound eyes composed of countless single eyes, the eyes of clouds, mountains, streams, meadowlarks and muntjacs, all arranged together. As I gazed, each little eye seemed to contain a different scene, and those scenes arranged to form a vast panorama the likes of which I had never seen." (Wu Ming-Yi, Translated by Sterk, D., 2013, p.186) According to Wu's interview carried by Eslite Station, he says the idea of "the Man with the Compound Eyes" is derived from his experiences in the field alone. He always feels some kind of existence close by him. When he sees beautiful butterflies, he is eager to share this experience with someone. Though there is no one, he cannot help talking to the air or to "the omnipresent existence" (Eslite Station, 2011, April 11).

The new Mandarin version of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* was published in June, 2016, and the publisher ThinKingDom organizes a series of talks and outdoor activities to help readers explore deeper into the novel and learn more about the rivers and the ocean. ThinKingDom cooperates with Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation to hold the outdoor activities and one of them is called "Walking along the Ocean." It is about cleaning up the beach of the estuary of Hualien River. Why arrange the beach cleanup? Wu explains that it is related to the Trash Vortex scene in the novel. Also, he thinks novels in the 21<sup>st</sup> century play a different role: Novels create more than a fictional world, and it can connect with the world we are living in (Wu Ming-Yi., 2016, August 15).

Wu's classes and works are comprehensive and multifaceted, just like compound eyes; each contains different topics and issues. Through those eyes, I see the world. He inspires me to read and opens my eyes.

## Acknowledgments

Thank for Professor Akira Tominaga, who offers me this precious opportunity to introduce Wu Ming-Yi's class and works. Also, thank for Darryl Sterk's article "The Man with the Compound Eyes," which inspires me to write this article. Sterk, Darryl. "The Man with the Compound Eyes." In: Laura Miller (General Editor) *Literary Wonderlands*, UK: Elwin Street Productions, pp.300-301. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1219466874752932&set=p.1219466874752932&type=3&theater> (Accessed on August 26, 2016)

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Author obtained the permission to use the photograph of the cover from Wu Ming-Yi. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1203111539721799&set=a.1203111353055151.1073741883.100000688939773&type=3&theater> (Accessed on September 5, 2016)