



Two Trees Make a Forest: In Search of My Family's Past Among Taiwan's Mountains and Coasts

Jessica J. Lee

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In her memoir *Two Trees Make a Forest*, Jessica J. Lee braids together geology, language, and family history as she explores her Taiwanese roots.

Lee, who has a doctorate degree in environmental history and aesthetics, is attuned to nature, and her descriptions are often poetic, as of clouds that “hang wool-thick” in the mountains. While on group hikes through Taiwan’s forests, she tends to lag behind, absorbed with “the minutiae of the ground.” And as a biracial woman living in Germany, she feels an affinity with the swampy mangrove forests, which also exist in an interstitial space.

Aspects of nature serve as guiding themes within her memoir, which is divided into sections named for Chinese characters that represent natural features. In addition to her quest to become familiar with the terrain of Taiwan, Lee studies Mandarin and learns that the ideogram for “island” represents a bird on a mountain—apt, since Taiwan is a mountainous island with many endemic bird species.

While getting to know the land, Lee hopes to form a better understanding of her deceased grandfather, Gong, who was a Flying Tiger, but with whom she could not communicate because of their linguistic differences. She undertakes a painstaking translation of his left-behind diary from Chinese into English. Upon seeing a character in her grandfather’s handwriting, Lee writes: “In that single word—gege, ‘older brother’—an entire life appeared, the possibility of knowing Gong as a child and as a man, more of him than I had ever known.”

Interspersed with observations of nature and family lore are details about Taiwan’s difficult relationships with China and Japan, as well as the years of martial law that followed its colonial rule. *Two Trees Make a Forest* is a compelling memoir that’s threaded with information about Taiwan’s past and the natural beauty of its present.

SUZANNE KAMATA (September / October 2020)

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