

Brandon K. Liew and Daryl Lim Wei Jie, eds. *In the Mirror: New and Selected Poems of Wong Phui Nam*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2025. 241 pp. ISBN: 9789813252844.

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As one of the pioneers of Anglophone Malaysian poetry, Wong Phui Nam needs little introduction in local literary circles. Writing since the late 1950s till his passing in 2022, he published seven collections of poetry, many of which received praise from Malaysian and international critics. *In the Mirror: New and Selected Poems of Wong Phui Nam* which was published posthumously is a welcome updated compilation of his best-known poems like “How the Hills are Distant” to his later unpublished pieces, charting the development and evolution of an enduring Malay(si)an literary voice.¹ The editors Brandon Liew and Daryl Lim had befriended Wong and were given access to his manuscripts including revisions of his earlier poems that are now included in this volume. What is new in this edition is how Wong’s poems are divided into three parts and chronologically arranged by the period in which they were written instead of publication, thus serving as a useful context to certain poems, especially the Osiris poems which can now be re-evaluated as having been written earlier, while making evident the interregnum during which he stopped writing altogether. The inclusion of Wong’s critical writings (also present in two previous collections) is now supplemented with an “Afterword” by the Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo who had been a friend, and a 1999 interview by the Guyanese literary scholar Daizal Rafeek Samad. Wong had dedicated the poems

¹ I use *Malay(si)a* to signify the “Malayan” in “Malaysia” since the collection is dedicated to “all Malayan poets”, recalling the shared beginning of Malaysian and Singaporean poetry in English in then-University of Malaya.

“A Fire-Easter” and “Against the Wilderness” to them respectively. Credit goes to the editors for these important editorial touches, including the critical introduction which provides a detailed overview of Wong’s life and works that both new readers and scholars alike would find valuable.

The newly published 2010s poems reflect subtle changes in Wong’s poetic tenor over the decades. While he still engages in “personal mythos”, as the editors have observed, his late poems are “notably sparser and more direct” (Lim and Liew 14, 16). In fact, there are a number of openly political poems unlike most of his oeuvre. The most notable example is “Hanpa” which uncovers among “[f]ragments of the ruins” the story of an unnamed charismatic leader who had travelled across the country to “roil the people up” (italics in original 214, 215):

*Our faith is the one true faith,
and our god, the one true god.
These Kafirs, their ungodly beliefs
deceive and confuse.
Look at them. How dark, how filthy they are.
Low breeds. They infest
our land, breeding killers and rapists.
Why do our youth not find work?
Herding, wood cutting, well digging,
they rush in, and offer to slave for a pittance.
They will not replace us.
They will not replace us.
Light your fires, take out your knives,
pick up rocks and stones,
anything ... Exterminate ...* (italics in original, 215)

These lines capture a fiery denunciation of another ethnic group for their religious difference and the threat they posed to the local community’s way of life, followed up with a call to arms to chase away and even kill the outsiders. While Wong avoids specifying ethnicity, he draws on well-known local terms such as “Kafir” and “dajjal” from the Islamic faith, having converted to become a Muslim upon marriage many years ago (215, 216). The lines “[t]hey will not replace us” indirectly echoes the famous declaration by the legendary Malay warrior Hang Tuah that

Malays will never lose their place in the world (215). Having set the poem in some distant pre-colonial past, anachronisms such as “town” and “print” become slightly jarring, but these are deliberate choices to indicate the contemporaneity of the poem which serves as a cautionary tale against inflammatory racial discourse and exclusionary identity politics in Malaysia today, even as the fictional ruins and its records reveal the annihilation of a community (215, 216). Such reflections are prominent in Wong’s late poems, where it appears as if he were loosening up his oblique style and no longer holding back his words. There are more direct and specific references made, especially to historical events like the fall of the Melaka empire to the Portuguese in “Advent”, the assassination of the colonial British official James W.W. Birch in “Birch”, and the story behind the incomplete castle in Perak in “Kellie’s Folly”, each looking back to how the colonial past has shaped Malaysia, for better and worse.

Known for his sharp criticisms against the National Cultural Policy of 1971 and subsequent marginalization of all other cultural works other than those in the Malay language, Wong’s poetry painfully retains some of the isolating despair he had when he first started out, struggling in his own words to “make one’s language as one goes along” (20). Although writing in English, Wong had sought early on to infuse and localize his poems with images of the tropical sun, monsoon rains, rubber estates, and tin-mining pools, thus mapping out both the Malaysian landscape and evoking it as a personal, living experience. But, a careful reading of his poems will also show how he benefitted from a broad and diverse range of traditions, gleaning insights and weaving in techniques which enriched his own literary craft. From T.S. Eliot to the French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud, from ancient Egyptian religious beliefs to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, all these varied influences and ideas find their way into his poetry. Notably, Wong’s last book length collection *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai* is excerpted in this volume,

featuring sonnets about an Egyptian priestess who performs funerary rites that usher the Pharaohs to the next life. Such cosmopolitan capaciousness did not sit well in the political context of Malay-Muslim cultural primacy in Malaysia. It may be argued that the angst of his poetry reflects the complex contours of his cultural identity and his experience of displacement as a Malay(si)an postcolonial subject, being ethnically Chinese with a colonial English education in a Malay marital home.

Wong Phui Nam stands out as a Malaysian poet whose despairing vision of a cultural wilderness belie his contribution, having charted out his own path alone when others like Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim became émigré poets out of the political exigencies in the 1970s. Reading Wong's poetry is challenging, not only because of what and how he wrote, but for the lack of literary foundations that he bemoaned and which he sought to mediate through his own work. If there is one quibble on this book, it would be the need for annotated literary notes which would greatly enhance the appreciation of the individual poems. Nonetheless, the publication of this new selected edition allows new and existing readers alike to read Wong Phui Nam's poems afresh, even as the editors' judicious inclusion of a speech he gave at a poetry competition in 2021, "Advice to Young Poets" is an open invitation and inspiration to aspiring poets. Although Wong writes, "[...] the present too is a passing dream from which / we will salvage nothing, not even ourselves" (226), his words live on in these pages as a distinct poetic voice.

Works Cited

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