

## Making One's Language as One Goes Along: Wong Phui Nam's *Ways of Exile* (1993)

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In his foreword to Wong Phui Nam's *Ways of Exile*, KS Maniam draws attention to how Wong Phui Nam ended his own Introduction to the first edition of *How the Hills Are Distant* (1968) with an especially suggestive remark about the central role played in his work by a *creative* use of poetic language:

On looking back I realise I have written these poems for those who truly understand what it means to have to make one's own language as one goes along. (Wong 1968, n. p.)

In a precise sense, of course, the situation Wong alludes to is rarely literally true. Language is almost by definition something which pre-exists the individual user; and so “making one's own language as one goes along” – no matter how extensive the process may seem to someone engaged in it – it almost always a process of only marginal modifications, revision or coinage. Essentially conventional and social characteristics are what most clearly distinguish a genuinely living language from a made-up, personal or private 'language'. In this sense, Wong's English (as he recognized when he indicates that he is, at least partly, an “heir to the tradition of Shakespeare and Milton” (Wong 1993, p. 140) is in important ways an already-established – if nonetheless problematic – social and historical construct.

In a less literal sense, however, Wong's statement signals an important dimension of the poet's work. Writing poetry not only draws on existing linguistic and cultural codes, but also transforms given materials so that they can articulate, in a texture of often unresolved connections, new and unique perceptions and social experience. In the case of English writing in Malaysia, this individually creative, rather than conventional or formulaic aspect of poetic writing is amplified by two specific factors. The multilingual situation of the country, in which English occupies a marginal and unstable position alongside Malay, Chinese, Tamil and other languages, means that writing in English already represents a very significant choice – a choice made all the more problematic by a current divergence, in attitudes towards English, between traditions carried over from its earlier colonial imposition on the one hand, and its siren, contemporary role as threshold to an international world of technology and commerce on the other. Writing in English in Malaysia in these circumstances represents a marked cultural choice – a choice no doubt overdetermined by responses to a range of issues concerning personal and national identity, foreseen local and foreign readerships, and attitudes towards culture and colonialism.

Having selected English as the preferred medium of public expression, at a practical level the Malaysian poet is obliged to mould existing usage of the language to the task of describing emotional attitudes, thought processes and experience for which its history has not directly suited it. The scale of this task – and accomplishment in it – would be self-evident, if “making one's own language as one goes along” were achieved through neologism, dense use of dialect markers or thickness of local cultural allusion; but the achievement is equivalent even where newness lies in nuance, in implied connections between concepts or images, or in local rhythmic patterns or speech conventions. Commenting on such formal aspects of his work, Wong describes what he sees as a need to “clean out” words of their traditional English connotations whenever these intrude into the texture of the writing, and so to forge new possibilities for them (Wong 1993, p. 141). It is in this sense – of subtle nuance, as English is redirected towards new, specifically Malaysian purposes – that the poetry in this collection constitutes, beyond its clear importance within the national literature of Malaysia, a significant innovation within English expression internationally, and occupies an important (and unduly neglected) position within the emergent New Literatures in English.

## II

In order to appreciate the urgency with which Wong's poetry tackles the question of a newly-made language, however, we should consider further the sense of necessity conveyed by the words “have co” in Wong's formulation. What is it he assumes is lacking? As Wong puts it in the brief reflective essay, “Out of the Stony Rubbish” (1993), there is for the Malaysian poet writing in English no common body of cultural assumptions or traditions on which to draw. The poet writing in English in Malaysia, he argues, therefore “becomes painfully conscious of a special kind of poverty that comes from being almost entirely bereft of an identity that finds its confirmation in a community of belief and tradition – and in the use of a received language whose origins may be traced back to common ancestral beginnings” (Wong 1993, p. 133). Emphasising further the deprivation he considers a consequence of this situation, Wong continues, “Without access to a meaningful tradition or claim to even a disintegrating one, the Malaysian writer in English brings, as it were, to his work a naked and orphaned psyche” (Wong 1993, p. 133).

The circumstances Wong Phui Nam alludes to here are specific and historical, rather than permanent or essential; they form part of the colonial, and more recently postcolonial, history of Malaysia rather than a general South East Asian or even Third World artistic consciousness or sensibility. At the time of Wong's early writing, in the late 1950s, Malaysia was entering a major phase in its shift – during a period of rapid global decolonisation – from colonial rule towards government by an emergent Malay ruling class, following the defeat of revolutionary communist forces. What is significant about this period as regards writing in particular is that by this time earlier, colonial literary aspirations were already largely discredited

(partly as a result of arguments taking place elsewhere about Indian and African writing in English), but new directions for Commonwealth Literature which were gradually being defined in a number of postcolonial situations were as yet not being self-confidently or accessibly promulgated in Malaysia itself.

As part of a generation of Chinese Malaysians born in the 1930s, Wong came to maturity and studied at a university with a marked European cultural bias at the end of the 1950s, within an active, indigenous intellectual culture whose links to arguments being debated by intelligentsias in other, comparable situations were nevertheless restricted by political conditions. It is true that, following its establishment in Singapore at the end of the 1940s, the University of Malaya acted as a centre for literary discussion and composition. But the influence of the so-called 'Pioneer poets' (Lim Thean Sao, Beda Lim, Goh Sin Tub) had passed its immediate peak, and the work of writers such as Muhammad Haji Salleh, Omar Mohd Noor, Pretam Kaur and Shirley Geok-lin Lim was still to come. Bridging the divide between colonised and postcolonial formations – and paving the way for this later generation of writers – the 'university poets' (Edwin Thumboo, Wong and Ee Tiang Hong, first gathered together in the collection *Litmus One: Selected University Verse, 1949-1957*) experimented to an unprecedented degree, while remaining in some ways within a formative, Western literary-cultural paradigm shaped by Modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot.

In the context of these broad circumstances and influences, the sense Wong forms during this period of what he calls a 'cultural wasteland' takes on a clearer shape. But that sense has several further, interlocking historical causes which are also worth noting.

First, there is the much earlier formation in Malaysia of a Chinese diaspora, following extensive but piecemeal immigration. Wong himself reports that the Chinese migrants from whom he is descended were deprived, by class position, from access to much of the Chinese culture they otherwise might have brought with them; and since they arrived in small groups rather than as a single community (unified as colonisers, soldiers, or evangelists, for instance) they could not easily establish a common set of roots from which later cultural forms might grow in any kind of continuous descent.

Second, a high degree of cultural separation between Malays, Chinese and Indians has retarded in Malaysia the process of formation of a new, common (and necessarily hybrid) cultural tradition which might have been expected to result from extensive social contact and intermarriage between communities, and from multilingualism and translation between languages. Such ethnic, cultural and religious separation, which has occasionally fuelled mutual suspicion between the respective communities, has inhibited the

emergence of a distinctively new syntax of Malaysian multicultural identity that might be reflected in literary and other forms.

Third, as regards English in particular, language policies since Independence (unlike those adopted by many other formerly colonised, Anglophone countries) have resulted in a lack of institutions or outlets for writing; and more generally, Wong notes, one “external aspect of the Malaysian poetic wasteland is the lack of, for want of a better word, an infrastructure for the support of its propagation and growth” (Wong 1993, p. 143). Nationalist reaction against English in the 1960s and 1970s significantly reduced the potential national audience for English writing, and appears to have implied on some occasions that English writing involves a form of cultural dissent.

Fourthly, and relatedly, relative isolation of individual writers from one another has resulted in a shortage of opportunities for discussion or for informal critical comment and review. Contemplating this isolation, Wong has said that the Malaysian writer accordingly as “much in the situation of, perhaps, the mythical shipwrecked sailor who casts messages in sealed bottles into the sea, relegating them to the wind and tide to carry themselves wherever they ill”.<sup>1</sup>

Considered together, these four factors produce for Malaysian writing in English a distinctive dynamic within the global development of postcolonial literatures. The unique configuration of ethnic, economic, religious and other factors should, of course, preclude generalised response to Malaysian writing as being somehow representative of 'Third World literature' (e.g. on the basis of an assumption that individual works should be consistently read as “allegories of national experience”, and so should guarantee an international hearing for works by Wong and other important Malaysian writers. At the same time, however, to the extent that little of the writing in English produced in Malaysia has dealt with cultural or political struggle or been aligned with perceived socially progressive forces within the society – the two main factors which typically recommend non-European writing to the attentions of a metropolitan Western readership – Malaysian writing remains neglected by comparison with works from (for example) the Philippines, the Indian sub-continent, or Southern Africa. For his part, nevertheless, Wong dismisses politically partisan writing, on the basis that, “Ultimately, artistic work for the national cause (at least this is made patently clear to writers in English in Malaysia) will be doomed to failure” (Wong 1993, p. 138).

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: the source for this quotation was not included in the original essay.

### III

If we are to read Wong Phui Nam's poetry closely, within these larger coordinates of the changing literary geography of English, it is important briefly to consider two consequences described above, as regards what Wong chooses to write about and how his writing is presented: first, the generic or formal conventions Wong chooses to follow; and second, what might be called the poetry's patterns of repetition, contrast and transformation between themes and topics.

The collection *Ways of Exile* is made up of four sections, each a sequence of short lyrics: (1) 'How the Hills Are Distant', in which the poem "Nocturnes and Bagatelles" convey a sense of loneliness and separation accentuated for the poet by being awake during the night; (2) 'For a Local Osiris', which depicts a resurrected, mythical Osiris seeking to redeem an evil world for civilization; (3) 'What are the Roots ...!', which contains English version of Taoist poems and writings by Tu Fu, evidently as a quest to constitute or restore an absent poetic tradition; and (4) 'Rumours of Exits', which presents a range of images of death, as well as modes of access to a transcendental, other world.

Throughout, these sequences reflect in their modes of composition a set of constraints Wong feels exist on writing English poetry in Malaysia. For example, he discusses difficulties presented by certain English verse forms, such as the sonnet or ballad, arguing that these appear inappropriate to a culture with a largely agrarian history; Wong prefers short lyrical forms arranged in loose sequences to such closely structured idioms. Noting, too, the suggestiveness of precise details of register, Wong negotiates issues of mode of address and sense of occasion by opting for an introspective lyrical subjectivity rather than any suggestion of public declaration. And in "What are the Roots ...", translation plays an important role in creating a specifically Malaysian Chinese poetic voice. Rejecting the idea of scholarly, word-for-word translation, as well as such terms as 'imitations' or 'interpretations', Wong argues rather that, "Because of the differences between the languages, I feel the best strategy for rendering an English version of a Chinese text is to write it as if it is an original poem in English" (Wong 1993, p. 87); and pointing to the cultural purpose of translation – perhaps especially resonant in the Tu Fu sequence – he suggests that translation makes possible "putting poems into English, and saying, in the process, something about the Malaysian condition in ways I could not manage in my own verse" (Wong 1993, p. 86).

It is less, however, this ability of translation to symbolise contemporary cultural conditions than more local symbolic patterns which has given rise to descriptions of Wong's work as especially rich in symbolic qualities. Much of his reputation follows from the observation that a focus for many of the poems

is provided by two recurrent symbols – the body and the landscape – woven together into a symbolic texture which is well illustrated by the following lines from poem “vi” in the 'Hills' sequence:

I feel out of the verges of the swamps  
in the body's tides, out of the bones  
of an ancient misery,  
the dead stir with this advent of rain;  
and in a landscape too long  
in the contours of a personal anguish,  
assume its presences: hedges and barb-wire,  
trees in the numbness of the field;  
and, moving in the dark between the houses,  
conjure the heart  
to breed upon the hint of a primal terror. (Wong 1993, p. 11)

In other poems in the sequence (where more conventional contrasts are also drawn between city corruption and escape into the natural world), landscape is presented in an extension from established pastoral conventions as a representation simultaneously of physical, mental and social structure; and Wong depicts the death of the individual, anatomically and graphically, both to record individual pain and to symbolise more general forms of cultural death (perhaps most effectively in the poem “For my old amah”). Working through patterns of symbolic equivalence, contrast and transformation, Wong develops personal, contemplative lyrics into larger-scale, social and philosophical comment.

But if such descriptions suggest that *Ways of Exile* is concerned only with decay, pain, and death, it should be emphasised that a way out of “the desert”, and out of “primal terror”, lies for Wong in what he calls the “transcendent” (Wong 1993, p. 139). A symbolic pattern suggestive of this transcendent presence is developed, for example, in Wong's translation “A Mountain Visit”, where the poet's efforts and labour in ascent (searching, significantly, for “an ancient trail”) are contrasted with the tranquillity, plenitude and knowledge offered on arrival by the poet's conversation with a figure (“the master”) whom the poet has clambered up to consult. Here are the opening lines:

The mountains here dissolve into the one blue  
of the sky - into silence - towards a stillness

beyond the bounds of time. I grope my way up them  
through descending banks of cloud, feel  
for traces of an ancient trail. (Wong 1993, p. 84)

But the temporary stasis and plenitude enjoyed by the poet is quickly displaced; and the poem ends with the poet symbolically returned to his 'ways of exile':

I find the master in. Our conversation fades  
with the light which turns rivers into slow veins  
blackening on the far plains at the approach of night.  
Alone, I stumble my way down into biting cold and fog. (Wong 1993, p. 84)

#### IV

In citing the title of the collection here, however, we should pause to consider what 'exile' means in this context. The term has gained such currency in recent cultural analysis that its meanings are complex, ranging from a literal sense of political expulsion to figurative description of a universal, ontological condition of general 'uprootedness'; and a convergence between these two senses – brought about partly by intellectuals from post-colonial countries now resident in the West, and combining in some instances political engagement with post-structuralist theory – has helped in efforts to include New Literatures within university and school curricula. Wong's own use of the term – unlike Ee Tiang Hong, Wong has continued to live in Malaysia – brings together a sense of present cultural marginalisation with a more abstract sense of historical displacement influenced (like many writers and teachers of the period) by T. S. Eliot's belief in the essential value of cultural tradition. Set alongside the palliative of transcendent forces invoked in Wong's poetry, 'exile' also implies exclusion from a paradise which cultural belonging might have provided.

Wong's most interesting insights combine the influence from Eliot, however, with acute observations about the situation of the Malaysian writer, as in this striking passage from the “Out of the Stony Rubbish” essay, which is worth quoting at length:

The non-English writer who writes in English and has no similar recourse to his own language is thus, in allowing English to take over his affective faculties, in a very deep sense a miscegenated being, very much and yet not an heir to the tradition of Shakespeare and Milton. The language he uses to name, organise and express his experience of the life around him removes him from that life and, whether he is aware of it or not, he becomes a stranger cut off and always looking in as an

outsider into that life. In that sense, the more facility he has with the adopted language, the more unauthentic he becomes. Culturally, and so spiritually, he is induced to place himself in exile from England and be cast out of an imagined Eden. (Wong 1993, p. 140)

The parallels with Eliot are evident, stylistically as well as conceptually (for example, in such words and phrases as “heir to the tradition” and “unauthentic”, or in the essay title itself, “Out of the Stony Rubbish” – as elsewhere in Wong's idea of a “cultural wasteland”, the “impossibility of meaning”, or the “primal terror”). But the argument has gained a vital new dimension, by focusing on how the cultural incongruity of the colonial language interrupts perceptions which might connect the poet more closely with his or her immediate social surroundings, while, implicitly, a combination of Malay hegemony and the earlier, intellectual formation of the poet block off the otherwise obvious nationalist, vernacular alternatives.

It is this cluster of concerns with language and social belonging which most distinguish and inspire Wong's writing; at the same time, forms of repetition or closure in the treatment of these concerns signify the formative conditions of his work. Wong's term “miscegenation”, for instance, has increasingly been recast in postcolonial writing as a phenomenon of 'cultural hybridisation' (in which experimentation in local or 'nativized' dialects of English plays an important part; and much contemporary argument over postcolonial literatures takes *as one of its starting-points* the presumption that English is no longer the property of native speakers, given a shifting global balance between monolingual and bilingual uses of the language. Despite risks of being lumped together in a simplistic unity of 'oppositonality' and otherness – especially in the hands of Western reviewers and critics – postcolonial writers and critics have increasingly explored comparisons between respective national experiences, and developed supportive connections with each other (including with writers literally in exile).

Such descriptions can easily seem idealistic or pious, however; Wong himself remained silent through the 1970s and most of the 1980s, returning to public prominence again with *Remembering Grandma and other Rumours* in 1989. Rather than contributing to a global dialogue ironically facilitated by the colonial imposition of English, in fact, contemporary Malaysian writing in English may merely “die out like dinosaurs” (Wong 1993, p. 144). But if this happens, then readers and writers alike will have failed fully to appreciate the insights into linguistic and cultural identity presented so vividly in this collection of Wong Phui Nam's work.

## References

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