

# Barren Fecundity: The Poetry of Wong Phui Nam<sup>1</sup>

*Daryl Lim Wei Jie*

Wong Phui Nam (b. 1935) is a Malaysian poet writing in English. He was active in the literary scene at the then-University of Malaya (now the National University of Singapore), in the footsteps of earlier writers in English such as Edwin Thumboo, Wang Gungwu, Beda Lim, Lim Thean Soo and Hedwig Anuar (nee Aroozoo). Wong was actively involved in the literary magazine *The New Cauldron*, and was co-editor of the early poetry anthologies *Litmus One* and *30 Poems*. An early chapbook of his poetry, *Toccata on Ochre Sheaves*, was published in 1958. Most of Wong's poems in the 1960s were published in *Bunga Emas* (1964), an anthology of Malayan writing published in the United Kingdom. These poems were subsequently collected in *How the Hills Are Distant* (1968). Thereafter followed an astonishing silence of nearly twenty years. Wong has said that the emphasis on Malay as the national language, exemplified in the passing of the revised National Language Act (1967) (and perhaps even more significantly, the aftermath of 13 May 1969), provoked a crisis about the writing of poetry in English in Malaysia:

But in the 1970s and 80s, the language situation created grave doubts for me about my writing. I felt then that, by writing in English, perhaps I would never be able to draw on the 'authentic' life of this country. I questioned myself as to the legitimacy of my writing and I questioned myself into silence for quite a long while. These questions, for me, have as yet not been (and, I now realise, cannot be) fully settled. However, I have the choice of either going on asking myself irresolvable questions or just write. I decided to write.<sup>2</sup>

Wong re-emerged in 1989 with the collection *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989), published by the English Department of NUS. A collected edition of some poems was published in London by Skoob as *Ways of Exile* (1993). *Against the Wilderness* (2000) was published in Kuala Lumpur by Blackwater Books. Another collected edition, *An Acre of Day's Glass* (2005) was published by Maya Press in Selangor. His most recent poetic work is the sonnet sequence, *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai* (2013), published by Ethos Books. A revised and expanded edition of

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier form of this essay appeared on Poetry.sg, an online encyclopedia of Singapore poetry.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum (ed.), "Wong Phui Nam (1935 –)", *Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian Poets, Novelists and Dramatists*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 82.

*The Hidden Papyrus* was published in 2019, by Bluback Productions. Wong is also a playwright, and has published two plays *Anike* (2005) and *Aduni* (2006), the latter in the journal, *Asiatic*. This essay will focus on themes and ideas in his poetry.

## Themes

One unbroken thread that runs through all of Wong's collections is the anguish at what he has described as the cultural nakedness of the Malaysian psyche:

In cultural terms, the Malaysian psyche is a naked one. By this I mean that as a collection of peoples domiciled in a particular place and finding their way towards being a nation we do not yet have a common tradition. We clothe our nakedness in tatters stripped from mutually unrelated cultures to which we severally claim to be heirs but which are not ours as a single people. I have thus come to see my work as a progressive mapping of this unprotected state.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, Wong is haunted by the barren circumstances of his immigrant ancestors, the resultant aridity of their lives, and the near-impossibility of any sort of real culture in that context:

The origins of the individuals and families which make up the immigrant communities ensured that even before their removal to the country of their eventual domicile they would come to the new settlements in a culturally (and spiritually) denuded state [ . . . ] The accretions of more than three millennia of history had left them unburdened of the ancient classics, of religious insight, of the Confucian precepts for correct social relationships, of poetry and letters, the fine arts and so on. The inner guides to behaviour were a debased form of Taoism mixed with the veneration of ancestors and worship of household and other familiar spirits and a sense of kinship loyalty. These were the scant inheritance they brought with them to contend with the wilderness.<sup>4</sup>

The pain of not being able to lay claim to any tradition, of living among a people with a culture "based solely on nothing else but an overriding concern over bodily survival,"<sup>5</sup> of having to work in an

---

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, "Wong Phui Nam (1935 –)", p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Wong Phui Nam, "Out of the Stony Rubbish: A Personal Perspective on the Writing of Verse in English in Malaysia", *Ways of Exile*, London: Skoob, 1993, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, "Wong Phui Nam (1935 –)", p. 93.

unsatisfactory language not foreign and yet not native, to “make one's language as one goes along”:<sup>6</sup> these pains drive much of Wong's poetry. Even the book titles are revealing of Wong's imagined position: he is writing *against the wilderness* about the *ways of exile*. T. S. Eliot easily comes to mind, for what else is Wong doing but shoring fragments against his ruins? (Wong titled a reflective piece on writing poetry in Malaysia “Out of the Stony Rubbish”.) Yet despite the similarity of theme, an examination of each volume reveals how Wong has developed, tweaked and revised his poetic strategies in relation to this abiding theme. The history of Wong's poetry through the decades can perhaps be seen as repeated forays to assail and reckon with this pain and peculiar situation; his works represent his refusal, in the words of a critic, to forget his losses.<sup>7</sup>

In the titular sequence of *How the Hills Are Distant*, Wong's first mature work, Wong's fears about this cultural condition are played out against a bare and inhospitable landscape. Animals and vegetation are invested with ominous portent, reflective of the poet's mood. Thus, in one part we are told of “the mild hysteria of lalang, green under road lamps” (VI – the numbers refer to parts of “How the Hills Are Distant”), in another, of how “the crinum lilies fountain inconclusive into the after-light” (II) or even more tellingly, of how “Feelings assume the twists and tangles of vegetation” (X). The landscape and its apparitional beings mirror the poet's turmoil:

Out of my window I watched the scatters of swallow  
spiral, tugging against tentacles in the streaks of cloud  
and I too was unwilling for the dawn (XI)

This landscape is not explicitly named, though it is undoubtedly part-Malayan, with its mentions of *lallang*, *merbah*, *blukar* (*belukar*), *lorongs* and frangipani. Wong's diction in “How the Hills Are Distant” does not feel deliberately localised: the language retains the rhythms and structures of more conventional English poetry. Rather, the attempt to bridge the Malayan condition and the constraints of the English language is done through the seeding of symbols and appropriating of language throughout the poem, the tools which Wong uses to tentatively map this condition. Wong has described this task as the “flooding out of English words with one's own immediate apprehension of the world to clean out their traditional English connotations

---

<sup>6</sup> Foreword to *How the Hills Are Distant*

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Sparkling Glass”, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* Vol. 6. No. 2. (2 Jan 2007). Web. 3 August 2017.

whenever they intrude inappropriately into the texture and feel of the writing”.<sup>8</sup> Take, for example, the beginning of part III:

The mist drifting across the field  
edges up the compound of my house,  
along the foot of the hibiscus hedge  
moving vaguely like fear among the cane.

“The mist drifting across the field” is a conventional enough start, but the choice of “compound” in the second line, which echoes Malay “kampong” (which is, in fact, one possible etymology for that meaning of “compound), is an unusual way to introduce human settlement. As the stanza shades into the unfamiliar, the introduction of a “hibiscus hedge,” a tropical flower, heightens the strangeness—especially when one considers the audience of the 1960s, educated on Wordsworth’s daffodils. By the last line, as the mist is compared to “fear among the cane,” Wong has successfully remade the language to startling effect. We see another instance of Wong’s method at work in part IV:

In the red light of an afternoon  
gathered on the goldfish in the garden  
where edges break in the bond of things,  
shadows harden, confuse with their plantain leaves.

The choice of “goldfish” and “plantain” may already serve to sufficiently overturn expectations of the conventional pastoral. A haziness is introduced with the line “where edges break in the bond of things,” and this haziness comes to fruition in the last stanza, where the persona complains that “Within the abacus of my thought I cannot add / to the moon precise on the gushed up furrows” (note the choice of “abacus”). In the second stanza, Wong describes how “the tractor gashes its way up the hill / of stone structures deposited of time and flexed muscles,” undoing the work of tradition and nameless ancestors, but also

---

<sup>8</sup> Wong Phui Nam, “Out of the Stony Rubbish”, p. 141.

completely upending the expectation of the landscape set in the first stanza. By the end of part IV,<sup>9</sup> the garden of the first stanza has transformed into the forlorn landscape of the mutilated hill:

Along stone corridors of the ordered hill  
the wind crept unseen, divorced of leaf-voices.

Who are these people that then inhabit this landscape? Wong tells us that they are a people who have lost their ability to commune with their dead:

There is no commerce with the ghosts of those who died  
.....  
Against the rain, nothing of the memory of the dead  
is caught and held on among the roots. (V)

This discontinuity is vital, and further illuminates the exilic and bereft condition that so concerns Wong. Not only are their ancestors forgotten, but also their gods:

[ . . . ] a people who, when they came,  
already had their demons  
die the sterile deaths of gods;  
so too their legendary kings. (V)

What is left for them are the “ways of submission,” a land of hollowed-out customs where the death of a king does not make the water “turn bitter,” but merely provides “one day off” for the clerks.

---

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, part IV seems to be the only survival of *Toccata* in “How the Hills Are Distant”: part IV is a rewriting of part II of *Toccata*.

The landscape and the people who inhabit it form the backdrop to the psychic drama that Wong's persona undergoes. It is one hand, an Orphic quest for the right words, which the poet grapples for:

I may be ready for the torment which infects  
a new beginning—to be my lute's flame  
[ . . . ] to sue  
out of a paranoiac darkness for a forgotten eurydice (XII)

The persona paces the landscape, in search of meaning and of renewal, but finds little to hearten him, to make sense of his situation:

You who would look for signs, or starve  
among a wilderness of stone, there are only the boulders  
drowning in pits of worked out mining leases.  
From the main street of the town,  
see how the hills are distant, locked in their silences. (IX)

The landscape yields little, being both distant and silent. The poem concludes in part XX with the chilling realisation that “there are no gods / to propitiate,” “There are no shrines” and “There are no pilgrimages but into the rocks' madness / at noon or their whimpering in the chill by night”. Yet despite this god-forsakenness, Wong has not failed his Orphic mission, and the twenty hard-won parts of *How the Hills Are Distant* lie as testimony of his success.

*How the Hills Are Distant* can also be read as a preliminary attempt to reckon with the history of Malaya. This is particularly apparent in part VIII, which is subtitled “Notebook entry—Singapore January 1962”. (This part is subsequently presented as a single poem in *Remembering Grandma*, suggesting a certain completeness and self-sufficiency of theme, in Wong's view.) Part VIII is ostensibly about a car journey from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore (“And KL hours behind.”). It quickly becomes a daydream that probes the history of Malaya. We are told of the “Capitan China” (the colonial Chinese official at the head of the Chinese communities of various Malayan cities, such as Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore), who is

condemned by the persona as “obscured in his vision”. The forefathers of the Chinese in Malaya are said to have “left much behind,” “bringing mostly, when they came, the body / to contend with,” foreshadowing the approach of *Remembering Grandma*. The persona goes on to imagine how the “laterite and gibberish of vegetation” frustrated the mission of Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, who attempted to conquer Malacca in the early sixteenth century. De Sequeira’s men “forgot the meaning of their Christ and King”. (This topic is later taken up again and more expansively explored in the sequence “Advent,” in *Against the Wilderness*.) Wong solemnly describes how he and his fellow travellers

[ . . . ] passed the region  
of the dead, the circular descent of those  
who died and who had committed nothing.

Wong thus expands his horizons even beyond the millions of migrant Chinese who died in Malaya before him, to document the accursed fallowness of the land: it frustrates all sojourners who attempt to make something of it. *How the Hills Are Distant* chronicles the psychic struggle of the latest sojourner, hemmed in by vast blankness of history and the barrenness of paths.

In *Remembering Grandma*, Wong adopts a different, more personal poetics, but it is one that complements the themes and mood of *How the Hills Are Distant*. In the continuing quest to map the cultural nakedness of the Malayan psyche, Wong turned to his family. He has commented that this turn was due to the discovery of Robert Lowell and the confessional poets.<sup>10</sup> Events in Wong’s life, namely the death of his relatives, triggered a crisis, a realisation that their lives had been, in Wong’s judgement, barren:

[ . . . ] I looked at the lives of my relatives and saw the failure of their lives in the crisis they underwent when they sensed their impending end.<sup>11</sup>

In “Remembering Grandma”, the titular sequence, Wong thus acts as both obituarist and judge of people who only “mind the things of the flesh”. (Wong quotes Romans 8:5 as the epigraph to the sequence). In “Fat Uncle Dying,” Wong observes and condemns his dying, sensualist uncle:

---

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, “Wong Phui Nam (1935 –)”, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Yeoh Shu Ying, “Mapping the Psyche: A Critical Biography of Wong Phui Nam”, M.A. Thesis Proposal, Universiti Putra Malaysia.

You could only crawl back into the mountain  
of your much used body, and groan,  
you could take it, if you had one more,  
you could take it, if you had only to keep  
your mind between the legs drawn up  
of just one more woman on her back.

Wong is unsparing in his descriptions of dying, sickness and pathology, as extinction and death stalk his clan. Rather than wallowing in sentimentality, Wong seizes upon these crises to dramatise the sense of the futility of these lives, spent pursuing things of the flesh. But Wong does not merely exploit the disgust with the sights, smells and sounds of death. Wong goes beyond to conjure up a horror of death matched with at times macabre description—a tendency that reaches almost Gothic, even Lovecraftian, heights in *Against the Wilderness*. As Wong’s stepmother approaches death, she is described as “an enlarged / failed pupa—the senses / fully blocked out, fully compacted in death” (“Stepmother”). Wong’s father’s leg is a “one tight congested melon, ready to give out / its soft pulp at a touch” (“Last Days in Hospital”). He too is not spared from Wong’s judgement. Wong proceeds to make light of how his father unwittingly came to take a second wife (Wong’s cousin), due to the scheming of Wong’s grandma:

so it was that, Father,  
who, tiring of his shelf of Pitman manuals,  
turned to the business  
of grappling with his one real book,  
Robinson Crusoe,  
without quite realising when he did it  
took to wife my mother’s niece,  
and she barely fourteen.



So utter is Wong's judgement that he seems to provide no hope of redemption or, in the words of a critic, Wong exposes "the hollowness of any consoling illusion".<sup>12</sup> Describing the death of his brother from cancer in "Brother", Wong ends the poem with these lines:

Out of the melting heat of fierce corruption  
there rose no other, no spreading of great wings,  
no bird of renewal, bird out of the cleansing fire.

But Wong is not utterly bereft of hope. Hints of hope can be found in the Coda to "Remembering Grandma", where the persona admits that he is "too much of the flesh, / bearing faint imprint only," but nonetheless lies in wait, and hopes that he might be "blinded" so that he might see. One can read into this Wong's own hopes for himself, as a poet-seer who manages to disentangle himself and his people from their collective plight. Another hint of hope is found in a poem, "Caves," near the start of the collection. This extended allegory for the journey of Wong's people (whether conceived of as his familial clan or more broadly, the Malayan people) ends on a note of hope, observing that "there are exits / in the most unexpected places, sudden openings". In a reversal of "Brother," Wong concludes "Caves" with:

Breaking out of the earth, it will ascend  
taking to itself half of the heavens, reveal itself  
a tremendous bird of lightning, of the source of light,  
  
bird that cleaves the world to itself in a consuming fire.

The other major sequence in *Remembering Grandma* is contained in the section "For a Local Osiris". The origins of this section, which contains three separate poems ("Candles for a Local Osiris", "Osiris Transmogrified", and "Address from the God"), are illuminated by a thesis proposal by Yeoh Shu Ying (Universiti Putra Malaysia). Yeoh interviewed Wong about these poems in 2002. According to Wong, "Candles for a Local Osiris" was reworked from an original sequence written in 1964-5. (Intriguingly, read closely, part VI of "Candles," subtitled "Song," is actually a reworking of part XIV of "How the Hills Are

---

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Lim, "Sparkling Glass".

Distant,” suggesting a more complicated history of reworking that invites more excavation.) In this sequence, Wong had attempted to answer the hypothetical question: What if Osiris, an Egyptian god, were transplanted to Malaya, and failed to survive in this new environment? (Wong’s interest in the Egyptian myths was demonstrated from the very off in his first work, *Toccata on Ochre Sheaves*, which also explored the myth of Osiris.) The other poems, “Osiris Transmogrified” and “Address from the God”, were written in the 80s, and they attempt to answer the question of what form Osiris would take should he return from death. Wong had found in the Osiris myth the perfect set of symbols to work with: one that he had constantly reworked from *Toccata* to *Hills* to *Remembering Grandma*. The Osiris myth tells the story of how Osiris, the mythic God-king of Egypt, is murdered by his brother Seth and eventually dismembered, the pieces of his body scattered in the river Nile. Eventually, Osiris’s wife, the goddess Isis, regenerates Osiris and becomes pregnant with their son, Horus, who eventually defeats Seth. In the version quoted by Wong in *Toccata*, Wong adds that the pieces of Osiris’s body are “transformed into river reeds” after Isis gathers them and deposits them, which gestures at the fertility brought about by Osiris’s scattering and rebirth. This vision of the body transformed into landscape is present in *Toccata*:

The king’s body drives roots into the mud  
Casting the heavy gold of his gemmed serpent.  
Of his limbs are made the reeds  
Holding up the round flowereyes that scan  
Absorbed in the running metrics of the sun. (IV, “Toccata on Ochre Sheaves”)

It is also present from the very first part of “How the Hills Are Distant”:

The old man grows,  
lives from subconscious hills,  
sentient in fishes and reeds that slant  
towards an eloquence of words.

Yet as noted by at least one critic, Wong’s use of the Osiris myth significantly downplays the fertility of the regenerated Osiris, choosing to emphasise instead, the failure of regeneration of the local Osiris in this new

landscape.<sup>13</sup> Osiris is now placed in the Malayan landscape and dies, again. The death of this local Osiris betrays the inhospitality of the landscape:

[ . . . ] A god, that day you stalked  
your quarry till a sudden clearing in the woods  
happened on you and its changes of climate  
coursed through your veins. The flowers  
you found here were furry and green  
and could not bloom. In the undergrowth, the thing  
you surprised had the look you did not understand.  
[ . . . ] under the leafy shadows,  
you were made ready for death.

This change of landscape, this sudden unrooting, dooms the local Osiris. The local Osiris is a god for “the maimed and the dead,” to whom “Candles for a Local Osiris” is dedicated. He is a suitable god for the people of this failed land, who reflect his grubby image:

[ . . . ] a beast, elemental god  
incarnating, sprawled upon damp sacks, old newspapers,  
trousers opened at the fly.

Even as the later Osiris poems imagine the local Osiris’s resurrection, there is no hope of salvation or redemption for the would-be worshippers of the local Osiris:

[...] There is no shrine here,

---

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Jeyam, “[A] country where one cannot wish to be”: Place and the Mythic Imagination in Wong Phui Nam’s *How the Hills Are Distant?*, *Southeast Asian Review of English*. Vol. 48. 2008, pp. 75-94.

no benign god – but devourer who moves  
in the life of vegetation broken out of their bounds  
of darkness, who would take you whole and spew  
you out only as a pair of beating lungs,  
as heart, liver and genitals and as maw  
ravenous in the jungle’s floor [...] (“Address from the God”)

The local Osiris, on his return, inflicts his mythic fate upon the inhabitants of the landscape, dismembering them in turn. Rather than freeing the inhabitants from the constraints and depredations of the environment, the local Osiris is made one with the hostile landscape, a subversion of the fertility brought about by the mythic Osiris. Wong also illuminates the universal condition of the exile, cut off from his native clime, a preoccupation that recurs in his poetry: the local Osiris is an exile, and also an exile god for exiles.

In *Against the Wilderness*, published more than ten years after *Remembering Grandma*, there is little indication, despite Malaysia’s substantial economic and social development, that this sense of nakedness and barrenness has been ameliorated. If anything, Wong, in his preface to the collection, finds that market and commodity capitalism has intensified the barrenness of the wilderness. Wong had previously spoken unhappily of the growth of individualism and self-interest:

[ . . . ] there has also grown into mature fruition by now out of the barren ground a pervading spirit of grasping individualism which encompasses a single-minded dedication to the pursuit of self-interest. This is invariably centred on the acquisition of possessions, status and power and consolidation of the means for their preservation [ . . . ] Greed, anger, lust and a “boastful pride of life” are thus given free rein. In the guise of progress and development, we have in consequence raised up idols of wealth, prestige and power and concupiscence whose worship is evidenced in the corruption, abuse of privilege and power, and lax sexual morality much rumoured about in public and business life.<sup>14</sup>

Wong does not speak as an outsider to capitalist economy: he took a degree in Economics and had worked in finance. Here, though, Wong imagines himself writing against this wilderness. It may also be worthwhile

---

<sup>14</sup> Wong Phui Nam, “Out of the Stony Rubbish”, p. 136.

to note that both *Remembering Grandma* and *Wilderness* were published close to the unfolding of political upheavals in Malaysia: for the former, the constitutional crisis provoked by the removal of the Lord President of the Supreme Court of Malaysia and other Supreme Court judges in 1988; and for the latter, the removal and conviction of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998-9. (Wong has said that his play 'Darkfall' is a dramatisation of the book *May Day for Justice* (1989), an account of the events of 1988 by the former Lord President himself, Tun Salleh Abas, as told to the Malaysian journalist K. Das.)<sup>15</sup> While Wong's poetry of the period does not directly respond to these events, the gloom and moral chaos of the period is perhaps reflected in these works.

What is immediately notable about *Wilderness* is how the sense of horror has deepened. This is enhanced by Wong's choice of form: in contrast to his earlier collections, the poems in *Wilderness* mostly take on the form of the 14-line, non-rhyming sonnet. Wong has commented that while he is not drawn to traditional English poetic forms, he nonetheless pays close attention to organisation, metre and structure, "eschewing rhyme, while composing a poem as a shapely aural structure".<sup>16</sup> This formal choice considerably tautens the language and drama of each piece. In the first part of the titular sequence, "Antecedents", Wong dramatises the predicament of starving Chinese ancestors:

[ . . . ] Nursing with paps

blackening from the teats, I was death for our howling son.

In the city we gave him up that we might eat.

Though we were ghosts, we found it very hard to die.

Wong exploits the sense of perverse, horrific life, of nature going wrong, of a frightening elision between decay and fertility, to heighten this horror. Take, for example, his evocation of a bride brought from China for the migrant Chinese men:

But he never found me even as he rifled, sieved

my body, smelling out crotch and underarm and drugged

himself on bitter exhalations from my woman's glands.

---

<sup>15</sup> Private email correspondence between author and Wong Phui Nam.

<sup>16</sup> Daizal Rafeek Samad, "A Heritage of Fragments: Interview with Wong Phui Nam", *Manoa*, Vol. 11. No. 11. 1999.

He burrowed, a fly into carrion, to seed me with his death. (vii, "China Bride")

The themes present in previous collections are extended in *Wilderness*. Wong returns to the tension, even outright hostility, between the environment and the people inhabiting it. The understanding between man and his land, captured in the idea of *terroir*, is in Wong's vision completely upended and turned against the inhabitants:

For it was the earth that took from us, burning  
with fevers from its breeding waters, our dreams off us.  
We were the ones to relinquish, with our bones,  
our flesh, give it all back to the digestive earth. (vi, "Mining the earth")

What may have been a reassuring earthiness in another clime is in Wong's vision a squalid surrender to the soil. Another theme is that of arrival of the coloniser, first tentatively explored in *Hills*. In the sequence "Advent", Wong tells both sides of the story: through the eyes of the natives and also the invading Portuguese. Wong archly and ironically remarks, in the voice of the native that

We will, in time, see their bleached beaked faces as beautiful,  
voice the myths of northern seasons soughing through our bones  
in the speech of their fathers made the angels' tongue.

The situation for the invaders is not much happier. We are told that the Portuguese men will "settle into the mildness / of mindless sea-cows that breed here in these tides". A Christian chaplain tells God:

[ . . . ] Lord,  
you had not told us there are places on your earth  
we cannot drive out demons or heal the sick.

In “Advent”, Wong returns to the theme of the inhospitability of the land—whether to invader or migrant. Wong’s fascination with death, and the continuing questioning of what death reveals about humanity, are also very much present in *Wilderness*. Thus, in the sequence “Variations on a Birthday Theme,” we have an invocation of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death:

All we creatures who shall be seized and led  
by the neck into the terrible black mills  
of our mother’s mouth [ . . . ]

Two poems later, both of which also deal with the theme of death, Wong invokes the Egyptian god of the afterlife in “Anubis in Declension”. In a move similar to his treatment of the local Osiris, Wong imagines Anubis entering the local landscape, “a strange stink in the night gardens”. Anubis brings death to the suburbs by mating “with women nourished for softness and delicate skin” and “with scavengers / among the dogs”. Wong ends the poem by imagining a generation of Anubis-like jackal men, “with dog’s eyes that stare glass-green / into the light”. This is not just an exploration of death, but perhaps a condemnation of the “consumers” and “owners” that inhabit the “wilderness” spoken of in Wong’s revealing preface to *Against the Wilderness*.

It is in *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai*, Wong’s latest collection, that we begin to sense a shift in direction. Wong returns to Egyptian symbols and themes, but uses them to new effect. The voice of the fifty-three sonnets that comprise *Hidden Papyrus* is Hen-tai, a “neophyte priestess from the provinces” (x). Despite her religion assuring resurrection in death, Hen-tai wishes to face death squarely without any sentimentality or promise:

I am already skull, ribcage, spine and limbs  
compacted into the sand as I sit here  
in these grounds and think how like Nefer-hetepes,  
my bones will divested for uncertain keeping  
here under this burial mound. (xlix)

Despite “so much happiness” with her lover, Hen-tai is acutely aware of mortality, where “we too will soon be gone like the fast dying year”. The beauty and vibrancy of the temporal world is, in Hen-tai’s mind, closely wedded to its acute perishability:

The world in parched summer’s fire is perfect in beauty,  
perfect in words which made it beautiful, made it for death. (iv)

Hen-tai is ultimately doubtful of the claims and trappings of her religion. We sense this in her discussion of a dead man, Sennedjem, who imagined “he would regain for eternity/ his house lands”. Yet, Hen-tai says that

Sennedjem is unmindful now of the easeful husbandry  
of otherworldly fields painted on walls,  
their sun unlit in the utter darkness of his tomb. (iii)

The Pharaoh, seemingly secure in his dreams of immortality, is not spared, for Hen-tai imagines how his tomb will in the future be desecrated by “Coarse and venal men,” who will “break the seal of his immortality” (xi). Perhaps the key to the collection lies in the first two poems, which hint that the conventional promises and rewards of traditional religion are false – and that the traditional gods we worship are the gods we have fashioned in our own image:

Because we are mistaken about ourselves,  
We mistake a fearsome punishing god for you  
.....  
We who would see you need close out sight;  
in not seeing, we see beyond darkness, beyond light. (i)

The implication here is that the rudimentary system of rewards and punishments is no true religion. In the second poem, we are told:



[ . . . ] We fear the end of our days  
when we wake to find him, accuser and judge,  
a god who commits us, still ripe with our earthly wrongs,  
to that eater of dead flesh [ . . . ]  
Yet he may surprise us, not coming in judgement  
.....  
but returning as earth to earth, with us who made him. (ii)

Hen-tai seems intent to remind us of the man-made nature of organised religion, and how its practice often reflects our own fears and dreams. This promise of immortality, as a later poem says, is simply “a way the gods hold us captive”. Similarly spurious is the immortality offered by the monuments and works of great men, such as the Pharaoh, who is “yet flesh-bound,/ tethered by his linen to our common earth”, despite the grandeur of his pyramids and sarcophagus. It is no surprise that Wong describes *Hidden Papyrus* as not simply a meditation on death, but also a “veiled critique of how religion is practised”.<sup>17</sup>

Our deaths are inevitable, that much Hen-tai makes clear, a natural consequence of the lives we lead. Yet it is terrifying, “the disruptor of all the buzz that is our little selves”. There are numerous hints throughout the sequence as to what Hen-tai believes the right attitude and approach towards death is. In xiii, we are told that

The true sarcophagus...  
... is a nothingness that does not eat flesh  
but enfolds those who first have its fires stilled

Later on, Hen-tai compares mortal life to a dream, and speaks of the need to liberate oneself from this “common dream of the world”:

---

<sup>17</sup> Private e-mail correspondence between author and Wong Phui Nam.

I am lost so deep in the common dream of the world,  
I cannot wake. In dreaming the world, I weave  
my own snare, a shimmering web sticky with the reality  
of a seeming world. I am as a fly enmeshed,  
aware of its entanglement but caught still. (xxxvi)

We are caught, says Hen-tai, in a “cycle of dreams”:

When the self, fearful of its end it dies,  
not knowing it is but a dream that dies,  
Another succeeds it in a cycle of dreams  
and in between dreams. Not until I wake, will I  
be whole in the known and knowing, without end. (xlii)

What Hen-tai is describing is reminiscent of Hindu and Buddhist teaching, where the goal is to liberate oneself of the illusory world and its phenomena (*maya*). What the acolyte then seeks is liberation from this cycle of illusion and eventually, rebirth. (The cycle of death and rebirth is sometimes called *samsara*, and the release from it, *moksha*.) What Hen-tai describes in the final poem as a release, as a “return to being, to you, the still centre” is similar to the end goal of some Buddhist and Hindu schools: *nirvana*, where *nirvana* is seen as an extinguishing or quenching of all desire. It is also sometimes described as a nothingness, and key to *nirvana* is the realisation of the inherent emptiness of things – including the self. Related to this is the idea of *brahman* in Hinduism, or the supreme reality, and the idea that all souls seek to return to this supreme reality. Perhaps this then, is the true god, the “you”, of the sequence.

## Engagement with Classical Chinese Poetry

Before moving on to consider Wong's legacy, it would be remiss not to comment on Wong's substantial corpus of translations and renderings of classical Chinese poetry. Wong has elaborated on his method in these renderings, which he disclaims are translations. For Wong, "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 [ . . . ] giving what one understands to be the essential life of the poem recognisable form in the structures available in English".<sup>18</sup> Wong adds that it is inevitable that the subjectivity of the poem is intensified in English, as it would be difficult to leave out the "strongly subjective organising 'I'" when writing in English. Bearing this in mind, what immediately strikes one about Wong's renderings is how much they fill in or add to the original text. Take for example Wong's rendering of Du Fu's "Prospect in Spring 春望", in *Remembering Grandma*, compared with a more literal translation:

### Literal<sup>19</sup>

A kingdom smashed, its hills and rivers still here,  
Spring in the city, plants and trees grow deep.

Moved by the moment, flowers splash with tears,  
Alarmed at parting, birds startle the heart.

War's beacon fires have gone on three months,  
Letters from home are worth thousands in gold.

Fingers run through white hair until it thins,  
Cap-pins will almost no longer hold.

### Wong's

At the death of great houses,  
the waste of cities,  
the land returns to desolation  
of its rivers and its hills.  
The high walls under a mild sun  
lie fissured, opened in great wounds  
to the ravening tide of spring.

These flowers that well up from the  
ground  
are tears I will weep  
against adversity.  
I think of you my children. My fear  
darkens around this chirruping  
of sparrows fighting beneath the walls.  
The skies these nights are louring, red

---

<sup>18</sup> Wong Phui Nam, "Reading of a Tang Poem," *Ways of Exile*, p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> Translation by Stephen Owen in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996, p. 420.

with beacon fires built for the invasion.  
I would there were news from home.  
Daily the comb slips more easily through  
my hair.  
Of little use my passions, held  
this hairpin in my fingers.  
It will not catch, then falls  
from the hair against the palm.

Wong fills in details of his own and significantly expands but also redacts the poem (there is no mention of letters from home, for example): it is as much his as Du Fu's. Eddie Tay has postulated that Wong's engagement with classical Chinese poetry is also a means of "clarifying and affirming his identity as a Chinese Malaysian".<sup>20</sup> In Tay's view, Wong's choice of poems and poets to engage with closely mirror Wong's sense of exile and the exilic condition of the Chinese in Malaya. This is undoubtedly true to some extent. Wong engages closely with Li Bai, Du Fu and Tao Yuanming: both Li Bai and Du Fu were driven to political exile and witnessed the desolations of war. Tao Yuanming, who precedes the Tang poets by roughly 300 years, was a recluse who withdrew from the civil service. Thus Wong renders the last line of Li Bai's most famous poem (静夜思; roughly "Quiet Night Thoughts") as "my fierce unsatisfied longing to be home": a revealing insight into the mind of the exile. But it would be reductive to simply read the concerns of Wong's larger oeuvre into his renderings of classical Chinese poetry and fail to appreciate these works on their own terms—as a poet's attempt to inhabit the space of his forebears, and to recover what he can from them for his own time. Here, I am in agreement with Shirley Lim, who finds Wong's renderings of classical Chinese poems "most precise, most authentically released from material circumstance to transcendent and tender sensibility".<sup>21</sup> One gets the sense in Wong's engagement with classical Chinese poetry, despite the occasionally similar bleakness of theme, a sense of some relief, such as in Wong's rendering of Du Fu's "Evening Banquet at Zuo's Villa 夜宴左氏庄":

Our verse recited  
moves with lightness of a skiff,

---

<sup>20</sup> Eddie Tay, "Unsettling Ways of Exile", *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, Vol. No. 1. 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Shirley Lim, "Sparkling Glass".

passing into waters where the sky recedes  
into the horizons of another speech,  
another place, another time. (“Late revels”)

## Conclusion

From the vantage point of Singapore, where I am, talk of a cultural wasteland or wilderness seem quaint, antiquated and overly dramatic. Singapore and Malaysia have developed to a point where the days of bare self-sufficiency seem happily distant, leading some to assume that cultural and spiritual development naturally proceed from economic development, in some sort of crude Maslowian schema. It may also be tempting to assume that after fifty years or more of independent history, Singaporean (and Malaysian) writers are way past the postcolonial issues of language appropriation (or abrogation), mimicry, identity and hybridity. Yet even a superficial examination of the lives we live now will reveal to us the falseness of these suppositions. The softness of capital, now cloaked in the language of service and authenticity, should not blind us to its pervasiveness, its inventiveness and its ever-increasing ability to dictate the terms of our lives. The marketing of lifestyle, consumption and property continue to scale new heights in both countries. If anything, “the things of the flesh” are far in advance of the literature and culture. Nor has development dulled self-interest, self-promotion and self-love: one only has to look to social media and the narcissism it generates. The growing sophistication and reach of the American (and to some extent, British) culture and media industries serve to intensify, not lessen, the urgency of the question of the significance of writing in English in Singapore and Malaysia. Writers may choose to ignore the question, but it will nevertheless linger.

The questions and fears of Wong Phui Nam’s wilderness have perhaps never left us. We may think we have left it behind, but the reality is that we live in it nonetheless. Writers and readers of English literature in Singapore and Malaysia risk forgetting the struggles and lessons learned by our forebears. A deeper appreciation of them may just serve to refine our writing, to avoid a state where

Language here turns gibberish, resistant as brown earth,  
as raw green scrub that over it senselessly runs. (“Against the Wilderness,” iv, “Arrival”)

Against the odds and, yes, the wilderness, Wong’s peculiar fecundity should serve as an inspiration and a warning to aspiring writers in English in this part of the world.