

Wong Phui Nam – A Note

Edwin Thumboo

The mid-fifties were a busy time in the Faculty of Arts canteen and Dunearn Road Hostels at the University of Malaya, then in Singapore. There had been a growing movement – more of ideas and discussion, agreement and disagreement, than actual action – in many matters, including Malaya’s growing political independence. Indigenous political parties were few and young. Political feeling had yet to harden and multiply, and become what it is today, sadly, in Malaysia. We saw Singapore as part of Malaya. Social and cultural contacts between them were strong. A large majority of families lived in each colony. We were related. What mattered most was the shape of government we wanted for ourselves. There were relatively small groups at the University, including the Socialist Club, which worked against the British. There was the Fajar episode in May 1954. Politics was growing, marked at its worst by racial identity. The notion of a multiracial society was popular. The majority of Malay undergraduates, especially from the East Coast of Malaya, particularly Kelantan and Terengganu, wanted Malay control of the government for the nation.

Among the main issues were the creation of a literature for ourselves, Malay, Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians. The first three of these four groups were beginning to feel increasingly Asian, and English-speaking. For instance, those around Beda Lim were so. They wrote poems, published them, but stopped after they left the University. Only Lim Thean Soo and Hedwig Anuar of that generation continued to write, she occasionally. They headed the Singapore Customs and the National Library respectively. Beda had published Wang Gungwu’s *Pulse*, the first collection after WWII. But Gungwu stopped writing and moved into history.

It was in the mid-fifties that started ongoing continuity. Ee Tiang Hong came to the University from Malacca in 1951. He was the first post-war English poet who kept writing for the rest of his life, complaining that the early Peranakans and others were not treated equally with the Malays, who had been given special rights, reflecting the depth and reach of Malay institutions. The friendship Tiang Hong and I formed was close, and we kept in close touch. He wanted to leave Malaysia. He went to Australia because we could not find a suitable appointment for his wife, who had a New Zealand first degree, and ended up teaching at Curtin University for the rest of her working life.

Those active in the mid-fifties included Tiang Hong, Edwin Thumboo, Phui Nam, Tan Han Hoe, Ho Wah Kum, Daniel Kovalpillay, all of whom wrote and published. Phui Nam – a close friendship with Han Hoe – was among the key figures. He wrote *Toccata on Ochre Sheaves*. His next personal volume, *How the Hills Are Distant* appeared in 1968, well after he graduated and had returned to Malaysia. The only writing officially accepted in Malaysia was and is in Bahasa. Writing in other languages were read and promoted by the speakers. Had he been in Singapore, he would have been rewarded for his work.

The central theme in all of Phui Nam's work, directly and indirectly, was the question of attachment. He needed a country in a fuller sense. He wanted to feel belonged, located, in the most realistic sense; attached with a foreground, middleground, and background that was not merely personal but also shared with others, forming part of the nation. His very background worked against this. Phui Nam's father was Peranakan but decided to become Cantonese. Like most converts, his aim was extreme. Phui Nam's mother had come from China. He was the 8th child and had lost his mother when he was young. He was brought up by a servant in a Cantonese household which was isolated in its inner workings and habits. His sense of isolation is very strong in his poetry. In "Spirit Rampant"

When the hour comes
there shall be
no redeeming word, no help,
not even from you.

Done with mourning,

I shall take on,
with all its unreason,
the blind unregeneracy
of the beast
forced in upon itself
and rage, though guns
may open great wounds in my sides,
rage against dying.

Bearing all wounds, all infections,
I shall press on

till past pain,
past mere mortality,

I seize an inward freedom,
will to live
yet another thousand years. (*Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989), p. 22)

Years later, the same deep, massive feeling, is embodied in a Note introducing *Against the Wilderness* (2000). The poems had been written much earlier and the fourteen-line stanza – modified sonnet form free of rhymes and much his favourite – has these two opening and closing paragraphs:

Where we find ourselves to-day is a wilderness. It is a wilderness for its origins in serving the imperatives of commodity markets. It has, as one of the consequences, possessed the world (*kata, ci* or any of its forms) only imperfectly....

As with any utterance in the wilderness, there is, in the mere need for making these poems, an implicit faith in the existence of a moral order despite appearances to the contrary in these most unpromising of times.

That “moral order” was absolutely his own, and kept his vision of society in which he lived whole and overbearing as far as he was concerned. I myself, and others of my generation who lived in Singapore, where the government adopted what we had believed in – a multiracial nation – could never feel the way he did. We knew the main makings of his dilemma but never the whole of it. Now we know partly because Phui Nam was recently interviewed and made his position clear:

Up to the age of 14 I didn't know English at all; my environment was totally Cantonese. My mother was from China; she was Cantonese. My father was from Melaka; he was Peranakan. I think somewhere up the family tree we had a Malay Portuguese great-grandmother somewhere! But you don't see that in my features....

Yes. Even now, even though English has been a benefit, linguistically I still feel like a displaced person. I mean, I can't claim Malay, even though I live here – it's not my heritage, and I can't claim Chinese either, because my lineage has been cut off from China so many years ago, so where do I stand? (Laughs) So I just take the practical view that this is my working language, English – I speak it, I work in it, and when I worked I was using English; maybe I even dreamed in it. What other language can I use?...

Even now, even though English has been a benefit, linguistically I still feel like a displaced person ... I can't claim Malay, even though I live here – it's not my heritage, and I can't claim Chinese either, because my lineage has been cut off from China so many years ago, so where do I stand? So I just take the practical view that this is my working language, English. (Pettener, 2021, "A Conversation with Poet Wong Phui Nam (Part 1)")

But Phui Nam saw what had gone, and what was going on, around him. He and Han Hoe knew what had been done and felt strong enough about its achievement to bring poems together – hence *Litmus One*. The thirteen poets, of whom six continued to work after University: Ee Tiang Hong, Lloyd Fernando, Goh Sin Tub, Oliver Seet, Edwin Thumboo, Wong Phui Nam. The selection was good. Many one-poem poets were left out. But it was the beginning of a tradition that continued. Unfortunately, there was no *Litmus Two*. A pity. Thus *Litmus One* became an important publication and inspired a lot of other books quite soon after.

At that time, I had left the University, spending the next 9-10 years putting right what was missing in my University education. I broadened my interests considerably, moving into the history of Asia, China and India especially, the Middle East, Ur Chaldea, The Hittites, Egypt and Israel. Apart from history, it meant moving into mythologies, which took me into Central and South America, the Aztecs and the Incas. I read a book called *Cheng Ho* by one of our High Court English judges. It was as if I was doing another degree. The one person I kept in touch throughout this period was Ee Tiang Hong. I used to go up to Malacca and spend a few days with him. He had a wonderful mother. I did not write much; read a great deal instead. I kept in touch with Phui Nam desultorily, as with other old Dunearn Road friends. At times, I drove right up to Penang, meeting up with classmates but always thinking that the two countries were becoming more different with Malaya under the rule of the Malays.

Phui Nam made trips to Singapore, sometimes staying with me for a few days. And when we had conferences, he came down and took part. We kept in touch, but have not for the last few

years. He searched for a focus for years, going over the same ground. Egypt had played such an important part in his thinking. So it is therefore no surprise that Phui Nam's *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai* (utilising the fourteen-line poems, modified sonnets) carries what at the moment is his final message. Published by Ethos, it is a return to the early Wong Phui Nam of the Fifties, to the University of Malaya undergraduate who worked with close friends furthering the growth of Malayan literature in our English. It is only through that English language that poets like Phui Nam and myself could bring in figures from other cultures into our own. For it is through that language, English, our Englishes, world Englishes, that we have made the journey. But I must add that it is Phui Nam who has the largest vocabulary with Oliver Seet, though the latter's motivation is different.

It is perhaps surprising that both Phui Nam and myself are associated with icons far from our culture. Most Singaporeans today know *Ulysses by the Merlion* and Phui Nam's *Hen-tai* as our younger citizens look more at ourselves. They may find it difficult to understand why. In a sense, our search was wider and deeper because of external circumstances. There was less of ourselves to look at because we grew up in a colonial world and felt its presence as we explored it more and more. This is why I have argued, alas without success, against our Literature being called 'post-colonial'. I have argued it has to be national, and after that, given our name. We have our own literature, all the ex-colonies where English started off as a colonial language. It is now our own. We write in it, though I must add, that the generation in which Phui Nam and I belong was educated in it, and we use it with confidence. Our English is less marked and therefore closer to its colonial origins.

How do I conclude? Get hold of and read Phui Nam's works. His most recent, *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai* is available. Some of the earlier works are hard to get. Remember that in it is a summary of Phui Nam's position, one we should remember and share, and celebrate despite its darkness:

Out of our essential loam, our sour breath,
we provide him his life, and life after
in the heavens, one lone soul in a sun-boat
looking down on us, the multitudinous swarm
the earth brings forth and takes back compacted
into silt and loam in our ignorant flesh. (*xiii*, p. 16)

Here darkness has no end. We are more
than a mile up from the pit. Do not look back,
for you will not see me. I am merged
into a total blackness dense as coal
with the rock and sulphur walls of this ascending pass. (xxx, p. 30)

All things that ever had weighed upon me
as flesh in death, now fall away. I am not, yet I am.
A sweetness swells up in me of pervasive peace,
and the vast surrounding darkness holds no fears.
Though I have about me still the odour of recent death,
I wait, in love, at this point of light, at this, my still centre. (xxxii, p. 35)

Thanks to Phui Nam and thank you.