

WONG PHUI NAM (1935-2022): A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

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Wong Phui Nam came from a generation of pioneer Malaysian writers in English and was certainly a torchbearer for the future generations of Malaysians who chose to write in the English language. His writing career began at the University of Malaya in Singapore, which was established in 1949. Wong recalled that most of the faculty in the English department were indifferent to their students' literary pursuits, and a few of them were hostile. Even so, the then-new university was relatively conducive for student writing, as evidenced by the various literary journals and anthologies that were published throughout the 1950s.

Later, as a post-colonial writer, Wong was marginalised by the new Malaysian government for writing in English instead of Malay, the official language of the country. Unlike some writers of his generation, he chose to stay in Malaysia and continue writing in the English language. He felt acutely the lack of a local readership for his poetry. There was a long period of silence between the publication of his much-celebrated poetry collection *How the Hills are Distant* (1968) and his third collection of poems, *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989). In Malaysia, his poetry was generally appreciated by academics and students of poetry while lesser poets who wrote in the national language were given national awards. His poems have been republished in several anthologies: T. Wignesana's *Bunga Mas: An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature* (1964), in Edwin Thumboo's *The Flowering Tree* (1970) and *The Second Tongue* (1976), and in Malachi Edwin Vethamani's *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems* (2018).

Wong had a long literary career as a published poet which spread over almost eight decades. He started publishing from the late 1950s right until his death in 2022. He published seven volumes of poetry and two plays. His earliest poems were published in *30 Poems: University of Malaya Poems 1957-1958* (1957) and *Litmus One: Selected University Verse* (1958). His poetry collections include *Toccata on Ochre Sheaves* (1958), *How the Hills Are Distant* (1968), *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989), *Ways of Exile* (1993), *Against the Wilderness* (2000), *An Acre of Day's Glass: Collected Poems* (2006), and *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tau* (first published in 2009 and republished in 2013; a revised version was published in 2019). Wong was constantly reworking his poems and often dismissed his early writing (especially poems from *Toccata on Ochre Sheaves*) as weak and not noteworthy.

Rather late in his writing career, Wong turned to drama and published two plays, *Anike* (2006) and *Aduni* (2008). The former was an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, while the latter was an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. He mentioned to me that he was unhappy with his first version of the two plays. He felt the language was not natural and did not work on stage. I was privy to the drafts of his play, *Anike*, as he reworked it. I published his revised version of the play in the December 2021 issue of *Men Matters Online Journal*.

Wong was often regarded as an enigmatic and distant figure. He was soft-spoken and gentlemanly. Those who were acquainted with him at a personal level, however, admired his immense knowledge (especially in literature and philosophy), wit, humour, generosity and humility. On a personal level, my friendship with Wong grew from my encounter with his poems as an undergraduate. Later on, I began teaching his poems. He was gracious and never turned down an invitation to attend my classes and interact with my students. I wanted my students to meet the man and the Malaysian poet who had written on the alienation and the injustices he had felt as he attempted to engage with the nation he had chosen to live in.

Over the last few years, we worked on several projects at the national level. He was among a panel of Malaysian poets who selected works from Malaysian poets below the age of 35 years. I then edited these poems, which were published in *Malaysian Millennial Voices* (2021). He was on two judging panels for national level poetry writing competitions organised by the University of Nottingham Malaysia. He took time to write advice to young Malaysian poets and encouraged them to write poetry. He was deeply concerned about the future of Malaysian poetry in English and wanted to see it develop with youthful voices and fresh ideas.

During the last two years of Wong's life, I met him quite regularly. We often had lunch at the Selangor Club. We also met at his home to chat and work on our writing projects: his play *Anike* and my poetry collection *Love and Loss* (2012), which he graciously selected, edited and wrote an introduction to.

I wanted to celebrate Wong for all that he had contributed to Malaysian literature in English. I organised an online birthday celebration in 2021, determined to get his friends from his youth to send him their happy birthday greetings. Wong was excited to receive recorded messages from Wang Gangwu, Edwin Thumboo and Shirley Lim. His family was with him in their home and watched his friends and fans celebrate him. As part of celebrating his 86th birthday, I also curated a special feature on Wong in the December 2021 issue of *Men Matters Online Journal*. We also published one of his last poems, 'At Eighty-Six'. Wong was very conscious of his impending demise. The references to "shutting down", "snuffing out", "a homecoming" and "a return to stillness" all reflect Wong's philosophy on life and death. The final stanza of this poem reads:

At eighty-six I hear – yet barely

of *sure and certain hope*

that with the shutting down of the senses,
the snuffing out of thought and the turning up
of its deep roots – that after earth or after fire,
silence at journey's end is not an utter, unremitting nothingness
but a homecoming, a return to stillness,
stillness that is the origin of all creatures great and small.

Despite seeing Wong's health deteriorating over the last few months of his final year, it still came to me as a shock when I heard of his passing from his son Sha'arin Razali Wong. I still have the last few WhatsApp text messages between us and I don't have the heart to delete them. The last message was on 20th September, on his 87th birthday.

Wong's demise signals the passing of one of the greatest Malayan poets who wrote in English and continues to be an important voice in Malaysian poetry in English. Thank you, Phui Nam, for your legacy. You will be remembered through your writing.