



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

WONG PHUI NAM: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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By

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts**

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*To Kian Seng, who pushes me on to greater heights
and Mei Hsuan, Ch'ang Lun and Mei Kuei,
who make everything worthwhile*



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of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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“Wong Phui Nam: A Critical Biography” is a study of a Chinese Malaysian poet who has produced a significant body of works in the English language. In literature, the biographical approach is well accepted for the study of poets and works of poetry. In fact, it has long been proven effective as a useful and thorough method and is able to provide important and interesting details for a better understanding of a poet and his or her works.

Wong Phui Nam has been writing poetry from his base in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for almost half a century. A *Peranakan* by birth but brought up as a Cantonese, Wong was first educated in Chinese and later in English. Wong’s poetry, which is closely linked to his personal thoughts and experiences, is best studied in the light of his interesting life. He started writing in the mid-fifties, just before the country achieved independence and has not stopped producing poetry through the years. He published his latest book of poetry in 2000.

Wong’s writings belong to the field of Malaysian literature in English, where there is a lack of supplementary material due to its short history in the country and secondary



position where language policies are concerned. As such, this critical biography of Wong Phui Nam would contribute in some manner to this select field. This is because Wong's four books of poems and various articles on local poetry form an important part of Malaysian literature in English. He has been on the scene of this field since the early stages of the formation of a body of works known as Malaysian literature in English and is one of the few writers from the fifties still producing poetry into the new millennium.

Most of the data in this study is obtained from personal interviews and talks given by Wong and his contemporaries. Critical essays by him and articles on him and his works are also studied for a more complete understanding of this man, who is also a poet. This study focuses on how Wong's life has impacted his poetry in a significant and perceptible manner. It shows how he draws inspiration and ideas from his surroundings and how events in his life influence his writings to a great extent.

In taking a close look at Wong Phui Nam's life and works, this critical biography helps readers come to a better understanding and a deeper enjoyment of his poetry, which mostly describes a landscape familiar to him and people close to his heart.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
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WONG PHUI NAM: SEBUAH BIOGRAFI KRITIKAL

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“Wong Phui Nam: Sebuah Biografi Kritikal” merupakan suatu kajian tentang seorang penyajak Cina Malaysia yang menghasilkan karya-karya dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Dalam sastera, pendekatan biografi biasanya diterima untuk kajian penyajak dan sajak-sajak yang dihasilkan. Sememangnya, pendekatan ini telah lama terbukti berguna untuk memberi gambaran yang lengkap dan menarik yang membawa kepada pemahaman yang lebih terperinci tentang seseorang penyajak serta hasil karyanya.

Wong Phui Nam telah menulis sajak dari pusat beliau di Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia selama hampir setengah abad. Dilahirkan di dalam sebuah keluarga Peranakan tetapi dibesarkan sebagai seorang Kantonis. Wong mendapat pendidikan Cina pada awal hidupnya diterusi dengan pendidikan Inggeris kemudiannya. Sajak-sajak Wong yang berkaitan dengan fikiran sendiri dan pengalaman pahit manis beliau menyebabkan mereka baik dikaji dari kaca mata kehidupan beliau yang begitu menarik. Beliau memulakan penulisan beliau pada pertengahan lima puluhan, sejurus sebelum negara Malaysia mencapai kemerdekaan dan beliau masih belum berhenti lagi. Beliau telah menerbitkan buku sajak yang terkini pada tahun 2000.

Penulisan Wong tergolong dalam bidang sastera Malaysia yang ditulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris di mana terdapat kekurangan bahan sokongan akibat kesingkatan sejarah dalam negara ini dan kedudukan sekunder dari segi polisi bahasa. Oleh kerana itu, biografi kritikal tentang Wong Phui Nam ini dapat menyumbangkan sedikit sebanyak juga dalam bidang khas ini. Ini adalah kerana empat-empat buah buku sajak Wong dan artikel tentang sajak tempatan hasil beliau merupakan sebahagian penting bidang sastera Malaysia yang ditulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Beliau telah terjerumus dalam bidang tersebut sejak terbentuknya bidang sastera Malaysia Bahasa Inggeris dan merupakan salah seorang penulis sajak dari zaman kelima-puluhan yang masih menghasilkan sajak sehingga ke milenium baharu.

Kebanyakan daripada data dalam kajian ini diperolehi daripada temu ramah persendirian dan syarahan daripada Wong dan juga kontemporari beliau. Esei-esei kritis beliau serta artikel-artikel mengenai beliau dan karya beliau turut dikaji untuk memperolehi pemahaman yang lebih rapi berkenaan insan yang juga penyajak ini. Kajian ini tertumpu kepada bagaimana kehidupan Wong telah mempengaruhi penulisan sajak-sajak beliau dengan mendalam dan berkesan sekali. Ianya memperlihatkan bagaimana beliau mendapat inspirasi dan idea daripada persekitaran dan bagaimana pelbagai peristiwa dalam kehidupan beliau telah begitu mempengaruhi penulisan beliau.

Seiringan dengan usaha mengkaji kehidupan dan hasil penulisan Wong Phui Nam dengan teliti, biografi kritikal ini dapat memberi kepada para pembaca pemahaman dan penikmatan yang lebih mendalam tentang sajak-sajak beliau, yang

kebanyakannya menerangkan persekitaran yang dikenali dan insan-insan yang rapat dengan hati-naluri beliau.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every poet of worth deserves a critical biography, a document to record all the significant moments, important figures and works accomplished. A poet is more than just an ordinary person living an ordinary life. Throughout the ages, poets have been ascribed myriad roles, one of which is that of a chronicler. This is because poets are often attuned to their surroundings, aware of what is happening around them and conscious of their part in the greater circle of things. Whether the poet was born a poet, gifted with an innate sense of the lyricism in life, or developed into one because of the kind of life lived: whether poetry becomes the record of an interesting and colourful life, or life is lived like a sublime piece of poetry: for a poet, life and poetry are always very much intricately intertwined. A poet's biography can therefore serve as a useful and pertinent record of the period that he or she had lived and worked in.

As we read poetry, how can we appreciate a poet's writings fully and not seek to find out about the kind of life he or she had lived? How can we be touched by lyrics and not think of the conditions that had inspired a poet to write those lines? Some may feel that poems can be read and appreciated without any inkling of the kind of life a poet had led, but I believe most readers would not pass up such information. This can be attested by the fact that biographies of poets abound and this has been so since the early ages of literature.

With that in mind, I set out to write a critical biography of Wong Phui Nam. I have read and been touched by his poems and I want to find out more about the man. I started off knowing Wong as a Chinese Malaysian poet writing in the English language and residing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Even though I enjoyed his poetry then, I know that I will read it better if I know more about him. I want to find out about his childhood, his family background, the education he went through, his career: the story of his life in short. I am convinced that such a study can provide an enhanced reading of his poetry because as his life is unfolded, so would his poetry be revealed in fresh, new ways through the anecdotes of his life.

Background of the Study

Wong Phui Nam belongs to the group of early Malaysian writers writing in English. This group had gone through the British education system during colonial rule and as such, their works are mainly in the English language. Many of their writing are in either the form of poetry or short stories. Though small in number, the literary output of this group is significant and forms a part of Malaysian literature. Some stop writing after a while. Others emigrated and continue to write from overseas. Wong however has opted to remain and test the "literary waters" of Malaysia. Today, Wong Phui Nam can be counted as one of the country's finest resident poets, writing in the English language that is.



As Wong started his literary career in the late 1950s, he can be considered as having written poetry for almost half a century. A Chinese *Peranakan*¹, Wong was brought up in a Cantonese-speaking Chinese home. He started off in a Chinese school as a young child but was sent to an English school after his father's death. He started life as a British subject in one of Britain's most far-flung colonies and became a Malaysian citizen as a young adult upon the country's independence in 1957. Wong started writing as a young undergraduate in a young country at a time when fresh and exciting ideas were being disseminated to the new intellectuals. Later, as the country moved towards nationhood, going through heated debates and communal riots: Wong too is moved to discover his poetic voice and a distinctive style of writing.

Since then, Wong has developed into a fine poet with no less than four volumes of poetry to his name. His poetry is distinctive and imbued with a strong presence of personal experiences. To date, no effort has yet been made to document his life in the form of a biography, which would have helped readers to explore his poetry in the light of his life. It is also a fact that no biography could be found on any Malaysian poet writing in the English language.

Admittedly, it has just been forty-five years of nationhood and Malaysian literature is still at an early stage. Works of many Malaysian writers writing in English have yet to be systematically compiled and reference materials on them remain scanty and scattered. The relegation of Malaysian literature written in English to the status of "sectional literature" since the passing of the National Language Act in 1967 did not help matters at all.

¹A Malay word meaning "local-born person," used to describe the more acculturated "Malay-speaking Chinese" (*The Chinese in Malaysia* 48-49).



In recent times though, there has been a gradual shift towards a more conciliatory attitude towards the English language and its literature. No longer viewed merely as a legacy of British colonialism, English is now acknowledged as the most widely used language in the world. Many find it necessary for international networking. As such, the use of English is again being actively promoted in the country and its literature explored with keener interest. To support such a move, critical studies of Malaysian works in English need to be actively cultivated. This is where a critical biography of Wong Phui Nam, whose poetry spans the years of Malaysia's nationhood, can contribute its part.

As described later in the thesis, Wong's upbringing is typical of Chinese *Peranakan* sons of that era. But for the early deaths of his parents and the war, he would have led a rather comfortable life in childhood. These early traumatic experiences are reflected in his poems when he started writing in his twenties. In fact, throughout his rather turbulent life, events and circumstances have worked in such a way as to deeply mark his poetic psyche, causing him to develop a personal and unique style of writing.

The *Peranakans*, from whom Wong is descended on his father's side, are a unique people. They are descendents of early Chinese settlers who had married local Malay women as the migration of Chinese women to Malaya began only in the mid-nineteenth century. The descendents of these early mixed marriages gave rise to the *Peranakans*. Their men and women are also called *Babas* and *Nyonyas* respectively. Even though the *Peranakans* have a longer history in the country as compared to other groups of Chinese, they are however not readily accepted as true Chinese by

these *sinkheh*², who consisted mostly of Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew and Hakka Chinese.

The Cantonese, from whom Wong is descended on his mother's side, belong to one of these four dominant dialect groups. They came to this country in the mid-nineteenth century to escape poverty and harsh living conditions in China. European expansion and the British free trade policy made the colonies in South-East Asia attractive as places to start anew. Mostly, the early Chinese immigrants came either on a kinship-based³ or a credit-ticket⁴ system. In fact, Wong's grandmother, mother and uncles were brought to Malaya on the strength of their relationship to the China bride who had been commissioned by a wealthy Chinese miner, who incidentally was the younger sister of Wong's maternal grandmother.

As Chinese observe strict patrilineal descent, Wong is therefore a *Peranakan*. He however could not speak their language as neither parents spoke it. Instead, Wong spoke Cantonese up to the age of ten. In fact, the whole family, including his *Peranakan* father spoke Cantonese and observed the Cantonese way of life. After he was orphaned at the age of ten, Wong was sent to an English school. Here, he not only learnt the language, he was also introduced to a new world built on the rich traditions of the West. Wong's life took a 180-degree turn: from one that was steeped in Chinese traditions to immersion in exciting Western ideas and philosophy. Upon completing his university education in Singapore in 1959, Wong returned to

²A Chinese term for the later nineteenth century immigrants from China (*The Chinese in Malaysia* 49).

³In a kinship-based immigration, established settlers recruited relatives and kinsmen from China to help out with work and businesses in the new country.

⁴In a credit ticket immigration, impoverished prospective Chinese immigrants received advanced passage money from labour brokers and entered into written contracts to repay their debts in the form of labour (*The Chinese in Malaysia* 1-2).

Malaysia. He found work and later married a Malay woman. Through marriage, Wong immersed himself in the Malay culture. Through it all, Wong continues to write poetry in the English language.

The life that Wong has led goes a long way to explaining the kind of poetry he writes and his style of writing. On its own, a critical biography of Wong Phui Nam would make for an engrossing read because of the interesting life he had lived and his strong opinions on Malaysia and the local literary scene. However, a critical biography of Wong Phui Nam is especially useful to readers who would like a deeper insight into the man who had written the poems.

Statement of the Problem

As suggested by the title, “Wong Phui Nam: A Critical Biography” is a study of the life and poetry of Wong Phui Nam. As such, it traces his life’s journey and seeks to link it to the poetry he writes. In tracing his life, this biography not only takes note of the physical aspects but also seeks to explore the inner man, the sum total of which can best be described as his psyche.

As the subject of this study is a poet, it only makes sense that his poetry is checked against important people and events in his life. In Wong’s case, his poetry not only reflects his life, it is a showcase of personal and national events and figures from his life. In this critical biography, both aspects, that is life and poetry, which is very much bound up in the psyche of the poet, are brought together in a single work for a complete and holistic study of Wong Phui Nam.

Scope of the Study

This critical biography of Wong Phui Nam seeks to cover aspects of his life such as family, education, career and literary output. For this study, Wong's life is traced from the very beginning, in fact from before his birth by going right up to the coming of his ancestors from China to Malaya. It tracks his life as he matures from boyhood to adulthood and to the present stage, taking into consideration important happenings and figures that have impacted his life in some way or other. The emphasis is more on his early life as many of his poems are based on that period of his life. Most of the information is obtained through a series of interviews with Wong and his contemporaries.

Against the backdrop of this life, his poetry is studied and compared to the life he has lived. All known poems in print, even those from his university days are studied. Most of the major poems studied are in the last three volumes: *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989), *Ways of Exile* (1993) and *Against the Wilderness* (2000). Incidentally, *Ways of Exile* contains the whole of his first volume, *How the Hills are Distant* (1968) as its first section. Wong's other writings, which are mostly in the form of literary articles, are also checked against his life.

As for criticisms, articles that discuss about Wong Phui Nam and about his poetry or certain of his poems are taken into account when delving into the critical part of this critical study, which is that aspect that is more concerned with the poet in the man. As can be observed, the very nature of a critical study calls for a thorough study of the whole person.

Conceptual Theory

A critical biography such as this is a piece of work about the life of a person and in the case of a poet, his poetry too. This is because the complete story of a poet's life cannot be told without a comprehensive look into his works. A critical biography attempts to find links between life and poetry, to arrive at an understanding of a poet and his or her works.

The challenge here is therefore not so much as to how to chronicle Wong Phui Nam's life or document his poems, but to really get to know the person who wrote the poems. As there are no two ways to separate a man from the poet within without sacrificing cohesiveness, life and literary output are therefore studied together. The circumstances in his life and the people he had met that had led to the writing of certain poems are explored in this study. Many of his ideas that had led to the formation of his worldview are also reflected in his poetry. Thus, even though poetry can be said to be the fruit of his creative imagination, still it remains very much an imagination that is coloured by his life.

This study of Wong Phui Nam is also charting the development of his psyche. Here, his life's journey is traced even as his poetry is tracked, all for a better understanding of this psyche, which is the essence of who he is. As the psyche encompasses both the inner as well as the outer man, it is therefore very much a part of his poetry, the outpouring of his inner self. Wong defines the psyche as "the soulish part of man in the New Testament sense" in an article "Out of the Stony ... A Personal Perspective on the Writing of Verse in English in Malaysia" (*Malaysian Literature in English*

102). He later describes the condition of his psyche as “naked ... an unprotected subjectivity, as unprotected as an exposed physical body” (Appendix D 145).

It has taken Wong years to arrive at an understanding of the naked condition of his psyche. He realises that he “can lay no claims to any tradition,” as writing in the English language, he cannot base it on the Western culture, being not native to it although he acknowledges “the native English poets [he read in school] are in a sense precursors but emphatically not ancestors” (Quayum, “Interview”). He cannot really base his poetry on the Chinese culture of his ancestors either because he has neither the fluency in Mandarin nor a grounding of Chinese high culture. Wong however discovers a “psychological counter balance to Western influence and a great comfort” (Quayum, “Interview”) in his readings of Chinese classical poets like Tao Qian, Du Fu and Li Bai. Even then, these are no more ancestors than the English poets he studied in school. Finally, the Malay folktales he incorporates into his later poems are at best second-hand, having come from his readings and observations of the Malay culture.

The fact that Wong writes in the English language is in itself “one such sign that we [that is, he and other Malaysian writers like him] really have little or nothing of our own” and therefore “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” (Quayum, “Interview”). Wong explains that our psyche needs “protection... the intermediation of something between this raw reality [of human existence] and our bare subjectivity” and this protection is supplied by “history and tradition.” This causes Wong to believe in his writing:

When a person like me writes about it [the naked psyche], and others as well and as time passes, these accumulate, and then maybe, we'd have our own culture in that sense. The psyche will gradually grow into a "clothed" one, probably in another fifty to a hundred years. Now we don't have it yet. When I write or other writers write, we stand witness to the condition. (Appendix D 145)

Objectives of the Study

I have undertaken this study to introduce Wong Phui Nam to researchers of Malaysian literature in English and to those who have yet to come across his writings. Wong is one of the major poets in the field of Malaysian literature in English. It is my hope that more studies will be done on his works in Malaysia and abroad.

More specifically, I want to show that in Wong's case, his poetry reflects many of the events and people in his life, especially the early part of his life. I want to show too that the English language he uses in the writing of his poetry and the kind of poems that he writes can be related to and explained by the life he has led.

Indirectly, I want to document the period that Wong lived through in the earlier part of his life. I believe that that period, which is the fifties to the sixties, is one of the most interesting and eventful periods of Malaysian history. It was then that the country achieved independence from Britain and embarked upon self-governance. It was also during that time that Wong started to write poetry in earnest. I want to show how that period affected and defined Wong, who was in his twenties then, and how it is recreated in his poetry.

Finally, I have the opportunity to study Wong's poetry all over again and in the light of his life. I hope to link many of his poems to the important events and people in his life and in the process come to a better understanding and enjoyment of his poems. I hope the appreciation for his poetry will come across in this biography.

Significance of the Study

A critical biography of Wong Phui Nam is important firstly because Wong is one of the most significant Malaysian poets writing in the English language. A critical biography of a Malaysian poet writing in English has never been attempted before. I strongly feel that Wong's poetry is an important part of Malaysian literature in English and the greater arena of literatures in English too. As such, this study can be a contribution to the literary world, both locally and abroad.

Secondly, a critical biography of Wong Phui Nam acts as a record of the kind of life and poetry produced during a particular period of Malaysian history. Even if Wong does not speak for all Chinese Malaysians and his poetry is representative of only a portion of Malaysian literature of the second half of the twentieth century, all in all Wong remains an important representative in every sense. The kind of life he has led has its place in Malaysian history and the poetry he has produced is a significant part of Malaysian literature in English.

Last of all, a critical biography of Wong Phui Nam helps open up the sensibilities of a Chinese Malaysian poet to readers of Malaysian literature in English. After all, it should be interesting to get to know such a poet, who has written all his poetry from

