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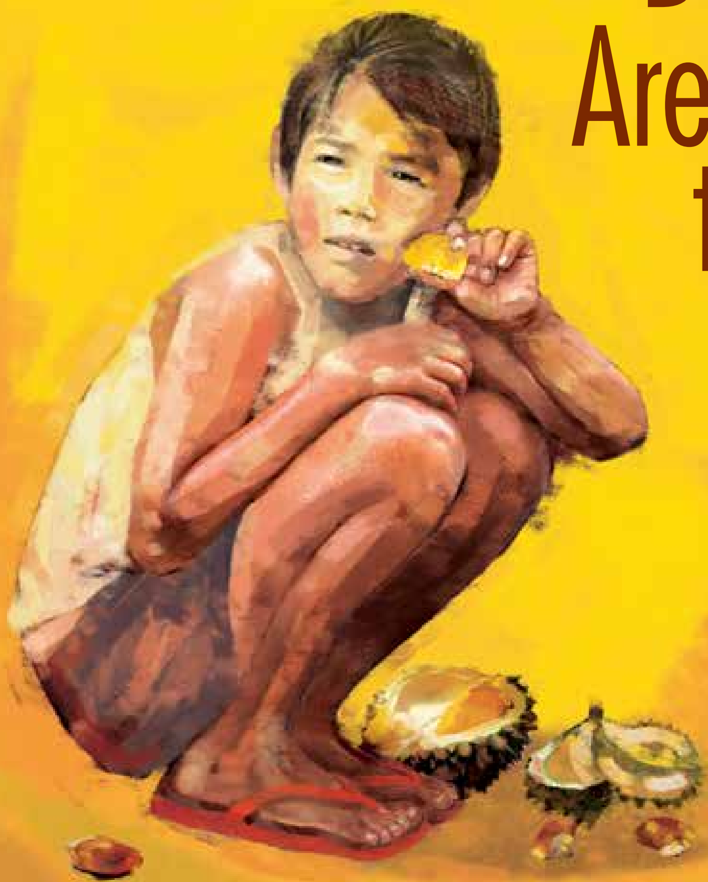
WONG YOON WAH

Durians Are Not the Only Fruit

NOTES FROM THE TROPICS



TRANSLATED BY JEREMY TIANG

Durians Are Not the Only Fruit

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WONG YOON WAH

Durians Are Not the Only Fruit

NOTES FROM THE TROPICS

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY JEREMY TIANG

E

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Introduction

I

THE ESSAY TODAY is a thriving, popular prose[1] vehicle for treating every conceivable subject for every conceivable reason. They are anywhere from 500 to 10,000 words long, popping up in all manner of media having space for texts.

The need to tell is inherent, primal. As necessity always primes invention, essays grew where and when there was writing, then more rapidly, at times exponentially, with print and other ways of dissemination, a means to many ends. Chiefly because of versatility in multiplying roles and dextrous re-positioning, they responded across the ebb and tide of history, more amply and sharply than any other genre, serving the new, widening demands of nation, community and individual. Their presence is international, even customary. Board virtually any international flight. They accompany you in the *Financial Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*. Add *The Straits Times* if you take Singapore Airlines. Its Opinion and Saturday sections of 2 August 2013 carry, *inter alia*: 'Taking the community seriously', 'Separate inequality, opportunity issue', 'Singaporeans at work', 'How important is a university degree?', 'Al-Qaeda, Taliban jailbreaks a sign of renewed strength', 'Rise of civil activists in China', 'There's no value or merit in unpaid work',

'My other self' (loneliness and angst), and 'City of wonder, then and still' (New York). Written by politicians, CEOs, academics and journalists from the world over, they include reprints from leading international papers. These form the bulk of essays today, and continue to entertain and instruct as their predecessors did. 'Inequality and "conscience laundering"' (1 August 2013) by Peter Buffett, son of Warren, the American billionaire-investor and philanthropist, left me with two noteworthy phrases: 'Philanthropic colonialism', a modifying reminder, and 'conscience laundering', a wedge opening doors to high seriousness, to what triggers off our actions, thus strengthening the implicit invitation to read and ponder.

We are familiar with the essay, having written our quota in English through school and university, later tapping that experience to compose reports and submissions. We grow through complex, escalating tasks, moving from the simple and directed to the free-flowing, sporadically adventurous, and the occasionally irreverent, masticating and digesting. We take elements of structure and style to essay new, even strange subjects to domesticate and make them more usual, accustomed.

Unlike China, the essay in England is not indigenous. Literacy spread. National languages expanded in Europe to meet developments unleashed by the Renaissance, rivalry among nations, religious conflict and irredentist energies. Knowledge is power. The Greek and Latin classics, from philosophy to medicine, got translated into these languages. The classics were joined by contemporary works, especially those in the sciences. English grew. It was also boosted by the great faith, spirit and daring of those who risked their lives translating the Bible into what was then early modern English, enriching it while opening the way for secular subjects and themes.

But it was secular energies that pushed developments. While subjects were frequently borrowed, that mattered little as the treatment was fresh and the style often rich and distinctive. In Francis Bacon for instance, it ranged from the plain and direct to the terse and epigrammatic, often producing memorable turns of phrase. As the essay was part of the interlacing intellectual network emerging in Europe through shared institutions such as Christianity with the phenomena of the literary phrase 'the mind of Europe'[2], it is not surprising that Bacon's *Essays* were translated into French and Italian in his lifetime. An emergent England was essaying back.

While at university in the early 50s, we read Bacon's *Essays*, and those of Addison and Steele—co-founders of *The Spectator*—Johnson, De Quincey and Hazlitt. Tudor England was the early push factor. Later it was a rising middle class, the increasing urbanisation of 18th and 19th century London, the Industrial Revolution, the new sense of Europe, the Americas, and the further world that came with colonial expansion. They fuelled demand for neatly packaged accounts of their life and contacts. They included curiosity in the strange, the odd, the arcane, from the behaviour of exotic birds to opium hallucination. That opened up an infinity of subjects which multiplied further when the newly independent former colonies adopted English extensively. This broadened the essay base by adding a large number of writers belonging to World Englishes. While it led to a noticeable loosening of focus and organisation down the cline, the quantity, variety and quality of the essay in English is stronger than ever. The world is its oyster, yielding many white, pink and black pearls. Any anthologist would have a hard time sifting through the embarrassment of riches to make a selection, even if he had three thick volumes at his disposal.

That would also require systematic arrangement, as the essays are a microcosm of their literary and larger world. They mark off various themes and histories and what elaborates identity. That is hardly surprising as great civilisations have a special genius for classification and systematic self-appraisal and creating spheres of serious, durable influence: Akkad, Egypt, China, India, Greece, Israel, Rome, early Mexico and Peru. And the great religions or moral systems—Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism—especially when they harness or enjoy the support of kingly, secular authority, or incorporate a militant spirit as in Judaism and Islam in different times and places, consolidate a double strength. Control and influence, as well as direct occupation—often more potent for being soft power and harder to obstruct—through writing, religious, philosophical, social and other systems, ideas and organisational structures, material culture, art. Thus arise spheres of influence, South Asia and East Asia formed by India and China respectively.

The geography of the Chinese-language commonwealth is far smaller than the global grip of Englishes. It is not only native, but emerged almost 2,500 years ago in what is the world's oldest, longest, unbroken literary tradition. Generated entirely from the *qi* of her cultural matrix, in the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BC) and the Warring States (475–221 BC) periods, its subjects ranged from war, conquests and contentious politics, competing ideologies and philosophies, to shifts in values and other changes. These required far more space than poetry could comfortably afford to defend a position or develop an argument with strong, convincing detail. Prose had the space, directness and pace, yet had scope for the poetic phrase, allusion and sharp, epigrammatic punch, that made it a genre for all seasons. In Charles A. Laughlin's review of *The Chinese Essay*, he says that:

> "…the larger cultural themes for which the Chinese essay served as the principal vessel, and which through the essay traditional and modern writing are linked—the cultivation of the art of living, the struggle between transcendent and worldly values, or the contrarian resistance to 'political correctness' of every imaginable kind?… memorials to the emperor, philosophical treatises, formal and informal correspondence, prefaces and colophons, travelogues, epitaphs, biographies, etc."

Despite their polemics and didactic drift, essayists—especially poet-scholars—sought the highest literary quality. Style gave them that edge, that special power, durability and persuasiveness through elements that included imagery, metaphor, symbol, allusion, allegory, without jeopardising argument and logic. The strength of poetry inserted into prose. Consequently, they were a source of proverbs, of neat, memorable phrases, some of which were adopted as mottoes.

The Tang Period saw notable developments mainly through Han Yu with his *Mao Ying Zhuan* (Mr Brush Tip), Liu Zongyuan with his animal parables, and landscape essay as an art form.[3] With six others from the Song Dynasty, Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan were the Eight Masters of the Chinese essay. Their work was an intrinsic part of Chinese education. In Malaysia, Wong Yoon Wah went through what is still the best Chinese education offered outside the Chinese heartland. He then studied Chinese in Taiwan and followed that with a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin. His essays belong to this long tradition. The vision behind them is undoubtedly Chinese in origin and trust. While there is this overarching singularity, there are noteworthy differences that do not ultimately undermine its wholeness. The Chinese are to be found

all over the world but significant communities relative to the size of the body politic of which they are part are predominantly confined to Southeast Asia.[4] They arrived in various parts of the region early and contributed principally to their economic development, especially under Portuguese, Spanish, British, Dutch and French colonial rule. There are Chinatowns in almost every major city in the world, where they add glamour and variety, especially gastronomically. They prosper, some exceedingly, but do not formally constitute a political or social force as they do in Southeast Asia. They are in Malaysia, where transactions of adaptation carry valuable insights.

II

Wong starts from the fact that with the arrival of a foreign culture—almost always colonial—a two-culture system is created. When immigrants arrive, that system becomes:

> "…multi-cultural. Looking at the foods devised locally, from yusheng and Hainanese chicken rice to Nyonya kueh, their preparation methods put one in mind of the construction of local Chinese literature, in that both face a particular challenge: whether a type of food or a literary work, the creation must contain a local flavour, whilst incorporating the original traditions of China." (58–59)

This connection between food and literature is enlarged by linking them to the physical environment, and daily life in a British colony whose politics involved armed conflict and so on. A sense of life and its challenges in such circumstances can be gleaned from Wong's *The New Village: Chinese Poems* (Ethos Books, 2012). The vision driving

The New Village and *Durians Are Not the Only Fruit* is indubitably Chinese, a necessary reminder as there are writers with impeccable Chinese names, yet who are relatively deracinated as they know only English. Moreover, while there is this overarching Chinese singularity, significant differences evolved among and between those who settled in Nanyang. These differences did not undermine their basic identity. Instead they added to this ultimate Chinese wholeness. First among these is the desire—and need—to adapt, especially if it is to a multi-ethnic body politic. Multiplicity engenders cultural and identity permutations, and various other processes. Of these at least two are major and overarching. And there is a third, if there is a pre-existing community of compatriots. Despite a common inheritance and shared core values—which they, especially the older generation, do all possible to retain—variations blossom. As Wong reiterates:

> "There is a huge gap between the culture and political situation of the Singaporean Chinese and Thai Chinese, and even though a Singaporean Chinese and Chinese American both speak English, their world views will be very different… The Chinese will never be able to make themselves non-Chinese, their Chineseness will always be present in some form…The first time Singaporean or Malaysian Chinese visit China, they're always startled to realise how different they are from the Mainlanders." (43–44)

Adaptation required coming to terms with the physical environment, which is the external context of whatever active legacy that needed transplanting. As visitors, the Chinese first saw the flora, and as uncommitted outsiders, it is the settlers who come to terms with what is new and often strange, to better live with it. Wong uses the

durian, central in the life of the region, as a major icon to make the point. Chinese fascination with the fruit started with Zheng He's voyages, the last of which was between 1430–33.

> "Throughout the various countries of Southeast Asia, the durian is considered the king of fruits. It appears frequently in books of the Ming and Qing dynasties such as Ma Huan's *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, Ong Tae Hae's account of the Malayan archipelago, Huang Zunxian's *Within the Human Realm*. Ma Huan called it 'a smelly fruit of the first rank'." (3)

Unquestionably "smelly", yet a "fruit of the first rank", revealing a propensity for hierarchy. That reaction is not unusual: love it or hate it. The Chinese were here well before the May Fourth Movement (1915–21). Often called the New Culture Movement, it led to a loosening of classical stylistic shackles. There was a greater openness to direct experience and observation that suited settler needs, leading to:

> "*Durian Poems* edited by Tang Chengqing, Pan Shou's eponymous collection, Wu An's *Ode to the Durian*, or my collection *The Rubber Tree*. And also in novels and essays, including Zhou Can's *Under the Durian Tree*, Bi Cheng's *The Final Durian*, Yongle Duosi's *Yongle's Scribblings*, or my *A Walk Amongst Autumn Leaves*. Idly leafing through these books, you'll find plenty of legends about durians." (3)

Wong continues his walk and talk, this time down memory lane, leading to *Durians Are Not the Only Fruit*, as it led to *The New Village*, whose first four sections of six are 'The myth of the tropical rain-

forest', 'Memories of the Malay kampong', 'Impressions of the New Village' and 'New Village after curfew'. Both volumes obviously cover the same deeply rooted experiences and themes. They correlate and comment on each other. Being co-extensive, they devote much space to nature, commensurate to its importance in Wong's growth. Moreover, between them, the poems record his passage to manhood, through an examination of his relationship with the forces that shaped, advanced and at times retarded the society and its people in the future Malaysia. In this sense, it is his autobiography and simultaneously, the biography of his country.

Nature is essential learning. Living closely with her and observing her rich variety to unlock her discourse enabled him—as it has for some of us—to digest his green environment, skimming its profound, life-long lessons. Add narratives—historical, scientific etc. —and you accumulate, deepen, consolidate and kept active an ever expanding store of Wong's insights. Nature unlocks through our five senses, and shapes the doors of perception. We recall the words of William Wordsworth:

> "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
> Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:"
> (*The Prelude*, Book 1, lines 301–302)

and through them, arrive at the acute and decisive understanding that:

> "There are in our existence spots of time,
> That with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A renovating virtue…"
> (*The Prelude*, Book 12, lines 208–210)

These "spots" formed at crucial moments of our lives are healing markers that re-energise without diminishing their capacity. They are occasionally renewed by a rainbow, "an untrodden way", or a "crowd of golden daffodils". This link is immemorial, open to all who drink, breathe, embrace and are embraced by her, creating our own "spots".[5]

But even in Wordsworth's day threats loomed:

> "The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"
> (*The World Is Too Much with Us*, lines 1–4)

Striving for the Nation to be strong and stable, and to prosper national principles has not changed since circa 1802, when the sonnet from which the third quote of Wordworth's is taken was composed. But some key institutions have lost authority as societies increasingly secularised. Chief among them is religion, the one check to the consequences of rampant materialism. In its most extreme form 'Nature as nurture' metamorphoses into 'Nature as cash'. That meant ever efficient means of exploitation. She has been invaded, ravaged, cut down, dug, levelled, blown open, destroyed, despite a growing movement to save her, to help redress the over-emphasis on the bottom line mentality. The resulting mind-set takes over and re-calibrates virtually every aspect of life and expectations.

Be that as it may, the Nature that Wong, I and others of our generation lived close to became increasingly parcelled, methodised. Even in Malaysia with her large forest reservations, the contact with dew, the sough of winds, the cool scintillating waters of a mountain

stream, a drop of rain rolling off a yam leaf used as an umbrella, are reduced by an increasingly urban lifestyle, a gathering into small towns and the conurbations of expanding state and federal capitals. Texts like *Durians Are Not the Only Fruit* and *The New Village* that recount 'Nature as nurture', in a context of migrant history and coming to terms with the colonial and national hopes, re-construction and construction, are especially valuable as analysing the resulting complexity yields fresh ideas, definitions and paradigms relevant to various other areas of study.

Wong's essays have a rich, galloping descriptive power, construing subjects ranging from 'The Queen and the Concubine' (mangosteen and rambutan), 'Smelly Beans and Question Marks, 'Feed at the Raffles', 'Cathedrals of the Tropics' (the rain tree), 'The Oldest Rubber Tree, 'Tembusu', to 'Return to the River of Fireflies' and a series of Revisitings that conclude the volume. The satisfactions they give the reader apart, there are lessons both for the general reader and the student of cross-cultural studies.

There are elements in that environment that yield fresh images, symbols and metaphors and some of the vagaries connected with how established, customary practices metamorphose, acquire new names and acceptance. A good example of this last is from the "Hakka dish that comes from *leicha*":

> "From a simple Hakka beverage, it's evolved into a delicacy;
> from a tea drink only seen in the homes of one dialect group,
> it's become a symbol of our multi-cultural society, a fashionable
> food suitable for entertaining. The changes that *leicha* has
> gone through, from ultra-local to international, is a model
> of the spread of Chinese culture, and how it has been able to

> take root in foreign lands, melding with local customs while also showing how Chinese culture outside China can merge with Western elements to create something new…" (29–30)

'Thunder in a Bowl' traces the journey of names and changes that turned *leicha* into an international dish in the Chinese diaspora and beyond. We see how misreadings can, and do, take on a distinctive, vigorous, enterprising life of their own. Thus we have "thunder tea rice …an overseas Chinese speciality" (34) for which Wong reproduces a recipe as well as method of preparation. Additionally the style of preparation and presentation, as well as some of the ingredients, are traced to the circumstances shaped by colonial times. "*Leicha* sailed from Jieyang in Guangdong to Nanyang, where a different environment and post-colonial society transformed it from a drink to a filling meal for the working classes" (40). Such encounters leading to cultural fusion are readily and most visibly exemplified in food. Barring religious dietary restrictions, the boundaries and criteria here are dictated by taste, by preference. Thus the freedom to mix vegetables, meat, fish and spices and modes of preparation, all to better the results. Cuisines travel easily across cultures and geographies. To alter or to invent is to add. And the benefits move from arithmetic to algebra to calculus, strengthen the bonding multi-ethnic peoples. Wong notes a classic instance of how:

> "Tossing yusheng may sound like a Cantonese custom, but no one in Guangzhou or Hong Kong will have heard of it. It originates in Malaya and combines many cultures—acceptable to all, whether Malay, Indian, Arabic or otherwise. Nothing in yusheng could offend any particular group,

> as it consists mostly of local and imported vegetables and fruits, including shredded carrots and radishes, pomelo, fried dough sticks, and the fish itself, usually imported salmon or local mackerel. This has spread through the mass populace, becoming an important element of business, society and politics. The mixture of imported and local ingredients also symbolises internationalism, the arrival of people and cultures from all parts of the world." (59)

Thus the unique soft power is released and absorbed. This sharing is becoming a custom that embraces other significant occasions such as Hari Raya, Deepavali and Christmas, all of which have religious elements, thus fortifying and reframing goodwill in a vital area. It is clear in Wong's work that the many traditions from China became pluralistic upon arrival in Southeast Asia, vaulting divisions of religion or ethnicity.

All this is the result of different peoples settling with their culture in a rich tropical environment. It creates a reality which, when it enters literature, is for Wong a form of 'magic realism' (see M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 1993) rising out of:

> "the tropical rainforest, Nanyang and colonialism…three conditions—natural, cultural and political—that have given rise to our version of magic realism…causing the region to possess a mysticism that mingles with everyday life…the plants and animals found here, all have a surreal feel to them." (45)

Art, including literature, imitates life. But art, too, imitates life. On the level of community, the one truly fascinating result is the Peranakans. They adopted much that was Malay: language, cuisine,

the dondang sayang, the pantun, chewing serai, wearing the sarong and baju. But they maintained a core Chineseness despite assimilating much from the other. They provide a unique instance of cross-cultural assimilation. As Wong reminds us, when the Chinese set down roots in a strange land, intermingling with the local customs and culture, the results can be magical too.

These broad sweeps of mind and imagination engaging with the immigrant experience are complemented by insights useful for understanding the reach and vitality of language, a matter of first importance in the creation of a literature. We know that languages appropriate each other. In this regard, English owes some of its richness to the number of languages it has taken from. But more important,

> "Language contains elements specific to place and culture.
> The Chinese diaspora, responding to a changed environment,
> have had to alter the structure of their language in order to
> truly reflect their new experiences and the world around them.
> This has created something called *huawen*, the Chinese
> language, instead of *zhongwen*, the language of China." (32)

So too the term for Chinese immigrants overseas:

> "Overseas Chinese, ethnic Chinese, *huaqiao*, *huayi*, *huaren*,
> *haiwai huaren*, Chinese diaspora, and so forth. Each term
> has its merits, and also its limitations. The Chinese identity
> is constantly changing…" (43)

Apart from such re-orientations, honing of terms and labels—for classificatory accuracy—and the warp and woof of individual essays, the reader soon notices that most of Wong's most acute comments and tight phrasing are directly related to the comprehensive

intensity of observation. The pucuk paku has a special place in his poetry and essays. He watched it grow, harvested and ate it regularly, and liked it. He obviously had studied its structure, texture, and especially the tip of the stem, the part that uncurled as it grew, in all this responding to its suggestiveness.

> "Whether while picking, washing or cooking the plant,
> or even when it's served at the table, you can't help noticing
> its elegant structure, its intricate, enchanting patterns.
> Naturally, this fern has made its way into their artwork,
> especially their tribal handicrafts. In 1974, when I returned
> to Singapore from America, I noticed pucuk paku in the
> forest beside Nantah, in the vegetable market, even growing
> amongst the grass by the stream that flowed past my house.
> I'm always moved when I encounter the question mark of
> this fern, its interrogation of the earth and its inhabitants.
> I couldn't resist composing a poem in its honour:" (65–66)

There is a great deal of Wong history here. But before unravelling it, here is the poem he wrote:

> 1.
> As a child
> The December monsoons
> Brought daily storms.
> Ferns like children released from school
> Raised both hands high in question marks
> In valley and marshland
> Wading across water,
> Children anxious about the homework in their schoolbags,

The ferns cling tightly to their queries of the earth
Afraid the floods will wash them away.

2.
Before dinner
A great pan of fried pucuk paku
Reaches from the morass of Malay sauce
Holding up giant question marks
And the whole family
Out of all the food before us
Most loves to pluck the question marks with our chopsticks
And devour them
Because when the British or Japanese ruled us
The towns and jungles of Nanyang
Had too many tragedies with no answer. (66)

What Wong has to say stresses the broad suggestiveness of this humble plant. It is able to generate complex responses and draw in the broader context of village life as well as history, precisely because Wong himself has journeyed through all these areas: Malay sauce, British and Japanese colonialism, the precarious life of the fern with which he empathises, the way they bob and weave in the wind, suggesting children released joyously from school, all generated by the question mark that is the end of the pucuk paku. Wong has selected from the full content of his life, invoked by this reconnection. The moment is layered, moving from past, present and the future, which is there because he will encounter this humble plant again. The plant is featured in the design for the black ceramic pots famously produced in Kuala Kangsar. For Wong, the design represents a "journey of vegetation from nature into art, and thus

a powerful symbol of Malay culture". (67)

The mind playing upon subject and theme and the metaphors embedded in them, such as the durian, the saga tree, or the neat determination of marauding ants, are released in both the poetry of *The New Village* and the prose of *Durians Are Not the Only Fruit*. The vividness of his accounts, whether the focus is the Nyonya dumpling, the rain tree, the tembusu or the rubber tree kingdom, constructs both connotative and denotative responses. Items such as the tree taken from nature become correlatives. They are then manipulated to modulate and extend significance, as for instance, references to old, dignified trees which stand as guardians of our history.

> "Full of the spirit of our native soil, the two century-old tembusu trees in the Singapore Botanic Gardens continue to withstand tropical rainstorms. They've seen the end of the colonial era, independence, urbanisation, global warming. And they will continue to watch as the land around them changes, because they have another hundred years to live." (132)

The remarkable point about these essays is not that each succeeds vividly in delivering what it sets out to do, whether growing up in Perak, the hierarchy of fruits, re-visiting a colony of fireflies, or the insect and plant life of Nantah's Yunnan Garden, and how each has impacted his life. It is the embracing spirit at work, a special learning and doing. Firstly, through acute, sensitive observation, it consolidates that compressive sense of seasonal time and place, turning them into continuities and into home. Secondly, it converts observation into understanding and then distils it into exemplifying metaphor and symbol. The issues and pressures generated by the Emergency (1948–60)[6] interfered with and distorted daily rhythms,

and spawned suspicion of the Chinese, especially those in the countryside, thus fuelling racial and other tensions. It was traumatic for those like the young Wong, pitched into a colonial world, in a conflict that was not quite war, and not quite peace.

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1. Given its propensity to state, illustrate, discuss and urge a point of view, the word 'essay' has been used by other media: the photographic essay, the pictorial essay and the film essay.
2. This phrase is taken from T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood*. It would be intriguing to consider what could be subsumed under 'the mind of East Asia', or 'the mind of South Asia', each inspired and dominated by Chinese and Indian history and cultural influences respectively.
3. Pollard, D. E. 'The Chinese Essay.' In *Encyclopaedia of the Essay*, edited by Tracy Chevalier, 374. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.
4. This is in sharp contrast to the Indians, whose migration was more global because it followed the roots of the British Empire: to South Africa, the Caribbean, including the British Guiana, Mauritius, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore and Fiji.
5. They could be moments of epiphany, Bible-inspired or based on other intense, life-shaping experiences.
6. The Emergency, or the Anti-British National Liberation War according to the Malayan Communist Party, was declared in 1948 after three European plantation managers were killed in Perak. Other attacks soon followed, the best known being that in Batang Kali, Selangor. This was because on 12 December 1948 unarmed villagers were shot by British troops during a counterinsurgency operation.

Translator's Note

IN ONE OF those coincidences life sometimes throws up, my mother was born in the same small town as Dr Wong Yoon Wah—Temoh, in Perak, about 50 kilometres from Ipoh, so unimportant today that the KTM train goes right past it without stopping. I have been on that train, chugging along at a stately pace from the crumbling grandeur of Ipoh's Majestic Station Hotel, which looks like someone put a scale model of Singapore's Istana over Ipoh train station and then didn't maintain it for forty years. As we passed my mother's hometown, I tried to see as much of it as I could, but only got an impression of coconut trees and faded clapboard houses. My grandfather had a shop near the station, my mother once told me, but I couldn't work out which building it might have been. Perhaps it's no longer there.

My mother wasn't in Temoh all that long, but still, it's where my grandfather collaborated with the Japanese occupiers and where my grandmother died and where all the things happened which ended, one way or another, with the family coming to Singapore. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if they hadn't left for another country, if part of the family were still in that tiny place instead of having thrown in their lot altogether with the big city. My mother doesn't know anyone there any more, but I'd like to see

where she spent the first part of her childhood, how they lived. My aunt had a pet goat. It was that kind of place.

This is the side of Southeast Asia that Dr Wong describes, with a particular emphasis on the villages and rubber plantations of Perak where he spent the first two decades of his life. This is a place away from shopping malls and candy-coloured condominiums. Another what if: Say the last 50 years of explosive economic growth hadn't happened. Where would Singapore and Malaysia be? It's a salutary reminder of how far we've come, to read Dr Wong's account of a childhood spent not taking electricity for granted, relying on fighting fish for entertainment and firewood for heat. Yet at no point does he seem unhappy or deprived—this is just how his childhood was, and bits of it sound rather magical. He spent many hours in a rambutan tree, eating all the fruit within reach. I don't know anyone who's done this.

I am writing this on a computer that I can't imagine living without. This is an alarming thought, the extent to which I have organised my life around a metal box full of wires (and, via the Internet, to many other metal boxes full of wires). Someone told me most of the Internet is stored in a warehouse somewhere in North Carolina. I don't know enough about technology to gauge if this is true, but it made me realise how little I actually understand about the world I inhabit. The world of Dr Wong's childhood was significantly smaller than mine, but he understood every square inch of it.

In anatomising the culture of Singapore and Malaysia, Dr Wong Yoon Wah takes the unusual approach of turning his gaze away from the people of Nanyang, and examining instead what surrounds us: the fruits we grow, the food we eat, the trees and animals that thrive in our midst. Along the way, he throws us fascinating cultural

insights—how 'thunder tea rice', which contains neither thunder nor tea, acquired its name; how early settlers used the rain tree to tell the time; how the behaviour of ants can tell us when a monsoon is about to arrive.

What defines who we are as a people? Dr Wong implies that instead of a single answer, we owe our identity to the things around us. He takes us through each in turn, examining its meaning from a whimsical perspective: humidity, durians, Nyonya dumplings, rubber trees, mosquitoes—each element of life in the tropics is gently prodded and dissected.

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When I told my mother I was translating the writing of someone else from Temoh, she got quite excited and wanted to know all about Dr Wong. In such a small place, she must have known him. I started by saying he'd gone to Peiyuan Secondary School—and her face fell. Oh, she said, that's one of the Chinese schools. I wouldn't have met him, then. We all went to the English schools.

This illustrates the deep fault lines that run through Singaporean and Malaysian society. Even between two people of the same ethnicity, other markers such as education and language can present an insuperable boundary. It's easy to imagine how many divisions there are in countries which successive waves of immigration have filled with a population diverse in any number of ways; harder to come up with ways of bridging these gaps.

While writing this translator's note, I started imagining what would happen if my mother actually met Dr Wong. Would they get on? What language would they even speak? He knows English, of course, and my mother has Cantonese (but not Mandarin)—

would that be enough? And would their memories of Temoh have anything in common?

My mother will not, before this, have been able to read any of Dr Wong's essays. Will they be more accessible now that they're in English? My job as translator is only to move them from one language to another—but this project, more than any other, has reminded me that my work is about much more, that texts exist as part of cultures and mindsets and all kinds of other patterns of thought, and those can be much harder to make explicable to outsiders.

What I enjoy about Dr Wong's writing is how he focusses not on these divisions, but rather on what brings us together. He enjoys talking about fish, and how it crosses boundaries; no religion has an objection to it, whereas other meats can be problematic to one group or another. In a way, that's all we can hope for in society, finding enough common ground that we can function, groping our way towards accommodating each other's differences.

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One generation of Singaporeans had the opportunity to live through extraordinary times, for better or for worse. Born while the country was under British control, they witnessed the Japanese Occupation, the chaos afterwards, merger and independence, followed by the extraordinary economic transformation that saw a hitherto low-rise island suddenly acquire high-rise apartment blocks as quickly as a Sim City game.

Many people of my generation have experienced a more stable world, and it is hard to imagine undergoing such radical changes of circumstance. I have enjoyed working so closely with Dr Wong's pieces because he is one of that group that was born into one place

and, without having to move, ended up in quite another. In his essay about the tembusu tree, he talks about what sights this century-old tree might have seen, but I'm personally more excited by the sights the writer himself has witnessed.

Dr Wong has travelled widely since leaving Temoh, having been attached to universities in Taipei and Iowa, and seen a great deal of the world. His collection of essays offers an exciting array of perspectives, particularly as they were written at different times. This posed a challenge to me as a translator, since it wasn't always clear what "here" or "now" meant. I've tried to smooth over some of the gaps, but overall it seemed best to leave things as they were, so we find ourselves in Taiwan one minute and Selangor the next, switching between the 20th and 21st centuries.

In a way, we've all travelled great distances to be here. The history of Southeast Asia is, in no small part, a history of immigration, and the Chinese diaspora Dr Wong describes converged on Nanyang—the 'South Seas', meaning Malaya—for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways, forging new existences here. He mentions that Singaporean Chinese are often startled to visit China and realise how different they are from the Mainlanders—but of course, the two countries have developed in different directions, and the China that our ancestors left a century ago no longer exists. Nanyang is all that is left to us now, and for all that, our roots here are still comparatively shallow.

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I recently visited Temoh for the first time in thirty years, not having been there since early childhood. My mother hasn't been back for more than a decade. I didn't know what I expected to find there,

but felt compelled by something akin to nostalgia—a longing for a past that I didn't own, yet somehow felt like part of me.

In the middle of translating Dr Wong's essays at that point, I'd brought along the manuscript to work on, only to find his writing replicated all around me: in the rubber trees, the tropical fruit orchards, the remnants of rural life. Temoh was exactly as he described it, still known as 'Sixth Mile', its location defined in relation to the urban centre. Wandering the dusty roads of this Perak settlement, I felt I'd dropped out of the modern world. This was not a place I could ever be part of—as Dr Wong says, anyone who's lingered too long in the city becomes unable to return to the paradise of nature, let alone those of us who are urbanites by birth.

Wandering around, I saw signs that this idyll was slowly expelling its humans. The town centre consisted of a single road with shops on either side, yet one row was entirely dilapidated—the side where my grandfather's shop once stood—the roofs collapsed, plants flourishing in what had been the interiors. How long would the rest of it last? But this is only to be expected. Once the tin had been fully extracted and rubber decreased in importance, Temoh lost its reason to exist. As for the rubber plantations and fruit trees described so lovingly by Dr Wong, they have been completely forgotten. The land has been dug up and replanted with oil palms—a squat, greasy crop without any of the poetry of rubber trees, with their silvery bark and eerie, slender presences.

In the end, there was little to be gained there. I found one old man who remembered my mother as a little girl, but he was deaf and only spoke Cantonese, so we didn't get very far. Living in cities, it's easy to believe that we are at the centre of the world. It is only the diligence of writers like Dr Wong that reminds us there is life

on the margins, and that no point of view can truly encompass the sum of humanity. Dr Wong has found a way to use his privileged position at the centre to describe his origins on the fringes, and in doing so shows us where, ultimately, we come from, and what we have lost.

JEREMY TIANG

SECTION ONE

The Kingdom of Tropical Fruits

The Pettiest Tree

THROUGHOUT THE VARIOUS countries of Southeast Asia, the durian is considered the king of fruits. It appears frequently in books of the Ming and Qing dynasties such as Ma Huan's *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, Ong Tae Hae's account of the Malayan archipelago, and Huang Zunxian's *Within the Human Realm*. Ma Huan called it "a smelly fruit of the first rank".

After the May Fourth New Literature Movement, many writers began using the vernacular: more vivid work such as Xu Jie's *The Coconut and the Durian*, Wu Jin (Du Yunxie)'s *Tropical Landscape*, Qin Mu's *Nectar and Bee Stings*, and Zhong Meiyin's *Yesterday at the Mekong* were produced as a result. In the Chinese literatures of Southeast Asia, in both classical and contemporary poetry, descriptions of durians are even more plentiful: *Durian Poems* edited by Tang Chengqing, Pan Shou's eponymous collection, Wu An's *Ode to the Durian*, or my collection *The Rubber Tree*. And also in novels and essays, including Zhou Can's *Under the Durian Tree*, Bi Cheng's *The Final Durian*, Yongle Duosi's *Yongle's Scribblings*, or my *A Walk Amongst Autumn Leaves*. Idly leafing through these books, you'll find plenty of legends about durians.

Writers and travellers from the West have left their share of writings about the durian. To them, this fruit seems more mythical.

Here, I'd like to solemnly begin my account of eating durians with a poem of Pan Shou's:

> A thorny hero defeating illness and infection,
> A true king of the forest fruits.
> No harm if his armour's unappealing,
> Weakness and warmth have the same smell.
> In the world, men brag of eating giant dates
> While beauties crumble spring onions with smiles.
> We pawn our possessions, live for a moment's pleasure
> And addicted to the durian, we do not fear poverty.

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Throughout the jungle regions of Southeast Asia, on either side of every road, you can see the green silhouettes of tropical fruit trees. Whether in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia or the Philippines, there are more than twenty common varieties: the chiku, soursop, jackfruit, starfruit, papaya, lime, durian, mangosteen, langsat, duku, mango, rambutan, guava, jambu, banana, pineapple, pomelo, and so on. In kampung areas, fruit has an intimate relationship with people's daily lives, and is often used as medicine or in cooking, not to mention as a source of income. In the afternoon when temperatures are at their highest, villagers enjoy sitting under fruit trees outside their homes, chatting or napping. In these regions, not only are there many species of fruit, but each comes in a great number of varieties. The banana, say, as eaten in Singapore and Malaysia, has more than ten variations in colour, size, shape and taste. No wonder Nanyang is regarded as a fruit paradise.

And yet, the lord of this paradise, the durian, is ugly in outward

appearance, and has such a peculiar smell that people are often scared to approach it.

The durian is called *liulian* in Chinese, transliterated from the Malay, but it should really be called the thorn fruit. It is sometimes round, sometimes oval, and can be as small as a papaya or pineapple or as large as a human head. The peel is covered with little spikes, a centimetre and a half long, very hard, very sharp, and therefore impossible to hold in the hand—usually, it's carried by its thick inch-long stem. When eating the fruit, being prickled by its shell feels like the price one has to pay, and anyone injured in this way certainly shouldn't curse the durian for it.

The durian is a tropical deciduous tree, and probably originates from the Malaysian peninsula and Borneo. At present, the fruit's production is greatest in Malaysia and Thailand. Grown from a seed, it takes nine years for a tree to reach maturity and bear fruit. The tree grows straight up and can reach a height of more than thirty metres. Apart from the coconut, it may be the tallest tropical tree, and also the longest-lived—an ordinary tree can still produce flowers and fruit in its fiftieth or sixtieth year. Standing beneath one of these giants, I am made deeply aware of my own insignificance.

Among Chinese Singaporeans and Malaysians, many hold the belief that when Admiral Cheng Ho landed in Nanyang, he relieved himself in the jungle, and the steaming puddle of shit and piss evolved into the durian tree. To put it less elegantly, the mounds of flesh inside the durian resemble a row of little turds, resting neatly in a boat-shaped husk.

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The durian tree bears fruit once or twice a year, with two seasons—the first in June and July, the second in November and December. It takes three months for its small rice-yellow flowers to transform into giant fruits. Other tropical fruits can or must be harvested from the branch, continuing to ripen as they're transported to market. The durian tree does not permit humans to climb it and pluck its fruits though. When ready, the fruit falls to the ground—though I have heard there are exceptions with some Thai varieties. Rural folk believe that once the durian is picked, it will not continue to ripen, and as a result, there is no such thing as 'durian harvesting' in Singapore and Malaysia, only waiting for the fruit to come to earth in its own time. The story is that the durian is practically human, and doesn't forgive a slight—if molested by human hands, its flesh will remain spitefully unripe, neither sweet nor fragrant when eaten, as flavourless as an inferior sweet potato—in fact, such specimens are known as 'raw sweet potatoes'. Not only that, but a durian tree that's had its fruit wrenched from it will suffer injury, and forever after produce only half-ripe durians, and not many at that. Nantah's Yunnan Garden has a durian tree, almost twenty years old, that's never borne fruit—or rather a few have occasionally appeared, but they were inedible. A colleague told me this was because in the tree's early life, someone climbed the tree and plucked its fruit, forever disabling it.

When I was little, my family owned two rubber plantations in Malaysia's Perak state, which were next to two hectares of durian groves. One durian season, a horde of wild monkeys arrived and swarmed up one of the trees, almost a hundred feet high, and hurled hundreds of the ripening orbs to the ground. Because the fruit stops maturing once off the branch, the orchard owner lost a lot of money. After that, this tree really did only bear deformed, half-ripe fruit.

I remember my mother often saying that if you slash a durian tree several times or hammer a nail into it, that tree will stop bearing fruit, at most producing only stunted specimens.

Villagers keep these warnings firmly in mind. They know that the durian is the pettiest tree.

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When the durian fruit first appears, it's as small as a lychee, but already covered with tiny thorns. The ripe fruit can weigh up to three kilograms, dangling from a thick branch, and will have turned from green to muddy yellow, its spikes slightly further apart and blunter than before. The durian's flesh is softer than a papaya's but hidden beneath a one-centimetre-thick shell, and remains intact even when dropped from a hundred-foot tree.

At first sight, the tall durian tree, its sturdy branches full of spiky fruit, immediately gives rise to the question: What happens to people walking underneath? Wouldn't an unlucky pedestrian, hit by one of these ripe missiles, have his brains dashed out? Yet those of us who've grown up here have never heard of someone losing their life in a durian-related accident. As a schoolboy in Malaysia, I walked beneath durian trees every single day. We had a kind of superstition—that the durian was a magical fruit, possessing a pair of eyes so as not to tumble blindly onto the heads of the innocent.

I, too, had my childish superstitions about this tree—I had to pass daily beneath its branches, watching the labourers stand guard in the neighbouring plantation during the season, collecting fallen fruit, a temporary attap hut as their only shelter. These workers patrolled the plantation day and night, yet were never hit by durians. A more scientific explanation is that the durian fruit only drops at

particular times, usually at night. In the daytime, the fruit will not fall unless brought down by forceful winds or rain.

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In Singapore, as our society becomes more commercialised, the durian is starting to disappear. The country roads of Malaysia, meanwhile, grow fragrant with the scent of durians during the season, and everywhere you can see trees laden with the fruit. Roadside stalls made of bamboo poles and attap leaves spring up, displaying spiky rows of the fruit. In the kampung districts and within the rubber plantations, you can usually find a few isolated durian trees, appearing there by serendipity—a seed flung carelessly from a window, say. They are free agents before the flowering season, but once the fruit begins to appear, the villagers look at them differently.

There are various reasons why the durian is called the king of fruits. Apart from the legends surrounding it, its smell and odd shape, a major factor is that it's the most expensive. A small or medium-sized durian, sold directly from the roadside, can fetch two or three American dollars. And usually you'll need a couple of those to feed your addiction.

A few durian trees can make a great deal of difference to a kampung-dweller's life. With two fruiting seasons, each tree can produce three or four hundred durians, selling at three dollars each—a significant amount in a rural context. The king of fruits thus takes care of its subjects, earning its crown.

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'When the durian appears, off comes the sarong' is a Chinese saying that illustrates how fervent the Malays and Peranakans are in their

durian eating. During the season, in order to get their hands on fruit they couldn't otherwise afford, some would sell their clothing. Of course, there's another layer of meaning these days—it's been discovered that the durian contains a stimulant that can make it function as an aphrodisiac, allegedly so electrifying the body that hitherto infertile women become pregnant. Due to the taboos of the past, conservative people didn't dare mention that this fruit could arouse the most primitive urges, fanning such passions.

But actually, many Chinese people in Singapore and Malaysia, not to mention those from other regions—particularly Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan—especially love the durian because it brings vigour and desire, and when travelling will persist in their obsession with the fruit. In the few years after I returned from America, when durians appeared in the market, as soon as the urge struck I'd leap into my car and head to Chinatown for my fix, even though the trip would take a couple of hours and use a fair amount of petrol.

What most mystifies outsiders is the number of people who eat durians as a main meal, or mix the durian flesh with rice. It's probably the fruit most able to stave off hunger. And in fact, the durian was a staple food of the indigenous people.

The durian resembles Korean ginseng, a high-energy tonic, full of heatiness. Its consort, the mangosteen, has been called the queen of fruits, and shares the same season. One normally eats mangosteen after partaking of durian, because the former is 'cooling', with a more subtle, delicate flavour, leaving one relaxed. This combination is ideal for generating lust, the two fruits working together, one filling you with vigour, the other teasing out the longings crammed in your heart.

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The durian might be expensive, but it has never been accepted by the establishment. In posh Singaporean and Malaysian hotels, the grand restaurants proudly display a row of tropical fruits outside their doors, but the king of fruits is always excluded. It is, in fact, forbidden in expensive hotels and even supermarkets, because upon ripening it acquires a strong, impenetrable smell. A ripe durian, even before it's been opened, will disperse its scent throughout every corner of a building.

My family used to live in Singapore's Parkview Apartments, on the sixth of ten storeys. If any of our neighbours above or below us had bought durians, we'd definitely smell it in our own apartment. My durian cravings were often incited by these stray fragrances. Sometimes they wafted to us from the rubbish bins.

Even after the durian has been eaten, the spiky discarded rind releases the same scent, still as pungent two or three weeks later. In the durian season, the ferocious stench of rubbish left under the hot sun is transformed into something more pleasant. This is the only time I don't need to hold my nose while walking past our bins.

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I attended a village primary school. Beyond its classrooms were rubber plantations, interspersed with many tropical fruit trees. One day, close to noon, we were midway through our final class, Composition, when we heard the unmistakable sound, one field away from us, of a durian falling to earth. We knew the positions of all the surrounding fruit trees, and deduced instantly which one it must have fallen from. Our teacher having just left the room, one of my classmates instantly darted out and ran towards the jungle,

returning full of laughter a short while later, bearing a ripe durian. Under our admiring gaze, he placed his trophy in his wide desk drawer. When the teacher returned, it took her only a moment to detect the presence of durian—its scent was too penetrating to conceal.

Another time, during my secondary school holidays, my sister and I arrived at our family's rubber plantation before dawn. We noticed the neighbouring durian orchard was completely silent, and realised no one had arrived yet to collect the fruit that had fallen in the night. Greedily, we harvested more than twenty, stashing them in bushes on our own land, camouflaging them with dead leaves. We didn't expect the Malay watchman, when he arrived, to realise immediately that the two tastiest trees had no fruits at all beneath them. Guessing that one of the nearby smallholders must be responsible, he made a quick round of the plantations and, by following the trail of durian scent, easily discovered our hiding place.

Even when eaten, the aroma of durian flesh continues to linger, never mind how many times you rinse your mouth or brush your teeth. Once, rushing to a meeting after a durian feast, I found the tiny air-conditioned room gradually filling with the fumes rising from my belly. The other four people present began looking uneasily at each other, wondering what was happening, causing me no little embarrassment. Since then, I haven't dared to eat durians if I need to leave the house soon after.

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The scent of the durian is legendary. Inhabitants of my country have only to catch a whiff of it to start drooling. Those who love it will swear this fragrance trumps any other fruit from any other country. But to most outsiders, this is no sweet smell but a stink, and they

rush away with their noses covered at the first hint of it, shrieking that they're about to vomit. The first Chinese migrants to Nanyang detested it. In the Ming dynasty, Ma Huan described it as "having a stench comparable to rotting beef", which is not too different from what the contemporary Taiwanese essayist Chung Mei-yin said about it, likening the smell to "stinky chicken shit". Caucasians tend to reach for comparisons more along the lines of decomposing onions—though there are exceptions. The British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace wrote that if a Westerner could taste the durian even once, it would make the whole voyage to Asia worthwhile. As early as the 16th century, the traveller Linschott was already extolling the durian as the most fragrant fruit known to man.

The early Chinese immigrants had another superstition: if they were to taste the durian, they'd never be able to forget it, and so would be forced to settle in Nanyang. This is the explanation my mother gave me when I asked how our family came to live in South-east Asia: my grandfather arrived here with the intention of making his fortune through 'gold-mining' and returning home after a few years, but he ate a durian and so remained here. And of course he ended up in Perak, where more durians are grown than any other Malaysian state.

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Traditionally, the Malay people buy and eat durians by the sides of roads, whether out in the country or in towns and cities. Today, the older generation still ask hawkers to help them break open their fruit after they've bought it, then squat by the path or street to begin eating. Even those who bring their durians home won't sit comfortably at a table, preferring to place their haul on the floor and

squat around it. There is a good reason for this practice—no one wants their table scarred by the durian's thousand spikes.

The durian is defended not only by these thorns, but also by its impenetrable husk. Amongst wild animals and birds, only the squirrel is able to eat this fruit—first using its nimble teeth to gnaw off some spikes, then breaking through the shell. People unfamiliar with the durian usually have no idea where to start. This is where the hawkers' skill comes in. They hold the fruit in place with their left hand, protected by a thick piece of cloth, while their right wields a wooden wedge or sharp knife that is inserted into the durian's tail end, then twisted suddenly to split it into segments along its markings. The husk has round or oval gobbets of flesh arranged neatly in four rows, each holding four or five seeds. The flesh is like ice cream, mostly yellow, known locally as 'wong yoke kon pau'—dry, dark yellow meat. The sooner the durian is eaten after falling from the tree, the fresher it will taste, and even a few days will make the flavour less keen. Durians are therefore not suitable for export.

Rural folk, having finished a durian, will fill the husks with well-water to drink, which they say dispels the heatiness of this fruit. Similarly, washing your hands in husk water is supposed to get rid of the lingering scent that even soap won't dispel. Another rumour is that spirits, drunk immediately after eating durians, can cause death. I've heard many stories of this kind, and one of my friends says his father really did die after indulging in drink following a meal of durians.

Like many people, I don't fully believe these tales, but have never dared to take the risk of disproving them. We who grew up in Nanyang know the king of fruits is somewhat mystical, and treat it with reverence and a little fear, mutely accepting the superstitions and customs surrounding it.

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In 1928, following a visit to South America, leading European surrealist André Breton sighed that nature there was so bizarre that surrealism was all around. The effects he sought to achieve with various literary tricks were effortlessly, dazzlingly present in this region.

The tropical rainforests of Nanyang would likely have provoked a similar reaction in Breton. Many aspects of nature here are mystical, like something from a legend, illusory and dreamlike. No wonder magic realism first sprang from the rainforests of Latin America. As Joseph Conrad said on more than one occasion, these jungles, whether in Africa or Southeast Asia, make white people forget their civilisation, especially their sense of morality, returning them to a primeval state in which they ultimately lose themselves. This phenomenon gave rise to his masterpiece *Heart of Darkness*, a novel that probes the very soul of humanity.

I'm interested in the origins of durian legends. I believe they hold great significance. Firstly, they make clear that the tropical jungle is a mystical place, and that the customs and tales surrounding the consumption of durians are in themselves a work of magic realism. When I put together the writings and oral histories about this subject, they morph from reality into legend and literature. Let's take the idea that no brand of soap can clean your hands post-durian, and the only effective way is to rinse them with water poured from the husk—this may be a native custom that flies in the face of science, but it is part of the way we live. Ditto the idea that durians have eyes to avoid landing on our heads. As for the durian tree springing from Admiral Cheng Ho's excreta, this surely speaks to the Chinese migrants' need for a powerful Chinese tribe—the scar across all our hearts.

The great fleet led by Cheng Ho into the South China Sea and the Western Ocean is a symbol of the power of China and its mighty civilisation, hence the irresistible urge to link the durian with this expedition, imbuing the fruit with Chinese culture. The symbolic heft such tropical rainforest icons carry with them can lure writers down the path of magic realism. In the last few decades, Zhang Hui, Xi Ni'er and Liang Wern Fook, among others, have used this mode of expression to explore contemporary Singaporean society.

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The legends around durian eating should be taken seriously, because they embody many of the characteristics of post-colonial literature. The durian is a symbol of assimilation—only those who came to love eating durians remained in Nanyang, putting down roots, whereas neither the colonisers nor those merely passing through could stand the distinctive smell. This shows that they were unable to acknowledge the native culture, unwilling to embrace this country. On the other hand, the durian is a unique product of this region, not found anywhere else in the world, and so is venerated by people here as their king, showing how close they are to the land. Post-colonial literature uses a connection to the soil as one of its tropes.

In the colonial period, the durian, a foodstuff beloved of every race, brought together the oppressed people of different communities, becoming the symbol of a multi-cultural, multi-racial society, and therefore a weapon against the hegemony the British sought to impose.

As colonial-era hotels were run by white people, durians were naturally forbidden from entering their doors, a rule that has remained to this day. This is one of the clearest indicators of the scars

left behind by colonialism even after we regained independence—once again, a frequent motif in post-colonial writing.

The stories surrounding eating durians remind us that literature should incorporate low culture, bringing it closer to lived reality. These legends come not from the pens of the elite, but are assembled from the words of the masses, both written and spoken, passed from one person to another—the only way to create a text this deep and compelling.

In this mix of memoir, essay and nature writing, Wong Yoon Wah evokes the beauty and seduction of the tropical rainforest and rubber plantations of his childhood in Malaya. He examines what surrounds us: the fruits we grow, the food we eat, the trees and animals that thrive in our midst. Along the way, we gain fascinating insights: how thunder tea rice acquired its name; how early settlers used the rain tree to tell time; how the behaviour of ants can tell us when a monsoon is about to arrive. Both personal and informative, this selection of Wong's essays is a stunning re-addition to the creative non-fiction landscape.

WONG YOON WAH grew up on a rubber plantation against the tumultuous backdrop of the Malayan Emergency and spent most of his childhood in a New Village set up by the British. A writer, poet and scholar specialising in comparative and post-colonial Chinese literature, Dr Wong was a former head of the Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore. He was also Dean and Faculty Professor at Taiwan's Yuan Ze University before becoming senior vice president of Southern University College, Malaysia. His awards include the *China Times* Literary Award for non-fiction, the S.E.A. Write Award, the ASEAN Cultural Award and Singapore's Cultural Medallion.

JEREMY TIANG is the translator of the novels *The Promise Bird* by Zhang Yueran, *Unrest* by Yeng Pway Ngon and *Island of Silence* by Su Wei-chen, as well as many short stories and plays. His short fiction has won the Golden Point Award, and he has attended the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. In 2013, he was awarded a PEN/Heim translation grant.

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