

## The New Village

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ISBN 978-981-07-1598-4

Published under the Ethos Books imprint

by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

65 Ubi Crescent

#06-04 Hola Centre

Singapore 408559

www.ethosbooks.com.sg

www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

with the support of



Designed by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

Printed by Digicool Pte Ltd, Singapore

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### National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Wong, Yoon-wah.

The New Village / Wong Yoon Wah ; translated by Ng Yi-Sheng and Ho Lian Geok. – Singapore : Ethos Books, c2012.

p. cm.

ISBN : 978-981-07-1598-4 (pbk.)

1. Malaya – Poetry. I. Ng, Yi-Sheng, 1980- II. Ho, Lian Geok. III.

Title.

PL2920.044

895.1152 -- dc22

OCN778589589

# The New Village 新村

Chinese Poems by Wong Yoon Wah 王润华

Translation by Ho Lian Geok and Ng Yi-Sheng



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# introduction

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A notable figure in the Chinese literary Commonwealth, Wong Yoon Wah is known for his work on its Southeast Asian tributaries. While these relatively modest waters complement his larger canonical interests, the great Chinese tradition, Wong's poetry, criticism, various anthologies edited, conferences organised and other associated activities – often with a strong Singapore-Malaysian focus – continue to enlarge and define the field, engaging those interested in the Chinese elements in the modern phase of the diasporic, cross-cultural dynamics that shaped the region over two millennia. Depending on place and time, that experience was successively Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic. Though over-archingly religious in thrust, and chiefly from South Asia, each generated enormous cultural and political changes, some deeply architectonic, whose influences, filtered by successor powers, entered the core of society and nation, creating in time *satu bangsa, satu syariah, satu agama*. Yet, as we are reminded, empires wax and wane, states cleave asunder. But as we shall see from the experience of Singapore and Malaya/Malaysia, the major sources of change were modern colonialisms all of which were in Southeast Asia.

Wong's family migrated from southern China, to Perak, Malaya; he himself went on a pilgrimage of learning to Taiwan, the USA, then to an academic career in Singapore, before spending the last ten years at Yuan Ze University, Taiwan, where he was Faculty Professor. Wong is now Senior Vice-President of Southern College in Malaysia. First established 30 years ago, Malaysia's Ministry of Education recently approved upgrading it to a full university. Through all this he was poet, critic and

pioneer, remembering ancestral voices and maintaining continuities, constructing links, and energising them in a multi-ethnic, changing and challenging world. Born in 1941, he schooled at Pei Yuan High School and left for National Cheng Chi University, in 1962. Upon graduation in 1966 he returned to teach at his old school. In 1968 he left for the University of Wisconsin, USA where he got his doctorate, subsequently joining Nanyang University, Singapore. As is generally known, the period from 1936 to 1965 was packed with a full range of events that led to change in almost every nation in the world to an extent never seen before or since.

## The impact of history

Lying between two oceans, the Indian and the Pacific, Southeast Asia has a chequered history. As a force that stayed, as significant settlers, the Chinese were relative latecomers. Nor were they kingdom-builders, like the Hindus and their tutees. There were hindunised but no sinicised kingdoms, no Chinese monuments on the scale of Angkor, Parambanan or Borobudur. The Indian movement into the region from Burma, down to Java and up to Cambodia, Campa and Funan in present day Vietnam, was a 'process of religious and spiritual tutelage, but it was not a Hindu supremacist idea of India's mission...'. The Chinese diaspora which came much later was constrained by a particular view of imperial power. The Middle Kingdom's expansion and maintenance were secured by wise governance, Confucian values and military strength, held together in part by a sense of innate superiority and sought to dominate neighbours through diplomacy. National integrity was land-based, a Han domino ultimately protected by its mentality whose core durability rested on the notion of a superior culture, a superior people. The Celestial Kingdom was confidently self-sufficient. Any expansion was into contiguous

## New Village after curfew

*Although I am in California tonight, I hear once again the nightly sirens of Temoh New Village of my school days, making me recall colonial life during the Emergency.*

each night at ten o'clock  
after the siren's blare  
only sounds of hurried footsteps  
mothers scolding children, husbands fighting with wives  
I shut the door so tight  
even moonlight  
may not enter for a hiding place

soon after  
hostile dogs  
bark wildly at MPs on patrol  
up in the watchtower  
the mighty searchlight sweeps  
between the barbed wire fence and rubber plantation

insects and owls  
dare not screech  
only in the fishpond by my house  
do snakeheads and carp  
have the courage to leap from the water  
to peck at moonlight

studying at night  
I discover  
how the searchlight beams  
the patrolling MPs' footsteps  
fall on my textbook  
without moonlight  
I can only wait  
till half past five in the morning  
for another siren to signal curfew's end

I push open the door  
to search for moonlight  
on the muddy track of the village  
I find last night's barking  
and dark shadows  
have transformed into numberless white  
anti-colonial leaflets

University of California Library, Santa Barbara,  
28 February 1997

The guerilla warfare of the Malayan Communist Party led the British colonial government to declare a state of Emergency. The place where I lived - Temoh in the Malayan state of Perak - became a New Village (concentration camp) in 1951. From 10 pm to 5.30 am, everyone had to remain indoors, and from 6 pm to 6.30 am, no-one was allowed to leave the village. This lasted for about ten years. Never will I forget this part of my life from the colonial era.

## inspection post of the concentration camp

### female rubber tappers

at five o'clock in the morning  
MPs rummage with care  
through tools in bicycles' latex buckets  
beaming their flashlights on faces  
half-asleep and on ID cards  
in the end, they're still suspicious  
of the rubber tappers' full breasts  
and their pregnant, swollen bellies  
policewomen must search their bodies  
to prove their bras and trousers  
contain no hidden food or drugs  
before letting them fade  
into the dark rubber plantation

### primary school children

at the checkpoint, British and Malay soldiers  
flip through my textbooks and homework  
they find neither rice nor medicine  
so they batter me with questions:  
"why are your Chinese books so heavy?  
why are your brushstrokes so black?"  
halfway home in the afternoon  
they would even search my memories  
terrifying my shadow  
barring him from following me home

### bayoneting shadows

after sunset  
as the lorry returns

through the winding mountain road  
soldiers frenziedly search with care  
the lorryload of darkness  
bayoneting each shadow to death  
for its lack of ID

### starving shadows

since "Operation Starvation"  
my papa and the policemen  
jointly guard the New Village exits  
with rifles and carbines they stop  
each grain of rice from slipping out  
making sure that within a year  
all forest shadows shall starve to death

yet Papa and the policemen's guns  
are puzzled to see  
how children after school  
leave the concentration camp  
to search for food in the wild  
guavas, rambutans, mangosteens  
all growing in the shade of the forest

Iowa, 27 November 1996

To cut off the Communists' food supply, the British colonial government implemented the New Village policy from 1950 to 1951 whereby Chinese scattered around the mountain were resettled in a central location: the New Village, where all who entered or exited had to be inspected. Under the Home Guard scheme, at least one person from each household had to take up defence and patrolling duties. The so-called New Village was in fact a policy to limit Communist infiltration of Chinese villages and prevent the Chinese from helping (by way of manpower, intelligence, finance and food) Communist military operations. As there were few Malay and Indian Communist sympathisers, they were not affected by the policy. My second home, before I went to university, was in such a concentration camp. The address was B-31, Temoh New Village, Malaya. My primary school was outside the camp and there being only one route to the school and back, I had to pass the inspection post every day.