



**Review of Wong Phui Nam,
*The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-
taui***

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Wong Phui Nam. *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tauai*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012. 1st Edition Paperback. 35pp. ISBN 9789810717506.

Malaysia's pre-eminent poet Wong Phui Nam has made yet another important contribution to the Malaysia canon of writings in English. This time he has not, however, chosen to situate his poetic landscapes within colonial or postcolonial Malaysia but somewhere else in the fictionalised space of Egyptian mythicism. And because of that *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tauai* might seem like an imaginative undertaking that is not only arduous to comprehend but also difficult to grasp in terms of poetic feeling as the cultural signifiers of the ancient Egyptian world would seem wholly foreign to most Malaysians.

This latest sequence of poems has an interesting genesis. The footprint of the project first finds light of day in Wong's second volume of collected verse, *An Acre of Day's Glass* (2006), under the same title. The introductory ideas of the preparation of a pharaoh's body for the journey into the afterlife is clearly spelt out there. Then a few years later the poet decided to publish a blueprint of sorts in the online journal *Asiatic* (2009) of what is the first five stanzas of the current poetry sequence, all polished and fashioned using a tighter but unrhymed sonnet form.

However, it is the current emanation of *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tauai* that provides real clues for the reader to fully appreciate the sequence. But it must be stressed that this text does not read as if it is a reworking of the famous *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a collection of ancient funerary chants and incantations that are said to guide the dead to finding rebirth in the afterlife. What Wong has done is in some ways very postmodern: he creates a fictional persona called Hen-tauai, "a neophyte priestess from the provinces", who acts as a guide for us to feel and imagine her fraught world as she longs for immortality just like Pharaohs of the land. This was the clue that was hidden from us in the earlier versions. We were never told who Hen-tauai is and so we never really understood why she is depicted as hesitantly pondering the funerary rites that help the Pharaoh find his place amongst the gods of the sky.

As the Pharaohs go forth into the light, it is Hen-tauai who is left on earth pondering the tenuousness of living and dying, a theme that Wong has employed to great effect in all his poetry thus far. In his earliest volume *How the Hills Are Distant* (1968), we were made to experience the great tribulations of a persona-self struggling to live out his days amidst rumours of strange gods trying to find rebirth in the hostile terrain of the tropics. Moving away from mythopoeic strategies, Wong employed the theme again in the form of the struggles of his family members who have to come to terms with dying in the volume *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989).

In the next two volumes, *Ways of Exile* (1993) and *Against the Wilderness* (2000), those complexities of living took the shape of a different and more grotesque transformation. Instead of gaining some kind of finality in death, various personae in poems such as "A Night Easter," "Lazarus Recumbent," and "A Fire Easter" are seen to be struggling to die because their corporeal bodies appear to be trying to resurrect but in half-formed and repulsive ways. In the first poem we hear about the rumours of a Messiah of the tropics whose attempts at a bodily transfiguration are hindered by the politics as well as the lack of an imaginatively transformative character of the land. In the other two poems, the possibility of a spiritual rebirth is hindered

by the realities of what the corporeal body experiences, the travails of physical corruption, or what the poet terms the “ruined flesh”.

In all these earlier poems, the possibility of a meaningful resurrection or rebirth is never present. However, it is only in the poetry sequence “Temple Caves” in *Ways of Exile* that the poet finally allows us a glimmer of salvation. After an arduous journey wherein the resources of the human psyche or soul are summoned, the image of the human spirit is whittled down to the metaphor of a “naked flame”, which finally finds redemption in the form of “a tremendous bird of lightning, of a source of light”. Therefore, the ideas of Hen-tai’s struggles with this world and the celestial one are not wholly new in the poetic oeuvre of Wong but rather an imaginative metaphorical relocation to the land of ancient Egypt. While the structuring myth for *How the Hills Are Distant* looked to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as a model, *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai* depends largely on a generalised understanding of ancient Egyptian mythology to succeed.

The metaphysical anxieties of Hen-Tai are all too evident. At the very outset of the sequence she contemplates the Pharaoh rising up to the heavens in “eternal glory” but is ironically left to ponder her mortality and the mortal remains of the Pharaoh:

Yet it is we who will not die.
Through the stink and maggots of soft-tissue corruption,
through fly-blown, sand-salted flesh and bones,
through mastication by the earth itself,
we journey home to darkness to come again
and see Pharaoh dead in his temples, his pyramids. (Sonnet IV)

Yet, as she grieves the death of her friends, Sennedjem and Nefer-hetepes, something within her psyche and salubrious imagination senses that the way into “eternity’s door” is to solve the bewildering paradoxes of religion and the soul. Like words in a testament of belief or theology, Hen-tai endures the temporary bliss of earthly love before she waits out her time for the “earth-fires, earth-dreams” to die out and face death, which she fears might “surprise [her] into oblivion”:

I have yet to find endurance and the courage
of love to turn to where no light is, no darkness,
where there is no end, no beginning,
and leave behind all impediment of words
to touch your quietude, the bliss of dissolution
of thought and self. (Sonnet XVI)

And then it finally happens. After experiencing a profound romantic love Hen-tai falls ill and senses her mortal coils unloosening, as “[a] spreading sorrow begins to stain [her] unhappiness”. Not unlike the journey of the psyche or soul in the earlier poetry sequence of “Temple Caves” her quite naked consciousness has to endure a kind of purgatorial fire. When that too ends, she prepares us for the “final ascent” of the soul, but now with the music of a metaphorical lyre also guiding her:

I lose by this my last traces of heavy sleep
before the final ascent to what will seem an eye
of light widening into the world. Here the demons
grow persuasive in the ear to snare me
with a remembered sensual heaven in deep darkness. (Sonnet XXXI)

As she approaches the light, a new quality to her consciousness emerges which she terms as a “bare awareness”, when finally the longing to “see beyond darkness, beyond light” turns into the consequential reality of:

In the encircling halo, awareness is radiance –
radiance stained with no trace of thought, no shadow.
All things that ever had weighed upon me
as flesh in death, now fall away. I am not, yet I am.
A sweetness swells up in me of pervasive peace,
and the vast surrounding darkness holds no fears.
Though I have about me still the odour of recent death,
I wait, in love, at this point of light, at this, my still centre. (Sonnet XXXII)

To a more recent reader of Wong’s poetry *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai* might seem as an imaginative departure from his earlier metaphorical landscapes, although his reflections on the religious transformations of the soul are not anything new. And as with his earlier poetry, there is nothing else in all of Southeast Asian poetry to match the originality of such mythmaking and metaphorical evolutions. Indeed, in this latest volume, Wong seems to have reached the very pinnacle of his art.