

# Re-discovering the South Seas: Diaspora, Memory and Modernity in the Literary Works of Wong Yoon Wah

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**Abstract** A Malaya-born Chinese writer, 王润华 [Wong Yoon Wah, 1941--] is internationally recognized as a leading figure in the Chinese literature of Southeast Asia. This paper aims to elucidate how Wong represents “南洋” [the South Seas] by focusing on four interlinked dimensions, i.e. colonial history and decolonization, the Cold War, the Chinese diaspora and the localized identity, and postcolonial modernity. Combining textual analysis and conceptualization with contextualization, this paper intends to re-read Wong’s literary works through the looking glass of postcolonial and diaspora studies. By drawing theoretical discourse from Sinophone studies to Wong’s case, this paper illuminates his blindness and insight as he addresses the cultural identity of Chinese Diaspora. In the conclusion, the paper holds that Wong’s literary works paves the path for rewriting the South Seas in an age of globalization.

**Key words** Wong Yoon Wah; the South Seas; diaspora; identity; modernity **Author** **Zhang Songjian** is Assistant Professor of the School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research fields are modern Chinese literature, overseas Chinese literature, and comparative literature.

## Introduction

Wong Yoon Wah has been internationally recognized for his wide range of literary works with related to the South Seas. The South Seas always evokes his strong feelings, which also lies at the very heart of his literary imagination. Then, where is the “South Seas”? According to 李长傅 [Li Changfu], in the broad sense, it includes the Indo-china Peninsula, Malay Peninsula as well as Malay Archipelago starting from Australia and ending at New Zealand; but in the narrow sense, it only refers

to the Malay Peninsula and Malay Archipelago. As 许云樵 [Hsu Yun-Tsiao] points out, the South Seas literally refers to the “Southern Sea of China,” which is actually an ambiguous geographical term for lacking explicit connotation; The Southeast Asia where the ethnic Chinese have resided is called “the South Seas” (Wang Gungwu 12). Obviously the term “South Seas” has a slight implication of Sino-centrism. Then, one may raise the questions: how does Wong represent the South Seas through his literary works? What are his primary concerns when he describes the history, culture and landscape of the South Seas? What is the cultural politics of this representation? I will investigate these questions from the following four dimensions.

### **Colonial History and De-colonization**

From October 1996 to March 1997, Wong took a sabbatical leave— first to the University of Iowa and then to the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he concentrated on his poetry writing. As the result of his intellectual adventure, Wong produced a collection of poems named “热带雨林与殖民地” [*Tropical Rainforest and the Colony*], which is a broad yet critical account of the British colonialism in Malaya. Wong admits that composing these poems has been a dream for decades, and that he regrets not writing this colonial history earlier. He is now realizing this dream:

“For such a long time, no other authors have ever tried to use this kind of subject matter; nonetheless, I’m doing it now. Finally, I’ve found some commemorative films of my own life, even if all of them resemble dim and vague shadows, which still makes me feel comfortable, especially when I recall my life spent in Malaya” (Wong Y. W., *Rainforest* 8-9).

The *Rainforest* covers a historical period spanning from 1819, the year that Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) landed in Singapore, to the 1950s when the Malayan Emergency occurred. In a sense, Wong conceives of this volume as an endeavour to explore the colonial history of Malaya. The main body of this volume addresses the main events of the era, e.g., colonialism and de-colonization, the occupying of Malaya and Singapore by the Japanese, and the Cold War.

In 1819, Raffles, a British public official and Governor-General of Bencoolen, landed in Singapore and soon announced it a free port and a British colony (Turnbull 19-52). As Edward Said (1935–2003) points out, “imperialism” means the practice and theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; “colonialism,” which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory. Neither

imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition (Said 5). In terms of Said's definition, Raffles is both a colonizer and an imperialist. After conquering Singapore, the British Empire opened the door to conquer the whole Southeast Asia. Wong's narrative poem "绿色的诱惑：斑兰叶写真记" [Green Lure: A Sketch of Pandan Leaves] describes the historical trajectory of colonization:

Since the British colonizer / started burning the forests / and planting the rubber trees from Brazil / Pandan leaves were killed by Parang / the green, aromatic spirit flew down / it powerfully enchanted / the desires and fancies of all the peoples of the South Seas. (Wong Y. W., *Rainforest* 57)

The pandan is an upright, green plant with fan-shaped sprays of long, narrow, blade-like leaves and woody aerial roots. As a tropical plant, the pandan is rare in the wild, but it is widely cultivated and commonly used in Southeast Asian cooking to flavour dishes. In the poem quoted above, the pandan is impressively depicted as a witness to the long colonial history in Malaya, with words such as "burn," "parang," and "slay" connoting the violent process of colonization.

Another dimension of Wong's literary imaginary on the South Seas concerns the "ecological imperialism" largely committed by British colonial authorities in Malaya. Perak, a city best known for tin mining, maintained one of the oldest and most profitable industries in Malaya. Dredgers were first introduced in Perak in 1913 and later widely used to extract tin. The British colonizing capitalists operated these tin-dredging machines to extract the tin beneath the soil to then transport it in large quantities to England, thereby contributing to the economic success of Britain.

The British clearly economically exploited colonial Malaya through the tin-dredging industry, inevitably leading to ecological catastrophe for the local environment. Wong describes all these aspects either directly or indirectly in the poems published in the *Rainforest*. "铁船写真集" [The Portrait of Tin Dredger] presents a teenaged "I," who is astounded to encounter a terrifying scene: a pack of "wild animals" are roaming the plains, unearthing the soil to search for "food" – tin in this case. Their teeth fiercely gnaw at the soil, riddling the earth with large holes. As the narrator grows up, he comes to realize more secrets about these "wild animals":

"In the secondary students' geography textbook / I saw these animals from England / they were herded by the colonizer / and trampled on the Malay Peninsula / devoured tropical rainforest / rubber plantations, coconut trees, bananas and rice fields / sometimes they bit off the North–South Expressway / swallowed tiny

villages, railway stations / then blew out / huge sands and lakes” (Wong Y. W., *Rainforest* 42).

The British settlers and capitalists in colonial Malaya got involved in tin dredging. The brutality of this economic exploitation not only resulted in the poverty, pain and hopelessness of local residents but also greatly endangered the local environment, which may be termed as an alternative “ecological imperialism” (Crosby). Wong’s short poem “荒芜的矿场记” [A Desolate Quarry] echoes his feelings on this exploitation:

After I came out of the soils / an empty lake was left in the earth / black waves  
rolling inside it / the lake sadly looked at the sky / only wild orchid flowers and  
ferns / helplessly lived / on the sand dunes. (Wong Y. W., *Rubber* 48)

Through the eyes of the first-person narrator (“tin”), the landscape and surroundings seem tinged with melancholy, and the blame primarily lies at the door of the tin-dredging colonizer. Furthermore, Wong’s poems delicately represent the racial repression and class conflict in Malaya, where British colonizers and Chinese capitalists were responsible for this ecological calamity. Tin mining produced gravel and sands that ultimately had adverse ecological effects. Combined with tropical downpours, these conditions resulted in the severe loss of mineral fertilizer. In a consequence, the “pitcher plants” in this desolate land have been forced to change their eating habits: the pitcher starts as a small bud and gradually expands to form a tube-shaped trap; the latter contains a syrupy fluid that the plant produces to drown its prey (e.g., insects). Apparently, this unique carnivorous habit of the pitcher is explicit evidence of ecological imperialism. Wong’s short poem “猪笼草：把美丽的陷阱悬挂在空中” [Pitcher Plant: Hanging a Beautiful Trap in the Sky] brilliantly captures this incredible phenomenon:

Contending with each other to capture the Malay Peninsula / the Portuguese and  
Dutch Armies started bombing tropical rainforest / I was awoken by a horrible  
nightmare / and threw the truth ‘tender leaves are the food of animals’ / into the  
turbulent rivers / Human beings snatch money and land with their hands / my  
leaves finally evolved into a killer forever. / By luring lively insects to their death  
/ I make nourishment for my own life. (Wong Y.W., *Rainforest* 22)

Wong powerfully exposes the sins of the colonizers by anthropomorphizing the pitcher plant (with the use of “I”). The strange pitcher plant is also a metaphor

for the ill-fated and tenacious Chinese diaspora exiled to the South Seas, living in poverty and surviving hundreds of years of colonialism at the hands of Dutch, the Portuguese, the British and the Japanese.

As Wendy Darby suggests, the representation of the landscape is not only trope but also deeply rooted in politics, ideology and power dynamics, e.g., nationalism, the Industrial Revolution and imperial wars (Darby 6). As far as Wong's poetry is concerned, the landscape of the South Seas is at once a projection of his teenage years and a metaphor for the Chinese diaspora, and it is closely associated with the historical memory of British colonialism. In addition, in the 1990s, eco-criticism, green humanities, and environmental ethics flourished. In this line, through his poetic critique of ecological imperialism, Wong makes a dialogue with nature and calls attention to this specific topic in Southeast Asian literature.

Paradoxically, Wong's attitude towards British colonialism is ambivalent and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, Wong vigorously denounces British colonial authorities in Malaya, revealing his unyielding longing for de-colonization, as evidenced in the poems quoted above; on the other hand, Wong sometimes commits acts of "Occidentalism" in relation to the colonizer. For instance, the second section of the series poem "Raffles and Tropical Rainforest" condemns the colonial administration in Malaya. However, Wong writes sentimentally in the first section; confronting the environmental problems due to rapid urbanization, Singapore's national totem "鱼尾狮" [Merlion] cannot help but burst into tears. Wong then fondly recollects "'Raffles,'" praising his environmental conservation efforts. Here, the reader may wonder: "who on earth is Raffles?" For general readers, Wikipedia provides a brief yet useful biography on Raffles:

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, FRS (6 July 1781–5 July 1826) was a British statesman, Lieutenant-Governor of British Java (1811–1815) and Governor-General of Bencoolen (1817–1822), best known for his founding of Singapore. He was also heavily involved in the conquest of the Indonesian island of Java from Dutch and French military forces during the Napoleonic Wars and contributed to the expansion of the British Empire. He was also an amateur writer and wrote a book titled *The History of Java* (1817).<sup>1</sup>

Raffles played a key role in British colonial expansion, namely, through his deep engagement in the imperial invasion of Southeast Asia, the exploitation of the

1 For more detailed biographical information on Raffles, please see the Wikipedia. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stamford\\_Raffles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stamford_Raffles)> (accessed January 6, 2019).

natural resources of Malaya, and the overthrow of Sultan Hussain of Johor to conquer Java. Most important, he built Singapore as a base from which the British Empire could conquer Southeast Asia. Ironically, the imperial war, economic oppression, shame and pain that Raffles exposed on the peoples of the South Seas, vanishes completely in the first portion of the *Rainforest*. Wong pays tribute to Raffles:

Besides being an honourable, clear-sighted colonizer, [Raffles] was also fond of plants and flowers. Due to his report, a variety of flowers and plants in the rainforest gradually became familiar to the common people. He once hired many painters to portray the flowers and plants of Southeast Asia. [The paintings] are currently stored in the Museum of Singapore. (Wong Y.W., *Rainforest* 35)

In the preface of *Rainforest*, Wong resembles a peacemaker: “those soldiers of the colonial administration deserve my solemn mourning.” To Sir Henry Gurney (1898–1951), a British colonial administrator who died in a violent attack at the hands of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) during the Malayan Emergency, Wong speaks magnanimously from the heart: “I did not forget to install a gravestone for him.” In the notes of the poem “水花与枪弹” [Splash and Bullets], Wong seems to think highly of Mark, an executive officer of the New Village, whom he depicts as a respectable and dedicated guy. Wong’s prose “The Legendary Writers in the Raffles Hotel” expresses high gratitude to this colonizer once again (Wong Y. W., *Leaves* 197-209). On another occasion, Wong praises the colonizers William Farquhar and Raffles for their contributions to the flowering of horticulture in Singapore and Malaya (Wong Y. W., *Durians* 49-50). After hundreds of years of colonization, “Occidentalism”<sup>1</sup> was embedded in the structure of feelings of the colonized, and their ambivalence about the “colonizer” was formed irreversibly. So, we may ask a speculative question: for the Southeast Asian people, is it possible to consider the importance and significance of de-colonization in the Twentieth-first century?

### **The Malayan Emergency in the Cold War**

Most parts of Wong’s *Rainforests* deal with the Malayan Emergency during the Cold War era. The “Cold War” is the specific geopolitical tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, which spread from Europe to Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, thus the entire world was split into two groups.

1 Xiaomei Chen articulates the origins, development and variation of “Occidentalism”, please see her seminal book (Chen).

The Cold War stretches from 1947, the year the “Truman Doctrine” was announced, to 1991 when the USSR collapsed. Recently the studies of Cold War have gained international popularity. In this research area, there are representative works in relation to East and Southeast Asia. <sup>1</sup>According to Liu Hong, the cultural Cold War is actually the “battles for hearts and minds,” promoting political ideology into the feelings of the colonized especially the Third World.

The Cold War is the primary subject of Wong’s heartfelt collection *Rainforests*, but the former has a local variant named the “Malayan Emergency” (1947–1960). This volume fiercely asserts that members of the Chinese diaspora in Malaya are the oppressed, marginalized people. The “Malayan Emergency” refers to the military conflicts between the armed forces of the British Commonwealth and the troops of the CPM from 1948 to 1960. In the wake of the Pacific War (1941–1945), the British army returned to the Malay Peninsula and resumed its colonial dominance. In June 1948, Chin Peng allegedly ordered members of the CPM to kill three European plantation managers. Immediately the Malayan colonial administration declared a state of emergency on 16 June 1948; the CPM was then banned nationwide. To uproot the CPM militarily and economically, the colonial authorities began implementing the New Village scheme for the Chinese community in 1951, but Malays and Indians were excluded from this scheme. Consequently, numerous towns and neighbouring villages were connected with barbed wire, and millions of ethnic Chinese were forced to reside there. Those older than twelve years had to apply for their own identity cards. Guarded day and night by police who enforced the imposed curfew, the “new village” is just like “concentration camp,” and the “new villagers” felt themselves like prisoners. Those who dared to provide the CMP with human resources, information or grains will be severely punishment.<sup>2</sup>

We now return to Wong’s poetry. Cries of pain clearly reverberate in his heart, as the following details illustrate. “橡实” [Acorn] is an elegiac anecdote describing a silent, stuffy afternoon of a summer: On “my” way home after school, when walking through the rubber trees, “I” heard the sound of “acorn” falling down, and it kept begging with me for homecoming as it fears of breathing in the gunpowder and smoke. “蝙蝠与花朵” [Bats and Flowers] is a portrait of the tense atmosphere of the 1950s. Frightened by the Emergency Declaration, the bats have to change their ecological cycles. “新村印象” [An Impression on New Village] offers some

1 As far as the studies of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, suffice it to see the representative books in the cited works (Xiaojue Wang; Lau; Day and Liem; Foley; Zheng, Liu, and Szonyi; Goscha and Ostermann; Tyner; Tarling).

2 For the research on the New Villages in the British Malaya, see the major books in the Works Cited (Markandan; Carpenter; Ray; Lim & Fong; Hoon).

sorrowful scenes: when an “attap” hears the British army’s order of relocation and smells gunpowder, it suddenly faints, falling to the ground; from a first-person perspective (using “I” and “myself”), the attap wishes it was a Muslim church or a herd of cattle or sheep because it would not have to return to captivity behind the barbed wire at curfew; instead, it would choose to reside in the rainforest. The “morning glory” tries to secretly enter the concentration camp for a visit to the remaining “rubber trees,” but they are slashed to death by the brutal soldiers’ knives. Finally, the white terror culminates a miserable spectacle:

Only the tropical shower / and moonlight / are allowed to freely enter / new  
villages surrounded by barbed wire / they neither need to bring IC cards with  
them / nor accept the body inspections. (Wong Y.W., *Rainforest* 68)

Despite the adverse surroundings, the Chinese community’s longing for freedom and dignity is unstoppable. For example, the “rambutan” and “durian” trees refuse to abide by the relocation scheme; rather, they decide to live in their homeland along with the mangosteen, guava and wax apple: “the leaves of the abandoned attap / rotted in the wild grass / they are the pages / of years torn by wind and rains” (“ 逼迁以后的家园” [Homeland after Eviction]). “ 集中营的检查站” [A Checkpoint of the Concentration Camp] presents a touching scene; The suffering of the Chinese people in Malaya is displayed largely. A woman who labours on a rubber plantation rushes to work in the early morning, and she is forced to accept body inspection by a police officer. After school, the primary students have to have their textbooks and assignments checked, and the soldiers try to find the grain and medicine specifically prepared for the CPM in the forest. When the evening comes, someone driving a lorry home has to stop the vehicle for a regular check. Wong writes, after ten o’clock every night, the alarm bells are heard everywhere; new villagers close their doors; searchlights shine brightly; insects and owls remain silent, and only the fish are seen jumping, breaking the surface of the river. Nevertheless, a member of the CPM steps forward bravely: “as I opened the door / looking for the moonlight / in the muddy road of the countryside / I found that last night’s barking / and those shadows / turned into white, / anti-colonialist leaflets” (Wong Y. W., *Rainforest* 83). As Edward Said claims, “real intellectuals are never more themselves than when, moved by metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of justice and truth, they denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority” (Said 6). We can consider Wong to be this kind of intellectual.

In addition to the bitter lives of the ethnic Chinese in the new villages,

Wong's literary works splendidly represents the CPM's military struggle against the Malayan colonial authorities. The short poem “山中岁月” [The Years in Mountains] uses the interior monologue of an anonymous CPM soldier:

As the colonial armies / set out to snatch / the burnt ideals / that we found in  
the ruins of Anti-Japanese War / Once again, we had to return to / the tropical  
jungles / of Banjaran Titiwangsa / and search for the buried and rusty firearms.  
(Wong Y. W., *Rainforest* 95)

The British colonial authorities betrayed their alliance with the CPM and defied the people's claim for Malayan independence, consequently, the CPM had to use military force against Malayan colonial administration. The colonial authorities took a variety of measures to halt the revolt. For instance, they implemented the New Village scheme, firebombed the jungles, hired the Dayak to hunt down the CPM in the forest, broadcasted traitors' confessions, and extensively distributed propaganda leaflets to the masses. Surviving years of tenacious struggle, the CPM displayed sophisticated tactics and a strong will meanwhile paying a high price (Chin). Some Chinese youth bravely joined the CPM to fight the British colonial authorities. Wong offers a brief account of the vicissitude of the Malayan Emergence and the survival strategy of the CPM in hard times. One example is “马来亚丛林里的埋伏” [An Ambush in the Malayan Jungles]. A CPM soldier is returning from a rubber forest, walking down the road with a bag of rice on his back; he is unexpectedly ambushed by colonial forces, and “the blood spray looks like the orchid flowers growing on the trunk” (Wong Y. W., *Rainforest* 128). “友情与埋伏” [Friendship and Ambush] tells the stories of Ah Kuang, the District Secretary of the CPM, who is betrayed by a comrade and dies a brave death, which impress the enemy deeply (Wong Y.W., *Rainforest* 100-101). Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) proclaims that “[e]very time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows; I have felt solidarity with his act” (Fanon 176). The critical imagination presented in Wong's poems clearly echoes Fanon's thought, which also clearly voices Wong's yearnings for freedom, justice and dignity.

### **The Chinese Diaspora and Localized Identity**

#### **The Metaphor of Chinese Diaspora**

After earning a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wong sought career move to Singapore, an integral part of the South Seas, where he assumed

his teaching position at Nanyang University (“Nantah”). Many years later, Wong recalled this exciting experience:

At the first night, I slept in Yunnan Garden where the croaking of frogs and the sting of mosquitoes evoked vivid memories of the South Seas of my teenage years, which looked like a canopy covering the whole person. At that time, Nantah’s campus was located on a rubber plantation; the former is called ‘Yunnan Garden’, which invoked my local memory. Hence, it was indeed the inspiration and epiphany that forced me to return to the tropical rainforests. Until now, I’ve been thinking in the rainforest. (Wong Y. W., *Poems 2*)

Originally called “the South Seas,” this place is becoming strange to Wong. As a result of rapid industrialization and urbanization, Singapore’s rubber plantations have disappeared completely. To Wong’s surprise, even Yunnan Garden, where Nanyang University is based, has no rubber trees any more. Wong was so disappointed about his surroundings that he composed a series of poems, later had them published under the title “橡胶树” [*Rubber Trees*]. Previously as a Malaysian citizen, Wong had published three collections of verse, i.e. “生病的太阳” [*The Sick Sun*], “高潮” [*Climax*], and “内外集” [*The Inward and Outward*] came out from the Taiwan publishers. Later, Wong was naturalized to a Singaporean, and created the collection “橡胶树” [*Rubber Trees*], it was published by a local press. Thus, this poem collection should fall under “Chinese Singaporean literature.” Moreover, unlike Wong’s previous collections with somewhat Sino-centrism, this volume has impressed general readers and professional critics with the vivid depictions of “the South Seas.” As he confesses, “the poems collected in fourth volume are wholly distinct. Each piece resembles a beggar’s-tick or Raintree; it sprouts and grows up in tropical sunlight and rains, and is deeply rooted in the soil of the South Seas” (Wong Y. W., *Rubber I*).

In the preface for *Rubber Trees*, Wong mentions the tropical rainforests of the South Seas as “a heaven of wild grass and trees, kingdom of fruits, and origin of myths.” The “South Seas” (literal meaning: the “Southern Ocean”) is a traditional Chinese name for the geographical region south of China, particularly Southeast Asia, which has an implication of cultural Sino-centrism. In past centuries, the diasporic Hokkein, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese migrated to the South Seas to make a living. A descendant of the Chinese diaspora—with ancestral lands based in Tsungfa, Kuang Tung—Wong was born in Ipoh, Perak. The tropical landscape and plants in Wong’s literary works are metaphors of the Chinese

diaspora in the South Seas. For example, his influential essay “沉默的橡胶树” [the Silent Rubber Trees] begins with a touching description:

My grandfather was just like a rubber tree, who was ‘transplanted’ to the earth of Singapore and Malaya by the British colonizers at the same time, and then he was found very suitable to live on the tropical hilly lands. He not only grew downward towards rooted there but also blossomed upward. My father was like the second generation of the rubber tree, he identified himself with the tropical wind and rain because he was born and raised there, a native man rather than the transplanted thing for experimental purposes. (Wong Y. W., *Leaves* 163)

Wong once recalled his child years in Banir, a small village situated between Kampar and Tapah, and its name disappeared on the tourism map published by Miller Freeman Press. Wong offers us with a moving account of this village:

Prior to the Second World War, the British colonial authorities had developed vast rubber plantation gardens. Banir is the portraiture of the colonial Malaya ruled by the British Empire, which illuminates that, in order to maintain its hegemony, the empire also resorts to cultural knowledge and administrative means as well as the military forces. The rubber plantation gardens based in the flattest and best central lands are run and managed by the companies of the British capitalists. The rubber plantation gardens with rivers, lakes, hills and mountains nearby are divided into small unites and sold to the ethnic Chinese. (Wong Y. W., *Returning* 94-95)

Here, the rubber trees are metaphor of the Chinese Diasporas who moved from China in exodus to the South Seas where they witnessed the vicissitude of the local, the regional and the global histories. Wong’s short poem “橡胶树” [Rubber Trees] reads as follows: “The naked rubber trees / each of them is skinny / and has numerous cuts on its body / I know it is anticipating / the rainwater coming back to tropical jungles / that will help it put on green clothes / and wear tiny yellow flowers” (Wong Y. W., *Rubber* 72).

The poet metaphorically depicts the rubber tree, an ordinary plant in the South Seas, to reflect on the fate of the Chinese Diasporas in Malaya. According to historians of Southeast Asia, Chinese people started migrating to the Malay Peninsula in the fourteenth century when the Malay Dynasty (1403–1511) was established. In 1874, the British colonial authorities in Malaya succeeded in

transplanting twelve rubber tree saplings from Sri Lanka to Singapore, then developed a rubber industry on a large scale that would include natural and synthetic rubber. Consequently, the exploitative use of local natural resources greatly contributed to the economic success of British Empire and the further global expansion of colonialism. Due to the prosperity of the rubber plantations, a cheap labour force was needed. Tempted by the prospects of a good life, Chinese people in South China started migrating to Malaya, working as rubber plantation labourers and tin miners (Wong Y. W., *Reflections* 99). The rubber tree referred to in the poem above looks like a skinny man with countless cuts on his body, who is desperately yearning rainwater to come. This image, with its strong visual shock, is reminiscent of the Chinese diaspora as the rubber plantation workers. As such, the landscape is subtly transformed into geographies of class and race with the condemnation of British colonizers. On another occasion, Wong comments on these rubber trees as follows:

Rubber trees not only present the life experience of the Chinese diaspora and other minority communities in the Malay Peninsula but also narrate the numerous crimes that Western capitalists and the British Empire had committed: emigrating overseas, piratical robbery, the slave trade. They also represented the evil business conducted by colonial officials and merchants in the Malay Peninsula, including repression, labour and capital exports. (Wong Y. W., *Reflections* 111)

Wong specifically relates the symbolic connotations of the rubber trees to the British colonial dominance from the late nineteenth century to 1957, thereby providing readers with a critical perspective with which to reflect on the significance of Wong's poems in particular and the issues about diaspora, memory and identity in general.

Among Wong's poems on tropical fruits, "Durian" deserves a critical analysis. The second stanza reads like this:

I'm a hereditary aristocrat in the orchid / during my teenage years, I couldn't play the 'hide-and-peek' game / even after I was a crowned king / I couldn't dress as a commoner and walk in secret, playing games anywhere among the people / Whatever I hide in a bunch of bananas / or in the sanctum of a hotel / the people of my kingdom / can discover my footprints from the air/ Because my prestige and grace / illuminates the whole world, just like the sunshine"

(Wong Y.W., *Rubber* 24)

The people in Southeast Asia consider the durian the “King of Fruits.” According to folktale, the durians grow in the faeces discharged by Zheng He (1371–1433). This folktale suggests that the Chinese Diasporas boast of powerful imperial China as the “Central Kingdom,” which is regarded as a symbol of longing for hegemonic Chinese culture (Wong Y. W., *Durians* 31). The durian is distinctive for its large size, strong odour, and formidable thorn-covered husk. It has an oblong or round shape; the colour of its husk ranges from green to brown; and its flesh falls somewhere between pale yellow and red, depending on the species. Some people love the durian’s sweet fragrance, while others cannot tolerate its stinking odour. As one of the main fruits of the people of the South Seas, the durian is equivalent to the “sunshine” illuminating the earth; hence, the common people cherish this fruit. As the harvest season arrives, people love to buy durians and enjoy eating them in the street. Interestingly, in Chinese language, “durian” has the same pronunciation as the Chinese characters “流 连” [meaning: ceaseless indulgence in pleasures], which implies that some Chinese diaspora love the South Seas so much that they are reluctant to leave this region even if their departure date is nearing. Some allege that the colonizers and some passers-by were unable to tolerate the strong odour of the durian, which implies that they were incapable of embracing the local culture of South Seas — not to mention their lack of loyalty to this place. A common belief is that only those who enjoy the durians would choose to reside in the South Seas permanently and engage themselves with racial integration: “Stranger, do you know? / Once you sincerely kiss me one time / you’re sure to respect me as the king / and discard your homeland / dwell on my earth forever / if you reject my grace / you’ll not have a dream of gold mining / you’ll surely smell the stinking odour of the fin-de-siècle” (Wong Y. W., *Rubber* 26).

Wong’s poem “凤梨” [Pineapple] broaches the same topic about the Chinese diaspora. In first two stanzas, the pineapple “confesses” that he has been leading a diasporic life: although God crowned the pineapple “king” in his adolescence, he presents a harrowing saga:

But, according to a horticulturist’s memoir, / my grandpa was an overthrown  
tyrant in the South America / exiled to the Malay Archipelago by Portuguese  
sailors / He led a wretched life under a foreign sky / when walking by the  
water, someone called me ‘Pineapple King’ / I lowered my head sometimes,  
seeing my own reflection had a crown / soon my heart was filled with bitter

memories. (Wong Y. W., *Rubber* 32)

The pineapple's miserable life of exile is an allegory of the Chinese diaspora in the South Seas. Boasting about thousands of years of culture and "noble blood," ethnic Chinese crossed geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries, finally arriving in the South Seas, toiling and moiling in a strange land. Occasionally they remember their transnational adventure in hard times and cannot help but utter a sorrowful sigh.

As always, tropical landscape, plants and fruits such as the rubber trees, durians, and pineapples depicted in the poems above are metaphors for the Chinese diaspora in the South Seas. In other words, the tropical things Wong brings to attention in his verses represent a new imagination for portraying Chinese diaspora in the South Seas.

#### **In search of the Localized Identity**

Wong's poetry in relation to the South Seas features the sense of place, the emotional attachment and the orientation of localization, which is reflected powerfully at once in the landscape and history and in the vocabulary that Wong uses specifically for his poem writing. Having spent years in the South Seas, Wong has "the sense of place" or 'topophilia' (all are Yi-Fu Tuan's terms). The strong consciousness of localization evoked in Wong's personal lexicon – including terms such as “罗厘” [lorry], “甘邦” [kampong], “巴冷刀” [berang], “组屋” [HDB flat], “驳火” [crossfire], “胡姬花” [orchid flowers], “亚答屋” [attap], “斑兰” [pandan], “沙笼” [sarong], – always impresses readers, whether professional or amateur. Some of the terms are rooted in Chinese dialects, while others derived from the transliteration of English or the Malay language. All the words regardless of their origins are very distinct from the authoritative “standard Chinese” widely used in mainland China, they represent an alternative “writing strategy” in the postcolonial context, namely, “replacing language” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin) or “linguistic hybridization” (Shih 2007). Once used in daily life or read by the ethnic Chinese of the South Seas, these words can easily evoke people's intimate experiences.

The mark of localization is the birth of “native consciousness” rather than by descriptions of the local landscape, history and language alone. To elucidate this point, we might as well compare Wong with other Chinese writers. From 1910s to 1940s, the South Seas were always absent in the literary works of Chinese sojourner-writers. Occasionally, they depicted the South Seas, but the latter tended to be marginalized, otherized, and exoticized and barely had a voice of their own.

Furthermore, the cultural identity of Chinese sojourner-writers was overwhelmingly linked to China. To reinforce a sense of cultural superiority, these writers grew accustomed to depicting the South Seas as a mysterious, primitive and erotic place. Evidently, for generations, they had been steeped in the binary such as “centre/margin,” “hegemony/minority,” and “civilized/barbarian” binaries (Lim B. C.). The 1960s witnessed the debut of a modernist generation of Chinese writers, including Lin Fang, Nan Zi, Yeng Pway Ngon, Tan Swie Hian, He-Lan Ning. Nevertheless the South Seas were not thoroughly covered in their works. By contrast, Wong has been dedicated to the search for a “local consciousness” since the 1980s, when *Rubber Tress* was published. The ethnic Chinese in Malaya receive attention in this volume, but a cultural nostalgia for China disappears there. Instead of embracing the “myth of consanguinity” (in Rey Chow’s term), Wong regards the South Seas as his homeland without any hesitations. Shu-mei Shih, one of the leading authorities on Sinophone studies argues with scholars of Chinese overseas studies by claiming the significance of the “Against Diaspora” position, which has recently gained currency (Shih, *Sinophone* 25-42). David Der-Wei Wang coins a neologism called “后遗民” [Post-loyalist] to describe an alternative cultural orientation: “The loyalist always suggests a dislocation of time and space, and replacement of regime, whilst the term ‘Post-loyalist’ means much more: it prefers dislocating the already dislocated time and space, and further to reflect on the questionable orthodox” (David Wang 6). As Safran articulates, both diaspora consciousness and the exploitation of the homeland myth is just “a defence mechanism against slights committed by the host country against the minority, but it does not—and is not intended to—lead its members to prepare for the actual departure for the homeland” (Safran 94).

In a sense, the local awareness that Wong pursues in his literary works sounds very much similar to “Against diaspora” and “Post-loyalism.” Wong suggests that the ethnic Chinese should replace Sino-centrism and the myth of consanguinity with a localized identity. Wong’s poems work towards such a direction. Confronting the trend, Wong describes how “all trees migrated overseas one by one,” and the humble “pitcher plant” is compelled to change its eating habits, insisting on living in the barren sands (“猪笼草” [pitcher plant]). The “carpet grass,” a seemingly fragile plant, proudly announces, “among the herbaceous plant family, only I love this land the most”; as the monsoon and deluge approach, the plants “closely embrace every sand on the island / hand by hand, [they] consolidate the foundation and dam / staunchly, calmly, and down-to-earth” (“地毯草” [Carpet Grass]). All the plants described in these poems serve as metaphors for the ethnic Chinese in the South Seas, who are willing to support one another and to stay rooted in this land,

tenaciously and peacefully.

Admittedly, the Chinese writers of the South Seas cannot totally evade the local landscape and customs. Wong is not the first writer to call for localization of Chinese literature of Singapore and Malaysia. In fact, as early as 1927, Chinese writers such as “张金燕” [Zhang Jinyan], “陈炼青” [Chen Lianqing], “曾圣提” [Zheng Shengti], “吴仲青” [Wu Zhongqing] were enthusiastically involved into advocating the “南洋色彩” [Nanyang Colour]. According to 崔贵强 [Chui Kwei-chiang], at the end of Pacific War, the national identity of the ethnic Chinese drastically shifted from China to Malaya (Chui; Cushman & Wang). Meanwhile, the debates on the “侨民文艺” [Chinese Sojourner Literature] versus the “马华文艺独特性” [Uniqueness of Malayan Chinese Literature] occurred in the literary scene in 1947 (Miao 8-20; Wong & Xu 20-28; Yeo 33-38). Based on a meticulous examination of four Chinese newspapers in 1940s-50s Singapore, 王慷鼎 [Wong Hong Teng] concludes that the weakening of Chinese “sojourner awareness” and the strengthening of “national identity” was booming from 1945 to 1959 (Wong H. T. 261-295). Nevertheless, the localized identity of Chinese Singaporean literature did not appear in 1965 immediately, the year that Singapore won independence; it was delayed until the early 1980s when writers including Wong composed such literary works as *Rubber Tress*. According to Wong, his unyielding search for local consciousness can be traced back to the late 1970s when he had first arrived in Singapore

After returning to the South Seas, I encountered the rise of postmodernism and post-colonialism, which have a primary concern on local culture and tempt me to turn to the rubber plantation. *Rubber Trees*, and *Collected Works on Rural Nanyang*, two of my literary works, are the products of my endeavours seeking to embrace tropical jungles. The wild flowers and grass at the equator offer me a new, imaginary space, and a localized language as well as narrative. Finally, I discovered the local characters and voices of Singapore and Malaysia by forging the images of shadow paly, rain trees, durians, rambutans. (Wong Y. W., *Village* 5)

Among the pioneers of Chinese poetry in the 1980s, very few like Wong actively focuses on the local landscape, language, customs and history of the South Seas. In this light, Wong’s literary works including *Rubber Trees* should be a groundbreaking contribution during that historical period.

#### **Reflection on the Postcolonial Modernity**

Modernity and globalization has been exerting tremendous impacts on the

world including the South Seas. As a Malaya-born ethnic Chinese, Wong has had nostalgic feelings for rural life in the tropical forest, which is one of his reflections on the postcolonial modernity. In 1978 Wong travelled to a wild forest in the east coast of Malaysia, where he had one-night lodging. But he got entangled with fears and nightmare at that night. As a result, he had to return to the city in a hurry early next morning. From this event, Wong realized that he had been used to city life and would not be able to return to the mysterious nature (Wong Y. W., *Leaves* 139-150). One more example is his mourning over the loss of the rubber trees in modern Singapore. Due to industrialization and urbanization, the rubber plantation gardens in current Singapore have almost vanished. The Yun-Nam Garden at which the Nanyang University (1955-1980) was seated originally had a vast rubber forest, but later the forest disappeared completely. As spoken, the rubber trees are the metaphor of the Chinese Diasporas who had migrated to the South Seas since the late nineteenth century and made tremendous contributions to the success of it. In 1978, Wong drove hundreds of miles to Kuala Kangsar just in search of the ‘rubber trees’. The Kuala Kangsar as the royal town of Perak, Malaysia, is located at the downstream of Kangsar River where it joins the Perak River. Fortunately Wong had an access to the oldest rubber tree in Malaysia:

Standing under this historic rubber tree, once again I can’t help having emotional attachment to it. I also sentimentally think of the fact that all the rubber trees in the Yun-Nam Garden perished already. It once brought civilization and economic prosperity, but it itself came to vanish gradually in the midst of modernization, industrialization and commercialization. (Wong Y. W., *Leaves* 162)

Wong’s literary works always convey his discontent with the postcolonial modernity, developmentalism and globalization as well, which, here, is clearly evidenced by his elegiac feelings on the disappearance of the rubber trees in Singapore. Thus, sighting the oldest rubber tree in Kuala Kangsar, Wong was able to realize his long-cherished dream of ‘the return of the native’, and recalled his teenage years spent on this land.

In February 2012 Wong retired from Yuan-Ze University, Taiwan, and returned to Singapore and Malaysia, working as professor of Chinese literature at the South University College until present day. As he drives on the express way, Wong finds that the swallows and eye-browed thrushes are totally absent from the light posts, instead, the silvery, 24-hour CCTV, Wong calls them the “birds” fed by the Land

Transport Authorities, is in operation. When walking on the Orchard Road, he was disappointed to find, the orchard where the pepper, uncaria gambir and nutmeg had grown, has been replaced by numerous shopping centres such as Ion! Visiting the Gardens by the Bay, what impressed him deeply is not the mortality of human beings but the rapid vanishing of the tropical forests in Singapore. The Gardens are currently filled with the tall trees, flowers and grasses made of metals, unbelievably many people acclaim them as creative arts:

The tropical forests/ were previously situated at the fishing village / unexpectedly occupied by / numerous towering iron trees / tourists look up happily / and see the green plants / bravely climbing up the iron trunk / and crying in the sunlight / and trying to cover the metal's / ugly faces. (Wong Y. W., *Return 4*)

The modernity characterized by the technological advances, urbanization as well as consumerism has not seemingly brought real happiness for the modern man. The Singapore where Wong had lived for decades is now transforming itself from a “place” into a “space,” finally he lost the sense of belonging. A modern home (-land) with a simple but cosy and comfortable atmosphere is unavoidably facing the destiny of permanent disappearing. In this sense, Wong’s literary works may be regarded as the unyielding search for a homely “South Seas.”

As is well known, the globalization is one of the transnational, extreme forms of modernity. The states in the South Seas are unable to escape from the influences of globalization. Wong’s literary works reflect on the negative sides of globalization. For example, when he visited the Singapore’s harbour, he found that the fishing village along with all kinds of birds had vanished, as depicted by the following scene: “Our country’s birds / became the cranes / and stood by the sea orderly / they pecked hungrily / the food in the containers / of the parking boats // our fishing villages and public parks were abandoned gradually / and innovated to piers / to feed up / the birds our country protect / the birds these transnational corporations enjoy” (Wong Y. W., *Return 5*).

Coming across the boundaries of nation-states, the global capitalism is so powerful that the postcolonial Singapore has no choice but to engage with it, which, inevitably leads to the cult of effectiveness, progress and success, last but not least, the rise of the sense of dislocation. That is one of the consequences of modernity. In short, the search for the sense of homeliness comprises of a critical voice in Wong’s literary world, Wong’s poem quoted above provide a succinct yet delicate picture

with regard to postcolonial modernity in the South Seas.

### **Conclusion: Re-discovering the South Seas**

Wong's literary works on the South Seas are highlighted by the issue of cultural politics rather than the aesthetic devices. By evoking collective or historical memories, Wong denounces the British colonial authorities in Malaya along with the Cold War, he expresses his yearnings for de-colonization but with ambivalence and somewhat Occidentalism. When dealing with the landscapes and culture of South Seas, Wong distinguishes himself from other writers by challenging Sino-centrism and the homeland myth; furthermore, he emphasizes the intimate experience and the localized identity. In details, Wong's shift of cultural identity is the result of the local, regional and global changes including the end of British colonialism in Malaya, rise of nation-building campaign in Southeast Asia, Singapore's independence and the pivotal role it has played for decades, and the identity conversion of the ethnic Chinese from sojourners to citizens. Wong's literary works witnesses the spread of modernity and globalization to the South Seas, and the loss of homeliness.

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