An Interview with Alvin Pang

Finding the liminal spaces in Singaporean writing

Yugin Teo

Alvin Pang, born in Singapore in 1972, is a prominent Singaporean poet, author, editor, translator and literary activist. He graduated with First Class Honours in Literature from the University of York in the UK and taught for two years in a junior college in Singapore. He has also worked as a civil servant, a journalist, a web producer and is currently an independent editor of both corporate and literary publications, including the public policy journal ETHOS, for which he is Editor-In-Chief. A 2002 Fellow of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program, he was named 2005 Young Artist of the Year for Literature by Singapore's National Arts Council and conferred the Singapore Youth Award (Arts and Culture) in 2007.

Pang's first two poetry collections, Testing the Silence *and* City of Rain*, both published by Ethos Books (Singapore), were listed in The Straits Times Top Ten Books of 1997 and 2003. A collection of creative prose* What Gives Us Our Names *was published by Math Paper Press (Singapore) in 2011. His poetry has been translated into over fifteen languages; translated volumes of his work include* Other Things and Other Poems *(Brutal: Croatia, 2012),* Teorija strun [String Theory] *(JKSD: Slovenia, 2012) and* När barbarerna kommer *(Rámus, Sweden, 2015). His first UK collection* When the Barbarians Arrive *was published by Arc Publications in 2012.*

Pang has made numerous appearances at major international festivals. His more recent appearances include representing Singapore at the Poetry Parnassus festival, which was a part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad in London, alongside Seamus Heaney (Ireland), Wole

Soyinka (Nigeria) and John Kinsella (Australia). He participated in the StAnza Poetry Festival in St Andrews in March 2013. After appearances at the Hay Festival Segovia (2014), he featured in 2016 at the Zee Jaipur Literature Festival in India, and the International Festival of Poetry in Granada, Nicaragua, and will appear at festivals in Bucharest and Belgrade later in the same year.

Pang's work has been featured in the Atlanta Review (USA), The Wolf (UK), English Review (UK), Salt (Australia), Westerly (Australia), Australian Poetry Journal, Bonniers Literary Magazine (Sweden), Washington Square Review (USA), Quarterly Literary Review Singapore and many others. His work has appeared in a number of anthologies, including Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond *by W W Norton (USA) in 2008,* RHYTHMS: The Millennium Anthology of Singapore Poetry *by Singapore's National Arts Council in 2000, for which he was the English Language Poetry Editor, and* The World Record *by Bloodaxe Books (UK) in 2012 as part of Poetry Parnassus.*

Pang is a leading advocate and anthologist of Singapore writing. Anthologies he has curated include No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry *in 2000;* Over There: Poems from Singapore and Australia *(co-edited with John Kinsella) by Ethos Books (Singapore) in 2008; and* Tumasik: Contemporary Writing from Singapore*, comprising both translated work and work in English, by Autumn Hill Books (USA) in 2009. In collaboration with US-based journal Drunken Boat in 2015, he curated* UNION: 15 Years of Drunken Boat / 50 Years of Writing from Singapore*, a 600+ page anthology featuring 140 distinguished Singaporean and international contributors. Pang is also a translator of the Chinese language poems of the Singaporean Cultural Medallionist author Yeng Pway Ngon.*

Yugin Teo first met Pang when he was in the UK for The London Book Fair in 2013, and subsequently suggested the idea for an interview. Their conversation in April 2014 began at

the independent bookstore BooksActually in Singapore, where Pang introduced him to a wide array of new Singaporean writing, and the interview then took place in a nearby cafe.

Yugin Teo I'd like to start off with *When the Barbarians Arrive* as it's your first collection published in the UK, and I want to look at 'Candles', as I was quite moved by it. In the poem you describe an intimate setting involving a discussion in Singlish between two brothers regarding a father figure who is not in the scene.[1] I was wondering if this resonated with particular childhood memories or were the characters an amalgamation of different people?

Alvin Pang It's quite literally adapted from a story my father told me about his childhood. I wrote this when I was in Iowa in 2002 for two reasons: one was that I was away from home and I had the necessary distance to think about this; secondly, I had been reading and listening to my fellow international writers at the Iowa International Writing Program. One of them was the Israeli writer Dorit Rabinyan, who had written beautiful novels based on her grandmother's life and her own family history as a part of a Jewish family in Iran. She is a Persian Jew and she talked about how she encountered tremendous discrimination in Israel because she and her family and people like her were seen to be too close to 'Arab' culture — even though they were clearly Jewish. The upshot of that is that she was upset enough to drop out of her medical studies to become a novelist instead. She decided that she was going to use the Hebrew language (which was not native to her, but her second language) better than anyone else in Israel. And she was going to use it to write stories about her family's way of life, which was very different from what was typically depicted of European Jewish history.

So that was her form of resistance and testimony. I was very taken by it and started thinking about my own family history, which is something that has often informed my work, although not quite in the same way. And I realised that my father had been telling me all

these stories over the years, but I had not hitherto regarded them as material for writing. Inspired by Dorit's tale and after reading her novels, I thought, 'Why not: let's give it a go.'

I soon found that the only way I could properly tell the story that became 'Candles' was to write it in Singlish. The characters in the piece would have been speaking Cantonese and Teochew at the time and not Singlish. But for me, Singlish approximates that sense of familial intimacy. It is the language of my hearth, as it were. I had not previously been successful in writing in Singlish — it had just felt forced. But to tell my family history using Singlish felt completely natural. Form and function and content came together. To this day I'm not sure I would use Singlish to tackle most other topics, but to write about family makes sense.

YT I'd like to ask you about Singlish as a voice for writers. I thought in your case it is interesting that only a small proportion of your work uses that kind of voice. What do you think about the current generation of poets and their use of Singlish? Do you think there will be a movement back to more standard forms of English or have they left that behind?

AP I think there was always a tradition going all the way back to our Independence of trying to capture the vernacular voice and sense of identity and culture.[2] Our particular forms of English have always been part of this larger experiment of creating, of charting – of not just documenting but consciously trying to construct – a notion of a national cultural identity. And Singaporean writers have been trying to do this for a while: for example, Arthur Yap's well-known poem '2 mothers in a h d b playground' or many of our short stories.

When I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, we didn't really have much exposure to literature produced in Singapore. We were reading the Shakespeares and the Wordsworths. If you were lucky, like me, you got to read some American writers; but there was nothing of

what was produced on our own soil. So we didn't get to know about all these experiments and we developed a sense of taste for literary practice that was very much informed by traditional Western canonical models.

YT Were you describing the earlier generation of Singaporean poets and writers from the 1970s and 1980s?

AP The earlier generation of writers in the 1960s and 1970s were more conscious of these different influences, of this sense of the vernacular and of how language could become a site for political discourse and contention; they were in some ways more experimental with it. My generation, on the other hand, was brought up reading other people's writing. There was never any overt discussion of language being a site of cultural contention. Postcolonial discourse was not part of our education; that was something we picked up later on at university, if at all. When I came back from university, I started looking around and realised we've been left out of how this discourse has played out on our own soil and that was when I started reading our own writers. My education left me with this notion that it's really hard to produce good writing with this particular vernacular. If you try writing a sonnet in Singlish it feels false to me, and authentic use of the tongue seems to be in drama and dramatic monologues. There was a disconnect between form and content where the use of Singlish was concerned. Which was why for ages I couldn't write in Singlish — until I realised if I were to tell my own family stories and return to that sense of that intimate space, maybe it would work. And it did work for me. For once, it didn't feel false or awkward.

Some of the more recent generation of writers have come to the same conclusions I have, I would say, having gone through more or less the same path of being cut off from this sense of discourse, and they are returning to the sorts of experiments embarked upon by Arthur Yap

and Kirpal Singh who were engaging in this before, which is to say: ‘Look we have this language, we’re perfectly confident in it and in ourselves, we know we can code switch and we know it’s not a matter of Singaporeans having poor English.’ You have to prove that you can use the Queen’s English as well as anyone, but on top of that you also have these other rich cultural nuances to draw from.

YT You mentioned earlier the theme of resistance. One way of creating resistance in writing is through reclaiming culture or language. I heard this in your reading of ‘Candles’ in 2013 for the Woolfson and Tay bookshop event for Singaporean writing in London. I was struck by the rhythms. There was something strangely performative about it, whilst also being very intimate. It’s a specific kind of voice that we don’t usually hear from your poetry.

AP Singlish, like may other Asian tongues, is performative by nature. It’s because the way we express something is part of the meaning. Tonal languages are like that; you can’t speak a Chinese language in monotone — beyond a certain point, you would be saying something completely different. So you do need the ups and downs and cadences. The words require it because it’s built into the language and when Singlish borrowed from these influences, it borrowed that aspect as well. This is also found in Malay.

YT Your poetry often reveals the intertwining nature of narratives, whether it is in mixing the contemporary with the mythical or childhood memories with religious imagery. For you, they are all stories, perhaps fables that we can learn from. Are stories important to your work?

AP I'm fascinated by the liminal; the spaces in-between; the transitional and its possibilities. I think that's where creativity and hope come from; I think that's where intellectual and emotional growth comes from; a space between narratives or myths. Sometimes the way to create or discover those spaces, those growth zones as it were, is to not only look in the chasms between narratives that don't quite connect, but in the overlap between narratives because they cancel each other out and create a neutral third space.

I like to give the example of religion and creed in Singapore, because we are a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. It's a lot more difficult to adopt any one mono-cultural narrative as '*the* narrative'. It's harder to take any one story as absolute if you've seen alternative ones — stories that are dramatically different but identical in weight, import and influence. I think our secularity comes from diversity, rather than absence. So it's not the liminality of absence, it's the liminality of range. I think that really is the Singaporean condition and the Singaporean opportunity. That's where our potential lies, if any exists at all; the fact that we are, in many profound ways, a kind of crossroads. I think our cultural value lies in containing all these different influences, which are often contradictory — seeing common threads between them, weaving something new from diverse strands. We embrace the fact that we are a chimera, as it were, of different influences. We take that as our birthright and our starting point. To a lot of cultures this is anxiety-inducing, the idea that you lack a sense of purity and groundedness. Our sense of groundedness is in having choice, range and all these different things that constitute a form of freedom. We're brought up holding not just six but maybe twelve contradictory things in our heads at the same time, to badly rephrase Fitzgerald.

YT So these liminal spaces of contradiction …

AP Not necessarily of contradiction, as they could overlap or override each other. Like ripples in a pond, they modify each others' trajectories. To contradict implies cancelling out; certainly some of it does, but sometimes what it does is push the forces in a third direction. When there are just so many things at work, it gets interesting. I think we are a classic laboratory for studying intersectionality, because we can see it at work every day. Everyone is at the confluence of so many different forces: ethnicity, gender, religion. All these in play at once. And while you can say the Chinese are a majority in Singapore, they're not the majority in the same way as the white majority in the USA, for example. So the forces that are exerted and the ripples that are created are different. I don't think we've even scratched the surface of what it represents.

YT I'm interested in how you meld religious imagery in your poetry, for example, in 'Salt', 'Merlign' and 'Incendium Amoris'. We've talked about Singaporean writing in general and the liminal spaces for that kind of productive work, but for your own work specifically, do you have a curiosity for religious imagery?

AP In the sense that I'm interested in the metacognitive reality of these narratives: how they are constructed, how they exert an influence on our thinking, on our language, on literature, on ideas of beauty. There obviously is something there that people care about or are drawn to or compelled by, something perhaps in common across all different models and modes of faith. If there's one place in the world where we can perhaps try to locate that, it would be Singapore. If there's one way in which I know how to deal with that, it would be as a writer, to get down and dirty with the language with which these ideas are constructed, through the language and through the images.

I feel I have a right to do this, first of all because I was brought up in this environment. On the other hand, part of my upbringing is to approach these things with a lightness of spirit. Rumi is a classic example. Why is he so popular? He returned this playfulness to language concerning the sacred. He returned sensuality, joy and delight, and a certain lightness of spirit to talking about God and the ineffable. So to me that sense, that Rumi-like approach to looking at the world, was pretty much the norm when I was growing up. The lines have hardened over time and I'm actually very sad that it has happened.

I'm suggesting that there are literary as well as sacred traditions in the world where this playfulness, this lightness, what can come across as irreverence, is very much a part of the deeply serious spiritual practice of many traditions and cultures. The Sufis were examples of that and also some Zen, Buddhist and Taoist traditions. I think there is wisdom in these cultures. It used to be a part of human affairs and human thought that you are prepared to play with your ideas and to question and qualify them. Cultivate detachment. It is the anti-fundamentalist impulse and it has to do with the growth zones again. If you're not prepared to admit that everything you know might be wrong, how will you ever be open to knowledge, hope, change, growth — all the things we care about?

If one were to say that faith requires rigidity, I would say that is a relatively modern dictum. There is for example a very powerful tradition of questioning, affect and play in Islam, a critical tradition that strikes me as having been forgotten or sidelined. I have deep respect for Christianity as a cultural force, but I have no stomach for a particular expression of contemporary Christianity that just takes itself so seriously. Where is the playfulness and erudite sense of the world, a sense of questioning, of the early theological fathers like Thomas Aquinas and Jerome? And what about the nuns who fell into trances …

YT When I read your UK collection *When the Barbarians Arrive*, the title poem caught my attention and stayed with me. I've heard you discussing this poem in an interview for the Scottish Poetry Library and you mentioned a specific setting — the second invasion of Iraq. When I first read the poem, and before listening to the interview, I thought you were writing about colonialism in the more general sense.

AP Oh yes, of course.

YT I just imagined Raffles and his ships arriving in Singapore and what the locals must be saying amongst each other.[3] I had this vivid picture that your poem brought to life.

I'd like to talk about another aspect of your work. *What Gives Us Our Names* is written in prose.

AP Is it?

YT Well, what is 'Candles'?

AP We were talking about liminality earlier. I don't believe in genres. Genres are marketing strategies and tactics. A book is placed on a particular shelf if a publisher thinks that customers are most likely to read it there. Ideally, I would love to show up in the fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry shelves all at once. I like work that defies easy definitions and pushes boundaries, whether it is with content or genre. Some of my favourite writers do this, including Lydia Davis, Italo Calvino and Jim Crace. Many of the really short pieces by Lydia Davis are prose poems; her publishers have chosen to file her under fiction for particular

reasons, but really, you could take some of her pieces and publish it in an anthology of prose poems and no one would bat an eyelid — good writing is good writing.

YT Staying a bit longer with *What Gives Us Our Names*, I feel there is something akin to a didactic quality, for want of a better description, in your writing, often told through the storytelling. I noticed this not just in this publication, but in your writing in general, which I think is part of what makes it unique. Have you considered this aspect of your writing? It is, I feel, a voice that is not imposing, but one that maintains some distance.

AP A friend once described my writing, in a positive way, as being predominantly whimsical at the start of a piece and then ending on a serious point. The idea that you invite the reader into a conversation with your particular ideas is something I like to describe. A lot of my writings are essentially forms of conversation. I am not trying to teach so much as present an argument or a possibility and to invite the contemplation of those ideas. Perhaps akin to a good lecture? In one of my poems I wrote: 'To read a book is to marry two solitudes'. The solitude of the writer is married to the solitude of the reader and it's a conversation that two people have across time; that has been my own reading experience. I cannot read a book without arguing with the author in the margins.

YT Can you describe your writing influences, both past and present?

AP That's difficult. I can tell you about some of the writers I have been very fond of who were early 'teachers'. Heaney was a huge influence; I can't emphasise that enough. What he taught me was that you can talk about quite complicated, important and meaningful issues in ways that aren't necessarily divorced from the basic music of language. So you can write

about farmers in Ireland, very earthy and ordinary things, and it can be expressed beautifully. On the aesthetic level it works, but it then also works as a thoughtful statement about the Irish Question. All these things can happen at the same time, you don't have to wave flags. So he was a great teacher, even on a very basic level of prosody and craft. I'm so glad I had the chance to catch him in person before he passed away. Our signatures are on the same desk — this was at Poetry Parnassus in the UK in 2012; I represented Singapore and he represented Ireland.

Other influences include Whitman and Dickinson, the father and mother if you like, of contemporary American verse; the effusiveness of one and the quirky restraint of the other.

YT What about Sylvia Plath and Marianne Moore?

AP Less so with Marianne Moore. But Plath, yes, I do think she is seriously underappreciated. I think she was a really skilled poet and, through a certain lens, remains a really sharp voice. She was one of my first introductions to contemporary poetry.

Pop music, especially indie rock, was also a big influence: The Smiths, Depeche Mode, U2. These bands were active in the '80s and demonstrated that you could be entertaining whilst simultaneously engaging with deeper issues than saccharine romantic relationships. And so I started writing indie rock lyrics and one of them won a school poetry competition, which gave me confidence to continue writing.

These days I'm fascinated by literary traditions that are more whimsical and non-linear. I'm very fond of the Balkans, some Korean and Japanese writers, but there is not enough work in translation.

YT Are you working on anything now?

AP Two recent volumes of my poetry in translation have just appeared in Europe: in Sweden and Macedonia, and Serbian, French and Spanish translations may be in the works. I've got a short story published that an agent wants me to spin into a novel. It features an invented south-east Asian language set in an imaginary future after Singapore has fallen and we've reverted (again) to maritime villages. I'm also working on a new collection of poems, which all so far have something to do with a sense of endings. Let's see how that turns out.

I have also been curating anthologies, which I see as important advocacy work — celebrating the work that we now have in Singapore. The point is to say 'Look, there's interesting stuff coming from Singapore. We're all part of this global conversation. Let's chat.' My recent anthology *UNION*, created in collaboration with Drunken Boat in the US, is an example of this: it brings together many different strands – race, culture, language, class, gender, nationality, power… it connects two diverse communities (Singapore and the US) that may not appear to have much in common, but which in fact demonstrate many of the prevailing tropes and tensions that characterise much of the human sphere in our time. Of course we do not go for the easy answers: instead we invite attention and suggest possibilities through a serendipitous and heady mixture. I've also just gotten involved as the Country Partner for the German lyrikline.org initiative, so I will be helping to curate audio recordings of Singaporean poets reading their work in their original languages for an international online archive. I'm glad to be able to put us on the world literary map in some way.

Arc Publications has asked me to put together an anthology of Singapore poetry, in translation as well as in English. I hope to look for writing that is fresh – not just historically important – by poets who have done something new with language based on their different backgrounds and influences. So, for example, I will feature a Malay poet who is heavily influenced by both the Sufi tradition as well as post-modernity and I think the end result is

very interesting. There are also some Chinese poets who are influenced by what's happening in north Asia, but with their own distinctively Nanyang (south-east Asian diasporic Chinese) slant. These are voices that the world doesn't get to hear enough of. All these disparate influences are filtered through the crossroads we call Singapore and that changes things.

YT I look forward to it. Thank you very much.

Notes

[1] Also known as Colloquial Singapore English, a variety of English commonly spoken in Singapore.

[2] Singapore became independent in 1965 following its separation from Malaysia.

[3] Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) was a British statesman and founder of Singapore in 1819.

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Alvin Pang

When the Barbarians Arrive

lay out the dead, but do not mourn them overmuch.

a mild sentimentality is proper. nostalgia will be expected on demand.

cremate: conserve land, regret no secrets. prepare ashes for those with cameras.

hide your best furniture. tear down monuments. first to go are statues with arms outstretched in victory, and then anything with lions.

it is safer to consort with loss, to know the ground yet suggest no mysteries.

purport illiteracy.

have at hand servants good with numbers. err in their favour between schemes.

keep all receipts out of sight. as soon as is proper, embrace their laws and decline all credit for your own.

confound their historians. give up the wrong recipe for ketupat, for otak.

lay claim to the tongue of roots, the provenance of trees. when the chiku blooms, tell them it is linden. when linden, tell them it is ginko.

recommend laxatives as love potions. attribute pain to the passage of hard feelings. there will be a surge

of interest in soothsaying. do not tell them how it will end, or when. progress, while difficult, is always being made.

on no account acknowledge what your folktales imply.

never deal in the dark unless you can see the whites of their eyes. when they speak of god

bow your head to veil piety, shame, laughter, or indifference.

dress your children like their long-dead elders. marry your daughters to them.

soon you will attend the same funerals.

This poem appears in When the Barbarians Arrive *published by Arc Publications (UK) in 2012. Permission to reprint the poem has been granted by the author.*