

Alvin Pang, ed. *Tumasik: Contemporary Writing from Singapore*. Iowa City, IA: Autumn Hill Books, International Writing Program at the University of Iowa & National Arts Council of Singapore. 243 pp. ISBN 978-0-9843036-2-5.

Most writers would rather write their own works than compile anthologies, particularly when they are not in academia where teaching a particular corpus of literature requires compilation of relevant sources in any case. So anthology editors who are also writers tend to create anthologies more as a service to the literary community and, in the case of national anthologies, as a service to one's country as well. In this regard, Singapore has been well served as several comprehensive anthologies have emerged in the last quarter of a century.

Given the multilingual context of Singapore, several early anthologies have adopted the approach of having four sections: Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English. The definitive anthology of Singapore poetry by Thumboo, Wong, Lee, Salikun and Arasu (1985) provides translations as well while its companion volume on Singapore fiction (Thumboo, Wong, Maaruf, Elangovan, Yap, Govindasamy, Wong, Salikun and De Souza, 1990) does not. In the 1990s, notable works include Thumboo, Wong, Ban, Govindasamy, Maaruf, Goh and Chan's (1995) *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation* and Goh's (1998) *Memories and Desires: A Poetic History of Singapore*. While Thumboo is still active in this area of work, for example, as the lead editor of two recent anthologies in 2009, among the younger generation of authors now based in Singapore, Alvin Pang has firmly established himself as a leader in the compilation of anthologies of Singapore poetry in English, having produced anthologies with Aaron Lee (2000) residing in Singapore and other editors in other countries (Sunico, Yuson, Lee and Pang, 2002; Kinsella and Pang, 2008; Pang and Fratus, 2009).

Pang's new anthology, *Tumasik* (2009), goes beyond his one decade of experience as a compiler of poetry anthologies in English as it includes not just poetry in English but also other literary genres and works originally written in the other three official languages in Singapore. Among the 39 writers featured, there are 19 presenting works originally written in English, 10 with their works translated from Chinese, 5 translated from Malay, 3 translated from Tamil and 2 with both their works originally written in English and also those translated from Malay or Chinese included. In *Tumasik*, the works translated from other languages are only available in English without a parallel version in the original language used. They are ordered alphabetically according to the authors' names and not segregated into four ethnic sections as in some previous anthologies. This in itself is a political statement or at least indicative of a wish to enhance the intercultural flow among the four literary sub-communities:

Unlike many anthologies of Singaporean writing, I have elected not to list the writers by their working language... these are all writers from Singapore – their work deserves to be read as contributions to our collective intellectual, cultural and social discourse as a nation....
(Pang, *Tumasik* 17)

Non-segregation appears to be a recent trend in anthology compilation in Singapore. In *Fifty on 50*, edited by Thumboo et al., the poems are also not divided linguistically. As Thumboo notes in his Preface to the volume, “after 50 years it would be invidious to segregate them linguistically.” Thumboo, however, does provide the original texts, not just the translations. Writers and readers appear to have different opinions about whether it would be helpful to have both versions of a creative piece presented in parallel within the same volume. So Pang certainly should not be faulted for not doing so, particularly when he is including extracts from other genres which tend to be longer; providing parallel texts for such might make the volume too unwieldy for the general readership, which the book seems to aim to appeal to particularly. Such an audience is also unlikely to be bothered that it is generally not possible to gauge the approximate historical setting of a creative piece without referring to the biographical data at the end of the book. Neither will the average reader worry about the relative chronology of the writers’ texts since they are likely to enjoy the works in themselves. Those more interested in scholarly research on Singapore writing can well consult Poon, Holden and Lim (2009), which provides the historical development of Singapore writing as a whole from before 1965 to the present time, but only of writing in English even though “a few significant early texts in translation that have become important to English-language writers” (xxiv) are also included.

Tumasik fills the gap between a celebratory text like Thumboo et al. (2009a) and a researcher’s volume like Poon, Holden and Lim (2009) and provides a valid representation of the Singapore psyche as it includes a wide spectrum of literary voices from the more recent generations. These voices blend one into another making the span of several decades almost irrelevant in that, whether the authors are younger or older, there is at the core of their writing the essence of Singapore presented in all honesty and without pretension. Even in the criticism of some of the societal developments in the more affluent Singapore, such as the insensitivity towards domestic helpers (in Suchen Christine Lim’s “Gloria”) or a law student dolling herself up as a “social escort” (in Philip Jeyaretnam’s “Best Face”), one is persuaded, as by Gwee Li Sui, that these writers as a whole are evoking the dreams and non-dreams of the average Singaporeans who might feel “a wish/ of soul amidst the generations of sights and sounds/ self-devouring and the marching thoughts” even as they rediscover

from day to day “the weight of the world,” the Singapore world as a globalised city state.

Agnes S.L. Lam
The University of Hong Kong

Works Cited

- Goh, Robbie B.H., ed. *Memories and Desires: A Poetic History of Singapore*. Trans. Chitra Sankaran, Sharifah Maznah Syed Omar and Robin Loon. Singapore: Unipress, The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore, 1998.
- Kinsella, John and Alvin Pang, eds. *Over There: Poems from Singapore and Australia*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2008.
- Pang, Alvin and Aaron Lee, eds. *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2000.
- Pang, Alvin and Tiziano Fratus, eds. *Double Skin: New Poetic Voices from Italy and Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009.
- Pang, Alvin, ed. *Tumasik: Contemporary Writing from Singapore*. Iowa City: Autumn Hill Books and International Writing Program, 2009.
- Poon, Angelia, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, eds. *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009.
- Sunico, Ramon, Alfred Yuson, Aaron Lee and Alvin Pang, eds. *Love Gathers All: The Philippines-Singapore Anthology of Love Poetry*. Manila: Anvil Publishing; Singapore: Ethos Books, 2002.
- Thumboo, Edwin, Isa Kamari, Chia Hwee Pheng and K.T.M. Iqbal, eds. *Fifty on 50*. Singapore: National Arts Council (with the support of Ethos Books), 2009a.
- Thumboo, Edwin, Wong Yoon Wah, Ban Kah Choon, Naa Govindasamy, Shaharuddin Maaruf, Robbie Goh and Petrina Chan, eds. *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation. Anthology of Singapore Poetry (1984-1995)*. Trans. Ho Chee Lick, Chao Ye Min, Shu Chunshen, Bao Zhiming, Alan Hunter, Shaharuddin Maaruf and Elangovan. Singapore: Unipress, The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore, 1995.
- Thumboo, Edwin, Wong Yoon Wah, Lee Tzu Pheng, Masuri bin Salikun and V. T. Arasu, eds. *The Poetry of Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore National Printers under the sponsorship of the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1985.
- Thumboo, Edwin, Wong Yoon Wah, Shaharuddin Maaruf, Elangovan, Arthur Yap, Naa Govindasamy, Wong Meng Voon, Masuri bin Salikun and Dudley De Souza, eds. *The Fiction of Singapore*. Singapore: Unipress, 1990.

Thumboo, Edwin, Yeow Kai Chai, Enoch Ng, Isa Kamari and Seetha Lakshmi, eds. *Reflecting on the Merlion: An Anthology of Poems*. Singapore: National Arts Council, 2009b.