

Su Wei-chen, *Island of Silence* [1994]. Trans. Jeremy Tiang. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 278 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-7994-8.

Recently translated into English by the short story writer Jeremy Tiang, Su Wei-chen's 1994 novel, *Island of Silence*, catalogues the rise of three Asian tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan) alongside the infusion of Western cultures and the tensions around emerging sexual mores tied to traveling bodies. This "catalogue" can also be called a remnant. The novel's story of a mixed race woman who desires foreign men to save her from a life caught between the emptiness of her "rootless" background and her alienated corporate life, all seems a bit too familiar by 2014. In the context of the War on Terror and the economic collapse in 2007, the novel seems to resemble a time akin to 1920s modernism, when novels concerning the alienation and insincerity of the new middle class can only be read with the ominous cloud of the Great Depression closing in. Here the main character's alienation and lack of an authentic identity seem to resemble the flurry of confusion and excitement of being cast on the world stage as part of an "Asian miracle." Read in 2014, the novel provides a sometimes quaint and sometimes agonising look back at a not so dissimilar time, when capitalist growth was accompanied by self-aggrandising invocations of cosmopolitan belonging.

The novel's main character, the twenty-six year old Chen-mian, epitomises the fleeting, soulless transcultural mutt of the 90s, when Asian leaders like Lee Kuan Yew were making claims that without "Asian values," Singaporean citizens would float off like boats without an anchor. Chen-mian's transcultural identity naturalises her into a cosmopolitan business labour wrought from her relationship to colonial history: she is mixed race, interested only in foreign men, speaks multiple languages fluently, has lived in multiple countries, sees herself as "rootless," and on top of all this, she describes herself as young and gorgeous. All of these qualities she exploits for her position, as she admits to herself that "if this identity were to become unprofitable one day, then she would alter it" (108). Chen-mian's disidentification with any recognisable national identity, naturally, pushes her to identify as a transcultural who has little less to define her than her class position.

This struggle with identity gives the novel a unique "double" structure, as Chen-mian's anxieties over her lack of an authentic self produces an imagined double, a more genuine Chen-mian. While the "real" Chen-mian performs multiple identities for the sake of a foreign company, the "fake" Chen-mian refuses such performances and leads a "straightforward existence, gifted to sniff out real feelings" (12). Rather than be burdened with indecision, the "genuine" Chen-mian "gets married in a flurry of excitement, not a care in the world" (12).

The “genuine” Chen-mian fulfils the “real” Chen-mian’s desire for something genuine among the cosmopolitan, jet-setting class. Almost every other character in the novel also contrasts the real Chen-mian’s dedication to corporate life in their relationships with academia: Chen-mian’s sister and brother-in-law are both faculty at Universities; Chen-mian’s primary love interest, Danny, is working towards his doctorate; and other characters are working on various theses or are part of an education institution. Surrounded by characters engaged with scholarship and research, Chen-mian wrestles with the emptiness of the corporate world, working as “a roving consultant for an international perfume business” meant to help companies “understand the [Asian] market better” (38).

As a woman characterised by alienation from both her culture and her family, Chen-mian finds meaning in islands because they are “small and complete in their solitude” (16). But the islands she lives in (Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) are anything but isolated – they are postcolonial spaces characterised by their interdependence upon each other and upon larger “mainland” powers (China and the United States, namely). Rather than provide isolation, these islands are transit sites where global capital and global culture flow freely, and their close proximity to mainland states (unlike, say, the Hawaiian chain), makes “escape” ever possible. The novel’s depiction of islands as spaces of solitude, however, seems not to evade discourses of postcolonial history, but can be seen as a direct symptom of it. Chen-mian lives on islands because she has “no attachment to any land; these unvarying roots were terrifying to her” (97). And Chen-mian herself – a product of racial mixture, migration and adult orphanhood – seems to resemble this absence of “authentic culture,” since she longs for something genuine among the circuitous routes of global capital. As former colonies, these islands have relied on their connection to, not isolation from, greater powers. As economic centres, they provide Chen-mian with a connection to “foreign” cultures that provide some escape from her trauma.

While the symptomatic relation of Chen-mian’s alienation to colonial history may spark the interest of some readers, the novel mostly bypasses colonial references to widely accept popularised and stereotyped depictions of these islands. To Chen-mian, the only genuine history worth knowing is characterised by monoethnic beliefs and origins. She does not even see colonial history. She calls Singapore “a country without any history,” and only goes to live there because “she needed somewhere boring” (131). This lack of history also functions as a business opportunity when Chen-mian takes advantage of the elite who feel “empty inside,” and she invests in “a combined arts venue and psychiatric treatment centre” (132). Rather than see colonial mixture as a genuine history, Chen-mian (and the interests of global capital) seek to mine feelings of alienation by providing “arts” and “treatment.” Perhaps the tone of the novel’s translation fails in moments like these, as events of comic wit are

not accompanied by an ironic, sarcastic or cynical tone that would push the reader to a more critical outlook. Instead, the novel's repetitive reference to islands as simply places of alienation and solitude are mediated through sentimentality, and are thus left unquestioned. Eventually, everything can be referred to as an island: sleep (213), faces, and naked bodies (163). The one thing readers don't get about islands is their vulnerability to colonial influence and imperial management.

While Chen-mian's desire for genuineness seems bound to her "rootless" identity, the novel expresses this theme mostly through Chen-mian's experiences with romance and sex. The other, more "genuine" Chen-mian is invented only after the real Chen-mian's "westerner" father – remembered for his "abundant hair" – cheats openly on her mother, who then kills him, and is sentenced to life imprisonment. When Chen-mian is twenty-five, her mother commits suicide (5). The "genuine" Chen-mian then emerges as a response to these acts, but with less psychological wounding. Her greatest pleasure comes "from making love" (49) and "like a demon, she was unable to refuse sex" (76). As a direct contrast to the "real" Chen-mian's mother, the "genuine" Chen-mian does not care if her husband, Feng Yi, cheats on her: "She asked only one thing of [men]: sincerity" (81).

What both Chen-mians have in common is that their anxieties for being "rootless" are most often expressed through their sexual desire for white, transcultural men, who are unattached to the corporate world. The first and most prominent of these men is a German traveller, Danny, who, in the "real" Chen-mian's world, is "six years younger than her," and becomes idealised for his indifference to money and shopping. Like other mystical foreigners who meet her attraction, "they seemed able to stay a long time in a place that held no memories for them, not working or pursuing anything just being" (21). Danny signifies an exotic figure characterised through his untraceable contradictions. He claims to love islands, especially Guam (another postcolonial site), but also has a phobia of rain. One wonders how Danny could deal with the sudden afternoon storms of Taiwan, the typhoons and monsoons that flood streets and create mudslides – but this all seems beside the point, as the mystical function of his contradictory interests take hold of Chen-mian, and soon Danny becomes heavily invested with magical aura: "his whole person [was] a burst of blue light.... Was he a god?" (30).

In the life of the "genuine" Chen-mian, Danny is replaced by the Taiwanese American Zu (who is sometimes called Danny). Zu's cosmopolitan belonging is signified by his accent and body. He is "tall, and spoke Mandarin without a trace of a Western accent, although his mannerisms and expressions were fairly American" (55). Zu's erotic magic matches Danny's, as he makes love in "a burst of starfire [that] seemed to dance all around them" (222). As with the colonial history of islands, one suspects that in the original Mandarin,

this image of the “god-like” foreigner is paired with a cynical or exaggerated tone. But the translation is matter-of-fact, and there is no tethering of the god-like westerner with humour or critical suspicion.

One hopes that the exotic depictions of foreign white men may add a glimmer of critical thought by inverting colonial desires for Asian women, yet this hope easily fades out when the privilege of the Western foreign traveller gets confused for independence and strength. The Australian, Sid, is

younger than [Chen-mian], but was of the new breed of internationalized global citizens who tend to start acquiring experience early.... Yet Sid himself did not have much time for culture.... He was Australian.... He loved chewing gum, and persisted in his habit even though it was not allowed in Singapore. (Long hair was frowned upon too). What most attracted Chen-mian to him was his self-confidence. (179)

Here the parading of one’s privilege as a Western white man, where one can break customs, moral codes and even laws without a second thought, is confused for self-confidence, manifesting in pleasurable eye-candy and admiration for the “defiant” foreigner (and thus admonishment for “servile” Asian men). While the colonial romance of the powerful white man and the exotic Asian women seems inverted, the positions of privilege remain the same.

Perhaps the novel’s most timely theme is its exposure of seemingly Western sexualities as a constant anxiety even for those who fetishise western cultures. Sid’s bisexuality is at first read as an expression of Western freedom (179), but like all the queer desires in the novel, Sid’s sexual desires are eventually marked as an excessive freedom far from the “magic” and “eroticism” of Danny or Zu. Sid instead becomes a figure of possible contagion, who pursues Danny “like a lover” (191). Since Chen-mian does not use condoms or contraception, the likelihood of her having HIV from Sid begins to dawn on her. When Sid is finally outed, his career is “utterly destroyed” (235). As for the other prominent queer character in the novel, the “genuine” Chen-mian’s brother, Chen-an, is also depicted as a tragic gay man whose story ends with his homosexuality appearing as a psychological disease (230). Queer desire thus shapes the limits of western freedom and maps its excesses. The novel’s attitudes towards homosexual desire waver from depicting it as a tragic exposure of cultural prejudice, to depicting it as a cautionary tale about what might happen if we become “too much like them.”

For the most part, the novel sticks to cosmopolitan heteronormative romances, where the meeting of the passionate and “authentic” Western (white) man and the sterile but business-savvy Asian woman seems predestined. Whereas Danny makes love with freedom, Chen-mian acts as a literally sterile receiver, as she never bothers with contraception, and accepts his seed without

hesitation. Danny's opposition to the corporate world both forecloses some anxieties from Chen-mian's position in it while opening up new ones: "Chen-mian thought of the natural scent that came off Danny – and how her company was working to destroy it" (38). The novel rarely denies how racialised their destined romance is, as Danny carries around a ring destined for his future wife, but it is far too small for a European woman. Of course, it fits Chen-mian perfectly.

The romance between the "exotic" Western man and the "sterile" Asian woman seems most cruel when Chen-mian's Westerner lovers are compared to "soulless" Asian men. Zu/Danny makes unrestrained love, as his "soul being free made his body unusually passionate. He couldn't stop giving her love, an inexhaustible supply" (229). In contrast, the "genuine" Chen-mian's affair with an Asian director, Luo Yi, is depicted as uncreative and disingenuous: he "placed too much emphasis on technique, neglecting his body's own instincts. It was more like sex than making love" (59). Later in the novel, after Chen-mian has nearly forgotten about Luo Yi, she happens upon him with a younger woman, and finds him "shallow... people of his type, having abandoned passion, probably had nothing left in them.... What a waste" (219). This condemnation against "people of his type" seems aggravatingly hypocritical, given that both Chen-mians are fully capable of having affairs and both have a habit of sleeping with younger, foreign men.

Another prominent Asian male figure in the novel, the "genuine" Chen-mian's husband, Feng Yi, plays the role of a passive monk who is feminised and honoured for his lack of passion when he agrees to "accompany her to have her abortion" from Zu/Danny (234). The last Asian man in the novel, Dolan, is an Indian man depicted as an outright patriarch. As Dolan attempts to make Chen-mian his third wife, she finds herself "becoming an accessory, her life shrinking to shopping and idle chatter... her only bid for safety was to have a child, grabbing at marriage and a man" (243). Meanwhile, "the money flowed from Dolan's bank account into hers" (243). Chen-mian's ascendance up the corporate ladder leaves her in a boy's world, where "her ability was invisible... [and] they [the men] quickly reduced her to her ornamental value" (244). While this may open a transnational feminist critique of global capitalist culture, "patriarchy" here seems reserved only for stereotypes of "soulless" Asian businessmen. Chen-mian's fascination for Danny as a figure of sexual freedom seems clear, yet when Chinese men find similar fascination for Danny by buying him a "huge lobster," Chen-mian thinks that it "seemed too much like lowering themselves to gain a white man's favour" (207). Meanwhile, Chen-mian's own "god-like" references to Danny and her sexual arousals are read as acts of freedom.

While reading the book, it seemed clearer with every erotic adventure among hot Western men that I was not the ideal audience for this novel. From

the novel's odd claims to authentic differences between males and females (Chen-mian muses that "the greatest good fortune women have is their pure femininity") (208), to its unique view on contraception (Chen-mian never uses any and seems indifferent to it), I was constantly anxious that something was lost in translation. Even though the book is about an Asian businesswoman, it seems to dismally fail the Bechdel feminist test, in that almost every concern in it seems devoted to the men (or lack of men) in Chen-mian's life. Again, I was not the ideal audience member. But perhaps, I thought, if this story was reversed, and featured a queer mixed race male (like myself) and his scandalous adventures with mystic and exotic transcultural queer folk, I might take a different view. Reflecting on this, I suppose the novel exposes the gendered dimensions of globalisation, where masculinised states, companies and technologies dominate feminised territories and peoples. In that sense, a Westerner like myself reading a story about a cosmopolitan and alienated Asian woman who exoticises western men may have some rupturing effect. Or, failing this, the novel may just reinforce notions of white western men saving Asian women by bringing them into the larger protectorate of cosmopolitan culture.

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