

Daryl Lim Wei Jie, *A Book of Changes*. Singapore: Maths Paper Press, 2016. 77 pp. ISBN 978-9811-11-238-6.

Many of us currently following the Singapore literature scene, while celebrating the unprecedented half-decade or so tsunami-renaissance of emerging Singapore writing, have sometimes also wondered if a little too much so-so writing might be indiscriminately being published in Singapore. The six poetry volumes recently published by the Maths Paper Press Ten Year Series, to which Daryl Lim's first collection *A Book of Changes* is part, happily provide us with some robust evidence suggesting to the contrary. Joshua Ip and his team's long and rigorous process of sifting through scores of local poetry MSS, further scrutiny of the longlisted, followed by an intense manuscript boot camp and other numerous critiques suggests a responsible and envisioning movement within the local literary community selecting, critiquing and fostering perhaps the very best poetry currently being written in the island-state: a kind of canon-forming before public reader reception. Why of these six volumes I find Daryl Lim's *A Book of Changes* some of the most accessible, readable and resonant of this selective, refined body of poetry, I hope will become clear below.

Though a heavy Heaney user since the late seventies, two local writers, Wong May and Boey Kim Cheng, seem to have recently hindered my picking up Seamus Heaney's poems once again, albeit for totally different reasons. Daryl Lim, a younger poet-historian with demonstrable roots in Singapore's democratised local makes me want to pick up Heaney once again, not least due to Lim's making fresh, imaginative poetic connections with Singapore's often forgotten, evaded past, pre- and/or counter-history, digging deeper into the island's archaeology and narratives and engaging scrupulously with the often troubling issues generated and exposed thereby.

Such historical moments include midway through the volume "Adnan," a meditative poem addressed to the shade of Malay World War II hero Adnan bin Saidi, hero and tortured martyr of the battle for Pasir Panjang, conjured up almost perversely by Lim, and despite eye-witness evidence, as a second St Sebastian:

By your feet you were hung, he said,
but I cannot help seeing you
in that pose of martyred ecstasy,
upon the brink of some world remade. (24)

But via a shift from renaissance Christianity to bloody Roman augury the poem ends abruptly far from easy nationalistic confection of SG "total defence" continuities, and rather in recognition of usually glossed troubling issues,

disruptions and differences in the forging of what we now call multiracial, postcolonial Singapore.

Like Lim Bo Seng,
you did not fight for Singapore:
the ideals you died for
we dare not claim. (24)

History looms so large (and small), it's not a surprise to discover that Daryl Lim is an Oxbridge trained history postgraduate. The title "A Book of Changes," simultaneously alludes to the ancient Chinese divination text, the I Ching, as well as historical changes that seem in hyperdrive in unnuancedly forward-looking Singapore. Sarah and Schooling's characteristically minimalist cover design for the series, eight squares of brown short and longer blocks, making one larger square resemble I Ching divination patterns, or the blocks of mass produced high-rise public housing that history has led Singapore's middle class majority to reside in. The titles of the 33 poems already suggest engagements with, and interrogations of, the past. Indeed Lim's academic specialism permeates this volume in intriguing ways. From the first poem, "Meanwhile," Lim seems to demonstrate the tedious predictability and repetitiveness of "big" top-down history, while revelling in the poetry of a plethora of national-personal mundane, overlooked details. While this collection isn't always going to be a walk in the park (as a non-player I'm still struggling with "Mahjong"!) it repays repeated, closer reading. Even in the first poem there are the kind of arresting, quotable, funny passages I often search vainly for in Singapore poetry: "Taboos/will come and go, whether bare/breasts or dog-eating or incest" (1). As in the equally exciting poetry of David Wong, there are also satisfyingly subtle, intimate, democratised small indicators of Singapore from Chilli sauce to park connector to tai tai to auntie to quotidian Singapore turns of phrase for real.

Lim's poems certainly tease a kind of top-down Singaporean "Social Studies" anxiety of what is recorded and what isn't. Take for instance his poetic series "21 July 1964" which takes its title from the first of Singapore's "sixties Malay-Chinese race riots," whose shadow, if expediently ignored surely still haunts Singapore's national narrative, not least that narrative's un-nuanced and incontestable racial harmony policy. I wouldn't be surprised if this is the first time Singapore poetry has so explicitly interrogated the riots. The poem, among others, deserves a sustained academic reading by itself. The fourth section of the poem concludes with a voice opining "I am unable to find it anywhere in the records," gesturing as Lim does repeatedly to the unreliability and incompleteness of officially recorded as opposed to other, democratised, more tangibly human, oral and thus less controllable histories. This intimation has general but also clearly specific Singaporean applications. In his arresting, enjoyable collection,

Lim writes with maturity and humour but also a feeling of purposeful, searching honesty in Singapore's current climate of not quite fear. At times, in passages not so much Lim's poetic style, but his poetic stance seems reminiscent of Heaney's struggle to make sense, find his place writing as a spectator but also as a decent, responsible and conscious, if not necessarily, conventionally religious, participant in "The Troubles" as both history and the current historical moment continually unfold. Lim taps a rich seam of glossed, jettisoned, now troublesome parts of the local past such as those two lions that once stood on Merdeka bridge as seen by Konfrontasi terrorists of 1964 fleeing a botched bomb attempt, "Bung Karno will have our balls" (40). The bridge at Kallang seems to be part of the poet's locality: see, for example, "Running by the Kallang," as the poet jogs past and waves tentatively back at congregated migrant Bangladeshi workers.

The "thick" micro social historical data privileged by Lim runs quietly counter to the top down Singapore story everyday Singaporeans are normally subjected to. Lim's possible echoing of seventies, continental microhistory might suggest something of a left-wing critiquing stance we catch little of hitherto in traditionally national, or politically ambivalent Singapore poetry, but sometimes encounter in Wong May's more recent poetry. However, Lim, a younger poet, of another (local) time and space, in the main posits investigations distinctly mediated through passing time and texts rather than immediately experienced contemporary events. Perhaps events experienced within by a post-1980s consummately reined-in Singapore where "things" hardly ever really happen requires engagements with a rich, less tameable local past to set off the subtler minute shades of "now." I like Lim's confident conjuring of a past most of us will now need to struggle to recall, as Singapore changes, forgets at hyperspeed: nightsoil, the smoke from suspiciously caused kampung fires, Rajaratnam reading, exiled to the loo.

Despite Lim's scholarly credentials, these poems make for some of the least intellectually precious Singaporean poetry I have encountered, the language never so sustainably esoteric to outweigh Lim's attempt to communicate something unique of this and other Singaporean moments memorably, arrestingly, afresh to his readers. And however deeply we touch upon history or historiography, Lim always seems to have one foot at least planted firmly on or in red soil, developed pavement. The poems reminded me in places of Jon Gresham's prose, the shocking or the bizarre described matter-of-factly in everyday fashion, even in a Singlish more subtly redolent of now and the street for real than Arthur Yap's much cited "two mothers in a hdb playground." In "Kangchu" (the name gesturing to the rare Singaporean constants of hierarchical power and economics), Lim uses an experimental stanzaic form to simultaneously ventriloquise a contemporary Singaporean worker's voice juxtaposed with that of a nineteenth gambier worker in the Straits Settlements. This juxtaposition of very different times generates fertile jarring sparks, notably the very idea that despite

the hermeneutical gap between nineteenth and twenty-first century Singapore, other continuities might include authoritarian unapproachable bosses, meaningless work, cultural aridity, a continuing indefinable disconnect between Chinese workers and a beautiful alien island, that is echoed in “To an Unknown Ancestor.”

In “An Argument for Chinese Folk Religion,” Lim’s tongue-in-cheek (or is it?) perverse celebrating of vibrant Chinese aspects of Singaporean traditional folk culture (Arthur Yap’s term “folkways” springs to mind here), an audaciously convincing case is made at a time in which such folk aspects are slowly dying out, if still very much present.

Therefore trade joss and roast duck for a fortunate life,
lion dance way last year’s bad luck,
tuck the talisman behind clear plastic
and don’t forget to ask for numbers. (10)

One might note here a poet unenslaved by form or rhyme, confidently but carefully feeling for his own music. As with Yap, there is a very Chinese Singaporean flavour in subject matter and perhaps theme. It’s there in “a visit to choa chu kang columbarium, 12 Jan 2014.” I’ve lived cater corner to this columbarium for almost a decade, but clearly Lim can ventriloquise in postcard-like stanzas a more intimate, informed troubled-satirical experience of this local heartland space.

hey, ah tai, it’s been
half an hour: have you
had your fill of joss?
hope the rice was nice.
we’ll be back next year. (7).

Perhaps the notion of SG living and dead both in their cells isn’t over-fresh, but Lim extends the idea nicely:

don’t worry, ah tai
the living too are all
in cells: housing blocks,
cubicles, excel sheets,
dating apps and forms.

The poem segueways nicely into “to an unknown ancestor.” Indeed, the patterned arrangement of the poems in this collection reminds me of a well put together double LP. The equally specific location this time is an older, seaside

temple echoing the cyclical repetitive aspect of life history and importance of place evident in the first poem:

Here where the loam is daily
made and unmade, where the sea
Unburdens and coaxes (8)

Lim's striking, unsettling phrase "golem of the kiln" fired from Singapore marine clay evokes again a sense of ancestors exiled in a strange land, if now home, truly, echoing the biblical: "by the river you wept." Apart from the ancestral image, little survives from the past aside from the anonymous "hint of a fingerprint" which seems to echo the "superannuated grime" of Arthur Yap's "old house on ang siang hill." In "Kopi Gau Siu Dai" Lim evokes the power and joy of both coffee and the officially marginalised Hokkien dialect. It's interesting, refreshing I think, that unlike some of the companion collections, Lim provides no endnotes or glossary. A quick laptop surf will confront you with say the Hindu-Indonesian *kala* meditated upon in a later poem. In "Kopi Gau Siu Dai," Kopi Uncles appear as "Hainan baristas" (9) which might sound tragically SG hipster but perhaps plays on barista's actual meaning: "bartender," simultaneously gesturing to Singapore's leaders' anxieties and proscriptions over the public sale of alcohol, as well as the nation's unnuanced gesturing to all things Italian as somehow indicative of progress, cosmopolitanism. But uncles also seem to appear as democratised repositories of Singapura arcana. I love the direct power of a line like line "Gau, like the blood of coolies" as well as the deployment of the monosyllabically unfamiliar: "Fug" (17) and "bracts" (30).

In "Dreaming of the City of Books," something of the national-historical is explored through that peculiarly Singaporean increasing contradiction in terms, a neighbourhood bookshop. The first lines of the final section seem to generate memorable poetry from one of the most depressing and disturbing aspects of hdb living – all your higher Neighbours waste waters passing through your demesne:

Next morning, I awake to sounds of water
flowing through the block's secret sluices. (18)

The next poem, "Garden City," plays on a troubling national fiction. Surely the speaker is THE pioneer, LKY ventriloquised with no wish to genuinely merge with development's rival, nature:

But some things are
beyond control. The *mempat*
I planted in sixty-three
is gone. Soon I will be,

like the wife. Scatter me so
I don't feed the trees. (20)

“Applying for an Invasion” seems a Yapesque parody of government speak, while taking things considerably further in form: a sideways printed, ruthlessly redacted or mutilated official letter, spaced with rigorous academic squared ellipses. I wondered for a moment if the poem originated in actual ministry correspondence. “Armllet with the head of a *kala*, National Museum,” perhaps rather like “To an Unknown Ancestor” does something Heaneyesque with an intimate, alien unfamiliar local ancient object, work of art – imaginatively bringing life and meat as a poet should to Singapore’s orphaned history pre-1819 – retrospectively generating it from a Singapore princesses’ arm jewellery featuring the Hindu god of time.

That grim immortal mask
worn by temples in Java was borne
on a spider of beaten gold that once clung
to your slim, shining arm. (23)

I am a little disturbed it took me so long to notice the haunting repetition of the last line of each stanza.

“Sang Nila Reclaims the Throne” indulges in “what ifs” – alternative history, alternative here and now – the mythical Sang Nila’s return to present day Singapore. President and Prime Minister have arrows in their backs, the 4D queues are longer, everyone wants to read the history books “But most of them only had a single unilluminating paragraph” (25). The epigraph comprises of the last line of Alfian Sa’at’s “Singapore, you are not my Country.” Thus Lim’s “Sang Nila” responds, picking up where one of Singapore’s controversial and critiquing poems stopped. So this collection is not only influenced by, but also extends the work of Arthur Yap, Alvin Pang and Alfian Sa’at, some of Singapore’s best, if not so national, poets. There are some deft, funny touches in this imaginative, clever poem: the minister of culture, a secret double agent, survives the regime change:

[Sang Nila] enquired about the state of his kingdom and successors. No one seemed to know anything, and so the presence of the Royal Historian was demanded. Someone found the number for the National Heritage Board. (25)

In a comparatively slim volume Lim exhibits an enviable range of theme, subject and form. In “Upsizing” Singapore progress to bigger and better seems gently mocked through gargantuan portions of very local food, including milo dinosaur. In “Bougainvilleas,” the ever-present flower is envisaged as “Gnarled wire, fencing/the condo-dwellers from the plebs” (30) with a glancing, telling reference

to ixora. In “Art of Memory” (31) the ventriloquised domestic paternal national voice seems less sure now than it was in nineties. Lim can convincingly evoke last generation Singlish and can deliver deadpan, “By the rubbish dump where the workers sleep.” Lim writes memorable, evocative poetry delivering genuinely something of Singapore relevant and pertinent.

... The man who screamed at four yesterday
will scream at four again today. And the scent of belacan will pervade the
block. (31)

“On the Impossibility of a Perfect Language (1819?),” borne perhaps out of one of Lim’s part-time jobs, seems to explore mutually related levels of cultural cringe: the graduate of “en-yoo-es,” a Malay fellow female employee, who is described as “irrepressible and lovely,” has issues with aunties saying “N-block.” This is followed by would-be elite attitudes to Shakespeare, who like the English language itself is misunderstood and prohibitively fetishised. There is tickling satire as Mandarin, the latter linguistic apple of LKY’s eye, is described as “the tyrannical dialect of Beijing” (14). And yet the poem also picks up on the potential and enduring power of the democratised masses, even in an authoritarian state: even English paired with mandarin supposedly dominant, impregnable uberlanguages are given “unexpected shade” by what ordinary Singaporean speakers bring to them “rendering artificial barrenness fertile” (14).

Lim’s poem “Ang Siang Hill” surely can’t help but be read after Arthur Yap’s c. 1967 “Old House at Ang Siang Hill” – complementing fifty years on – but as with the earlier Alfian related example, Lim seems to extend things; while Yap hinted at government development, Lim imagines past that development to future nature reshaping development itself, if not its architect.

Caught in paved
no-man’s-land, I fear the earth
also has redevelopment plans. (46)

“Last Rites” an extended poem dwells mediatedly upon void deck Chinese funerals and thus seems related to other poems discussed earlier about local columbarium, temple and ancestor. So many are cramped together in the heartlands and dominated by “pioneers” that life often resembles one extended noisy Chinese funeral.

Over half the poems in the collection have appeared elsewhere previously, and have then been presumably revised, giving a professional robust quality of the poems. Lim’s while a serious local poetry collection is also a page turner, never a chore, like reading *One Fierce Hour* or *Commonplace. A Book of Changes* in its illumination of the present through democratised recovered voices and

imaginings of present and past makes for a truly promising debut collection that signals both a healthy future and a decisive skip forward for Singapore poetry.

Works Cited

Arthur Yap. "old house at ang siang hill." *Poetry Singapore* 1 (August 1968): 54.

Angus Whitehead
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Email: richard.whitehead@nie.edu.sg