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Island of Silence

by

Su Wei-chen

TRANSLATED BY JEREMY TIANG



ONE

Chen-mian always remembered what happened after ‘their’ 30th birthday, the day she left Taipei to return to Hong Kong.

In those years, the most significant events in her life involved changing cities. At the end of June, on her way to the airport, she noticed the azaleas were gone. When she had arrived, they had been in full bloom on either side of the expressway.

The Taiwanese holiday had lasted two whole months, a solo trip – just her and ‘her Chen-mian’. Her existence was a blank at this time. The year she turned 25, her mother died in prison; the grandmother who brought her up died three years ago; her younger sister was far away in England. As for her father – her only memory of him was from the age of five, a pale-faced man with abundant hair who never lost his temper.

There was another Chen-mian. This began during her last prison visit to her mother, before she graduated from university and left the country. Some people like to fantasise about inhabiting a different space, from which they can spy on others; she wasn’t like that, she didn’t want anything false. She had to see her own destiny unfold – but through a separate self, starting in different circumstances. Her creation: A Huo Chen-mian whose experiences were opposite to hers.

She once asked that other Chen-mian, “Do you want this life?” Chen-mian was silent, then said, “At least someone’s asking that question.” Her first conversations with Chen-mian turned out virtually obstacle-free. After that, their destiny belonged to both of them.

Before her mother died, everything she knew about their family was rumour – and even then there were gaps. They said her father had Dutch blood in him, and her mother had been strange from a very young age. After high school, her parents met while her mother worked in a factory, waiting for her exam results – before those results were out, she was living with him. They got married because her mother got pregnant and refused to have an abortion. Her young father drove a truck and hooked up with women on the road, returning home as if nothing had happened and owning up as soon as anyone asked. He never told a lie – it was too much bother. When her father was 27, her mother killed him and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Other children seldom wonder why their parents are together. She and Chen-an always knew that for their parents, it was sex. Grandmother often said Chen-mian’s personality was the opposite of her mother’s: exceptionally quiet, like a traveller in a strange land, bereft of speech. She and Chen-an were desperate to be grown up, able to use their energies elsewhere. The sisters were a legend in the school, each perpetually in the top three of her class. Every winter and summer vacation, their most important tasks were weekly visits to their mother, and their holiday jobs. The neighbours said convicts’ children were the cleverest, and sure enough, they were full of flexibility, able to do any kind of work – in an electronics factory, or a food production plant, or washing dishes at roadside stalls. Every penny was saved up for their school fees. In her life, the part of

her personality that remained most coherent was her attitude to money. She never felt bitterness because she had suffered from it. Money was just money to her.

The person least affected by the whole sequence of events was their mother. She had stopped growing while in prison – Chen-an said this was because she had stopped having sex. She allowed her hair to grow long, never mind how troublesome this must be, and every time they visited, her frail, pretty face seemed to have shrunk a little. She and Chen-an visited together, and also separately in alternate weeks. Sometimes their grandmother went too. Her mother didn’t speak much, and never said any of the things a mother should say. Their visits felt like fragment after fragment of stillness drifting by, but never seemed especially long. Chen-mian always eavesdropped on other people’s conversations. Next to her, someone would be saying, “We’re all well, you mustn’t worry about us while you’re in here.” Her heart whispered that she had never learnt to talk to her mother. Still, she looked forward very much to her visit the following week. She felt her mother’s essence, as if her mother too were silently radiating something.

After graduating from university, she went to see her mother before leaving to study abroad. Her mother asked what subject and she answered, “Psychology.” That year, her mother was so rejuvenated as to appear the same age as her or younger, purely through her facial expressions. She and Chen-an had their mother’s features – they had their father’s paleness, but everything else in their appearance from her. Mother now seemed like their daughter who had done something wrong. For the first time, she gave expression to the words she had been preparing for so many years, including telling Chen-mian how she had gone to a hotel with her father before their marriage. Working life was so

dull that she took the initiative to ask him on a trip – a sex tour of the country. All along, she had understood what kind of person she was.

Chen-mian was certain that some unknown power made her mother able – despite not having received much inspiration on this score – to determine exactly what her emotions should look like. Mother knew precisely what feelings she required. Even at this point, her mother’s whole body silently, firmly exuded an aura of mysterious belief in love, and it was this faith that kept her young.

As visiting hours ended, her mother stood first and said, without a hint of sentimentality, “I want the two of you to resemble your father in every way, and not me. Your father was full of life. He was changeable. He could control our relationship, but not his own direction, and so we had nowhere to go. He had to push us until there was no further space.” Mother had always feared a depressing life. She thought of Mother in jail, a place where nothing changed, the smallest possible space in life – and in this instant of pain, Chen-mian produced her other self: someone who, at that moment, was at home saying goodbye to *her* mother, a pretty woman unfamiliar with worry and focused on the future of her children. This other self was about to leave the country to study theatre abroad. That night, the whole family – including her father and younger brother – would have a meal in a restaurant. This Chen-mian shone with personality, her movements enigmatic, everything about her gleaming with an ambiguity that made her all the more alluring. And she yearned for the ability to dream. This Chen-mian would never experience devastation. This was the first time she and ‘the real Chen-mian’ locked eyes. Through ‘the real Chen-mian’ – that is, the Chen-mian now studying her mother’s childlike

face – she could pass on the signs of life, and complete a different existence. She had just confirmed one thing: the other Chen-mian breathed at the same time as her, and filled in her blank spaces. She said, “Goodbye, Mother.”

Her mother’s heart did not contain her or Chen-an. Mother lived on, turning over in her mind the rightness of the relationship with her father, contemptuous of her mistake in killing him. Her mother only considered this one matter, and now had finally told her and Chen-an about it.

After Chen-mian had been overseas for two years, Chen-an graduated from university and prepared to leave the country too. The night before, she visited her mother, and was told the same things. As soon as Chen-an’s plane took off, Mother killed herself in prison. While abroad, Chen-mian had the habit of phoning once a week – she was worried about Chen-an and her grandmother, who was illiterate and would not be able to read a letter. After her mother’s death, while Chen-an was still in the air, Grandmother told her not to return, as if she had expected this. The old woman said, “It’s already happened, coming back won’t change anything. I’ve accepted it.” It turned out that Grandmother had known Mother better than the rest of them, having given birth to her. Now she understood that her mother’s second life had been for her and Chen-an – stolidly staying alive for them.

After Chen-mian got her degree, she didn’t linger another day. Had the ‘real’ one also finished her studies and returned home? But nothing happened, and for the moment she had no way of seeing the other sequence of events. Back in Taiwan, she began working for a foreign company, doing market research. She brought her grandmother from the South to live in Taipei, completely cutting herself off from the past. She didn’t try

to hide her background, but certainly didn't go around telling strangers about it. Having someone to lean on, her grandmother quickly turned into a normal old person, deteriorating swiftly, nagging endlessly about marriage being the most important event in a girl's life. Now that she and Chen-an were adults, her grandmother's decay seemed to accelerate. She could see at first hand that Granny did not have many days left, and felt uneasy. She had to stop this rapid ageing. She and Chen-an decided that one of them should get married quickly to comfort the old soul.

How quickly Chen-an worked. Soon, she was cheerfully announcing her engagement to an Englishman, Albert. Chen-mian laughed warmly, "Getting married to a Westerner is as good as not getting married at all. Granny doesn't speak their language." Chen-an replied, "How annoying! I'll have to forget this one and find another. Ma always said men like Dad were good, full of life force, no idea where they're going – but I've only inherited this lack of direction. I'll try again. Maybe Ma was right – life force takes away your sense of direction." They were able to laugh at themselves now. Chen-mian said, "Go ahead and marry your Englishman. I can't find even half a foreigner for myself. Maybe this kind of mixture will produce a better result." At the time, she had no idea that these words would soon apply to herself.

Chen-an insisted that Granny help organise the wedding. The ceremony was to be held in a small town near London, where Chen-an would settle down.

It was Granny's first time on a plane – an earth-shaking event for her. The old lady even asked Chen-mian to teach her a little English, returning to the inquisitive spirit of her childhood, spending all day learning and then forgetting her new words. Chen-mian remained enthusiastic, and taught her some more.

As a result, from the moment she boarded the plane to reaching their destination, Granny did not cause Chen-mian any alarm – everything she said was understood by the customs officials and stewardesses. She could feel her grandmother's strength of will.

The old lady adored her white grandson-in-law, and gave him a big red packet. Westerners are born with an innate sense of the worth of money, and he appeared overjoyed. But Chen-mian felt despondent that he was just putting on a show, whereas Granny's joy was real; she hadn't had more than a few days of happiness in her life, most of them in these few weeks. Chen-an quietly told Granny she was already pregnant, and Granny smiled as she scolded, "Heaven will strike you down! Naughty girl." She knew Granny was pleased that Chen-an would soon be accompanied by a relative closer to her than her husband. Chen-an had accomplished more than her mother – she was educated, and had married well. This little period of time was focused on pleasure – eating and drinking and having fun, totally unlike their real lives. It also did not feel like they were at a wedding. Days without content quickly become exhausting, but still, in that moment, she wished Granny could stay in England instead of returning to the endless cycle of Taipei, where nothing had ever happened.

She asked Chen-an, "Will you go on loving Albert?"

Chen-an replied, "What do you mean 'go on'? I've never loved him."

Was she shocked at all?

"And the child?"

"What child? I just said that to keep Granny happy." She lifted her head and laughed.

“Every man for himself! I wouldn’t want to actually fall in love.”

This last sentence made her heart ache for Chen-an for years afterwards. Chen-an didn’t lack the capacity for love, but had suppressed it. And so, Chen-mian decided to bring her grandmother back to Taipei. They could not keep play-acting much longer without the truth being exposed.

At the airport, Chen-mian looked through the faces of people leaving and returning, and understood ‘that Chen-mian’ had come back to Taipei, using her connections to get a job at the National Theatre, surpassing her, getting married in a flurry of excitement, not a care in the world. The husband was called Feng Yi. She was old while they remained young, living their entwined lives, not lacking in true emotion. Her ‘that Chen-mian’ was born to lead a straightforward existence, gifted to sniff out real feelings.

After she had returned to Taipei, she got to know several men, and realised that her existence somehow led to her meeting far more men than other women did, but this was no big deal to her. And in truth, she too was still young, only 26, but marriage loomed larger for her than others. She understood herself – that she needed an emotional connection. This was not desperation, but an inability to imagine how unattainably distant this completely new life was. Her heavy air of constantly questioning fate made her seem absent, giving her a mysterious aura impossible to fake or copy. This added to her allure. Men found her different from other women – her silence, her pensiveness, her longsuffering nature. Of course it helped that she was extraordinarily beautiful. Men liked to believe it was her unusual thought processes that made her looks so distinctive.

Drifting through a life with no distinguishing features, Chen-mian lost sight of her double. The only glimmer of life came around the time Chen-an should have given birth – a picture of her with a baby. Where had she borrowed the child from? It looked entirely Western. The deception was obvious, but their grandmother believed that genes always skip a generation, and declared that the baby looked just like its grandfather – Chen-mian and Chen-an’s father. How ridiculous, Chen-mian thought, for such 19th century events to still be going on in this day and age. But Chen-an had always been more ruthless than her – they lived for the people most important to them, and for no one else. Chen-mian never forgot to put this principle into practice. She could not decide whether she resembled her father or mother on this point. All she knew was that given this destiny, she longed to understand what kind of person her father had been. How could he have been such a strong character, yet unable to resist his fate? Is life entirely a matter of chance? Like this – after Grandmother died, Chen-mian got an interview for a job in Hong Kong, and her future was decided in 15 minutes.

The two-month vacation was shorter than she had imagined. Chen-mian still remembered that day, after the plane had taken off, when she looked down and saw how tiny Taiwan was, even smaller than the first time she had left the country. In no time at all, they were over the sea. She only understood much later that this instant was her saying goodbye to her life before turning 30. While in Taiwan, she had visited the South, even walking down the alleyway she had grown up in. Finally, she had checked into a hotel with flame flowers growing by its entrance. She also walked around the outside of the prison her mother had died in, and visited her father’s grave. After her mother died, her grandmother claimed the ashes and buried them beside his.

What kind of arrangement was this? When alive, her mother had killed her father, but then still loved him, and finally ended up sharing his grave. Who had agreed to this? Her mother had not left behind a suicide note.

She remained in a hotel in the south for 10 days, going through the routine she had built for herself in Taipei, reading and thinking, following the pathways to the heart of every topic, and remaining there. Apart from love, she thought, this was all she had.

In truth, it did not matter where she stayed, and in any case it was becoming more and more impossible for her to settle in one place. She understood very well that if she ever decided to make somewhere her home, that would be the most significant event in her life. Even more so than her mother's death. That was merely an end to life, whereas her own situation involved change, and would continue because of this choice. This change was important, and not to be feared, otherwise she would have given up. As for her present lifestyle – she sensed dimly that she was waiting for the arrival of that day.

At the time, many aspects of her life were dormant – she was not quite willing to admit they 'hadn't started yet'. Making love, for instance. She allowed that to drift into stasis, floating on the surface of her life, though that did not mean she had no knowledge of it. Her only regular action was to stay in touch with Chen-an, wherever they were, preserving their long-standing habitual conversations.

After Chen-an got her PhD, because her thesis was well-received and she was still young, the school retained her as a lecturer, and she also received several invitations from Taipei universities to speak at conferences. Chen-an's research was on

data transmission, and while she played the part of the academic well, her scholarly achievements had very little bearing on the rest of her life. She and Albert had agreed not to have kids – he was very pleased about this, actually. Chen-an said he regarded her Asian relatives as aliens, particularly her sister and their grandmother. He had a strong sense of curiosity about Chen-mian. Chen-an brought this up matter-of-factly, adding only, "That bastard can piss off."

They also discussed Chen-an's sex life. She'd say, "I guess most Asian people are genetically predisposed to be incompatible with Westerners? I know Albert has never inspired me, nor me him. Foreigners always think very deeply, but their behaviour is like a child's." Chen-mian sometimes worried that Chen-an was over complicating the matter. But Chen-an always went her own way.

When their grandmother passed away, Chen-an rushed home. Out of curiosity, Albert wanted to accompany her, but she would not let him, hoping to preserve the completeness of her relationship with Chen-mian and Grandmother. Chen-an didn't even mention her parents in front of Albert – she reckoned that was her business, and had nothing to do with him. Chen-mian knew that this was one of her reasons for marrying a foreigner – the other being that their father had been a Westerner too.

Chen-an returned to Taipei. Working as one, they arranged a gathering to chant scriptures for Granny. Everything they had done for her in life seemed superfluous compared to now. Just before their grandmother's remains were sent into the cremation oven, Chen-an suddenly shouted like a madwoman, "Don't burn her! She'll die! Don't burn my mother!" She seemed on the brink of collapse. In spirit and essence, their mother was in Granny's body. Stepping across memory and life or death, Chen-an saw

Granny as a mother, an older mother. They took Granny's ashes back to the South, placing them in the same columbarium their mother's were in. This thinking was hard to understand, even to themselves: when, in life, had the old woman expressed any longing to be with her daughter? Chen-mian could not feel any closure because she could not explain her actions. Why insist on burying them together? The only reason was each time she left a place, she refused to continue being entangled with its people or affairs. Granny had left the world, so surely must have forgiven her daughter for the nightmare she had created? The lives of those sorts of people lay far outside Granny's experience. Like trying to ride an out-of-control windsail. Perhaps the indication was how Granny retrieved their mother's ashes to place them with their father's? The day after the cremation, Chen-an returned to her original state, growing vacant, murmuring too quietly about leaving Taiwan early.

Everyone around them was dead, leaving them with no guiding posts within sight. Who were they? Unexplored, lonely islands.

Hong Kong was an island too. Maybe she loved islands because she was born on one. She loved how they felt, small and complete in their solitude. She would be in Hong Kong for a longer period of time, working as a roving consultant for an international perfume business. The company hoped her diligent reports would help them understand the market better. This was the main reason she had applied for the job in the first place. Besides, she wanted to utterly leave behind her former environment.

Before departing from Taiwan, she asked that Chen-mian, "Come with me?" The other Chen-mian shook her head, pushing her away, indicating she only wanted a normal life. After

starting the job, she made frequent business trips, criss-crossing the various territories of Asia. This should have kept her free of human entanglement, but the reality was different. The men she encountered were almost without exception high-ranking Western bachelors. Even if they were Asian, their mouths were still full of the English language. These 'peach blossoms' were so separate from her, they might have been distant islands – she had to maintain frequent, regular contact with them but never face-to-face. This may have suited a certain type of male psychology, and her performance in the marketplace of love was every bit as good as in the perfume industry.

Headquarters had designated Hong Kong as the regional sales centre for Asia. She worked a normal five-day week when in the country. She did not live on Hong Kong Island, preferring to take the ferry every day that brought her across the sea. The island she lived on held many people with similar lifestyles. But she did not think this meant they led the same lives – she wanted to remain fluid, escaping classification. She had thought before that her existence lay in individual fragments; she possessed life itself, but no fixed routines or systems. For instance, she was happy to read anywhere, but did not have the habit of doing so in one place – not even somewhere quiet, with adequate light and the scent of coffee in the air. Life was a series of 24 hour slots. Nothing had ever happened to her. She understood very well that she and Chen-an took the same approach, because they had not had a mother to teach them any better.

The island that she lived on and had grown familiar with, was invaded by hordes of lovers every holiday. Out of curiosity, she sometimes left her house on the hillside to walk amongst them. In the evenings, the streetlamps still unlit, the strolling individuals seemed like little pinpricks of light. In clusters, they

drifted into every open shop. Sandwiched in the crowd, she was as dark as the street. After the 'Islands Go Go Go' tourism advertising campaign, even foreigners started turning up here in pairs. In other places, she frequently saw single travellers, but here, they were as extinct as dinosaurs.

Holiday villas on the offshore island were now being rented out, unit by unit. Although they did not take up much space, there were many of these rooms – she had never seen such tiny suites before. During the day, the young couples frolicked on the beach, chasing each other across the sand. At noon they lay sprawled in the scorching heat, displaying a manic need for sunlight. They formed groups in the evening, going out for dinner or shopping for groceries to cook back at the villa. Whether day or night, looking at the rooms facing the alleyway with their curtains drawn, she thought they somehow resembled a refugee village. So many men and women desperate to use up their energy – how much sex was taking place in these darkened rooms each night?

She once said all this to Chen-an, who laughed, “If everyone’s already flying and nesting in pairs, you haven’t got a chance.” She then requested a description of those couples. Chen-mian thought about it. “Nothing stands out about their appearance. They seem neither male nor female. Especially the men – not masculine at all.”

Chen-an seemed more amused. “Then how do you know they’re interested in making love?”

“They believe it’s all part of going on holiday! You have to buy the whole package. They don’t seem able to think for themselves.” Growing emotional, she went on, “If I ever saw a single man amongst these holidaymakers, I’d actively pursue

him.” Chen-an wanted her to swear to this, so she swore.

As for Hong Kong, she had never felt anything but passive, as if the island required nothing of her but to stand there waiting for events to develop. Hong Kong was too pragmatic, lacking in mythology, which was why she had felt able to make that promise. The other reason was that her life seemed a blurry drift of moments, with no fixed divisions – no season of love or season of friendship. And even when she had had periods of love, they were not separated into the era of Michael, the era of George, the era of William... She could not see the possibility of this lone traveller turning up. That day, she returned once more to a familiar place.

The sky was still bright as she got off the plane. She looked at the daylight after getting through customs, and decided to go to her offshore island right away. The ferry was crammed full, probably due to the hour – everyone rushing to get there in time to enjoy a seafood dinner. The boat and its passengers appeared used to getting squashed. She was forced into a corner.

And there, she saw Danny. He was sitting alone, reading a book, his attitude relaxed. There was no scent of coffee and his surroundings were not particularly peaceful, but he gave off an aura of calm. She didn’t know his name yet. The first thing she saw was his lifestyle – yes, this was a person who had a lifestyle. To him, existence was a series of habits – eating and drinking, study, leisure, reading. After meeting him, she encountered his habits – that is, his whole person, including the gradual awakening within his body. But in that instant, all she saw was a man who had come alone to the offshore island, and what’s more, on her birthday. She instantly recalled the promise she had made to Chen-an.

She had come to know a fair few people in those years. She knew what sort of men would be interested in a woman like her. She stood where she was, perfectly still, until Danny raised his head and saw her. Without hesitation, he walked over and invited her to sit. He had something to ask her – “Where could he stay on the island, and what was good to eat?” He had read a lot about the place before arriving, but a few days on Hong Kong Island had shown his guidebook was not too accurate. He was confused. Chen-mian explained that neither he nor the book was wrong. Hong Kong was just full of changes, and there were so many varieties of Chinese food, it was difficult to find in a short time the version that suited you. Danny was relieved. He came from Germany, and was rational to the point of urbanity, and very focused. Traditional to a fault, he had never dreamt of asking a lady where she lived, suppressing any curiosity he felt towards her. He assumed her to be a fellow traveller to this small island, probably leaving on the next ferry. In the face of this logic, she gave him only her surname: Huo. This sound existed in his language too, so she did not need to correct his pronunciation, thus setting off a domino effect of consequences.

When they landed, Chen-mian helped him find a little holiday cottage by the sea. Not one of those clustered around the dock, but on the coast over the other side of the hill – a more remote location, with a good view. Imagining his large body shambling about the mini house, she could not help shaking her head. He said, “What?” and she answered, “Oh, nothing.” She suggested he hire a bicycle to get between the ferry dock and his cottage, and perhaps up to the top of the hill as well. Danny asked if he would get to see her again. She said, “Perhaps.” The landlady introduced herself as ‘Auntie Ping’ and

was eager to get Danny to the place quickly, afraid he would run off. Chen-mian helped Danny register his residence, discovering from his documents he was six years younger than her, and planned to stay on the island for a week. This confirmed once again that she did not understand foreigners. They seemed able to stay a long time in a place that held no memories for them, not working or pursuing anything, just being.

After saying goodbye amidst the crowd, Chen-mian watched him stride into the distance, so much taller than the locals, a stork amongst chickens, a lonely coconut tree by the seashore. The moon happened to be full, creating a bridge of light on the surface of the water, expanding with the ripples of the waves. As the moon sank, the bridge shortened gradually, disappearing just before sunrise. People roamed the beach all night – visitors to the offshore island seemed to become nocturnal as cats, staying up late and rising late the next day.

When it finally happened, it was simpler than she had imagined. She got home to find her house sparkingly neat – the cleaner had paid her weekly visit. What about dinner? She never kept food in the house. She phoned Chen-an, who suggested seeking out the foreigner to celebrate her birthday with him, thus ending her extended childhood. She told Chen-an to shut her mouth.

After she gauged that the first wave of people would have gone, around nine o’clock or so, she returned to the dock. Baskets of fish, prawns and shellfish stood as tokens of this island’s pride – its fresh seafood. What should she eat? Why, but it was all laid out in front of her. Saltwater fish so brightly-coloured, flicking in lively shoals through the tanks in front of her, more like coral than living creatures. Just as she was pondering what size of fish to choose, there was Danny beside her, asking as if it was the most

natural thing in the world, “May I have dinner with you? You can do the ordering.” She had not known there were foreigners who could recognise Asian faces so readily.

They sat at the table closest to the dock. The boats at anchor had their lights on, their inhabitants watching TV, eating dinner, bathing, drying a boatload of clothes. One deck had a child flying a pale blue kite, glimmering against the darker sky like a square moon.

Danny had obviously read something about them – he knew these boat people were known as *Tanka*. Not that he actually mentioned the name, she just felt he knew, and understood that they spent their whole lives on the water. Although perhaps this last point was harder for him to accept? They observed the world around their table. There were two distinct groups of vendors here – after you had bought your seafood from one lot, the others would approach you to ask how you wanted it cooked. Steamed? Stir-fried? Deep-fried? Watching the little boy sent by the stall owner to take away their fish, Danny said, “They won’t get it wrong, will they?” She shook her head. “Unlikely. But anyway, even if you don’t get your dish back, you’ll get someone else’s, and there aren’t that many possibilities.” For the first time she noticed that two people eating together was a lot more hassle. Whatever they ordered seemed wrong – too little or, more commonly, too much. A dish one person didn’t like suddenly doubled in volume for the other, overwhelming. Eating alone did not have this risk.

Danny selected a bright blue ocean fish, though the bluest fish still turns red upon cooking. She could not understand the theory behind it. It might be significant, but not at this moment. Raising a glass, she said, “Happy birthday.” Danny, sure enough, was clever enough to deduce it was *her* birthday, and raise his

glass in return. With utmost nonchalance, he inclined his body and kissed the side of her face. “Good health and beauty.” She smiled, “It isn’t as convenient for me to kiss you back.” He playfully spouted a whole string of German words, and when she wrinkled her brows in suspicion, said with a straight face, “As you command.” Joyfully, he bent until she could reach his lips. Chen-mian knew he had been saying something else in German, but it was best not to pursue these things.

For many years now, Chen-mian had spent her birthdays alone. She placed a great deal of significance on this day – something common to both fortunate and unfortunate people. When Granny was around, she hadn’t liked to admit this. Her grandmother had paid much more attention to death anniversaries, offering incense to their father every year. When their mother died, she got incense too. Chen-mian preferred to use her birthday to consider her relationship with her mother, even imagining her getting pregnant – something she had not experienced in her own life. These last few years, wherever she happened to be in the world, she made sure to celebrate her birthday properly, confirming her existence. More and more, she felt her mother’s turbulent past was responsible for her deepest memories. She had never been one of those girls who grow up without anything ever happening to them. Gazing over Danny’s shoulder, she allowed her eyes to drift onto the sea, listening to the city noise behind them flowing into waves, battling the sounds of nature. Danny was far too young. What if he had never experienced anything? Was he one of those men waiting for something to happen?

The sky darkened suddenly, and a streak of lightning seemed to reach up from the sea. Danny asked her, “Huo, what’s it like on this small island during a storm?”

AFTERWORD

Fantasy and Reality

by Su Wei-chen

Literary writing is unlike any other undertaking. It can be prophetic, or else completely fabricated, utterly truthful, or even a recreation of past events.

But with regards to *Island of Silence* – what can literature be? I'll try to answer this with the following words.

As with many people, my connection to Singapore is not deep – but more unusually, I visited the country for the first time in 1993. I didn't know it at the time, but this piece of land would come to occupy a very important position in my writing.

From 31 August to 5 September 1993, I participated in Singapore Writers' Week. At the time, I was entering my second decade as a writer. Caught in a fog of anxiety over constructing my personal style and seeking new subject matter, I was muddling over the draft of a new novel, its main narrative investigating the dialectic between Eileen Chang's 'I am like an island' and John Donne's 'No man is an island, entire of itself.' I come from an island, and feel a resonance with how the closed-off nature of islands along with their trivial form can give off a powerful magnetic field, producing inhabitants with the potential for being turbulent yet taciturn, complicated yet pure, wallowing

in their present circumstances while yearning to be far away. As a writer, I was drawn to the fragmentary nature of human existence, and was given to at any moment constructing scenes that made up the many voices and elements of the novel, tucking myself safely away in the folds and cracks of life. But how to sustain this fabrication while being true to myself? Novels offer the possibility for unfinished human affairs to move towards completion. I decided to follow this rough idea through, and began writing *Island of Silence*.

At the start of the writing process, I always seemed to be departing in a dazed state. I'd suddenly head for the airport and buy a ticket on the next flight to Hong Kong, and upon arrival I'd rush through the city to the ferry terminal, heading for an even smaller island. I'd live there aimlessly for half a month, not making much headway on my manuscript. I'd written the first sentence – "Chen-mian always remembered what happened after 'their' 30th birthday, the day she left Taipei to return to Hong Kong." – but had no idea what came after that.

Soon afterwards, I arrived in Singapore. That year was Singapore's 28th birthday, and compared to Taiwan and Hong Kong, it was a smaller, newer nation with a greater sense of raw energy, like the many offshore islands springing from the mainland, and the history of being colonised. At a first glance, the many races and cultures unified in Singapore gave rise to the impulse of 'my island'. And so I came up with the structure of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore – three islands. Part of me felt this was a bold move – after all, I didn't have too much knowledge about Hong Kong or Singapore. Fortunately, I was able to find my way deeper into these locations.

Island of Silence has three main characters. To keep things simple, let's divide them into two groups. The Chen-mian, Chen-

an and Danny of Group A drift between these three islands – but unlike the normal, defined flow of human migration, they are self-exiled, each an island in him or herself. Not satisfied with a single existence, each of these characters produces a parallel figure in a manner similar to asexual reproduction – the Chen-mian, Chen-an and Danny of Group B, each spawning their own gender, life experience and history, thus filling in the cracks of the Group A figures.

In Group A, Chen-mian and Chen-an are sisters completely dependent on each other as their parents are dead. Danny is Chen-mian's lover, an outsider – a foreigner. Once, Danny asks Chen-mian why she loves islands so much:

Chen-mian remembered her answer so clearly. She'd said, "I feel complete here. Large spaces seem meaningless to me."

The Chen-mian and Chen-an of Group B are brother and sister. Chen-mian's boyfriend Danny (whose Chinese name is Zu), asks Chen-mian the same question:

Chen-mian remembered with great clarity Zu asking why she loved islands so much, and her answer: "They have everything I want." She was willing to say it again. "Here, it's easy for things to happen to me."

The novel contains three repeated sentences like mantras or prophecies: 'Do you want this life of yours?' 'May I?' and 'Come away with me?' Like the golden key that opens Pandora's box. Chen-mian has only to hear one of these lines to start weeping, as if seeing her past life, because these randomly-occurring words have the effect of connecting her to another world, as if she is constantly talking to herself – she likes islands because 'I don't feel lonely here.'

Later on, when I'd finished *Island of Silence* and it had been awarded the China Times Million Yuan Literary Prize (Jury Prize

1994), I felt myself being smoothly sent down another path as a writer. The author's creations come and go from her pen, but their creator is forever lonely. When accepting the award, I wrote:

“I'm not afraid of a fate like loneliness, I believe that the novels of this era will bring me to the opposite shore of literature, the other side of life.”

It's hard to imagine what would have happened if I hadn't taken part in Singapore Writers' Week 1993. Out of the murky depths, the novelist who decided to trap her creation Chen-mian in Singapore – where 'time was frozen, passing at a glacial pace, nothing happening at all' – before arranging for her escape: 20 years later, she finds herself retracing her steps to Singapore. A proof of the power of creation.

So, what can literature be? Something that banishes loneliness? Leaps across gender lines? Recreates the past?

Thanks to Jeremy for his English translation, and to Ethos Books for publishing this novel, returning it to the land of its conception.

So, what can literature be? A kind of fantasy, a kind of reality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Su Wei-chen has served as editor-in-chief of the Weekly Reader News, and is now a professor of Chinese literature at National Cheng Kung University. She is the author of more than a dozen volumes of fiction and nonfiction, including the novels 紅顏已老 [The Faded Years of Youth] (1981), 舊愛 [Old Love] (1985), 離家出走 [Flying from Home] (1987), 離開同方 [To Leave the Village Tong-Fang] (1990), 魔術時刻 [The Magic Hours] (2002), and 時光隊伍 [The Procession in Time] (2006), as well as of the critical and essay volumes 單人旅行 [The Journey of Solitude] (1999) and 租書店的女兒 [The Memories of Books] (2010). Her academic publications are 張愛玲香港時期小說研究 [Eileen Chang's Hong Kong Period Novels] (2002) and 台灣張派作家世代論 [The Influence of Eileen Chang and Her Followers in Taiwan] (2006). She is the recipient of the United Daily News Prize for the Novelette and the Tainan Prefectural City Prize for Literary Contribution. In 2013, Professor Su was a writer-in-residence at Nanyang Technological University.



ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Jeremy Tiang has translated Zhang Yueran's *The Promise Bird and Ten Loves*, Yeng Pway Ngon's *Unrest*, (Math Paper Press) and Wong Yoon Wah's *Durians Are Not The Only Fruit* (Epigram). His translation of Han Lao Da's *Floathouse 1001* and Quah Sy Ren's *Dragon Bone* will be



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performed at the Arts House in 2014, and his adaptation of *A Dream of Red Pavilions* will be staged off-Broadway by Pan Asian Repertory Theater. He is the current recipient of a PEN/Heim translation grant. Jeremy's own short fiction has appeared in *Esquire*, *Meanjin*, the *Istanbul Review*, *QLRS*, and *Best New Singaporean Short Stories*.