

蔡欣：如果在島國，一個老人
If on an Island-State, an Old Man

By Cai Xin

Translated by Cheow Thia Chan

Translator's Introduction

The established Singaporean Chinese poet Cai Xin wrote 'If on an Island-State, an Old Man' in 2001, which Singapore's only Chinese newspaper with a literary supplement declined to publish. Two years later, the poem eventually found a home abroad, on the pages of the journal *Xianggang wenxue* 香港文學 [Hong Kong Literary Monthly] in June 2003.¹ The 'old man', the subject of the verses, alludes to Singapore's well-known opposition figure Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam (more commonly known as 'J. B. Jeyaretnam', 1926–2008), whom Australian scholar Michael D. Barr describes as the '*bête noir*' of Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀 (1923–2015).² In the late 1990s, after losing several defamation suits brought on by his political opponents in the ruling party, Jeyaretnam sold books outside subway stations and shopping centres to raise funds for settling the damages. Never finding adequate financial support from the people, he declared bankruptcy in 2001. By gesturing toward the downtrodden politician through the figure of a wizened man who plays his guitar as he sings to unappreciative masses in public locations, 'If on an Island-State, an Old Man' enriches the cultural representations of both Singapore's political history and literary history, drawing forth a rare feeling of solidarity between a Chinese-educated man of letters and an English-educated Indian political

¹ The full bibliographic data of the first published version is as follows: *Xianggang wenxue*, no. 6 (June 2003), pp. 46–47.

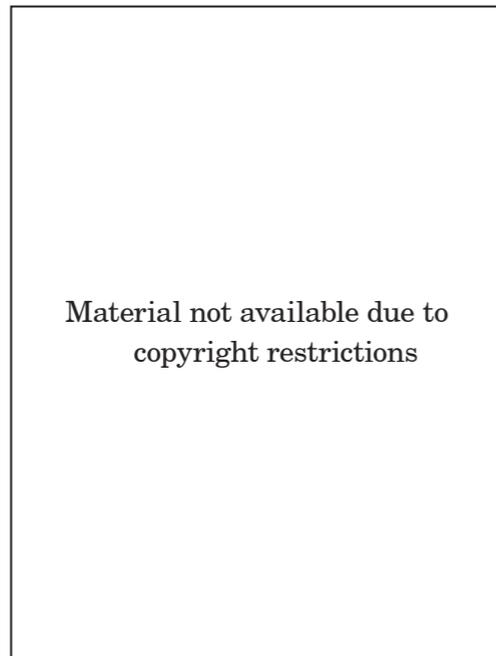
² Michael D. Barr, 'J. B. Jeyaretnam: Three Decades as Lee Kuan Yew's *bête noir*', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, no. 3 (2003), pp. 299–317.

outcast on the island-state where race and language still constitute significant social boundaries.

In the poem, Cai Xin uses recurring clauses and phrases to create a compelling momentum that renders the verses well for recital. The translation reflects the poet's use of interlocking syntax so as to capture the rhythm of the poem. Given that recreating the pithy rhythm in translation is a stylistic priority, there is a slight incongruence between the Chinese original and the English translation. At Cai Xin's suggestion, two repeated phrases, namely 'in the city centre' and 'at an exit of the MRT station', which appear in the first and the eighth stanzas respectively, were omitted.

One final note: the selected source text is not the original version that was published in Hong Kong in 2003, but a modified version provided by Cai Xin. In the current version, on which the translation is based, the poet adjusts the lines in the fourth stanza and includes an expanded postscript.

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Drawing of J. B. Jeyaretnam by Vanessa Leong
Courtesy of the artist

If on an island-state, an old man
 an isolated, helpless old man
 on the island-state, standing
 somewhere, in the city centre
 at a certain MRT³ station
 at its exit, in its vicinity
 at the side of a bustling shopping mall
 standing
 lonely and isolated
 displaying himself for sale
 displaying for sale
 a tale, riddled with scars ...

如果在島國，一個老人
 一個孤立無援的老人
 站在島國某個鬧市
 鬧市某個地鐵站
 地鐵站某個出口
 出口附近，某個
 喧鬧的購物中心旁
 孤寂而孤立地
 展售著他自己
 展售著，一則
 傷痕累累的故事……

³ Mass Rapid Transit, the colloquial acronym used for Singapore's rapid transit system.

If, an old man
a stubborn and unyielding old man
on a tiny island-state
sings a unique tune, and
suffers a litany of contesting notes
If the old man sings
till he loses his sight
till he becomes hoarse
and the strings of the guitar break
and his countenance turns dazed
his face wizened by hardship
If the old man is left
with nothing but a stubborn shell
of a body, and yet
doubles down
standing, stubbornly
on the island, standing
at a certain MRT station
at its exit, in its vicinity
at the side of a bustling shopping mall
isolated and lonely
standing
as he becomes an incongruous sight
a scene that embarrasses the island-state

如果，一個老人
一個固執而不肯妥協的
老人，在一個
小小的島國
為了唱一支
與眾不同的歌
而受盡各種音符的
折磨，如果老人
眼已瞎，嗓子已沙啞
琴弦已斷
神情已木然
臉上，已寫滿風霜
如果，老人
只剩一個固執的軀殼
依舊固執地
站在小島上，站在
小島某個地鐵站的
出口，出口附近
某個喧鬧的
購物中心旁
孤立而孤寂地，站成
一幅不協調的
令島國尷尬的景色

If those walking past the shopping mall
resemble schools of flatfish
their eyes right next to each other
never glancing sideways
swimming past the old man
numb and unconcerned
just like swimming past
an unrelated sliver of grass in the water
If no one offers this old man
this familiar stranger
a smile
a word of concern, or
a look of astonishment
If this group after group of passing travellers
as apathetic as schools of flatfish
have instead, on this tiny island-state
on a certain evening
flooded the same old man
with waves of applause
If, only if
what follows the abating of a storm is apathy
and apathy is just the norm
If on an island-state
someone who lives is no different
from someone who is gone
something happens
as if it never happened

如果購物中心旁
行人，像一群比目魚
目比目，然後目不斜視地
從老人身邊游過
就像從一根毫不相干的
水草身邊，麻木地游過
如果，沒有人對這個
又熟悉又陌生的老人
投以一朵笑容
一句關懷，或者
一線驚詫的眼神
如果這一群又一群
比目魚般麻木的過客
曾經在這個小小的島國
在某個晚上
為同一個老人，掀起
波浪似的掌聲
呵，如果
風平浪靜後是麻木
麻木就是正常
如果在島國，一個人
存在如同沒存在
一件事，發生
如同沒發生

If on an island-state
an acquiescent island-state
where the so-called wise determine all processes
and what they determine line up in order
those who must procreate, procreate
that which must blossom, blossom
that which must bear fruit, bear fruit
If food is delivered whenever a mouth is opened
If sunlight appears whenever one looks up
all animals grow up in obedience
all plants stretch taller
day by day

If on an island-state
on a tiny island-state
every corner is full of
guiding principles, guiding
you, as the island's inhabitant
exactly on what should be done, and
what should not be
what is proper, and
what is absolutely not
and there is only one singular norm
If the inhabitants of the island
have become used to a way of life
that lives to accept instructions
If living just means surviving
surviving is just some baseline of safe oblivion

如果在一個島國
在一個規規矩矩的島國
一切程序都由所謂智者設定
一切設定都井井有條
該生育的，規矩地生育
該開花的，規矩地開花
該結果的，規矩地結果
如果，張口就有食物
如果抬頭就有陽光
所有的動物乖乖成長
所有的植物天天向上

如果，在島國
在一個小小的島國
每一個角落，都佈滿
各種指導原則，指導你
身為一個島民
究竟什麼該做
什麼，不該做
什麼是正確
什麼，絕對不正確
而且準則只有一個
如果島民已習慣
一種接受指導的生活
如果，生活就是生存
生存就是某種低級的
安全的渾渾噩噩

If feeling numb means being sensitive
If being oblivious means being astute
If staying silent means speaking up
If indulgence is no different from sobriety
If sophistry is no different from truth
If hegemony is justice
If bondage is liberation
If trouble is pleasure
If white is no different from black, and
black is no different from white
love is hate, and
hate is love

If on an island-state
on a tiny island-state
the shadows of the past
forever shroud the present
the voices of the present
forever, command the future
If the island's inhabitants
have already grown used to
appreciating the same pitch
enjoying the same rhythm
under the shadows of those commands

如果麻木就是敏感
如果渾噩就是聰明
如果緘默就是說話
如果沉醉就是清醒
如果詭辯就是真理
如果強權就是正義
如果束縛就是解脫
如果苦惱就是愉快
如果白就是黑
黑，就是白
愛就是恨
恨，就是愛

如果，在一個島國
在一個小小的島國
過去的陰影
永遠籠罩著現在
現在的聲音
永遠，命令著未來
如果島民已
習慣在命令的陰影中
欣賞同樣的音高
享受，同樣的節拍

If on an island-state
on a tiny island-state
an isolated and helpless old man
stands somewhere
in the city centre of the island-state
at a certain MRT station
at its exit, in its vicinity
at the side of a bustling shopping mall
the old man
whose wizened face looks dazed
still holds on to the guitar with broken strings
lets loose his hoarse voice, and
stubbornly sings his own tune
stubbornly creating
a distinctive soundscape

If, an old man
a stubborn, unyielding old man
on a stubborn, self-righteous island-state ...

如果，在島國
在一個小小的島國
一個孤立無援的老人
站在島國某個鬧市
鬧市某個地鐵站
地鐵站某個出口
出口附近，某個
喧鬧的購物中心旁
老人滿臉風霜，神情木然
依舊抱著斷弦的琴
拉開沙啞的喉嚨
固執地自彈自唱
固執地製造，某種
與眾不同的音響

如果，一個老人
一個固執的
不肯妥協的老人
在一個固執的
自以為是的島國……

Postscript

The title 'If on an Island-State, an Old Man' was 'cribbed' from Italo Calvino's famous metafictional novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

Also, this poem was completed in 2001, but initially found no publication avenues. It is likely that the higher-ups running the local newspaper declined the submission due to misgivings that the imagery of the 'old man' in the poem would infringe upon certain boundaries. Eventually the poem was published in *Hong Kong Literary Monthly*. It is truly interesting that a poem about this island has to be 'birthed' by another island. Subsequently, the poem was republished in vol. 34 of *May Poetry* 五月詩刊, as well as in the Singapore Literature Society's 'Seventh Commemorative Issue of "A Tribute to Literature"' 第七屆“向文藝敬禮”紀念特輯 in 2008. I regret I had to publish this poem two more times, but my hope is that more 'literary islanders' get to read it.

The archetype for the 'old man' is the deceased Singapore's opposition party politician J. B. Jeyaretnam. One afternoon in 2001, I happened to pass by the City Hall MRT Station. Just as I stepped onto the elevator, I saw an old man, wizened by life, selling books along with a middle-aged man. It turned out to be Mr Jeyaretnam and his closest 'comrade in arms'. Touched by the scene, I stepped forward to purchase a copy of *Make it Right for Singapore*,⁴ and asked for his autograph. When Mr Jeyaretnam passed away, I attended his wake and handed his elder son Kenneth [Jeyaretnam] a photocopied version of this poem (of course he couldn't read it), as a form of 'closure'. I thought, regardless of whether or not we agree with Mr Jeyaretnam's political opinion or practice, his contribution toward the island-state's democracy should not be effaced. Just like whether or not we agree with the views and actions of politicians like Mr Lim Chin Siong 林清祥, Dr Lim Hock Siew 林福壽, and Dr Chia Thye Poh 謝太寶, their contributions should also not be wiped out.⁵ The island-state is not the 'possession'

⁴ The full title of this book J. B. Jeyaretnam wrote and published is *Make it Right for Singapore: Speeches in Parliament 1997–1999* (Singapore: Jeya Publishers, 2000).

⁵ Here the poet lists three prominent dissidents in Singapore's political history, namely Lim Chin Siong (1933–1996), the left-wing politician and Lee Kuan Yew's political rival who organized and directed the anti-colonial movements in 1950s and 1960s Singapore until his arrest and incarceration in 1963; Chia Thye Poh (1941–), Singapore's longest-serving political prisoner who was arrested in 1966 and spent thirty-two years in varied forms of detention; and Lim Hock Siew (1931–2012), medical doctor, imprisoned by the ruling government from 1963 to 1982, and was Singapore's second-longest-serving political detainee after Chia. For brief sketches of these three figures, see Clement Mesenas, *Dissident Voices: Personalities in Singapore's Political History* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2014), pp. 26–44, 90–101, and 156–172.

of a 'minority group', but has been collectively shaped by many others who loved this land passionately as their country.

This poem was written not just for Mr Jeyaretnam—he was but the catalyst that sparked the poem. I wrote it really out of deep affection for this land, hoping that it can improve, become livelier, and more diverse (rather than be attached to 'a way of life that lives to accept instructions' by habit, merely capable of 'appreciating the same pitch / enjoying the same rhythm', 'growing up in obedience', 'stretching taller day by day', just like oblivious plants and animals). I sincerely wish that in the time to come, all the absurd injustices expressed in the poem become history.

Those who know me
Say, 'It is because his heart is so sad.'
Those who do not know me
Say, 'What is he looking for?'

—'The Wine-Millet Bends', *The Book of Songs*⁶



⁶ Quoted from Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 56.