

“The city is a place laced with the material and the immaterial, the visible and invisible. It is filled with the migratory lines trod by our ancestors, the scent of our foodways, the flight of birds, the sigh of an old school, a demolished rooftop, an unassuming lamppost, fading tongues, empty chairs and extroverted harbours. These are the indelible marks that layer our city, that make up where we are and who we are.”

Drawing together her memories growing up in Singapore, Yi Wei creates an evocative portrait of Singapore. *Indelible City* is her debut collection of essays with lyrical observations of the nation’s ever-changing landscape, exploring issues of home, identity and place.

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Indelible City

Marshall Cavendish Editions

Chew Yi Wei

# Indelible City

Chew Yi Wei

*“The city, under the magic of Yi Wei’s creative non-fiction, is a living thing tinged with loss, nostalgia and wonder.”*

Yong Shu Hoong  
poet and editor of essays  
*Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*

*“Yi Wei’s debut guides with a gentle hand through a mnemonic city, her mnemonic city, signposted by fiction, fact and fancy.”*

Loh Guan Liang  
author of *Bitter Punch* and *Transparent Strangers*

Prologue:  
Maps of Places,  
Places of Maps

I was eight when I first drew a map. It was a map of an imaginary world where imaginary creatures lived. The creatures were inspired by the bolsters and pillows on my bed. I made them come alive. I gave them a school, a home, a country. Having already flipped the pages of the local street directory, and gleefully taking multiple copies of tourist maps from the brochure slots in shopping centres, I had, already, an idea of what a map should look like. Maps had borders, had scales, had indexes, had legends. Most of the time, they had fancy little sketches of buildings, monuments, and even animals. More often than not, maps were colourful. Though I couldn't understand them, I was fascinated that they could, on a mere page, represent an entire city, country, or continent.

I didn't start off ambitious. My first attempt was modest; it was merely a map, or more accurately, a guide to a little condominium development which my brother and I named "Coaster Apartments". On this map were a few cottages – which we whimsically called

“Coaster Cottages” – a cluster of small landed holdings supposedly part of Coaster Apartments. I think we liked the alliterative “co” sound that made a catchy appellation for a private property. In between the cottages that were spread out unevenly across the white sheet of A4-sized paper, I drew a forking path that linked one cottage to another. I labelled the path and numbered the cottages. Then I pencilled in a little drawing of my pillows and bolsters – faces, arms and legs included – next to one of the cottages and called it Coaster Cottage No. 5. I felt I had to number the cottages, give each one an address, so that I could identify them on my map, so that my soft bedfellows could have a house that was uniquely theirs.

At that age, I couldn’t yet understand fully what it meant to own a property; I only knew, or perhaps took it for granted, that staying in a house meant that one had to have an address. Maps, too, had to have addresses, places one could delineate with clarity, if they were to serve any function, make any sense. This simplistic equation found its way into the little world I created, on a map. Within the premises of Coaster Apartments itself there were also high-rise condominiums. And of course, a swimming pool, which I proudly included as a *coup de grace*. All private apartments, to my young and unexposed mind, had to have a swimming pool as I was always drawn to the square of clear blue, always fascinated that water, despite its transparency, could have a colour. To me, having a pool within one’s living space was like having an artificial oasis where I imagined myself frolicking in on a sultry afternoon after school instead of doing my homework. Back then, the place where I lived did not have a swimming pool, thus it was no surprise that

I could not but include that little item of luxury in the world I created with my brother. The pool within Coaster Apartments was encircled by the cottages and the high-rise units; a rectangular feature that provided some sort of recreation for the little pillows and bolsters on my bed.

Upon completion of Coaster Apartments, I drew a border around its compound, because I knew private properties had to be gated, and added in a few other tall buildings and mountains in the background. Coaster Apartments was located along “Coaster Road”. Just adjacent to Coaster Apartments, still along Coaster Road, was a school that my pillows and bolsters attended – a school discriminatorily called “Bolster City School”. I don’t remember why I marginalised the pillows. Perhaps it was because there were fewer of them on my bed. Finally, there was a city outside of Coaster Cottages, a city that was part of a country called “Singapoo”, with none of the scatological connotations, of course. I remember thinking that the city was very clean. Like the real city, Singapore. Singapoo was, manifestly, an echo of Singapore, the one city my young self knew. Only it was bigger, less torrid, more temperate and geographically diverse.

Of course, neither my brother nor I became property developers, architects or urban designers. Our tryst with urban planning stopped somewhere in 1993 when I turned twelve and decided that I was too cool for any further bolster and pillow talk. So, imperceptibly, my bedfellows ceased to speak, and the city which my brother and I imagined gradually faded into a remote region in our hippocampi. The bolsters and pillows, too, became older,

dirtier, and one day, my parents decided that it was time for them to be trashed. We were too old for them, and they, too, were too old for us. It was only when I was in my early twenties that I serendipitously stumbled upon that old map when I was clearing my room. It was hidden away in an old plastic file I kept buried under a heap of books for fear that my childhood art be found out. I smiled at the silliness of it all and the sheer lack of self-consciousness that my brother and I possessed back when we were younger. The apartments were haphazardly drawn, the forking path lined in an uneven hand, the cottages one-dimensional and conventional. The thoughts of a child visualised and materialised on paper. Crude, but bold. Ugly, but endearing.

We were, clearly, so much less inhibited with our imagination, so much more comfortable with building a city made up of our desires and our realities. After staring at the map for a while, I decided that it had to go. So I crushed it up and threw it into the bin, like the way my parents threw away my bolsters and pillows without much sentimentality. At that point, my brother was building another city, this time on the computer – *Sim City*. His city looked distinctly different from that of Singapoo. It was animated. People were moving, eating, doing everyday city things. He mentioned in passing that he felt like a god, being the builder of an entire city, controlling the ins and outs of the Sims, what they did, what they didn't do.

Perhaps that was what we felt when we conceived and drew that map of Coaster Apartments and Singapoo. Except that we were unable to articulate it then, nor were we knowing, or maybe



cynical, enough to grasp fully the power that came with designing a map of a city, creating a world – out of our experiences and memories, our then-past and then-present.

Now, in my thirties, it is remarkably clear to me that Singapoo and Coaster Cottages were really my brother's and my very own desires projected on an amateurishly conceived map. That city has now been resurrected from the dormant depths of memory, and will remain indelibly delineated on my mnemonic map. We imagined Singapore to have mountains. We wanted Singapore to experience the four seasons, especially winter. We saw snow-capped mountains in the picture books we read as children, and we desperately craved the presence of these sentinels overlooking our city. Coaster Apartments was our childlike imagination of what living in a private condominium and in a temperate climate would be like.

The very idea of a cottage was, of course, derived from the Enid Blyton books we read. Cottages figured prominently in her stories; they were a rustic fixture, a place where most, if not all, of her characters lived. From her stories, we imagined cottages to be cosy, to be firmly ensconced in the countryside – something that never existed in our reality, certainly not in the Singapore of the late eighties and early nineties that we grew up in. My map was a combination of my innocent longing for what I could only dream of, what I could only know from the medium of books. My map was my imagined city, my imagined country. I thrived on the vicarious experience of drawing a map, and hence owning and living in the very place that existed within the map. The map was

a conflation of my memories, my desires, my imaginings, and my hope – a hope that I would, one day, get to walk into that map.

The years have passed, and I have had the fortune to experience what living in the countryside is like. I have had the opportunity to immerse myself in the grand company of mountains. Yet, none of this has managed to replace the thrill of drawing my desires into being, of being my very own cartographer, of imagining what it would be like to be in my map, as though the fantasising itself were commensurate with reality. Coaster Cottage, Singapoo and its surrounding mountains are still today part of who I am; a magic map of an indelible city resides quietly, and comfortingly, some place deep within.

A map of a place. The place of a map.



The city is a place of many places. City maps only reveal the skeleton of any given city. The city does not lend itself to cartographical simplicity; a map need not speak for itself. Maps. Whimsical documents that tell us so much, and so little about cities. Just as much as cities can tell us so much and so little about the maps they are force-fitted into. Lines can be drawn, can be visible, but lines can also be un-drawn, invisible. There can be erasures, traces, lines hard to see, lines easy to miss. The multi-placedness and multi-spatiality of the city can therefore be hard to locate – unless one uses one's mnemonic map.

Every day, memories fill up a place, populate it with the gold and dust of yesterday. The past, according to Henri Bergson, is “lived and acted, rather than represented”: this should be the way we understand the city. The everydayness of the city’s inhabitants, the constant hum of lives write and draw the city’s map, and outline the city’s *genius loci*. Lives happen in the present tense, and then in the past. Place happens in the present, and is made from the past. Memory, that spatial and temporal substance, forms vestiges of meaning, at once imperceptible, irrepressible and indelible. Memory marks are left all around the city, in places at the core and at the periphery. Memory is central to place-making, and place, to memory-making.

What then defines this place, this city? Where do the lines on our mnemonic maps lead us? Here, the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible seep into each other. Our places make our memories. Our memories make our maps. Our maps tell our stories. Our stories continue to re-shape our maps.

In this city are the migratory lines trod by our ancestors, the scent of our foodways, the flight of birds, the sigh of an old school, a demolished rooftop, an unassuming lamppost, fading tongues and extroverted harbours. These are the signposts – both seen and unseen, but thoroughly felt in equal measure – that guide us to another place, an inner place, layering over the city’s capitalist terrain, the maps in tourist guidebooks. The interactions we have with the tangibilities of the city become maps in themselves, our very own private maps whose boundaries and borders shift with



the exciting capriciousness and spontaneity of memory. Place is perception; it moves into different spheres of understanding and experience, it can easily slip into being a non-place; it can lose itself, and find itself again. Through its movements and morphing, the lines of place are never fully given to erasure. We are left with patinas, palimpsests, the endurance of personal and collective memory. These bleached lines are the indelible marks that tell us where we are and who we are.

## Room Without a Roof

“Place is never completely effaced.”

— Mark Augé

It was January in 1995 when we moved to Holland Hill. I was all of thirteen, at the start of Secondary Two. Having spent my childhood in the East of Singapore, I now had a whole new neighbourhood to look forward to, in the West. As I return to my past, I wonder why moving did not unsettle me back then. Perhaps the romantic flares of sentimentalism had not yet warmed my young heart; or it could be, too, that I was considerably more adaptable as a teenager – one thrilled and happy to be on the move, to be going to a different place.

My brother and I were excited at the prospect of investigating our new place. So like amateur explorers, we ran around the compound. Empty stairwells and a miniature swimming pool more suitable for tanning than for getting a productive workout were the things we saw. The lobby was bland with grey tiles and white concrete

pillars, and the lifts serving nothing more than to take people to their respective floors. The squash court was hardly used, with lizards and moths making it their habitation, more than anybody who wanted to get an active game going. There was really nothing spectacular or remarkable, unlike the fearful excitement one gets when exploring a huge Victorian mansion with its many doors and secretive rooms. Our new apartment building was, simply put, a vertical collection of horizontal plains, stacked atop each other. Middle-class private apartments in Singapore built in the 1990s don't offer much nutrition and fodder for the imagination with their insipid modernist architecture. I had to drag it out, press it forth if I wanted my mind to meet my muse. That the surroundings outside the compound of my apartment were merely homogeneous blocks of HDB flats, lined with fluorescent lights and uniform corridors, starved my imagination further, making random jolts of inspiration next to impossible.

Or so I thought.



After walking through the entire premises and thinking that we had quite enough of feeling riled up, we decided to take one last tour, to the adjacent, connecting block. There we headed for the lift and went up all the way to the last floor, that being the fifth. As usual, nothing surprised us. The doors to each unit were shut, with random shoes scattered messily or arranged neatly outside. We noticed that this block had more units per floor than there were in our block. Being nosey, we walked the length of the corridor in

order that we might get a remote glimpse of how fellow residents kept the outside of their houses. Everybody minded their own business, so there was little opportunity for chatter or the general greeting to say that we had just moved in. So after satiating our banal nosiness, we decided to take the lift down, back to our unit, lest our parents got worried. As we headed for the elevator, we saw a door, the stairwell that would lead us downstairs. Perhaps it was better to walk, we thought. Opening the door, we realised that there was a flight of steps leading up to the roof. "Let's go and see what's up there!" I said with a slight hope of finding something different, unexpected. My brother didn't say much in protest; he ambivalently followed, looking like he was trying to understand my enthusiasm for the new place. Just two flights up was a door. We expected it to be locked; after all, most roof accesses are not permitted to trespassers or unauthorised personnel. But to our surprise, it wasn't. We opened the door to discover a wall and a ladder. They looked reticent, undramatic, white-washed, covered with the dust of the day. Yet beneath that unappealing façade, the ladder looked beckoning, inviting, almost seductive. So we succumbed.

Just two steps up the ladder and there I was, at the brink of this world and a foot into another bigger, brighter, better universe. I had to plunge into it. "Wow! You must see this!" I shouted excitedly at my brother who was just seconds behind me. Quickly, I completed the climb and there I was, two feet standing firmly on higher ground and I knew at that very instant that I had found my hiding place, my very own private nation. If I had to divide my life into two distinct chapters, it would be a life up to my discovery of

the rooftop and a life thereafter. Jon Krakauer says of climbing and being at an altitude that “Life thrum[s] at a higher pitch. The world [is] made real.”

Nothing had ever so powerfully and profoundly impacted me as that overwhelming, daring, dizzyingly centripetal, epiphanic moment. I was floored, flat-out, possessed. Like Neil Armstrong taking his first step on extra-terrestrial soil, I too completed my climb and made a leap, my two feet plastering themselves firmly onto the concrete surface. It was an open, flat roof with nary a shelter in sight, proffering a view unblocked. The only features sticking out from the levelness were a few lightning rods lining the roof’s perimeter. Around me were buildings, near and far, penetrating the skyline. I could also see the roofs and peer into the rooms of other buildings below me. Facing west, even further away were the chimneys of Jurong Island serried together, emitting industrial fires, a brilliant and amorphous orange, illuminating the urbanised horizon. If one went there after dusk and stayed on long enough, it was possible to see those fires burning all night, unabashedly signalling an economy ceaselessly hard at work, energetic and dynamic. Southward was the city, so the Swissôtel, known then as the Westin Stamford, one of Singapore’s tallest architectural gems, was easily identifiable. I wonder what the view would be like now, given that Singapore’s landscape has changed so much. I suppose I would be able to see the triple-towered Marina Bay Sands with its signature ark of a roof garden, as well as the bluish glitzy, glassy assemblage of buildings of Marina Bay Financial Centre. In the near distance, I could see ubiquitous clusters of Housing Board flats proudly gracing the landscape, some old, some new, some

upgraded. The only jot of green in the midst concrete was Bukit Timah Hill, Singapore's highest, natural feature. My thirteen-year-old self had never experienced such a panoramic sight of the city in such an uninhibited way. Previously, my only other memory seeing the city from a great height was through the windows of Compass Rose, the now-closed restaurant at the top of the Westin. Here, I was surrounded by nothing. No walls nor windows for safety. The only thing to keep anyone from falling was a parapet a few metres below the roof.

From then on, I never looked back. I developed an intimate relationship with the rooftop in the years that followed. I spent my adolescence running there for refuge under the open sky whenever the existential troubles of those years got the better of me. When I grew into young adulthood, it was there that I spent some of the most significant and precious hours of my life, in solitude and company. I began to share the place with those I trusted deeply; I was, in every way, letting them into my world. There, without the knowledge of parental authority, I had my first cigarette, alone. There, I managed to catch the meteor shower of 1999. There, I would retreat to alone at night, when I wanted to block out the noise from others, when I wanted only to listen to the sounds of the city. There, lying down and facing the night sky, I tried to point out the constellations hidden behind the fog of the city's bright lights.

There is something peculiar and alluring about rooftops despite their anonymity and unremarkability. In Anthony Chen's award-winning film *Ilo Ilo*, the young protagonist and his helper sneak up to

the roof of their HDB flat, a place that at once secludes and seduces by bringing two lonely people closer together, by connecting them in the height and midst of the city's vastness. In Royston Tan's *15*, the two protagonists, both marginalised misanthropes, find their own little sanctuary on a rooftop, a place where they are able to live out their little fantasies, where they are able to avoid the gaze of an ordered society in which they do not belong. The rooftop, despite its architectural inaccessibility and spatial alienation, is a place and space of belonging, a place and space where solitude and connection with another, or with oneself, reaches its fullness. The expanse of its surroundings engulfs and alienates. Because of the visual experience one gets on a rooftop, perspectives change. Height engulfs a person's being, taking him to the vantage point of phenomenological perception. One's sense of self in relation to one's physical environment reaches a profound symbiosis. A new existential dimension is created in such a place. Here, the individual becomes small and big at the same time, the city bigger, more isolating, more beautiful. It is nothing less than liberating when a place suddenly becomes part of a person and belongs to him, when the nearest and furthest boundary is only the horizon.

The rooftop was not only my place in the world, but a space I could return to, and into, time and time again. In the parlance of cultural critic Walter Benjamin: first, the rooftop was a landscape, now a room. My room with the sky as its ceiling. My room on the roof. My room without a roof. Overlooking the urban sprawl. Place and space morph into each other the moment meaning and memory take over. Nowhere else in this city have I been able to find a place like my rooftop, nowhere else in this city have I been



able to understand, and love, like that rooftop. Everywhere else is outside of it.



The years 2007 to 2011 were propitious, profitable and prosperous ones for Singapore's property market, much to the delight of eager developers and the disdain of intransigent residents. En-bloc sales were a dime a dozen, offering irresistible pay-outs to residents. In land-scarce Singapore, development is given the pecuniary go-ahead, at all costs. Old buildings are torn down to make way for new, swanky and more expensive ones, so that the value of land and the upward spiral of property prices are in tandem with the workings of the free market. Furthermore, with the wave of affluent immigrants and expatriates coming into the city, it is only natural that they would be attracted to purchasing prestigious properties whose prices can only climb. The lure of a promising good investment in a country so wanting in land cannot be anything but compelling. While the global economy has been nothing but bearish, sluggardly and tottering, the property market in Singapore has been relatively stable, as if it were the only boat afloat in a sea of sinking ships. En-bloc sales are therefore a good indicator of how healthy the private property market, in particular, is. In these past few years, Singapore has seen a glut of instant millionaires as well as overnight nomads hunting for houses with their newfound wealth. With the constant demand for property by the sudden influx of people evicted from their homes, demand has been kept alive, growing and heating up property prices further. At the height of the en-bloc boom in 2007 and 2008, there were 86 such sales,

generating a net gain of at least \$11 billion. Construction sites that hold the promise of pomp and luxurious living are a ubiquitous sight today, telling almost-completed stories/storeys of attractive remunerations made in the second half of this decade.

We were not spared from this wave. Appealing though the promised payout would be, we did not want to leave. There were a few of them, pushers of the en-bloc sale who could not but press the rest of the residents to acquiesce. They were a practical bunch, trying their luck with a property that was soon reaching its twentieth year, taking a stab at paying for a constant refashioning of the city's décor in accordance with the promise of capitalism. My father was cordially invited to the condominium's management committee meetings; he avoided their persuasions and persistence with a mixture of irritation and dignity. But the pull of money can be, in the end, annexing and invariable. We were one of the last few families standing; more than 80 percent of the residents had already agreed and we were left with Hobson's choice. The remnant, the obdurate 20 percent, was forced, by law and by lucre, to move out. We were that 20 percent, or less. I never bothered with the statistics. All I know and remember with considerable ire today is that the value of a home is not determined only by the value of money. We were attached to Holland Hill. My mother, in particular, was shattered to hear the news that the en-bloc sale had gone through. It was around March 2007 when my father broke the news to us. With a deep sense of loss and disappointment, we asked him where he was thinking of moving to. "Don't know. Search for a house," said my father who was by then too tired to entertain any more questions about the collective sale.

The satisfaction and anticipation upon finding Holland Hill back in late 1994 came to my mother like a dream. She told me, in the years that followed, of how she and my father searched painstakingly for a house that they would like on first viewing. And Holland Hill was it. She and my father knew, at the very instant they laid eyes on it, that this would be our house, our home. As such, while the confirmation of the en-bloc's success thrilled its proponents, it quashed its opponents in equal measure.

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It has been seven and a half years since we moved out of Holland Hill. After I got married, I moved into a little three-room flat directly facing the back of the old place. What faces me today as I open the door is a construction site. A concrete building, half-complete, stands imposingly, its skeleton and scaffolding grey and new. When complete, it will probably be about thirty storeys high. For now, there are the metallic, giraffe-like cranes that surround the building, robots that pile one concrete slab on top of another. Beside them are the excavators, the diggers or mechanised *chungkols*, as I call them. More soil to plunge their teeth into, more trees to uproot. Among the vertical mammoth and ubiquitous machines is a cylindrical structure, still unpainted, the only thing softening the angularity that engulfs the site. I presume that it will become a pool or jacuzzi when the construction is finally finished. In the day, I hear incessant drilling and hammering. Old walls are removed to make way for new walls. Old rooms vanish so that new rooms can appear. An old roof disappears into the rubble, with a new one to surface, closer to the sky.



So much happened in the twelve years I was there. I grew up, I loved, I lost. To see it hacked away and built over fills me with a nameless pain. Perhaps I am a sentimental fool. It is disconcerting, the hard-nosed detachment and the ferocious practicality of the free market. This is a city whose dictum is to innovatively change places, to re-place, to un-place, to dis-place. This is a city that operates on economic functionality, that thrives on and drives the quantifiable benefits laid down by property developers and corporations. What we know to be our very own sense of place, a place that is real, dear and authentic to us, a place in which we share an intimate relationship, is lost in, and to, the winds of commerce. What then can salvage the intangible detritus of urban renewal? What else can lay claim to a past (place) that has been forcefully removed from an individual or a community? What else can I depend on to reclaim and preserve my past, or at the very least, the memory of my past? Thomas Hardy says in *The Woodlanders* of place: "The spot may have beauty, grandeur, salubrity, convenience; but if it lacks memories it will ultimately pall upon him who settles there without opportunity of intercourse with its kind."

Memories make a place, and place makes memories. One cannot do without the other. Without memory, place would be meaningless; without place, memories impossible. Memories need a home in order that they feel more real, and lived. But unfortunately, so many memories have been let up, let go of, emptied of their place in the world, chased away from their places of origin.

What belies the colourless corners, general plainness and forgettable exterior of my apartment block at Holland Hill is a building fraught with pain and loss, a building in full knowledge of its imminent demise and demolition. Like a niche or a cemetery, my old house at Holland Hill is a place of memory and remembering. I have, with footsteps over those few chapters of my life, traversed its nondescript car park, its scant, bourgeois lobby lined with uncharacteristic, dull, grey and pink tiles; and most importantly, its flat open rooftop facing the concrete sprawl, the unlimited sky. Each step was in ambulatory sync with the years, with my coming of age, with my turning from 14 to 26. Somewhere in the beginning of those years and those steps, I discovered a place that I keep with me till today – that eternally lost but indelible place in this city that can only be justifiably remembered by writing it into re-existence, by prosaic confabulations.