



An Interview with XU XI

by Jeanie Chung

The author's bio in Xu Xi's 2010 novel *Habit of a Foreign Sky* says that she "inhabits the flight path connecting New York, Hong Kong and the South Island of New Zealand." New Zealand has been taken off the itinerary, but Xu Xi still drifts between those two cities and two worlds, though more of her time is spent in Hong Kong, where she is writer-in-residence at City University of Hong Kong's Department of English and directs its low-residency MFA program, the first international MFA program specializing in Asian writing in English. Until 2012, she also taught in the MFA in Writing program at Vermont College of Fine Arts, where she served as faculty chair from 2009 to 2012. Among her honors are an O. Henry Award, a Cohen Award for best story from *Ploughshares*, and a NYFA fiction fellowship. Before turning her attention to writing full-time, she worked for eighteen years in international marketing and management. Along with *Habit*, a finalist for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, she has written eight other books, including the novels *The Unwalled City* (2001) and *Hong Kong Rose* (1997); the essay collection *Evanescent Isles* (2008), and the essay and story collection *Overleaf Hong Kong* (2004). She has also edited four anthologies of Hong Kong writing in English. Her latest title, *Access: Thirteen Tales*, is a collection of short stories.

Jeanie Chung: In *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, Gail Szeto's mother says, "There're many ways to be a woman now." I think of the ways women, especially Asian women, are depicted in literature, even today, and not too many of those ways are being shown, generally speaking. Did you make a conscious effort to show more of those different "ways"?

Xu Xi: Yes, there are really more ways to be a woman now than in my mother's day. My mother was the model for my protagonist in *Habit*, because Gail's character mirrors hers. In many ways, *Habit* is my "woman's book," which is what I thought I was doing in *Unwalled* until I finished the manuscript and then realized, hang on, I've just written my Hong Kong book!

I'm not sure how *deliberately* I tried to show different ways, but I am and always have been conscious of my fascination with women's lives. Women are so different from men. You're not supposed to say that if you're being "Politically Correct," but PC is often such *un-critical* thinking that I've learned to ignore it most of the time.

Most of my work life was spent in rather masculine industries, and I've had lots of exposure to men's lives since my colleagues and peers were mostly guys. I've never done, or aspired to, many of what we might call the "traditional" women's professions or roles: mother—either stay-at-home or working—nurse, secretary, flight attendant, model, fashion professional, society or trophy wife, hooker, geisha/hostess, manicurist, etc.; yet I find such women's lives fascinating. Part of the fascination for me is that I find I have to learn how to think and feel like a woman who more naturally gravitates to such lives than I do if I am going to write convincing female characters. I sort of find it easier to think like a man, because the society I come from—Hong Kong—is so patriarchal, and my professional life has been so much around men. Yet as a writer, what is fascinating is equally as much what you don't know as what you do.

I love it when girls and young women come to me and tell me

I've written their lives. Because I *do* believe that, as a writer, I can and even *should* tell the woman's story in its myriad forms. As much as I enjoy hearing from male readers that I write sexy fiction, I love it even more when women are moved by what I have to say.

Chung: One of the themes in your writing seems to be women and power. Your essay in *Arts & Letters* talks about the idea of ambition in women, especially women writers, using your own life as an example. But

What informs my writing is the shifting nature of power and how too rapid or sudden a shift can completely derail one while empowering another, and that came partly from the business world, but initially from my undergraduate courses in political science.

one can be ambitious without being powerful, and vice versa. Lady Day in *Access* may be ambitious, but she isn't necessarily powerful. Andanna You in *Unwalled City* has a lot of a certain kind of power, for someone her age, but she isn't necessarily ambitious. Obviously, sexual power and corporate/professional/political power aren't the same thing, but are they so different? And how would you say your experience as a woman in the business world informs your writing in that area?

Xu Xi: Certainly my corporate life taught me about power, because there is more room there for women to simply step up to the plate and take that power if they want. A surprising number still shy away, but enough do want it enough to do what it takes. It's a sacrifice though, because the woman who has it all is much more fantasy than real. I don't have children, have divorced twice, and had to turn my back on more than one professional situation because the only way to survive it was to play the subservient woman. Well, relatively subservient—I was still better off than millions of women who don't even have the choice to be or not to be.

What informs my writing is the shifting nature of power and how too rapid or sudden a shift can completely derail one while empowering another, and that came partly from the business world, but initially from my undergraduate courses in political science. The first time I encountered the concept of "balance of power," I recall being struck by that very idea, and it's one that permeates much of what I write. Sexual relations are all about the shifts in the balance of power—cut Samson's hair, and overnight, power shifts.

I worked in a Wall Street law firm in the late '80s/early '90s, after the "irrational exuberance" and the downslide to sidewalks being paved with gold. The level of paranoia was astonishing to me; people around me behaved in a fashion that I can only describe as Nixonian. The more power you have, the more you stand to lose, and you are, I suppose, constantly aware of that. At that time, I was ambitious but somewhat powerless. My position was in the marketing department; it was a great team to work with, and I had a fabulous boss,

but in the power hierarchy we were definitely "downstairs" to the lawyers "upstairs" because we weren't lawyers. You became very *Remains of the Day* or *Invisible Man* to survive. I stayed in the job because I had been laid off after Pinkerton's was sold, and it had taken me more than a year to land a full-time position. So my economic situation was such that even a less-than-desirable job would prevail. But it was a great place to study the dynamics of power and ambition. I had to compile bios for all the partners—this was a white-shoe firm, so the blue blood flowed—which is a little like writing bios for authors. You misstate the wrong detail of the subject's own perception of his or her power at your peril.

Yet I could feel myself bristling at my own lack of power: after having managed much larger marketing budgets and worked for corporate-style senior management who

appreciated what I did, I found the lawyers insufferable in the way they would openly yell at my boss and our team, often because of their own insecurities or, perhaps, having been cut down by their clients. It was a domino effect: A yells at B, so B yells at C, and so on down the line. My boss was astonishing because she was somewhere down at M while we, her team, were N, but the buck stopped at M. She was one of the few women bosses I had in all my years in business, and remains one of my best bosses.

Chung: Were there more prosaic ways in which that corporate experience shaped you as a writer? Obviously, it may have given you more financial stability, but aside from that, did you learn anything as far as work ethic, or even, perhaps, becoming more savvy as to the business of publishing?

Xu Xi: Strangely, my business life made me less, not more savvy, or rather, less *concerned* with the business of publishing. Publishing is a loathsome industry, one that is too much about connections and where you came from and privilege. Corporate life actually offers a far more level playing field than the literary life, in my experience. You don't necessarily have to know anyone to get ahead. But publishing and the literary life, generally, is a *lot* about whom you know and even where you went to school. I managed to move to New York by sending out 200 resumes, hoping that one would land on the right desk, since I didn't know a soul. One did. I'm not saying this doesn't happen in publishing—it does—but the whole literary scene is a lot more about the one degree of separation than not. In time, you learn to play that game, too, but I have to say it was a lot easier

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in corporate life. There, it was mostly about just doing your job.

But yes, work ethic. I don't think I've ever in my life felt stymied as a writer for lack of so-called "inspiration." In corporate life, you just show up at work and keep going. Writing to me is pretty much the same. I tell my students that writers just have to write, otherwise they're not writers.

Oh, and spreadsheets. Most useful for any novel, or any book project where there's a timeline or layers of information to keep track of. I am so thankful for spreadsheets, an electronic, efficient, paperless way to replace the sheets of paper I used to tape together and spread all over the floors of my writing rooms—and you can carry the file with you on a laptop when you're traveling. These days, I don't know how to write a book without one! That was a bonus from my corporate experience.

More than all that, though, is verisimilitude. Even though I confess to a weakness for meta-fiction that is over-much about the literati—you love what you also hate I guess—I do think that the most important novels are about what we're all doing as human beings right now, as opposed to waxing lyrical about the process of being creative. Corporate life is a great study in verisimilitude because it really is about life as most of the middle class lives it, which is supported by the working class, i.e., life for ordinary people. Most people have to work, and corporations provide a great many jobs, and hence, create a great many lives. And that's the real world, as opposed to the world of the purely literary, or academia, which is correctly named an ivory tower. The best imagination captures that real world and spins it into the perfect metaphor or image or detail of character.

Chung: I guess maybe that's where the "write what you know" idea leads for some people: to a lot of stories about artists and universities and infidelity with married colleagues.

Xu Xi: I have to confess that I'm writing a university novella right now! It doesn't need a novel, I don't think. Maybe it'll turn into a long story.

One reason I think that early on I *didn't* want either the university life—after my B.A. I turned down an acceptance into the English PhD world in favor of a commission-only sales job to start out in business—or the MFA life is that I like school while I'm in it but never miss it when it's gone. These days, working in a university full-time for the first time in my life, I remember how much I hated homework as a child.

So I don't know about "write what you know," but rather, "write what you're willing to live and think about." One day I'm going to write a school story for children where there's absolutely no homework.

Chung: Let's get back to that sexy fiction thing, to say nothing of infidelity and power. What's the key to writing a good sex scene?

Xu Xi: Don't describe the actual sex? I read porn when I was younger—mainly the *Penthouse* letters—one way to learn about all the ways people have sex. Most of that was pretty boring but what always intrigued me was that in nonporn literature, or at least stuff that we wouldn't classify as porn, how little sex actually took place in a scene as opposed to in the imagination of the character. Anais Nin's forays into porn, *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds*, were always about what was imagined. What takes place is over pretty quickly. It's really difficult to write long, drawn-out sex beyond a paragraph or so.

Chung: Why did you decide to revisit the characters from *The Unwalled City* in *Habit of a Foreign Sky*?

Hong Kong was really
nowheresville for any
kind of MFA culture—
or even creative
writing education
generally. This
program has helped
kickstart that culture
at an international
level, because our
faculty come from
all over the world...

Xu Xi: Because they're not "dead" yet in my imagination.

Chung: Still? Are they coming back?

Xu Xi: Absolutely. My latest novel is about Gail's half-brother, Gordie. I mean, why invent new characters when the old ones are still yapping away, trying to tell you their stories?

Chung: Early in *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, Gail talks about a recurring dream in which Gordie asks her to fly with him, and you've mentioned you often dreamt of flying as well. What role do dreams play in your work?

Xu Xi: Dreams would probably play a bigger role if I slept more! Ever since I was a child, I've been an insomniac. As young as nine or ten I'd be up much of the night, which was quite useful during the years of full-time work life, because I'd just get up at three or four a.m. and write till it was time to go to work.

But I like it when I dream—the time I can remember dreaming most profoundly was during the year or so I spent in Greece: the one other time I quit full-time work in 1980 and ran away to Europe "to live the writer's life," only to capitulate in the end by enrolling in the MFA in the U.S. Greece was a great place to dream, and I filled pages and pages of notebooks with the results of those dreams. I can recall the sensation of dreaming, can actually *feel* it, but must confess that I don't dream much anymore except to daydream.

Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn wrote this gorgeous song, "Daydream" and the opening line is *Daydream / Why do you haunt me so?* Those lyrics are echoed near the end with *Daydream / Don't break my reverie*. That melody, and the lyrics, to a lesser extent, capture the essence of dreaming for me, a feeling of a

prolonged reverie from which you don't need or want to awaken. I did dream of flying as a child—childhood was the other time I can recall dreaming. I flew regularly over the Hong Kong harbor. It was such an efficient way to see the city, away from the traffic and dog poo on the pavement.

Chung: How do you think Hong Kong has shaped and continues to shape you as a writer?

Xu Xi: When I was a young writer, I didn't think Hong Kong mattered at all. How wrong I was. Youth usually doesn't know squat, although it thinks it knows everything. You can't go home again but neither can you leave home completely. Also, much of my adult life has been spent in Hong Kong as well as the U.S. Only my university experience was entirely American, although now I'm working

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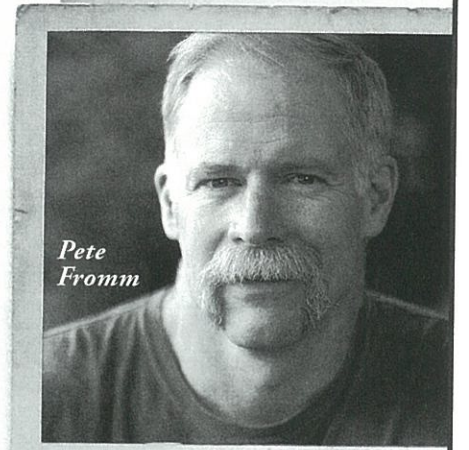
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in a Hong Kong university full-time for the first time ever and it's an eye-opening experience.

But my childhood and teenage years were *entirely* Hong Kong.

Recently, I was at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival in Australia and heard the novelist Gail Jones give a wonderful lecture on childhood memory. It made me think about how Hong Kong conjures up for me the ten thousand things that flutter around my heart and mind, no matter where in the world I am. New York is the one other place that does that, but not quite as fully. For instance, I don't know the streets of New York the way I know the streets of Hong Kong. One of my first jobs out of college was in sales, and I had to learn my way around several districts of the city that I hadn't known that well as a girl. Also, I was a girl guide—girl scout—in secondary school, and map reading was something we did in the urban and rural areas of Hong Kong. So its geography is sort of in my blood.

Ironically, I'm actually not terribly attuned to Hong Kong culture. I don't particularly like martial arts films, do not follow Canto pop, or any pop for that matter, cannot keep up with the numerous urban legends that appear and disappear so quickly in the city, and do not recognize most Cantonese film stars or celebrities. I watch some of the indie films, but basically, I'm not what you'd call a film buff, and of all the art forms that express Hong Kong contemporary culture, film is the most notable one. While I like dim sum, I never miss it if I can't get it, and Cantonese food, as fabulous as it is, doesn't compare to Chiu Chow or Italian for my palate. Likewise, although I'm relatively fluent in Cantonese—I certainly *sound* like a native speaker—I'm not completely literate in Chinese, so I don't really read Hong Kong Chinese

literature, or Chinese literature generally, unless it's translated into English.

When I speak in public about my role as a "Hong Kong writer," I always qualify that designation by noting that I am part of the *minority* English language literary scene—and it is a significantly minor literature on the world stage. I also self-identify as an American writer, because I am—and spent enough time learning baseball

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to own that identity!—as well as Asian American and Asian/Chinese diaspora, because I am also ethnically Indonesian. I can eat spicier food than most Hong Kong people can tolerate because I grew up with Indonesian cuisine and culture.

Yet I can't deny Hong Kong, and neither can Hong Kong deny me. Three times before the cock crowed I did try to deny it in my younger days, but, as Peter discovered, you don't get away with that denial, because you are found out in the end.

Chung: Have you ever written in Cantonese?

Xu Xi: Only as a child, in composition class, the only Chinese subject I liked because it didn't require me to memorize anything. Once, in grad school when I was studying Mandarin, I had a tutor from Beijing and started writing a journal in Chinese, but I can't really say I was "writing in Cantonese" because I was mainly trying to practice writing in "proper" Chinese, which is Mandarin.

Really, I write in Cantonese in English. Many of my characters think in Cantonese, speak Cantonese, are Cantonese, and all I do is render them in English and the world of Hong Kong which *is* Cantonese. Here's my favorite Canto-English line: *You bore me into a muscle cramp*, which is this wonderful Cantonese expression that, literally translated, is understandable in English, but is not really "English."

Chung: You've written extensively in different genres and forms—novels, essays, short stories. Some fiction is obviously very personal; some essays are more fanciful. Which is your favorite? How do you decide which stories to tell which ways?

Xu Xi: To date, I still love writing the novel the best. The process consumes you, and remains all-consuming for the many years it takes to write a novel from beginning to end, by which I mean the years prior to putting pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, because a novel is born in the imagination and slowly expands until your whole being is filled with it: its environment, imperative, characters, timeline, the whole shebang. Also, unlike for the short story, I don't have to try out and

discard as many ideas, because once a novel becomes real inside me, I sort of *know* it has to be written, the way I don't always know with a short story. I've written and discarded many short stories that will remain forever in "draft"—not quite true for novels.

The essay intrigues me. My earliest writing was the essay, because of school I suppose, but for many years, I thought of myself as a fiction writer, and only turned out essays because some editor asked me for something. Then the day arrived when I sat down and turned out an essay, unsolicited, which is the way I write fiction. That eventually led to a book of essays, and now I am regularly producing essays/CNF alongside the fiction I write. My current project is a series of personal essays about coping with my mother's Alzheimer's condition—I've produced three so far—which I hope will turn into a kind of memoir-in-essays titled *Typhoon Mum*.

The novella is a form I have a great fondness for. I've only published one to date, *Danny's Snake*, but my current long-form fiction project is a novella titled *The Milton Man*. Let's see how that goes. My publisher wants me to finish it to make the 2015 list, so I probably will. Deadlines are a form of inspiration.

Chung: Your latest book, *Access*, is subtitled *Thirteen Tales*, and divided into tall tales, circular tales, fairy tales, old wives' tales, and beastly tales. Where did that idea come from?

Xu Xi: It happened after the book contract, and I started thinking about how the stories should be arranged. Prior to that, the manuscript was loosely divided into "tales" already, but I hadn't been all that conscious about why I called something a fairy tale over a tall tale, for example. When the book was going to happen for real, the notion of tales really took hold—I think the genesis is Mark Twain, whose short stories I devoured when I was younger and

reread constantly until one day I just stopped. He wrote tall tales of course, but it made me think about the nature of storytelling, how much I loved the darkest fairy tales as a girl, Hans Christian Anderson's in particular—the original "Little Mermaid" is a profoundly disturbing tale, unlike the Disney version. Women tell each other old wives' tales all the time, and literature is full of the beastly, and bestial.

Circular tales was my nod to Chinese thought patterns, which I've seen represented visually as a kind of

concentric vortex. That's my word, vortex, because conversations with Chinese friends and acquaintances embrace a circularity that doesn't happen in conversations with Westerners, and at times, it does feel like this vortex.

Chung: The tales are simultaneously contemporary and old-fashioned. In fact, speaking of "The Little Mermaid," I always thought there was something very modern, even futuristic, about it. Of course Faye Weldon refers to it specifically in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. But if you

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think about it, it's not such a different idea than, say, a sci-fi like movie like John Woo's *Face/Off*. Or, for example, your story "All About Skin."

Xu Xi: Funny about this speculative turn. I don't really read much sci-fi or futuristic fiction, unless you count Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and yet I'm drawn to articulating a kind of sci-fi/speculative reality, at least in short fiction. Maybe it's because Hong Kong feels so futuristic, as does China and much of Asia. Fashion is very sci-fi to me, and it surrounds me much more in Hong Kong than even in New York—and I do live in Chelsea where leggy models flash by constantly with their portfolios. Also, the whole superhero thing seems to have taken hold of popular culture these days and I find myself recalling my DC comic-reading days of childhood.

Vampires, on the other hand, are boringly predictable—basically it's just all about repressed sexual desire in one form or another, even if they can do cool special effects these days.

Chung: Well, I guess vampires would be more gothic. More analogous to, say, some sort of bodice-ripper romance.

Xu Xi: When I was a kid, I used to watch the *Dracula* movies with Christopher Lee and these terrified me, although I pretty quickly got over horror movies, generally. I think I want my vampires terrifying, the way I remember *Dracula* before I ever read Bram Stoker, and when I see vampires on screen now, they're all way too beautiful, too self-consciously "young." Christopher Lee looked like he was hundreds of years old.

I've never been big on bodice-rippers or horror I guess, especially when these degenerate into the

visually obvious, which the genres seem to demand. Stephen King's *Carrie* is a much better book than film for me, but generally the trouble with bodice-ripping horror is that it cries out to be visualized, not just imagined.

Chung: To change gears a little bit, in addition to your own writing, you've always been involved in building communities among writers, whether through teaching, the Asian-American Writers Workshop, and even the anthologies you've edited. The City University of Hong Kong MFA program seems like an extension

...I do believe that, as a writer, I can and even should tell the woman's story in its myriad forms.

of that idea. Why is community-building important to you?

Xu Xi: It was awfully lonely being an English language writer from Hong Kong because there wasn't much of a literary heritage I could belong to. So community-building was just a natural thing for me to do, I guess, because I wanted to find my literary tribe, so to speak. I think I realized early on that I belonged to that "outsider" crowd of writers. I was smitten with Henry James in my younger years, and also Marguerite Duras and Doris Lessing, and of course Maxine Hong Kingston truly made me feel like maybe I stood a chance, finally. I've always searched for places to "land" as a writer where I felt wanted, or more importantly, where I really belonged. For a long

time in the U.S. during and after my own MFA, at University of Massachusetts in Amherst, I wasn't sure I could ever find that "home." The AAWW was astonishing when I first discovered it—although even they used to be more Asian American, i.e.: not as Asia-Asian, although that's changing with the new immigration patterns in the U.S.—and even after I left my corporate career, the colonies and residencies I gravitated towards were mostly international rather than American—Switzerland and Norway, for instance. If I build literary communities, it's because I'm trying to find the literary "village" where I fit. Setting up this MFA in Hong Kong was sort of an extension of that, because I tell my students that I tried to create the kind of MFA I wished had existed when I was a new writer starting out, looking for that space of my own.

Chung: How exactly did the program come about? Were you involved from the beginning?

Xu Xi: The genesis I think was really years ago. Probably as early as my own MFA. Here's how it went: I was one of the only foreign MFA students at my program—there were a couple of English students as well—and it soon became apparent to me that I hadn't been thinking about writing anything like I was supposed to if I wanted to be a good MFA candidate.

As a result, I almost lost my assistantship as a not-so-worthy MFA student. The only reason I managed to hang onto it was that I happened to be a pretty good teacher—we all had to teach freshman comp—and my students conducted a letter campaign on my behalf to the powers that be. The MFA fiction

faculty also came to my rescue, and I did eventually finish the degree. I took the long route—four years for a three-year program—it was a way to extend my student visa and hence my stay in the country, and I managed to persuade my advisor, the late Hungarian novelist Tamas Aczel, to give me a one-year independent study to work on a novel before I went back to the workshop grind.

Fast forward to VCFA, which was where I discovered low-residency MFAs when I started teaching there in winter 2003. The experience of teaching at VCFA converted me to the low-res pedagogy—a much better model for learning to write than the traditional MFA, at least for a writer like me. By 2009, I had a contract with City U to help design a new MFA for them. In between, I taught at another university in Hong Kong for a part-time diploma

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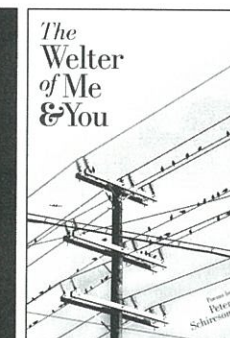
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program in creative writing—they did eventually set up a local residential MFA program. But my interest was to create an Asian-focused, low-residency, *international* program,

I wanted to create a program that didn't exist but needed to exist.

because with all the programs in the world, why should anyone—except for local students who *only* want to write for Hong Kong, perhaps—come to one in Hong Kong, a city with no

international reputation to speak of as a literary center? I wanted to create a program that didn't exist but *needed* to exist. So yes, I was involved from the beginning because for some four years previously, I'd been telling every university in Hong Kong that a low-res, international program was the way to go and if any institution were up to doing it, I was putting my hand up to help. City U answered the call when Kingsley Bolton, a sociolinguist I've known professionally for many years, came on board as Chair Professor and Head

of the English Department, and the rest is history.

We set up shop officially in 2010, and we started in summer. We take one "cohort" a year. The total

enrollment in the first three years was seventy-one in three genres—CNF, Poetry, and Fiction. We're limited to a maximum of thirty per cohort, but we've chosen to accept fewer so far in favor of quality over quantity, even though we had enough applicants to take thirty each year if we wanted to. Also, being new, we wanted to make sure we really established a strong program rather than go for numbers. The most interesting thing about our program is the extremely international profile of our students—much more than I imagined possible. The seventy-one students enrolled in the first three years represented twenty nationalities of folk living in fifteen different countries. Pretty wild, huh? Our external examiner is Shawn Wong, who said, after his first visit to a residency, that there's no other MFA program in the world like this one. He's right.

Chung: So it's going well?

Xu Xi: Yes. To date, our students have published (or received contracts for) seven books: three poetry collections (two by the same Hong Kong Chinese student with New York presses; one by a Japanese poet with a Singapore press), a debut memoir by an Australian CNF student, a collection of short stories by a Singaporean student, another story collection by a Swedish-Bosnian student, and a novel by an Indian student. They've also won and been finalists in fairly prestigious contests, and placed fiction, poetry, and CNF in U.S. journals such as the *Iowa Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Asian Cha*, *New Guard Literary Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Colorado Review* among others. This publishing fest was a little unexpected so soon, but I'm delighted. We don't overly emphasize publication, as what we want our students to focus on is finding their voice and producing quality work. But this is a bonus, especially so soon. More important however, is the wonderful community spirit we see among our students. Our first cohort, especially, was very giving and generous and supportive of the newer students—they set up their own Facebook page and continue to share work and support each other and the new students. We're very virtual and somewhat geeky, being low-res and international. No one *doesn't* use email for distance mentoring! We've also seen the quality of applicants improve with each year. The most recent intake came from an applicant pool that was quite impressive.

Chung: How much of an MFA culture, for lack of a better phrase, would you say exists in Hong Kong? I always think of it as such a business-driven place, though obviously there's a great deal of creativity as exemplified in the film industry.

Xu Xi: Virtually *no* MFA culture, and it's not just Hong Kong, it's most of Asia and Europe as well and probably the Middle East. I imagine this to be true of South America too, but I know nothing about that part of the world. The UK is *finally* catching up. But Hong Kong was really nowhere for any kind of MFA culture—or even creative writing education generally. This program has helped kickstart that culture at an international level, because our faculty come from all over the world—the United States, of course, Canada, the UK, India, Israel, Denmark, and they represent various Asian interests in their background and writing—Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Southeast Asian, Japanese, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi—and we're still looking to add faculty.

Chung: Other than, I guess, that lack of writing-education

culture generally, do you notice any significant difference between American and Asian MFA students?

Xu Xi: What they read, their worldview, and their engagement with language, including a variety of Englishes. Consider that in our new program, we already deal with US, Canadian, Australian, British, New Zealand, and South African English, never mind the Englishes of those who are not necessarily native speakers, or even if they are, their English is heavily informed by an Asian language or languages. Most Asian students—and here I include non-Asians who live in Asia—have lived in more than one country, speak more than one language, and read world, as opposed to only one national, literature as a matter of course. They are much more cosmopolitan and multicultural in outlook, and their sense of the world

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Vampires, on the other hand, are boringly predictable — basically it's just all about repressed sexual desire...

and literature is much broader than that of American students. Most of our students also don't have the luxury of enrolling in a full-time program, or even most U.S.-style low-residencies that require ten-to-eleven day residencies, because that really is a luxury, given the work pace in Asia. You don't get that many holidays and few, if any, employers would consider it a reasonable thing to take time off to do a long MFA residency!

Asian students also seem to have

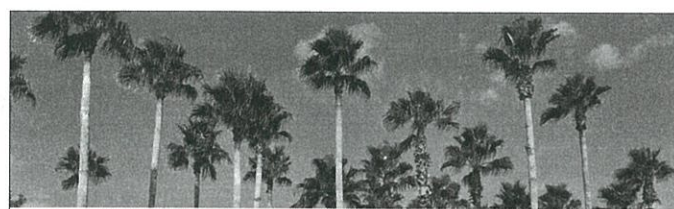
busier professional, and personal, lives than the American students I've encountered, partly because, I suspect, the Asian economies are booming and the pace of life in Asia is faster and more pressure-filled than even in NYC or LA, never mind the rest of the U.S.

Chung: To wrap up, with the thought of that broader outlook on literature, your tastes have always been global. Who would you say is the writer we're most missing out on?

Xu Xi: Surely I can't just name one! Mo Yan is one of the more significant Chinese authors today that we all should be reading. Also Geling Yan, who has several novels in Chinese, actually has written one novel I know of in English, *The Banquet Bug*. Jill

Dawson and Gail Jones, the British and Australian novelists/fiction writers, aren't as well known in the U.S. but have strong followings in their own country and are really fine writers. The late P.K. Leung, one of Hong Kong's leading Chinese poets is every bit as significant as the more famous Bei Dao from China, who lives in Hong Kong, but we should be reading both anyway. Portugal's Antonio Lobo Antunes is well translated now so there's no excuse *not* to read him. Owen Marshall is an amazing New Zealand short story writer: think Chekhov in the South Island. Jose Dalisay from Manila. The list goes on, and on. AWP

Jeanie Chung is a graduate of the MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College. A former sportswriter, her fiction has appeared in Timber Creek Review, Madison Review, Hunger Mountain, and upstreet. She lives in Chicago, where she is working on a novel-in-stories about a high school basketball player.



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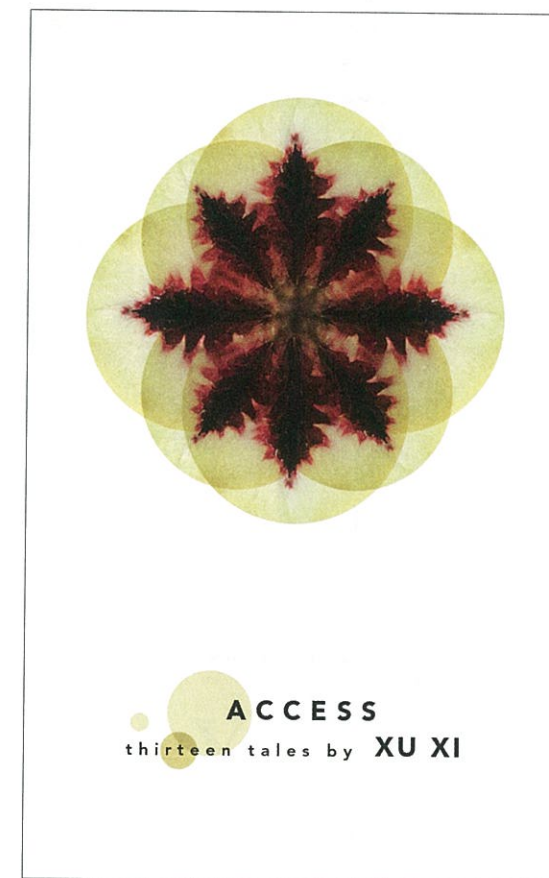
from *Iron Light*

She took her time getting up. Nowhere to be before noon was irresistible luxury. Post-Thanksgiving-but-not-yet-Christmas frenzy, this week-long trip, an unexpected fiftieth birthday present. It was all perfectly timed. When Rand had called a week earlier, offering a free business class ticket—his mileage surpassed even hers—Ida had just delivered two thousand winter solstice chopstick boxes to her largest client of the year and was ready to play, which was what she told him.

“Chopstick boxes?”

“For their mother of pearl sets. My client’s a Shanghai bank, and rather than Christmas gifts, they wanted something Chinese for their corporate clients. So winter solstice, which we celebrate.”

“Uh huh,” but she’d heard his attention stray, the way it did whenever conversation turned to that which did not especially capture his imagination. Things Chinese, for instance, or her graphic design projects. Rand Hillman was fifty-five, long divorced, childless, an architect who courted museums and historical renovations but made his nut on commercial projects, connecting developers and their money across nations. What he loved most about Ida Ching was her financial independence, and that she was the calmest, most collected woman he knew, something he said each time they made love. They had been a sort-of couple for almost five years, and after their first year, Ida had insisted he make it exclusive, the way she had since the start, and he had readily agreed.



Ida had said, “What time’s the flight?” He told her, adding, “See you at the bar?” “Where else?”

Short-speak, the privilege of lovers. They had met at one of Newark International’s airline club bars because they both were elite members of pretty much everything that made travel exclusive. After his call, she’d felt almost romantic.

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