

# Long-distance call

Chelsea Shover

When author Xu Xi was in her early 20s, she considered giving up on the city of her childhood.

'I kept thinking I wanted to turn my back on Hong Kong and a part of me wanted to write away from Hong Kong,' she says. 'Back then a part of me was desperate to get out of Hong Kong. I was so annoyed at the British colony set-up; the inequity between local-hiring firms and expatriate-hiring firms. I was a real sort of firebrand in those days, I found so much to be angry about in Hong Kong.'

She attended college in the United States and earned a master's of fine arts in creative writing. Then, while back in Hong Kong working in international marketing and management, she wrote *Chinese Walls*, *Daughters of Hui* and *Hong Kong Rose*, which were published in the years leading up to the handover. In 1998, she became a full-time writer.

'I found as I kept writing that Hong Kong would not let me go. The subject chose me rather than me choosing the subject,' says Xu Xi. The handover became the subject of one of her short stories. *Insignificant Moments in the History of Hong Kong*, which takes place from June 30 to July 1, 1997, tracks characters in two settings: an exclusive club and a restaurant under the Central escalator.

'Most of us did not think that we would go to sleep one night and wake up one morning and, 'Oh my God, disaster would reign'. But that's the way it was portrayed, especially in the western media. They made it sound like, 'Oh, the PLA [People's Liberation Army] is coming, Hong Kong is going to have a crackdown'.

'The most notable changes were tiny, superficial ones. One day we flew one flag, the next day we flew another flag.'

Xu Xi grew up two streets away from what was then the red light district of Tsim Sha Tsui, in a flat overlooking a harbour full of American battleships stationed here during the Vietnam war.

'I grew up with two languages that were second languages,' she says, because her parents, both of whom moved from Indonesia before meeting in Hong Kong, wanted their children to learn English and Cantonese.

Recently employed in the US as the faculty chair for the Vermont College of Fine Arts' creative writing MFA programme, Xu Xi says her 'home' now are the flight paths between New York, Hong Kong and New Zealand (where she has a small flat she uses as a writing retreat); a peripatetic way of life her upbringing prepared her for.

'I think Hong Kong was post-modern before the rest of the world,' she says. 'Hong Kong prefigures the time when people say, 'Wow, I kind of belong here and there', and it doesn't matter where they originally come from or what they look like.

'I hear a lot of young American people say that, and young Europeans and British people say that. But Hong Kong people have always belonged in more than one place.'