

## Non-fiction/ memoir: *Evanescent Isles*

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Xu Xi's latest work, *Evanescent Isles*, condenses into a small volume the span of the author's life in Hong Kong and her often fraught relationship with the city.

Presented as a collection of musings and observations, the book focuses on identity: Xu Xi's own, Hong Kong's and the identity they develop through each other. In this, the author sounds a note that will resonate with many expatriates.

The Indonesian-born Xu Xi tells of her early life in Hong Kong and much of it will be familiar to those with some knowledge of local life: her forceful mother who insisted all the children study sciences, for example, or the family's desire to keep face with regard to relatives, even to their own detriment. In this, Hong Kong does not seem out of place as the backdrop, but to Xu Xi it had the feeling of a "between" space.

As she shows through her interactions with friends and family, she is not alone in thinking this. Despite being Chinese, neither her father nor a mainland friend, she writes, "believes that this city ... can truly embody meaning for a people, by which, I imagine, each means himself". It is easy to side with this point of view in a city that can seem between two worlds and lacking in soul; many would "disdain local concerns", as both men do. The author, however, seems more determined to find or construct an identity, or perhaps a spirit of place, in conjunction with the city (as she observes, everyone constructs their own version of it).

This serves as both the major jumping-off point for superficially unrelated musings and as the thread that holds the book together. The reader is

admitted to many memories of Xu Xi's life, from childhood friendships and a secret language constructed with her sister (language being one facet of identity) to sometimes intimate details of her relationships.

In between are anecdotes about the changes in Hong Kong in her lifetime, whether being "too remote for a phone line" and bathing in a river in an area now bristling with high-rises, or using the illegal minibuses that are now official. This history is generally interesting, sometimes fascinating, and provides a vehicle for enjoyment for readers unconcerned with the author's personal journey.

Within each of the book's many standalone pieces a word or phrase often serves as the point of departure and links two different subjects: whisky and private taxis, for example. Here, Xu Xi shows the deft verbal touch and powers of observation that have distinguished her career. No less well realised is the potted history of Hong Kong presented as a dialogue with the city, which contains a few morsels from the past 150 years or so that will be illuminating to many.

If *Evanescent Isles* has a weakness it is that the author's purposeful exploration of history can come across as rose-tinted. And although politics rarely intrude, her observations in this area vary between illuminating and commonplace. In the context of the entire book, however, these are relatively minor quibbles.

In all, the work is one that shows us our city and encourages us to find meaning for ourselves within it; the connection Xu Xi creates will have readers smirking knowingly, frowning, raising their eyebrows and sharing her wistfulness.

Finally, Xu Xi is concerned that this unique Hong Kong is vanishing in a sea of generational superficiality and because of a government controlled by people with a veiled agenda. But as she observes, Hong Kong is and has been "colonial, communist, international, Chinese". Who can say with any confidence what China or the world will look like when our "one country, two systems" arrangement comes to an end in 2046?