



Reviews

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to key questions that have remained central to discussions of the way in which Rushdie uses language:

Is Rushdie's India constructed essentially through a colonial discourse? Is there really a sense in which Rushdie's inventive heteroglossic semantics signifies the kinds of linguistic competencies an ethnographer would attribute to a native informant? (30)

This book productively grapples with this question through phrases, words and numbers, and exposes the textured meanings that underpin Rushdie's story worlds.

The book is well produced and laid out, though there are some minor slippages which could have been ameliorated with more careful proofing (e.g. the publication date of *The Satanic Verses* was 1988, not 1983 (11)). This book is an invaluable tool with which to navigate the classic Rushdie corpus from *Midnight's Children* to *The Moor's Last Sigh*. It proves with erudition that his 'linguistic experimentation is at once a compulsive return to a hobson-jobson, a recognition of a colonial inheritance, as well as a transcendence over it' (63). And yet the book also firmly establishes that considerations of Rushdie only within 'postcolonial' parameters are too limited and more expansive frameworks are required. To arrive at this conclusion through annotation and developing this process into a critical and theoretical practice through a new methodological approach to annotation is this book's lasting achievement. It is my sincere hope that Rushdie's publishers, using Mishra's pioneering work as a model, might consider the publication of scholarly editions of his work. Indeed, this book might also serve as a template to consider his later works published after *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

The framing essays provide an erudite and cogent analysis of the annotation process that for the first time present in-depth archival evidence that enable a profound revelation of the complexity of the Rushdie corpus and his positionality as a cosmopolitan, postcolonial and transnational writer. At the same time, it also enables us to further complicate the ways in which Rushdie addresses his readership. This is an important intervention into Rushdie studies and will help scholars open up new pathways of understanding to this seminal writer of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Florian Stadler

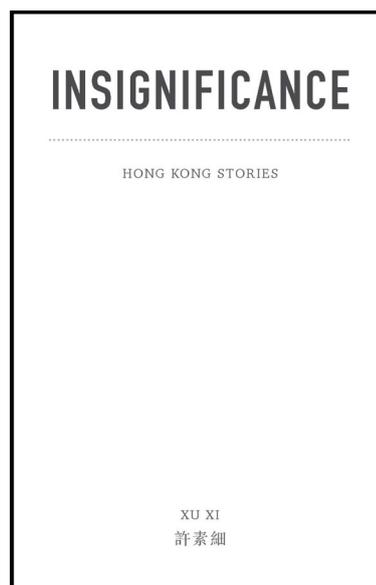
Insignificance: Hong Kong Stories

Xu Xi

Signal 8 Press, Hong Kong, 2018, pb, 186pp,

ISBN 9789887794868, £14.00

<https://signal8press.com>



In the opening story of Xu Xi's collection *Insignificance*, 'Longevity's Eyebrow', Stella Yuen is an artist who is famed 'for gargantuan, abstract ink drawings, although she always begins with tiny, almost miniature sketches, the details dizzying' (13). The same can be said for the portrait of Hong Kong as an epic, evolving, in-between space that emerges through the precisely drawn characters of *Insignificance*.

Take Stella Yuen, who is of Chinese-British heritage. Her mother 'swanned her way back to England and the estate in Dover, having slummed long enough in the colonies and fucked her share of bohemian natives' (14). The detail of the absent white (or Eurasian) parent of mixed offspring, repeats in subsequent stories, and recalls the 1997 handover of Hong Kong by Britain to China. But Xu Xi redirects: 'Ignore her illegitimacy.' The pressing issue is Jonathan, an English professor, who has pursued Stella even though she has resisted, declaring her celibacy. On the verge of his retirement and return to England, he wants one of her drawings as a gift. Xu Xi explodes their friendship before Jonathan leaves and then a year later, when she reveals the fate of Stella's gift. The betrayal Stella feels signals the gulf between the two and gestures to the extractive and transactional relationship between the art market and the artist, and perhaps too of Britain and Hong Kong. When Stella confronts him, Jonathan is unmoved.

He honestly did not understand what she was so upset about and then he changed the subject, as he was so good at doing, and refused to discuss the matter any further. (31)

Britain is gone and China's rule offers a troubling political present. On the personal front, not unlike with the

Brits, their lingering expats and mixed-race children, China brings complications. In 'The Loan', Xu echoes the relationship of 'Longevity's Eyebrow' but the characters here are a first-generation Hong Kong Chinese woman and a Chinese man from the mainland. Lai-tai's boyfriend, Xiong, a married man with a family in Guangzhou, takes her train tickets and has not repaid a loan she gave him. He's bringing a female friend, Yin-fei to stay at their apartment (again), which Lai-tai has had to scrub of her presence beforehand. All this on her birthday, which Xiong has forgotten. Still, she is sure he will make good on his promises and on his IOU: 'He said so and somehow she knew, this time, it would happen' (133). At the story's end, Lai-tai hopes that Yin-fei would not need to stay long. The reader, however, is crashed, with Xu's terrific pacing, into the awful reality of the character being utterly used by a cad.

In the eleven stories, ostensibly autonomous Hong Kong under the One Country, Two Systems model, which has prevailed since the territory's transition to a Special Administrative Region as part of the People's Republic of China, hums with personal fractures and pessimism. The 2014 Occupy protests against encroachments on electoral and civil liberties tore open Hongkongers' discomfort with the new regime's meddling. The movement serves as the backdrop to many of *Insignificance's* stories, and photographs of the time feature amid the text. For Xu Xi, who was born in Indonesia and raised in Hong Kong, the political veered into her professional life. In 2015, the Creative Writing MFA programme at City University of Hong Kong, which she founded, was shuttered despite its emerging profitability and its students' literary successes. The move was seen by the activist and literary communities as evidence of China's intent to suffocate freedom of expression. In mid-2019, Hong Kong railed against a proposed Extradition Bill, which would have seen fugitive offenders transferred to the mainland on a case-by-case basis. The bill would sanction interference in the territory's judicial system by China. On the night of 12 June, the protests turned violent as the police unleashed rubber bullets and tear gas upon protestors. The next morning, I spent the day in Hong Kong on a layover. The city, shrouded by heavy rain clouds, felt almost apocalyptically emptied of its usual dense mass of people, and heavily securitised by riot police.

The day's surrealness reminded me of Xu Xi's stranger, speculative stories, which felt more urgent and gripping than the tales of the mixed-race echelon and expatriates. The most intriguing is the satirical metafiction, 'Canine News'. The story takes the form of two found essays by an anonymous writer, who has 'Indonesian blood mixed with Chinese' (62), published by 'The Journal of Deficit, Disquiet & Disbelief' (58), whose editors include an odd, hilarious introduction to the piece. Xu Xi weaves

Hong Kong's love of dogs into its racism. A government study deems racism a disease. The proposed solution for those afflicted is a stay in a public space, 'The Doghouse', where they will be muzzled but otherwise treated humanely. A portable toilet would be provided to offer 'some semblance of dignity'. 'After all,' the essayist notes with bite, 'we Hongkongese are no longer "running dogs" of the British, just floating swine of the Chinese' (69). By identifying racism as a disease,

people can immediately see that no one is saying that it's their *fault* for being racist. As with any communicable disease, a racist might simply have caught a virus from some random carrier. (72)

Xu Xi's essayist offers possibilities of how infection spreads – including general pollution, migratory butterflies and rat meat – but loses count. The story's final lines escalate to include the devil and details, such as Hong Kong's love of designer brands. Xu Xi, as the essayist, writes: 'History is fluid. Life is in the here and now. Words are just words so we might as well lose count' (73). Dismay infects *Insignificance*, but her words, written as a farewell to Hong Kong, are hardly 'just' words. These stories will likely count for more than fictional snapshots of essential moments in Hong Kong's history, whatever the official version of that will be.

J R Ramakrishnan

The Life of Saul Bellow — Volume 1: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964

Zachary Leader

Vintage, London, 2017, pb, 823pp, ISBN 9780099520931, £20.00

www.penguinbooks.co.uk

The Life of Saul Bellow — Volume 2: Love and Strife, 1965–2005

Zachary Leader

Vintage, London, 2018, hb, 864pp, ISBN 9780224101882, £35.00

www.penguinbooks.co.uk

In 1984, the sixty-nine-year-old Saul Bellow travelled from his home in Chicago to the small town of Lachine, Canada, where a library was being named in his honour. Bellow's parents had been Russian Jews who emigrated to Lachine in 1913, and Bellow, the youngest of their four children, had spent the first three years of his life there. The poverty-stricken family later upped sticks for Montreal in search of employment before finally settling in