



Habit forming

Author Xu Xi looks at the choices people make in their lives in her latest novel

Richard Lord
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The most pleasing thing about Xu Xi's new book *Habit of a Foreign Sky* is what it isn't.

It isn't chick lit: despite the author describing it as "a book about what it means to be a woman in the modern era", and despite its emotionally and ethically confused female protagonist and sensitive-but-saturnine lead male character, the book resists simplistic narrative arcs and romantic wish-fulfilment. It also refuses to dodge difficult questions about the decisions that its characters take. Plus there's no shopping.



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It also avoids the golly-gosh culture-clash cliches you might expect of a globe-trotting tale that takes place in Hong Kong, New York and Shanghai, and features a central character with a Chinese mother and an American father who parlays a poor Hong Kong upbringing into a career in international high finance. (The tone is set early on when lead character Gail complains about a lack of initiative among New York service staff, in an amusing inversion of a standard-issue lazy Hong Kong expat whinge.) Yes, there's a never-the-twain

element to it, but mutual unknowability between characters from different backgrounds tends to be of the fundamentally human - rather than the culture-of-origin - variety.

Instead, it's a sophisticated take on the difficulties of making choices. The sudden death of her mother comes after the sudden death of her son for Hongkonger Gail Szeto, whose husband has walked out on her after having an affair and whose high-flying job, for an American bank, is her life. The novel plots her attempts to work out what to do with her new-found freedom - both financial and personal - against the backdrop of possible relocation to New York or Shanghai and a cast of suitors and romantic ghosts, chief among them Xavier, a suitably exotic Greek-Chinese-American-Lebanese-Frenchman with his own issues to deal with.

The way in which Gail's background and situation in life have failed to give her a toolkit to deal with this freedom is the book's key theme. She looks especially self-constrained in comparison to male characters such as Xavier who, as a hard-working, self-employed single parent whose business regularly forces him to travel at short notice, nominally has very little freedom, but rarely seems to notice and largely acts completely unhindered. Gail's somewhat confused cultural background also fails to give her a road map to navigate her issues. "Being American is part of her advantage in life, but it's also what constrains her," says the author.

The novel also concerns itself heavily with themes of family and guilt, the two frequently intertwined in Gail's relationship with her mother, a former prostitute and the book's most sympathetic creation, along with Gail's half-brother Gordy, her relationship with whom is the one genuinely redemptive element of the story.

Xu Xi was born in 1954 to an Indonesian-Chinese family in Tsim Sha Tsui, a stone's throw from the bar in the Sheraton hotel where I meet her. A globe-trotter herself, her first novel,



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Photo: Dale de la Rey

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1994's *Chinese Walls*, was set in the same district. Since then she's produced a body of work that includes pre-handover love story *The Unwalled City*, short-story collection *History's Fiction*, and *The Evanescent Isles*, a book of her essays about Hong Kong. She's also the editor or co-editor of three anthologies of Hong Kong writing.



Her current novel's genesis was as multinational as its subject matter. A friend's home where the author stayed in Shanghai, for example, became Xavier's apartment there, but plenty of places that don't feature in the book's pages - and that are considerably more bucolic than anywhere that does - were also involved in its creation, among them Minnesota, Norway and the South Island of New Zealand. Xu Xi also spent time in the Kerouac House writers' retreat in Orlando, Florida, and says the Beat Generation icon's obsessive relationship with his mother infiltrated the book, informing the difficult connection between Gail and her mother.

Xu Xi says the book's theme of Gail's unfettered choice - in particular contrast to her mother, sold into sexual slavery at an early age - came about when she started to consider her own mother, who abandoned her ambition to become a doctor, becoming a pharmacist instead, largely because of the circumstances of her birth and marriage. "What if my mother lived in a different time and place - if she'd had the benefit of feminism?" she asks. "I think she would've been a happy woman."

Gail herself is a satisfyingly contradictory creation, trying to do the right thing but frequently failing, and not in ways that the story can offer convenient excuses. Her treatment of her perceptive domestic helper Conchita, for instance, frequently verges on the contemptuous without her even realising, and most of her interactions with others are stalled, fuzzy, pregnant with meanings unintended and misconstrued.

I say it must have been tempting for the author to make her tragedy-blighted protagonist more sympathetic, but the opposite turns out to be the case: Xu Xi, who calls Gail "a pain in the ass", was persuaded by her editors to soften the character's edges.

Xu Xi's refusal to tie up loose ends sees standard narrative structure turned on its head: the book starts with a cataclysm - Gail's mother's death, the focal point of the entire story - and from there the plot is bravely allowed to unravel. "It's not about the deaths," says Xu Xi. "It's about what happens to the living after the deaths, so I thought: let's get the deaths out of the way." She reveals that the start of the book has remained more or less the same since the first draft. Xavier didn't originally exist, because "I couldn't imagine Gail having a standard love interest". In truth, he's the book's least convincing character, less for what he is - his shallowness feels authentic enough - but for his circumstances.

The characters in *Habit of a Foreign Sky* are like its locations: they are largely defined by what they are not rather than what they are, and they are constantly in flux. Xu Xi fluidly shifts the focus of the narration from one character to another, keeping readers on their toes by forcing them to perform disorientating jumps in perspective that bring home just how mutually unintelligible many of the characters are to each other. Likewise, the book's preference for interior monologue over dialogue is welcome, less because dialogue is one of its weaker points and more because the introspective focus reflects the atomisation, alienation and communication difficulties of many of the characters.

The novel has a few seams showing. There's sometimes a punctuation overload and there are times, particularly early on, when the need to explain characters' backgrounds can make it feel clumsily expository.

There's also an over-reliance on coincidence, and in particular serendipitous meetings, that's believable when they take place in Hong Kong but rings less true when it carries on in cities and airport business lounges across the globe. But Xu Xi more than mitigates those weaknesses with believable characterisation, a satisfyingly unsatisfying plot and a nice ear for the relentless, often clueless self-analysis of the urbanite.

Xu Xi says her work is consumed very differently in Asia and the West, adding she sometimes feels patronised by the classification, particularly in the US, of her work as "Asian writing" - an ersatz genre that usually lumps women-in-misery and political-dissidents-in-misery stories together to the exclusion of most other work.

"Most people in Asia aren't interested in politics in that way," she says. "They're just living their lives. It's not what people's lives are like. More people are now aware that the world

isn't that simple. But Asianness in the publishing industry still has to be exoticised, forced into this false state."

Peripatetic by inclination, having moved between several locations around the world for decades, Xu Xi is now living full-time in Hong Kong again after recently taking the job of writer-in-residence for City University of Hong Kong's new Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing course - her first full-time job since she left a career in marketing and management with what was then *The Asian Wall Street Journal* in 1998. At City U, she says, she teaches "interesting young people" from around the world, many of them learning remotely. "I didn't actually want a full-time job, but this was exciting, progressive - it's what Asia needs," she says.

Her next novel, *That Man in Our Lives*, will feature Gordy as its main character, while she will only divulge the title of the one planned after that: *TST*. Xu Xi, it appears, is returning to her roots - whatever that means.

Habit of a Foreign Sky is released on Thursday

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