Author Xu Xi is Hong Kong’s preeminent writer in English. She has penned nine works of fiction and essays, and has edited three anthologies of Hong Kong writing. Xu Xi received her Master’s of Fine Arts in Fiction at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and recently completed a three-year chairmanship of Vermont College of Fine Art’s MFA program. Now back in her home city, she spends her days as Writer in Residence, City University of Hong Kong, where she founded the first MFA program in Asia for English writers.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): In your most recent novel, Habit of a Foreign Sky (Haven Books, 2010), which was shortlisted for the 2007 inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, two of the most sympathetic characters have Jewish names. They both play large roles in the development of the story. Did you intentionally choose identifiable Jewish names for these characters in honor of people you know? Do Jewish characters play large roles in your other books also?

Xu Xi (XX): I am so pleased you picked up on the Jewish connection! That was deliberate on my part, not exactly in honor of any particular individual but to recognize the American Jewish world generally that I’ve come to know over the years. It was noticeable to me that many of the Americans abroad in Asia whom I met were Jewish, and it made me realize how much the diaspora Chinese and Jewish cultures had in common. Then later, living in New York City, I again met many Jewish people in the professional (and later literary as well) communities I was in (law especially), and the celebration of Jewish holidays in New York made me more conscious of the culture and religion. I did also date a couple of Jewish guys back in my twenties, and have had and of course still have a number of close Jewish friends. So yes I definitely did mean for both Jim and Josh to be sympathetic. Actually, Jim first appeared in The Unwalled City (2001) in a minor role and in my novel previous to that, Hong Kong Rose (1997), I had an American in Hong
Kong named Elliott Cohen who had a major role in the story. Elliott was a pretty sympathetic character as well. So as you can see Jewish characters have appeared for some time in my work.

AJL: Your family hails from Indonesia, where the Chinese community has suffered terribly. Do you find an affinity with Jews due to a shared background of persecution based solely on ethnicity, or otherness?

XX: I have mixed feelings about the notion of “persecution” of the Chinese community in Indonesia. Yes, the overseas Chinese were definitely persecuted – this is a historical fact. Yet having grown up listening to the prejudiced way many in my family spoke about the Indonesians – they unabashedly looked down on Indonesians, calling them stupid and lazy – that gave me a sense of why the Indonesians might have hated the Chinese. I recall as a child feeling ashamed of my family’s attitudes and prejudices and rebelled as I got older. The Chinese community valued education and were ambitious in terms of trying to build a good life for themselves and their families – this was certainly true in both my parents’ family. And this probably gave rise to envy by a local population that watched these immigrants move in, take over, and boss them around. In a way, it’s the immigrant story the world over and there’s no simple way to parse it and say we were right they were wrong because it’s never that simple.

AJL: For much of your adult life, you juggled a corporate day job with writing in your spare time. How did you decide to leave the corporate world so you could devote all your time to writing?

XX: The Peter Principle. I’d risen to my level of incompetence in corporate life and had lost interest, frankly, in climbing any further up the ladder. Most of the time, I enjoyed my work in the various corporations I worked for, and was ambitious and sought better prospects and promotions. But by the time my third book was published, I no longer was as interested in making my mark in corporate life and could tell that if I hung on, just to have a job, I’d begin a downslide which wouldn’t be good for me or my employer. It was beginning to feel too schizophrenic.

As fate would have it, my aunt passed away which was very sad, because she was someone my family was very close to. She surprised my family with her wealth and I ended up with this inheritance (she was a schoolteacher who lived frugally, saved a bundle, invested smart and died a very, very rich lady). So I knew that as long as I didn’t expect to live as I used to when I had a full-time salary, I would be just fine. And I was fine for many years, picking up a little part time work, later some part time teaching, and all through this I traded stocks & futures to stay afloat (that was quite a lot of fun, I found). And writing, writing, writing. It was a fabulous life.

So it was a decision facilitated by an unexpected inheritance windfall, because it was as if my aunt were telling me – here, go live your real life, go.

AJL: Several years ago, you edited an anthology titled, Fifty-Fifty: New Hong Kong Writing (Haven Books, 2008), which addressed the years leading up to the year 2046, when China’s one country, two systems policy of governing Hong Kong is due to expire. What are your views on the future of English literature produced in Hong Kong in the years leading up to this next handover?

XX: Ask me next year and I’ll have more views because I’m currently co-editing another anthology of new Hong Kong short fiction for CCC Press in the U.K. There’s more literature in English these days, although I must admit I’m not wildly optimistic about the future of this literature. As Hong Kong becomes more Chinese, it may lose some of its international edge. The English literature from this city has always been a marginalized and marginal literature, and I’m not seeing much by way of emerging younger writers because the ones with talent get sidetracked by the money culture and societal pressures to do something “practical,” which writing isn’t (although from my standpoint,
what could be more practical than trying to understand your raison d’etre, which is what all serious writers are basically doing). Much will depend on the Hong Kong’s government, if it can provide any kind of visionary leadership that allows one country two systems to flourish. But from my perspective, I do feel like I’m watching one country two systems languish. I’m just hoping it won’t fizzle out and die, because that will be the end of Hong Kong as any kind of international city.

AJL: Over the years you have been published by several independent presses in Hong Kong. Can you discuss your experience with Hong Kong publishers and what you see as the future of small presses?

XX: I’m actually very optimistic about the future of small presses, both here in Hong Kong and the U.S. This largely has to do with the major publishers abandoning any kind of literary vision (except for a very small part of their business) in favor of producing books as a form of celebrity merchandise. Let’s face it, if you’re sports star or movie star or someone who became famous for five seconds for some notoriety (Monica Lewinsky is a good example), you can be an “author” without having to be a writer, we all know that. This may be profitable for so-called publishers, but is extremely destructive to contemporary literary culture. Lewinsky signed a hell of a lot more books than I and most writers I know ever will! Meanwhile the midlist no longer exists. But what I do see are a lot of small presses picking up the pieces for the major publishers who have abandoned their original calling.

AJL: Can you share a little of what you’re working on now? In the future?

XX: Sure. I recently finished a new novel which my agent is shopping around at the moment. The book took me nine years to complete, what with everything else I was doing (and I did publish two books during that time), so I think I’m suffering from a kind of novel fatigue. In the past I always was into a new novel once I finish one. I did start a new novel but almost immediately put it aside in favor a novella, short stories and essays.