The City is a Journey
Heritage and memory in Zhu Tianxin's novel Old Capital
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Old Capital (古都 1997) is the story of a middle aged woman’s search for the Taipei of her childhood, in which the city itself functions as a material, yet fragile link to the past. Following literary scholar Svetlana Boym’s assertion that nostalgia is essentially “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed,” this paper analyses the protagonist’s narrative as a nostalgic project to reconstruct the city that no longer exists -while simultaneously constructing a fictional city that never existed- through fragments of cultural and material heritage.

By superimposing the memory-scape of the narrator on the physical cityscape, the novel challenges, thematically as well as structurally, the static notion of heritage as preservation. As literary scholar Ackbar Abbas writes: “Preservation […] is not memory. Preservation is selective and tends to exclude the dirt and pain.” Moulded by the interference between past and present, materiality and psychology, memory and fantasy, the narrative of Old Capital requires a more dynamic approach to heritage. Inspired by cultural geographer David Crouch’s description of heritage as a journey, this paper looks at how the narrator’s physical and mental voyage towards the old capital of her childhood incorporates multiple spatiotemporal layers of urban cultural heritage in order to reach a deeper understanding of the living historical city she calls home.

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My PhD project is about memory and space in contemporary urban Chinese fiction, with a special focus on Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei. I have previously worked as Assistant Lecturer at University of Copenhagen, participated in a number of conferences and published several articles as well as a book chapter on contemporary Chinese literature. (For list of publications see: http://writingchina.net/publications/) Contact: astrid.moller-olsen@ostas.lu.se