The City is a Journey

Heritage and memory in Zhu Tianxin's novel Old Capital

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2016

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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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,”¹ 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.”² 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,³ 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