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## The City is a Journey

### Heritage and memory in Zhu Tianxin's novel Old Capital

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## The City is a Journey

-Heritage and memory in Zhu Tianxin's novel *Old Capital*

*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,"<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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:

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<sup>1</sup> Boym, Svetlana (2001): *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Abbas, M. A. (1997): *Hong Kong, Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Crouch, David (2015): 'Affect, Heritage, Feeling' in Waterton, Emma & Watson, Steve: *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 178.