A CITY IN A THREE-SIDED MIRROR: CULTURAL MULTIPLICITY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL GEOPOLITICS OF THE UNITED STATES, JAPAN, AND MAINLAND CHINA IN CHU T'IEN-HSIN'S *THE OLD CAPITAL*

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Abstract: This study analyzes Chu T'ien-hsin's The Old Capital *(1997) by examining the depiction of Taipei through maps as an illusory city reflected in a three-sided mirror. By situating the novel within Taiwan's historical context, this study contends that the mirror metaphor evokes three geopolitical perspectives—Mainland China, the United States, and Japan—through which Taipei is perceived and interpreted. The novel's cartographic structure reveals the city as a spatial mosaic formed by overlapping linguistic and cultural frameworks. Although the ambiguity of identity is frequently considered the novel's central theme, it is challenging to confirm its tragic nature, as the protagonist arrives at a potential utopian space and the narrative concludes with an open ending. Rather than resolving the question of identity, The Old Capital exposes the ongoing postcolonial condition of East Asia.*

Introduction

Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital* 古都 (1997) is a Taiwanese novel written from the second-person point of view, similar to the French novel *La Modification* by Michel Butor and the American novel *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney. A notable feature of *The Old Capital* is its incorporation of maps that, as Mapping Taipei (n.d.) notes, digitally depict Taipei's evolving cityscape with both precision and contextual relevance. The maps reveal that the female protagonist, referred to as "you" (a narrative choice that underscores a divide between the self and the singular identity of "I"), is unable to articulate her connection to Taipei in her own language. Her cultural identity crisis culminates in a moment of confusion and disorientation when, at the novel's conclusion, she inquires, "What is this place?" (218). This scene has led many to assert that the central theme of *The Old Capital* is the struggle with identity ambiguity. However, as noted by Qiu (1997) and Liu (2009), Chu T'ien-hsin originally sought to eschew defining the inhabitants of Taiwan by a fixed, singular identity, as many, including Zhu herself, could not be categorized as Taiwanese, Chinese, or any other "–ese" due to their multifaceted identities. Instead, through maps, The Old Capital highlights East Asia's ongoing postcolonial condition, serving as a cautionary tale about the perils of uncritically celebrating cultural multiplicity—whether in East Asia or in regions politically dominated by external forces—in an era that emphasizes respect for diversity.

In the initial section of this paper, I affirm that the multicultural mosaics of East Asian cities reflect layers of political invasions by various countries and regions. In the subsequent sections, I analyze Taipei's representation through city maps. Notably, works that incorporate maps, such as Xun Qizhang's *Dituji* (*A Collection of Maps*), Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, and Haruki Murakami's works (which Suzuki (2013) describes as three-dimensional maps), are well-recognized. However, *The Ancient Capital* is distinguished by its use of a rotated map, an innovative approach that allows one to view their own country as if through a three-sided mirror, specifically illustrating Taiwan from three-dimensional perspectives.

The metaphor of the three-sided mirror is pivotal in this analysis, suggesting that Taipei is

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perceived not from a singular viewpoint but through multiple perspectives shaped by historical and geopolitical relations. Specifically, the three-sided mirror evokes three external perspectives through which Taiwan has been viewed and interpreted in modern history: mainland China, the United States, and Japan. These perspectives correspond to the linguistic and cultural frameworks that recur throughout the novel, in which places, buildings, and objects are described through references in Chinese, English, and Japanese. Understanding Taipei through this mirror structure also necessitates a spatial perspective. Urban space in the novel functions not merely as a backdrop for the narrative but as a symbolic structure shaped by historical memory, linguistic representation, and geopolitical power. From this perspective, the maps appearing in the novel transcend their role as narrative devices; they serve as spatial representations through which the protagonist endeavors to interpret the city.

In conclusion, by interpreting the novel's ending as open-ended, referencing critiques of singular identity, and affirming Zhu's perspective on identity, I assert that the novel encourages readers to transcend identity-based perceptions of individuals. Furthermore, it elucidates that East Asia continues to occupy a postcolonial position. Through the metaphor of the three-sided mirror, *The Old Capital* ultimately depicts Taipei as a city whose spatial significance arises from the convergence of diverse cultural and geopolitical perspectives.

I. The Risks of Uncritical Acclaim for Cultural Diversity from an East Asian Perspective

In Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital*, readers encounter references to various locations, buildings, and objects in Taipei presented in multiple languages. The female protagonist, referred to as "you," reflects that she "had actually found life bearable only by regularly imagining some part of the city, some section of a certain road, or some street scene as some other city, one you either had or had not visited" (Zhu, 2007, p. 134). For example, by employing the name of a river from another region, the protagonist illustrates her inability to articulate the characteristics of her own region in its native language.

> Traveling sixty miles an hour, the bus would roar through Guandu Temple Pass, where the wide river appeared before you, and each time you would be deeply moved, or you would breathe in the damp river and ocean air before saying to your companion, who was seeing it for the first time, "Doesn't that look like the Yangtze River?" (Zhu, 2007, p. 114).

While traversing Chokushi Avenue, a segment of Zhongshan Bei Ru, the protagonist employs American terminology and perspectives to describe Taipei.

> You walked down Chokushi Avenue, completed at the turn of the century, imagining you were in one of the thirteen New England states. It was all the fault of the MAAG dormitory, with its whitewashed walls, large windows, chimneys, and lush green lawn, a typical scene from a 1950s Hollywood movie. (Zhu, 2007, p. 129)

She frequently employs terminology from mainland China and the United States to describe locations and structures in Taipei.

> [O]n the other side was the spot where the wide river met the ocean. You ignored the single-ridge southern Min–style houses, with their slanted roofs, agreeing that it was a San Francisco sort of view, even though neither of you had ever been there. (Zhu, 2007, p. 115)

In "To the Land of Sunrise: Prologue to the Publication of the Japanese Version" (2000), Zhu

reveals that she intentionally interwove historical and contemporary place names in the novel to create a sense of disorientation among readers. As Shimizu (2000) observes, an analysis of The Old Capital is akin to an archaeological exploration. References to locations and objects in multiple languages present Taipei as a complex multicultural mosaic. As Hoshino (2002) explains in a detailed chronology, however, "you" [the protagonist] signifies a multitude of names, reflecting the layers of political occupation by various countries and regions, including the Dutch, Spanish, Qing, and Japanese, as well as the governance of the Kuomintang and conflicts with mainland China. In contrast to the novel's first half, where the protagonist primarily reflects on what has been lost in Taipei, the second half depicts her journey through Taipei, from downtown to Tamsui in the northwest, and finally to Dadaocheng near the old city. This journey is undertaken as if she were a tourist from a foreign land, with the narrative stating, "In the end, you decided to take another ferry and go upstream, like the ancestors, the Spaniards, and the Dutch, to Dadaocheng. The guidebook informed you that your tour would be complete once you visited Dadaocheng" (Zhu, 2007, p. 208).

In an era that extols diversity, *The Old Capital* serves as a cautionary narrative regarding the uncritical acclaim of cultural multiplicity in East Asia or regions politically dominated by external forces. This tendency is prevalent in East Asian novels and films. For instance, the renowned novel *Lust, Caution* (1979) by the Chinese author Eileen Chang explores the life of a woman who initially conforms to others' wills but ultimately chooses to assert her autonomy by saving a man marked for assassination, only to meet her demise. Essentially, the narrative centers on a repressed woman. As Suzuki (2015) contends, a defining feature of the novel is the multidimensional nature of suppression and politics, represented by diverse cultural symbols akin to a mosaic. Although *Lust, Caution* was adapted into a film by an American director in 2007, it intriguingly eludes classification as world cinema according to Denilson Lopes's (2010) perspective on cultural multiplicity. Lopes posits that authentic world cinema portrays a spectrum of ethnicities and social classes across regions worldwide, from the cultural elite to the working class. He further asserts that world cinema is characterized by a "rhizome structure" and by characters who are "nomads" (Lopes, 2010, pp. 4–5). However, this perspective often originates from political invaders. *Lust, Caution* does not align with Lopes's definition.

While the world of the female protagonist, Wang Chiachih, is multinational and composed of diverse cultural symbols, the multicultural aspects of Lust, Caution reflect not a rhizomatic structure but a stratified, gendered framework of historical oppression and repression that influences Chiachih. Indeed, she is unable to exercise her free will within the film's multicultural setting—an Asia politically invaded by the West and the Japanese Empire, whose policy was "Leave Asia, enter Europe." Thus, the film's portrayal of an Asian woman's experience diverges significantly from the multicultural society envisioned by Lopes, a Westerner. Should Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital* be adapted into a film, it would similarly challenge Western conceptions of cultural multiplicity. In fact, the protagonist "you" of *The Old Capital* experiences both physical and psychological wandering, rejected by both Taiwanese locals and Mainland Chinese. Ultimately, she does not "feel right" in her identity in Taiwan, where locations and buildings are often renamed in Japanese or American English.

Michaels (2006) has indicated two difficulties in the conceptualization and implementation of respect for diversity: the failure of mutual understanding and the ignorance of the poor. Michaels argues that while the theory and practice of respect for diversity emphasize identity and critique oppressive societal definitions of the self, advocating for self-actualization free from oppression, they overlook poverty, as the impoverished are not victims of an oppressed identity but rather of capitalism (Michaels, 2004, pp. 180–181). Additionally, the theory and practice of respect for diversity accept differences but do not permit criticism or denial of them; hence, the uncritically celebrated diversity has led people from different cultures to march in parallel without any authentic interaction (Michaels, 2006). To Michaels's identified difficulties, East Asian authors such as Chu T'ien-hsin and Eileen Chang contribute a third: the misinterpretation of layered political invasions as cultural multiplicity.

Thus, in Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital*, Taipei, with its locations, buildings, and objects referred to in the languages of political invaders, is depicted as a city of "the gazed at to that of the gazer" (Chen, 2007, p. 304). Zhou Yingxiong (2000) posits that Zhu employs a "transposition narrative" to position herself as the "other," grasping the details of current reality through an alienated perspective. This technique influences both readers' perceptions and their re-engagement with Taipei's colonial history (Zhou, 2000, pp. 412–416), indicative of reader response. However, from the protagonist's perspective, residing in a place with a history of political invasion, the portrayal of Taipei in various invaders' languages transcends narrative technique, embodying the transition from being observed to observing. This is not merely a deductive argument but an expression of Taipei's map as reflected in the protagonist's mind, rendering Taipei an illusory city mirrored in a three-sided reflection.

II. The Geographical Location of the Taipei Basin as a Simulacrum of Kyoto

In this section, Zhu's *The Old Capital* is compared with another work of the same title by Kawabata Yasunari, a Japanese Nobel laureate in literature. Additionally, according to Shimizu (2000), Zhu's *The Old Capital* refers to Matayoshi Seikiyo's guidebook of Taipei, published in Japan in 1996, which includes maps of Taiwan during the rule of the Empire of Japan. In Zhu's novel, "you" travels through Taipei and Kyoto with Matayoshi's guidebook, comparing the two cities. Therefore, confirming the affinities between the two *The Old Capital*s would be valuable, especially the use of maps in Matayoshi's guidebook. First, to ground the comparison, I briefly review the story in Kawabata's *The Old Capital*.

Chieko, a main character, was born in the northwest of Kyoto, specifically in Nakagawa village, renowned for its exquisite Japanese cedar (*kitayamasugi*). Owing to her family's impoverishment, she was abandoned shortly after birth and subsequently raised as the daughter of another family engaged in the wholesale of Japanese *kimono* on Muromachi Street in Kyoto. Unaware of her birthplace, Chieko visits Nakagawa village, where she encounters Naeko, a woman who looks identical to her. Unbeknownst to them, they are twin sisters. Subsequently, the two meet by chance at the Gion Festival in Kyoto. During this encounter, Hideo, who harbors affection for Chieko, mistakenly proposes marriage to Naeko. Although Naeko is happy, she regards the proposal with disdain, recognizing that for Hideo she is merely Chieko's illusion. In essence, Naeko sees (gazes on) herself as one gazed upon. Frequently contemplating the notion of "illusion," Naeko questions her identity. Chieko suggests that Naeko marry Hideo, but Naeko declines and returns to her home in Nakagawa, a tranquil village enveloped by the picturesque Japanese cedars. Thus, Naeko returns to the northwest, carrying the memory of fleeting happiness while believing her existence to be an illusion. She never again departs from the serene village amidst the beautiful Japanese cedars. The character "you" in Zhu's *The Old Capital* exhibits a similar trajectory. Originating in the old city of Taipei, "you" journeys northwest to Tamsui, then to Dadaocheng, near her birthplace. Her perception of existence is characterized by a sense of illusion, as evidenced by her inquiry, "What is this place?" (Zhu, 2007, p. 218). Furthermore, she visits an imaginary bamboo village, reminiscent of Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*. She perceives her surroundings as illusory, and identifying places, buildings, and objects in foreign terms renders Taipei insubstantial to her.

Interestingly, Kyoto has often been characterized as an illusory entity in Japanese history. A notable illustration of this perception is found in Kawabata's *The Old Capital*. Concerned with the gradual erosion of ancient Kyoto, Kawabata portrays the city's transformation as an illusion. In the novel's afterword, Kawabata (1968) admits that, under the influence of sleeping pills, he composed *The Old Capital* in a state of stupor, as if compelled by the medication.

Retrospectively, Zeami, a Japanese *Noh* playwright and theorist, in *Fūshikaden* (15th century), or *The Flowering Spirit*, not only elucidates the nature of a *Noh* play—a traditional Japanese masked dance-drama—but also conveys the essence of life in Kyoto through the metaphor of a flower. Zeami perceives a flower as the essence of a *Noh* play: a transient phenomenon, a variable rather than a constant, and a representation of life itself. Consequently, "flowers" are emblematic of Kyoto. Indeed, in *The Old Capital*, Kawabata describes various flowers in Kyoto. Similarly, in Zhu's *The Old Capital*, diverse flowers bloom in Taipei, culminating in the protagonist's recognition of both her own and Taipei's inherent variability.

The affinities between the two novels become apparent as Kawabata's depiction of Kyoto's transformations parallels Zhu's portrayal of Taipei's changes. As Ogura posits, Kawabata's *The Old Capital* is often viewed as emblematic of works that succumb to self-orientalism, characterized by the essentialization of one's culture through an external gaze, as evidenced by its stereotypical portrayal of the "good old Kyoto" and its picturesque four seasons (Ogura, 2019, p. 200). Similarly, in Zhu's *The Old Capital*, self-orientalism is evident in "you's" perspective on Taipei, as "the gazed at to that of the gazer" (Chen, 2007, p. 304), or transitioning from being the observed to the observer.

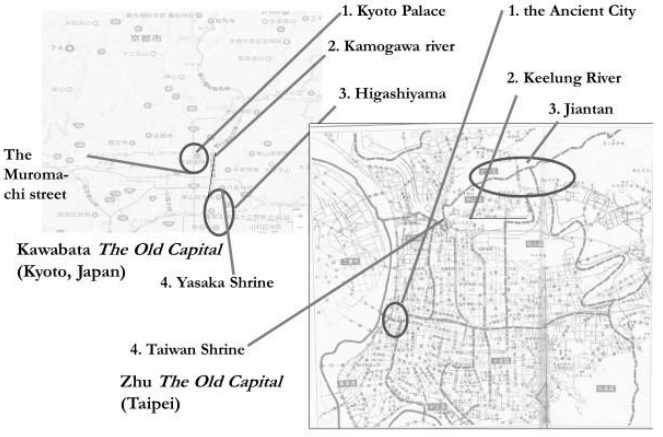

Figure 1: Depictions of locations in the two novels (The map of Taipei is derived from Matayoshi's guidebook, which the protagonist encounters.)

Furthermore, the novels share affinities in that "you" in Zhu's narrative frequently juxtaposes locations and structures in Taipei with those in Kyoto, guided by a travel book purchased in Kyoto, thereby overlaying Kyoto onto Taipei. For example, on the third day of her holiday in Taipei, "you" retrieves "your colonial map," contemplates the day's itinerary, and resolves to trace the paths trodden by "Mori Ogai and your grandfather" (Zhu, 2007, pp. 201–202).

> Taishō-machi.[1] To the left was Zhao'an Market, Zhao'an Hamlet […].
> Mitsuhashi-machi. The gunite exterior of the Renaissance-style bank was filthy […].
> Miyamae-chō.[2] That southern Min–style, red brick restaurant—strange, what had been there before?
> Maruyama-machi. The bus traveled over the Keelung River on the Meiji Bridge that was said to imitate either the Niju Bridge at the Imperial Residence or the Uji Bridge […]. (Zhu 2007, 203)

Notably, "you" ultimately perceives Taipei through the lens of Kyoto. She draws comparisons

[1] Taishō-machi was modeled after Kyoto, with a six-meter-wide grid of streets east to west.
[2] Miyamae-chō was named so because of its proximity to the Taiwan Shrine.

between the old city in Taipei and the Kyoto Palace, the Taiwan Shrine and the Yasaka Shrine, the Keelung River and the Kamogawa River, and Jiantan Hill and Higashiyama in Kyoto, thereby affirming that "the geographical location of the Taipei Basin [is] a simulacrum of Kyoto" (Zhu, 2007, p. 204). Experiencing their existence as illusory, both Naeko and "you" journey northwest to their places of origin. "You" first travels from downtown Taipei to the Tamsui area, and subsequently, in Dadaocheng (near her birthplace, where the tour guide advises her to pause), she acutely perceives the illusion that both she and Taipei lack substance. However, this phenomenon presents an intriguing enigma. Figure 1 illustrates the locations of historical palaces, shrines, rivers, and mountains. When the directional orientations of the two novels are compared based on the spatial relationships depicted in the maps, it becomes evident that, although only the north-south positions of the shrines are inconsistent, the protagonist perceives north in downtown Taipei as corresponding to east in downtown Kyoto. Consequently, when the map of downtown Taipei is rotated 90 degrees to the right, it can be superimposed onto the map of downtown Kyoto (Figure 2). In the words of the protagonist, "the geographical location of the Taipei Basin" serves as "a simulacrum of Kyoto" (Zhu, 2007, p. 204). For further context, Gion in Kyoto, where Naeko and Chieko encounter each other, and Naeko frequently alludes to "illusion," is situated immediately east of the palace. Similarly, Dadaocheng in Taipei, where the protagonist experiences a sense of illusoriness about herself and Taipei, is located immediately east of the Ancient City on the map when rotated 90 degrees.

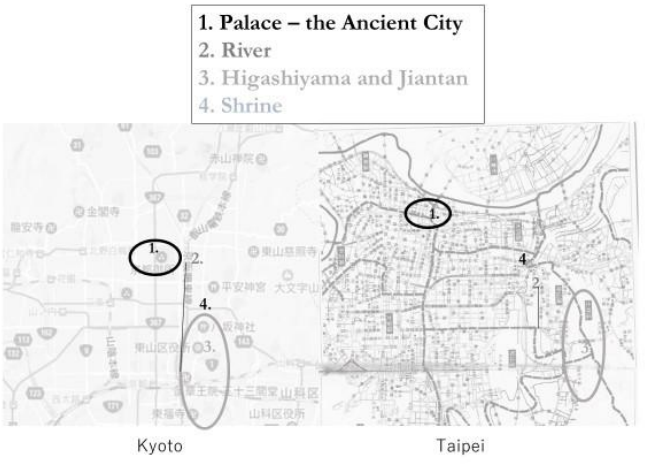

Figure 2: Positional relations after rotating the map of Taipei by 90 degrees

In the protagonist's realization, the map of Taipei is rotated, resulting in a discrepancy between the protagonist's movements on the map in Zhu's *The Old Capital* and the actual cardinal directions. Does this imply that "you" have confirmed the tendency noted by Baudrillard, wherein "the history that is 'given back' to us … has no more of a relation to a 'historical real'" («*réel historique*») (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 72)? Alternatively, does the alteration in the map's orientation possess some inherent significance?

III. Taipei in A Three-sided Mirror

To explore this inquiry, we consider Chen's assertion that Taipei is a city transitioning from

"the gazed at to that of the gazer" (Chen, 2007, p. 304). This suggests that Taiwan is an illusory city, akin to a reflection in a mirror. A mirror image appears reversed left to right: when one stands before a mirror with the right arm raised, the image may seem reversed; in the reflection, the raised right arm appears as the left. However, this is not the case. From the observer's perspective, the right side of the body, including the raised right arm, is on the mirror's right side. Thus, the raised right arm is reflected on the right side. The mirror image appears reversed because one mentally perceives oneself from behind the mirror, whereas the mirror image is perceived from the front. One views images from one's own side and simultaneously from the opposite side. This concept is applicable to Taipei, according to the protagonist. In the novel, Taipei is depicted through maps that compare it to Kyoto, a city perceived from "your" side (the gazer) and from the opposite side (the gazed-upon).

However, if Taipei were indeed such a mirror image, or if the city were transitioning from "the gazed at to that of the gazer," the map of Taipei should be reversed east-to-west compared with the map of Kyoto. In other words, Taipei's map should be rotated 180 degrees to the right or left. However, as previously mentioned, the rotation is merely 90 degrees, indicating that Taipei is not a straightforward mirror image of Kyoto. It is important to recognize that the term "you" refers to Taipei from at least three perspectives: the West—particularly the United States—China, and Japan. Consequently, Taipei is depicted as an image perceived by "you" and simultaneously viewed from the perspectives of the U.S., China, and Japan. This is not merely a straightforward reflection but rather an image in a three-sided mirror.

In this context, Huang Yingche (2005) offers an intriguing observation: Chu T'ien-hsin superimposes Kyoto and Taipei through the intertextuality of her novel and Yasunari Kawabata's work of the same title, thereby engaging with pre-existing literature. Through intertextuality, Zhu portrays "you," the protagonist, and "A," another character, as if they are twins (Huang, 2005, pp. 49–50). Notably, according to Huang, Zhu cites from Kawabata's novel: "Hideo turned his steps toward the bridge at Shijo where he had first met 'Chieko's Naeko' or 'Naeko's Chieko'" (Zhu, 2007, p. 135). "A" has been studying Taiwan in the United States, implying that "A" perceives Taiwan from an American perspective.

By incorporating the quotation from Kawabata's text, Zhu appears to suggest that "A" is an embodiment of "you" and vice versa; furthermore, "you" and "A" are "mirror images of two regions" (Huang, 2005, p. 50), akin to Taiwan and the United States. "A" and "you" are "like twin sisters, seeking each other to compensate for themselves, or to address the lack of self" (Huang, 2005, p. 50).[3]

In essence, "you" views Taiwan from the perspectives of both a Kyoto resident and a U.S. resident. Indeed, the protagonists' perspectives from the U.S., China, and Japan on Taiwan align with Taiwan's historical, political, and socio-cultural realities.

Interestingly, "you" occasionally refers to theaters in Taipei across Japanese, Chinese, and American cultures, and a theater is frequently used as a traditional literary metaphor for a society in which one cannot live authentically or feels as though they are living another's life.

> By reading the kanji in the guidebook, you discovered that the Wanguo Theater, which you'd never entered, had been the Shōnichiza, which had shown only Japanese plays. The Taiwanese theater was located at the site of the current China Cinema; Yoshino kan became Meilidu Cinema after the retrocession, then Guobin Cinema, where you saw *The Godfather* several times. New World Cinema used to be Shinseki kan, and you recalled that it was where your grandparents had seen *Daibosatsutōge* and *Aizenkatsura*. (Zhu 2007, 197)

Examining the four distinct historical periods in Taipei—namely, Qing dynasty governance,

[3] In the novel's beginning, the protagonist confesses that she and "A" make up for the lack of each other's selves through bodily analysis: "A, who shared your feelings, gestured a lot when she talked. You wished you had her body, all 5'6" of it, with the square shoulders of a swimmer and long, lanky limbs. She had breasts too, but they were more like an athlete's muscled chest. You hated your body, with its narrow waist, full breasts it was impossible to hide, and girlish hands and feet" (Zhu 2007, 116).

Japanese colonial rule, administration by mainland Chinese authorities, and self-governance by the island's Chinese population—is essential to this study. Each period reflects Taiwan's cultural and political expressions from the perspectives of mainland China, Japan, the United States, and observers who perceive themselves as the observed. Consequently, the "geographical location of the Taipei Basin" on the map can be perceived as "a simulacrum of Kyoto" (Zhu, 2007, p. 204) when the map of Taipei is rotated 90 degrees.

IV. Lacanian Geography and the Mirror Structure of Taipei

The spatial representation of Taipei in Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital* can be comprehensively understood through a theoretical framework that integrates Lacanian psychoanalysis with critical geography. This approach enables the interpretation of the city not merely as a physical landscape but as a symbolic structure in which historical memory, spatial representation, and geopolitical history converge. Recent geographical interpretations of Lacanian theory underscore the intricate role of space in shaping human experience. Derek Gregory (1999) posits that the spatial dimension of Lacanian theory elucidates how urban environments function as sites in which perception is structured by visual identification, symbolic inscription, and the tension between representation and its limits.

Within Lacanian theory, human experience is structured through three interrelated orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. These orders should not be perceived merely as psychological categories but as structural dimensions that shape how space is perceived and represented. The urban space depicted in *The Old Capital* provides a compelling literary example of this spatial structure.

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage serves as a valuable point of departure. During this stage, the infant perceives its reflection in a mirror and identifies with the unified body depicted therein. However, this recognition simultaneously constitutes a misrecognition. The coherent image in the mirror obscures the infant's fragmented bodily experience, engendering an illusory sense of unity. Gregory (1999) observes that the Imaginary order is intrinsically spatial, structured through visual relations such as reflection, perspective, and spatial positioning. In *The Old Capital*, Taipei is recurrently depicted through these reflective relations. As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, the protagonist juxtaposes Taipei with Kyoto, superimposing the geography of one city onto the other through maps and visual resemblance.

The previously discussed rotated map functions like a mirror. Through this cartographic reflection, Taipei becomes comprehensible only through comparison with another city. The urban space is not perceived as an autonomous reality but as an image produced through reflection. In this regard, the spatial perception described in the novel replicates the structure of the mirror stage: space itself becomes recognizable through an external image. While the mirror relation elucidates the visual structure of space, language elucidates its symbolic organization. In Lacanian theory, the symbolic order pertains to the network of linguistic and social structures that precede the individual subject. Language provides the framework through which meaning becomes possible, and spatial perception is inevitably mediated through linguistic systems.

The linguistic landscape of Taipei, as depicted in the novel, vividly illustrates its symbolic dimensions. The protagonist frequently characterizes the city using names and metaphors derived from other regions, such as the Yangtze River, New England towns, San Francisco landscapes, and Japanese colonial place names. Each of these references situates Taipei within a distinct symbolic framework. As previously discussed, Chinese, American, and Japanese perspectives operate as overlapping linguistic systems through which the city is perceived. Consequently, Taipei emerges as a space constructed through multiple symbolic orders. What

initially appears to be cultural diversity is the sedimentation of historical power relations embedded in language. Meanwhile, the narrative persistently alludes to a dimension that eludes these systems of representation.

In Lacanian theory, the Real denotes that which resists symbolization. It is not merely reality in the conventional sense but rather a dimension that cannot be entirely assimilated into symbolic structures. In the novel, this dimension becomes apparent when the protagonist inquires, "What is this place?" (Zhu, 2007, p. 218). This inquiry emerges precisely when the linguistic frameworks through which Taipei has been interpreted begin to lose their explanatory efficacy. Neither Chinese, American, nor Japanese symbolic frameworks can comprehensively account for the city she experiences.

From this perspective, the previously described three-sided mirror is not solely a narrative metaphor, but a spatial structure through which Taipei is perceived. The city manifests simultaneously as a reflected image, linguistic construction, and space that defies complete representation. The interaction among these dimensions engenders the distinctive spatial experience that characterizes Taipei in the novel.

V. The Issue of Identity

In conclusion, identity is a significant issue. Numerous critics have contended that the ambiguity surrounding identity leads to the protagonist's tragic experience of a lack of a stable sense of existence in *The Old Capital*. However, as noted by Qiu (1997) and Liu (2009), some scholars argue that Chu T'ien-hsin sought to avoid categorizing individuals residing in Taiwan within rigid identity frameworks. From this perspective, many individuals, including Zhu herself, cannot be comprehensively characterized as Taiwanese, Chinese, or any other specific ethnic identity, due to their diverse cultural and historical affiliations.

In general, the pursuit of a singular identity—referred to as identity-centrism—has frequently been considered problematic. The core of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction lies in the understanding that individuals should refrain from seeking a singular identity, as such an identity is inherently unattainable; they inevitably embody multiple identities. Amartya Sen similarly underscores that human affiliations are invariably multiple, with each person possessing diverse identities (Sen, 2006, p. 23). Theodor W. Adorno (1990) further introduced the concept of "non-identity," positing that one should abandon any identity once it has been acquired. Additionally, Michel Foucault (1973) highlighted that the dominance of the verb "to be" establishes a linguistic hierarchy, rendering identity fixed and static.

When identity dominates language, it deprives individuals of the agency to "do" and constructs a world defined by nouns rather than actions, a world in which human beings are perpetually categorized and othered. The spatial structure examined in the preceding chapter offers an alternative perspective on this issue. Taipei is portrayed as a city perceived through overlapping symbolic frameworks originating from mainland China, the United States, and Japan. Owing to the city's ongoing interpretation through diverse linguistic and cultural systems, it defies any single, stable definition. Within such a spatial context, identity inevitably becomes ambiguous, not because the individual lacks identity, but because the space itself is constructed through multiple symbolic perspectives.

Indeed, certain national literatures have challenged identity-centrism by presenting tragic narratives that emerge from the pursuit of a singular identity. As Suzuki (2017) elucidated, American literature provides a notable example. In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Thomas Sutpen endeavors to construct a new identity that will erase his origins. Born poor and white in West Virginia, he migrated to Mississippi in pursuit of wealth and social status. However, criticism of his origins compels him to establish what he perceives as a legitimate Southern aristocratic identity—owning land and slaves, marrying a white woman, and producing a white male heir. His obsession ultimately leads him to renounce his earlier mixed-race marriage and reject even his own daughter.

Consequently, the very family he sought to build is destroyed. Faulkner's novel thus pre-

sents identity as something that can become cursed by history and memory. At birth, an individual is simply a human being. However, almost immediately thereafter, parents or others register the individual as belonging to a particular nation or cultural community. At this juncture, the individual acquires an identity largely independent of birth circumstances. Even when the history associated with this identity is tragic, individuals are compelled to live with it. Memory functions akin to a specter that accompanies one throughout life. Sutpen's futile attempts to escape his origins and construct a superior identity ultimately culminate in disaster. In light of these considerations, a significant question arises: Should the pursuit of identity be regarded as detrimental or beneficial? Furthermore, should the ambiguity of identity be perceived as a tragedy or an opportunity?

It is pertinent to consider the concluding scene of Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital*. After traversing various locations in Taipei, the protagonist misplaces the guidebook containing colonial maps and arrives at a locale reminiscent of the village depicted in Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*, close to her birthplace. Enveloped by the illusory space reflected in the three-sided mirror, she inquires of herself: "What is this place?" (Zhu, 2007, p. 218).

At this juncture, the narrator notes that she "began to weep loudly" (放声大哭).[4] This scene is notably amenable to a deconstructive interpretation. The original Chinese expression "fang sheng da ku" (放声大哭) translates simply to "to weep loudly." The phrase itself does not specify whether the tears signify relief or despair. Thus, it remains indeterminate whether the protagonist cries because the utopian image alleviates her accumulated tension or because the place's illusory nature engenders sadness. Ambiguity is of paramount importance. The village of *Peach Blossom Spring* symbolizes a utopian realm in which an individual with an indeterminate identity might ostensibly reside in tranquility. However, utopia itself is an illusion, rendering permanent residence unattainable. The protagonist's tears thus signify a juncture at which the essence of identity becomes indeterminate.

Consequently, Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital* abstains from adjudicating whether the ambiguity of identity should be perceived as positive or negative, or whether the pursuit of identity is desirable. Instead of offering a definitive resolution, the narrative leaves this question unresolved. The novel's open conclusion implies that Zhu endeavored to eschew the inhabitants of Taiwan through identity categories. More importantly, the cultural diversity portrayed in *The Old Capital* serves not only as a basis for respecting diversity but also as a revelation of the tragic historical strata formed by successive political invasions, the remnants of which persist in the cultural consciousness of individuals in Taiwan and across East Asia.

Conclusion

This study scrutinized Chu T'ien-hsin's *The Old Capital* by analyzing the spatial representation of Taipei through literary, geographical, and theoretical lenses. The analysis has demonstrated that the novel transcends a mere depiction of the city as a physical landscape, instead representing it as a space shaped by historical memory, linguistic representation, and geopolitical influence. By examining the novel's maps and comparing Taipei and Kyoto, the discussion has illustrated that the narrative's spatial structure is constructed through reflection and displacement. Notably, the rotated map of Taipei and the recurrent comparisons between the two cities reveal that Taipei's urban space is perceived through relations of reflection rather than direct representation.

[4] Although the English translator uses the word "wail" (Zhu 2007, 218), I changed it to "weep loudly," following the original Chinese expression's meaning "放声大哭."

In this context, the novel portrays Taipei as a city viewed through mirrors. The spatial configuration generated by these reflections enables readers to perceive the city from multiple perspectives simultaneously. The metaphor of the "three-sided mirror," central to this article, thus describes not only a narrative device but also a spatial structure through which the city is perceived and interpreted.

One of the central themes of *The Old Capital* is the complexity of cultural identity, which prompts the female protagonist, referred to as "you," to question her own sense of self, as evidenced by her inquiry, "What is this place?" (218) at the conclusion of the novel. Throughout the narrative, she navigates transformed Taipei, a city reshaped by external influences, and engages with its multicultural landscape by referencing or renaming locations, structures, and objects in English, Chinese, and Japanese. Taipei is portrayed as a multicultural mosaic; however, this diversity also invites political encroachment from other countries and regions. As Chen notes, both the protagonist and Taipei transition from being "the gazed at to that of the gazer" (Chen, 2007, p. 304). To elucidate this dynamic,

The Ancient Capital is depicted through precise, detailed maps, with Kyoto and Taipei overlapping in the narrative. This overlap is akin to a mirror bent at a 90-degree angle and simultaneously a three-sided mirror, offering a three-dimensional perspective of Taiwan. Despite the protagonist's ambiguous identity, it is not possible to conclude that she is heartbroken, as the novel's ending presents her arrival at a utopian scene open to interpretation. Consequently, *The Old Capital* encourages readers to transcend identity-based perspectives while highlighting East Asia's enduring postcolonial status.

The metaphor of the three-sided mirror specifically evokes three geopolitical perspectives through which Taipei is perceived and interpreted: mainland China, the United States, and Japan. These perspectives correspond to the historical and cultural forces that have shaped Taiwan's modern experience. Consequently, Taipei is not defined by a singular cultural framework but emerges as a city whose meanings are derived from overlapping linguistic, cultural, and political viewpoints. From this perspective, the cultural multiplicity depicted in *The Old Capital* should not be merely understood as a positive celebration of diversity. Instead, it reflects the historical layers produced by successive political invasions and geopolitical interventions. The multilingual references that structure the narrative—Chinese, English, and Japanese—do not merely represent cultural variety but also reveal the historical presence of external powers within the city's spatial memory.

Consequently, Chu T'ien-hsin's novel portrays Taipei as an urban environment in which cultural diversity and historical trauma coexist. The city is depicted as a mosaic composed of fragments from various histories and languages, and the protagonist's journey through Taipei reveals the intricacies of residing in such a spatial context. The novel's open ending does not offer a definitive resolution to the question of identity. Instead, it encourages readers to reconsider the interplay of identity, space, and history within the postcolonial framework of East Asia. By depicting Taipei as an illusory city reflected in a three-sided mirror, *The Old Capital* ultimately suggests that the experience of space in postcolonial East Asia cannot be confined to a singular cultural perspective. Rather, it must be understood as a multilayered phenomenon shaped by historical memory, linguistic diversity, and geopolitical relations that continue to influence the region today.

Figures

1. Google Map and Matayoshi 1996, left to right.
2. Google Map and Matayoshi 1996, left to right.

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