The Heterotopic Agent in Chu T’ien-hsin’s “The Old Capital”

Chien-hsin Tsai
Department of Asian Studies, Universe of Texas at Austin, USA

Abstract
A number of heterotopias coexist in Taiwanese writer Chu T’ien-hsin’s novella “The Old Capital”: spaces of memory, reality, history; and here I analyze the female narrator in the story as a “heterotopic agent.” Building on Michel Foucault’s initial conceptualization of heterotopia as literature, I examine the agency of Chu’s narrator in terms of the operation of walking, the act of seeing, and the art of remembering, which, I argue, make the construction of a heterotopic space possible. The purpose of my Foucauldian reading of “The Old Capital” is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to reconceptualize “heterotopia” in relation to the human subject. On the other hand, it intends to cast a new light on the creative agency of Chu, substantiated in her attempt to rewrite the past, live the present, and realize the future. From the perspective of “heterotopic agent,” we may further entertain a creative hermeneutics of contemporary Taiwanese identity.

Keywords
Chu T’ien-hsin, Foucault, heterotopia, city, space, mapping, nostalgia, temporality
Introduction

Chu T’ien-hsin has been one of the most celebrated writers in Taiwan for more than three decades. Since Jirang ge (The Song of Tossing Sticks), a long work of prose Chu wrote and published while in high school, readers have come to expect nothing less than her unique blend of social criticism and nostalgic lyricism. Many critics say that Chu’s achievement is best understood if we look at the influence, not only of her father, Chu Hsi-ning, an outstanding storyteller in his own right, but also of Hu Lancheng, a wartime collaborator with the Japanese puppet regime and ex-husband of Eileen Chang. While the influence of the two patriarchs is indeed tangible, Chu has developed her own eclectic view of Chinese history, politics, and philosophy.

Although very much rooted in reality, the worlds Chu creates in her writings through her poetic imagination are seemingly unreal at times. Put another way, her commentaries on Taiwanese society and politics are sharply realistic, and yet the way she presents them gives one the impression of temporal disjuncture and spatial displacement. Her novella “Gudu” (“The Old Capital”) is a case in point. Intertextually rich, the novella frequently alludes to historical texts and moves rapidly and freely via its second-person narration. With its encyclopedic references to divergent spaces, times, and texts, this novella is virtually, in and of itself, a heterotopia.

Michel Foucault has famously defined “heterotopia” (literally “another place”) as a space that exists in the interstices between the real and the ideal and among different structures of power. A heterotopia is something like a mirror, a space in and by means of which one may reflect on abstract concepts and thoughts pertaining to power, time, and one’s very own identity. The concept embodies Foucault’s attempt to think about time and history in spatial terms. Thinking of time
in spatial terms or thinking of time as space calls for a creative hermeneutics of human activities that produce and give meanings to space. Foucault, however, does not elaborate on the role a human subject plays in the social production of space and time in “Of Other Spaces,” where he introduces the term heterotopia; he merely describes and notes the meanings of the places and spaces he calls heterotopia. In terms of space Chu, unlike Foucault, laboriously details the things people do and see that help delineate and define any given place and site.

Therefore, my purpose in this essay is not to simply provide a heterotopic reading of Chu’s novella; I do not look for evidence in Chu’s novella to further support the Foucauldian conception of the heterotopia. Rather, I analyze the role of Chu’s narrator in the novella in terms of three interrelated functions—the operation of walking, the act of seeing, and the art of remembering—in order to elucidate Chu’s view of writing and literature as a creative way of both understanding the space and history of Taipei and of coming to terms with her father’s and Hu Lancheng’s teachings. Even though Foucault initially referred to literature as heterotopia, he later turned away from both literature and heterotopia. Foucault’s turn from literature, as Timothy O’Leary observes, is part of his attempt to “recognize the limitations of focusing on literature and language if one wished to make a thorough investigation of the ‘larger politics of subjectivity’” (94). In spite of Foucault’s abandonment of literature and especially of literary criticism in favor of urban studies and other social sciences, I find his notion of heterotopia illuminating in helping us understand the issue of agency in literary writing. As I hope to show in this essay, Chu T’ien-hsin’s “The Old Capital” can be read as a multilayered heterotopic space characterized by temporal discontinuities, (post)colonial transformations, and an imaginary nostalgia.1

In his introduction to The Order of Things, Foucault uses Jorge Luis Borges’s “Chinese encyclopedia” in “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” to explain his conceptualization of heterotopia. Borges’s encyclopedia divides different animals into seemingly unrelated yet overlapping categories. The strangely overlapping categories prompt Foucault to state that precisely because one category cannot remain one category among others and yet at the same time include all other categories, the Chinese encyclopedia must be a heterotopia. Foucault’s coinage of

1 To the best of my knowledge, Foucault has not discussed nostalgia in relation to heterotopia although he has repeatedly mentioned “history” in “Of Other Spaces” and The Order of Things. In her understanding of history (especially in her earlier days), Chu labored under a kind of imaginary nostalgia, and David Der-wei Wang thus refers to Chu as a postloyalist writer. For an in-depth discussion of “postloyalism” see Wang’s “Houyimin xiezuo.” For Chu, then, a heterotopic agent is akin to a postloyalist.
heterotopia (hetero + topos) echoes Borges’s encyclopedia in the sense that if topos simultaneously refers to a literary motif—indeed, a topic—and a place, then writing or a written page becomes the site where topics/topoi converge. Fiction as a heterotopia is therefore a commonplace of uncommonality that reveals unexpected kinships among different kinds of topics/topoi. Like Borges’s “Chinese encyclopedia,” “The Old Capital” is an audacious undertaking whose cross-references not only give evidence of but, more importantly, expand the Foucauldian heterotopia. As I will explain in the following, Chu’s “The Old Capital,” like Borges’s short story, disturbs the very nomenclature of a topos as a standardized method of constructing a place and an identity.

Additionally, by having her narrator wander in the city of Taipei, Chu helps us understand not just what heterotopia is but how heterotopia may come to existence in relation to human actions. The narrator in “The Old Capital” assumes the role of an anthropologist who is carrying out an archaeological and cartographical project by walking through Taipei. As she navigates her way through modern-day Taipei with an old colonial map, the image of Taipei as heterotopia begins to emerge. More radically, I read both Chu and her narrator as heterotopic agents that illuminate the interconnections between different continents and conjure forgotten memories of the fraught relationships between colonies and empires. The heterotopic agent may seem to resemble Foucault’s heterotopia-as-boat, which remains the only moveable site among all his other examples—brothels, theatres, hospitals, museums, et cetera. Foucault speaks as if the heterotopia-as-boat had a will of its own and could move without a captain or a navigator, or as if a mirror could produce a reflection without ever having an object in front of it. It is worth reiteration that “The Old Capital” does not write itself; Chu and her narrator are the agents that make literature as heterotopia a realization.

Critics such as Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu) have referred to Chu’s narrator in “The Old Capital” as Don Quixote, and I wish to advance their comparison by calling attention to the way her narrator’s act of walking in the city with an old map is reminiscent of Don Quixote’s mad vision, and of the widening rift between things and words his journey represents. Perhaps more so than Don Quixote, Chu’s narrator as a heterotopic agent and her unique vision usher in a new way of understanding the world and its fast growing representations. It is not so much the “heroism” à la Don Quixote or the lack thereof that I wish to discuss in relation to Chu’s narrator as a heterotopic agent, but rather how Chu’s/the narrator’s practices of walking, seeing, writing, and remembering encourage readers to set aside existing (male-centered) historical discourses and read the space and history of
Taipei anew. Taipei is heterotopic in the sense that it is Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, as well as Taiwanese; that it is as much a Japanese utopia as a Chinese nationalist and Taiwanese nativist dystopia.

**Walking in the City**

“The Old Capital” is one of the most difficult stories from contemporary Taiwan. Its difficulty comes from intertextual allusions to pre-modern Chinese and modern Japanese literature, the entanglement of fictional writings and historical records, and the superimposition of reality and imagination. Plot disruptions also usher in different temporalities, rendering the novel discontinuous. Additionally, its second-person narration, instead of creating a sense of intimacy, makes the familiar spaces seem unfamiliar in this literary heterotopias and gives rise to a sort of dialogism in which a thought is forced to confront alternatives to itself. “You” may be the narrator’s “alter ego,” or another character in the novel, or even the reader in the way it points beyond the narrative to the domains of the author and the reader (see Tang). The narrator sometimes even seems to get lost in her own narration and her attempt to unravel the tangled history of the old capital.

“The Old Capital” begins with a nostalgic tone as the narrator reminisces about her high school years and her best friend at that time, “A.” The two grow apart as they move through different stages in life, until one day A sends a fax inviting the narrator to a reunion in Kyoto, the old capital of Japan. The narrator arrives in Kyoto before A and decides to visit the places she and her daughter had visited years before. Here, Chu embarks on a complex journey of intertextual play with Japanese Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari’s famous novel *The Old Capital.* After spending the day in Kyoto, the narrator realizes that A will not come, changes her itinerary and returns to Taiwan.

As soon as she arrives back in Taiwan, however, she is unexpectedly mistaken for a Japanese tourist by the airport shuttle driver. While being at home almost always removes or makes impossible the longing for home, this misrecognition presents an opportunity for the nostalgic narrator to see the city anew, and indulge in the sense of alienation of being a stranger. Instead of correcting the driver’s mistake, therefore, the narrator seizes the opportunity to tour the city with an old map of Taipei, purposefully defamiliarizing her memories of her hometown. This old map of colonial Taipei, curiously enough, comes from a modern travel guide to

---

2 For a thoughtful comparative study of the two stories, see Chen.
Taipei that she has purchased in Kyoto. In the novella, the map is not so much a visual aid as a mnemonic device. Rather than helping the narrator navigate the alleyways of contemporary Taipei (which, due to its dated nature, it cannot), it instead conjures up forgotten memories of Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule.

To assume that a map can guide the narrator down memory lane is to recognize the spatialization of memory and the relation between maps and power. Cartographical knowledge, like historiography, is a social product. As Foucault says in his critique of historiography: “[T]he quest for truth was not an objective and neutral activity but was intimately related to the ‘will to power’ of the truth-seeker. Knowledge was thus a form of power, a way of presenting one’s own values in the guise of scientific disinterestedness” (qtd. in Harley 279). Maps are not as truthful and unbiased as they seem, and indeed Foucault himself uses the concept of heterotopia to map the ordering and the space of knowledge.

The presupposed “truth” content of maps, when placed in the perspective of colonial history, is destabilized through its relation to the historical and personal. From the perspective of maps, or what Foucault would call a “grid of intelligibility,” Chu’s narrator nearly assumes the role of a colonial accomplice in the way she aligns herself with the Japanese through her use of the old map. While the two-dimensional surface, the flat representation of a map offers guidance, it does not—and cannot—in any way organize the itinerary of the map users, a point Michel de Certeau persuasively elaborates in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In short, the spatial form of maps does not lend itself to the recording of the progression of time.

In “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau understands the urban space of the city as a text in the continuous process of being written. He argues that city and text share similar ways of being construed and structured by way of human operations. Walking becomes analogous to writing, and the path that is formed constitutes a kind of rhetoric. In “The Old Capital,” the narrator’s long walk

---

3 But as Tsung-yi Huang poignantly asks in her studies of global cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai: are the footsteps of low-paid workers as “transgressive” as those of white-collar managers in their definition of the city (4)? To build on Huang’s insight, we may further inquire: who is this pedestrian that could afford the subversive power of walking? Who can afford to read de Certeau?

4 Michel de Certeau’s understanding of the city and the text as metaphors for one another is closely tied to his praxis of walking. No two people have a completely identical way of speaking, writing, and walking. Like language, each personal style of walking—or what de Certeau refers to as the “rhetoric of walking”—involves a peculiar way of construing the city as text. In contemporary Taiwan, Li Yung-ping (Li Yongping) is another writer that so memorably depicts a
resembles Chu’s stylistically idiosyncratic long sentences replete with imagery. The critic Ng Kim Chew rightly notices the narrator’s stylized way of seeing, walking, and writing, and refers to her as an “urban anthropologist.” Ng’s term further links Chu to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and “The Old Capital” to *Tristes Tropiques* (Ng, “Cong daguanyuan”). In fact, Chu has openly described herself as an anthropologist who “explores Taipei City by assuming the mentality of anthropologists from the end of the nineteenth century who carried out fieldwork on the aborigines of the South Pacific archipelagoes” (Chu, “Liushui” 41). Alluding to Borges’s stories with their complex narrative structures and intricate cross-references, Chu’s contemporary Lo Yi-chin (Luo Yijun) uses the adjective “encyclopedic” to describe “The Old Capital” (34). Lo’s comment should remind us that Foucault cites Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia to launch his discussion of heterotopia in *The Order of Things*. Likewise, “The Old Capital” is a literary heterotopia that elaborates on the multilayered ways of understanding Taipei.

With her own stylized operations of walking and writing, Chu is hardly a colonial accomplice even though she passes as a Japanese tourist with her map of Taipei made by the Japanese. Moreover, maps as guides to routes do not depict the act of passing-by and the trajectories of the passersby. By “trajectory” I mean the temporal movement through space that is not preserved in maps. In other words, maps are an insufficient representation of temporality in spatial terms. In this respect, Chu’s narrator is akin to a reader purposefully touring the city to challenge the totalizing observations of a colonial map and rethinking its time-testedness. Echoing de Certeau, Hillis Miller calls the genre of the novel a “figurative mapping” in which the author “traces out diachronically the movement of the characters from house to house and from time to time, as the crisscross of their relationships gradually creates an imaginary space”—an imaginary space that is based on the real landscape and on “the psycho-socio-economic realities of ways of life” (19). Simply, Miller’s figurative cartographer stresses the agency of not only the fiction writer but also the many characters that move among different sites and times. In Chu’s case, a fiction writer is precisely a figurative cartographer, or what I call a heterotopic agent, whose discursive operation of walking in the city illuminates new ways of reading maps, writing stories, and understanding cities.

---

5 All passages from “The Old Capital” in this essay come from Howard Goldblatt’s translation. Translations of Chu T’ien-hsin’s other writings are my own.

6 In fact, de Certeau’s theorization of the rhetoric of walking also recalls Foucault’s concept of heterotopia:
Additionally, by diachronic movements Miller reminds us of the different senses of temporality a writer and his/her characters may possess. In “The Old Capital,” Chu’s and her narrator’s divergent perceptions of time give rise to a haunting sense of nostalgia and longing, to which I will return in due course. Suffice it to state here, the significance of the narrator’s walk through the city with the help of an old map is that she experiences contemporary time and colonial time simultaneously, to say nothing of the “real time” in which Chu exists as she writes the story. The folds of different times—or what we may call “heterochronism”—instigate a confusing feeling of being simultaneously familiar with yet detached from the environment. By purposefully making her home *unheimlich*, or literally “unhomely,” through her use of the map, the narrator further intensifies, perhaps unknowingly, the uncanny feeling that seems to trouble her. In “Ghosts in the City,” de Certeau, reflecting on how Paris’ urban planning destroyed more remnants of the past than had war, proclaims: “An uncanniness lurks there, in the everyday life of the city” (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 133). By walking in the city with an old map, Chu’s heterotopic agent therefore opens up an epistemological space, enabling a critique of the knowledge that dictates the formation of Taiwan’s “official” identity, history, and collective memories.

**City as Garden as Heterotopia**

Ideas form a complete system within us, comparable to one of the natural kingdoms, a sort of bloom whose iconography will be traced by a man of genius who will pass perhaps as mad.

Honoré de Balzac  
_The Human Comedy_

Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken. . . .

In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs. (117; emphasis in original)
Rather than reducing lived experience to points and lines on a cartographical plane, Chu fills “The Old Capital” with descriptive details that help the reader approach issues of time and temporality. One of the most salient examples comes from her descriptions of the landscape of Taipei, dotted with plants of all kinds. In the course of her walk, Taipei is rendered a botanical garden. In his formulation of heterotopia, Foucault asserts that the garden as heterotopia “has the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible” (19). Foucault’s discussion insinuates the existence of a landscaper who establishes the garden as a heterotopia of contradictory emplacements although, again, he has never mentioned any human subject in the making of a heterotopia. In what follows, I will show how Taipei as garden is envisioned through the excursion of the heterotopic agent, who notices how plant growth embodies temporality and how the plants’ entangled roots may provide a glimpse into the circuitous routes of colonial travels.

In the following passage, Chu enumerates a number of plants in Taiwan and links them to time and memory. In addition, she also adroitly unfolds the layered colonial history of Taiwan by means of the names of flowers. We may refer to this as Chu’s Taiwanese encyclopedia:

South American purple jasmine, Oriental coral tree, large-blossomed crepe myrtle, red ixora, lady’s slipper [rose balsam], Chinese hibiscus, canna. . . . In particular, the Chinese hibiscus, known for reaching over walls from under eaves, left a deep impression on the group of young and middle-aged men who arrived in 1949, and the Portuguese and Spaniards who came to save souls and obtain pepper 300 years earlier. The latter group, away from their homelands for so long, were driven to the brink of madness as they recalled similar blue skies, white walls, green trees, red flowers, black hair, dark brows and lashes, and love songs like “Let me look at you, girl from Lima, let me tell you about the glory of dreams, dreams that awaken memories of ancient bridges, rivers, and forests. . . .” (118; ellipses in original)

---

7 I am referring to Paul Ricoeur’s influential discussion of narrative and time: “[N]arrative activity . . . provides a privileged access to the way we articulate our experience of time” (99). Ricoeur’s insights may be used to further develop de Certeau’s comparison of walking and speech act/language.
The literary mise-en-scène Chu creates here is characteristic of “The Old Capital” in the way that it mixes horticulture with history, space with memory. Flowers in the red category, including peach blossoms, add to the subtropical ambience of Taiwan. In this long list of flower names, “South American purple jasmine” is unmistakably foreign to Taiwan. More commonly known to the Taiwanese as *jiuchongge*, and in the West as *Bougainvillea*, it is a plant native to Brazil and named after the French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville. Other flowers mentioned in the passage are also not native to Taiwan, although they have become a familiar part of the landscape. The Crepe Myrtle, native to South Asia, and the Canna, an American species, are two further examples of flowers imported first to Europe from the East Indies. Even the sweet potato, a long-standing symbol of Taiwanese identity, is not a native species. Moreover, the twists and turns of vegetation in the subtropics may also be seen as more than a simple phenomenon of growth patterns, for they suggest the complex, non-linear temporal and historical strands that have led to their proliferation on the island. Chu knows foreign plants did not arrive in Taiwan without external help; it is the travelers from foreign shores who contributed to Taiwan’s diverse flora. Her narrator does not explain precisely how these types of vegetation arrived in Taiwan, but the clear emphasis of such passages is on the hybridity and constructedness of a Taiwanese identity over time.

Transplanted to Taiwan long ago, these foreign species may well be understood as Taiwanese, and Chu’s botanical trope, in this way, may also be extended to reflections on human migration. After generations of living in a foreign land, immigrants may treat Taiwan as their home. Landscaping projects that make use of non-native species give rise to a postcolonial critique of colonialism and exoticism. Chu’s narrator observes: “The Japanese who had originally thought of selling Taiwan for a billion dollars . . . tried to grow [trees] all over the southern island. They didn’t just plant annual flowers and plants; with an unworried certainty, they put down saplings that would take a century to show any resemblance to trees. Strange how they seemed not to have planned to simply eat and run” (148).

The saplings planted by the Japanese were tropical betel palms not native to a subtropical country like Taiwan, but long associated in the Japanese colonial imagination with the image of a southern paradise. This tropicalization—emphasizing Taiwan’s southern geography and landscape in terms that evoke an exotic radiance—defines the utopic vision of the Japanese colonial enterprise. Designating Taiwan with the adjectives *southern* or *tropical* in literary representations is no longer sufficient: the Japanese colonizers now aim to transform their imagination into reality. The transformation of Taiwan from a mere
colony into a paradise takes time, and planting saplings marks only the initial stage of this large-scale makeover.

Besides planting lines of betel palms alongside the entrances of schools, hospitals, and government buildings, the Japanese colonizers also cultivated a huge number of cherry trees in Taiwan. If the tropical betel palms help to perpetuate a deep-seated Japanese yearning for the bountiful South, then the cherry blossoms are intended to alleviate nostalgia. Taiwan, for the Japanese colonizers, is strangely familiar. The contrast between Japanese aesthetics and colonialism that is cultivated in the planting of cherry trees and betel palms is vivid. The transplantation of cherry trees and the strategic planting of betel palms turned Taiwan into more than an extension of the Japanese botanical imagination: these plants each possess their own lifespan and highlight the temporal element of a heterotopia. The short-livedness of cherry blossoms symbolizes a heroic yet tragic resolution during wartime. The longevity of betel palms means endurance in search of a southern paradise. In the heterotopic garden of Taipei, different times and temporal durations merge in the stream of Taiwanese history.

After the Japanese lost Taiwan and after their surrender in the Second World War, Nationalist soldiers from the Chinese mainland came to Taiwan. Like the Japanese colonizers, these soldiers took to plant cultivation as a way to overcome their homesickness. Their occasional attempts to plant Chinese peonies, however, failed. The failure of these species to flourish in Taiwan serves as a reminder of the inability of some foreign plants to adapt in Taiwan, and also corresponds to the soldiers’ own sense of rootlessness on the island. In Chinese culture peonies symbolize good fortune, and the inhospitable environment of Taiwan creates a sense of hopeless exile. For these soldiers, then, Taiwan remains a foreign land that is unaccepting of the familiar reminders of home.

As Chu’s heterotopic agent walks, the city is botanized. She makes an exact catalogue of the locations of the different plants she sees. Unlike Baudelaire’s flâneur, who strolls through the city and gazes upon the swirling modernity on exhibition, Chu’s narrator instead takes a profound interest in the old meandering alleyways and vegetation. Meticulously documenting the spatial and temporal dimensions of botanical growth, Chu’s narrator resembles an anthropologist performing fieldwork:

[T]he former residence of Chiang Junior, located at No. 20, Section 1 of Chang’an East Road, facing the rear entrance of the Presbyterian church, established in 1937 A.D. Japanese indulging in all-night
revelry had left the lingering pungent smell of urine at the base of the outside wall. Antitheft barbed wire atop the wall was intertwined with pink coral vines and hemlock at 75, Section 1 of Hangzhou South Road; the male head of a family, having neither been killed nor turned up missing, returned a year after the war ended and planted a giant breadfruit tree at No. 9, Lane 61 of [Linyi] Street; another planting by a head of household was of South Pacific firs at No. 1, Lane 44 of [Linyi] Street; yet another was by a South Pacific returnee who chose to plant Burmese gardenias at No. 2-l, Lane 3 of Tai’an Street; there was also a family whose status was impossible to guess; No. 3, Lane 2 on the same street spread out until it was the size of a row of apartment buildings; parallel to that sprawling house was No. 1, Lane 6 of Tongshan Street, with banana shrubs and mangoes stretching over the fence, reminiscent of your paternal grandfather's house. But more like his house ought to be the one at No. 11, Lane 24 of Pucheng Street. Many people’s old photo albums would have a faded black-and-white photograph in which, with azaleas and longan trees on a small patch of cement as a background, a child sits on a tricycle with younger siblings behind. There were also Nos. 23, 7, and 1 in Lane 264 of Ruian Street, which should have been a better location for the imposing mansion on Roosevelt Road that was searched by the female protagonist in *Dodder Flower*, a Guolian Film Corporation movie you saw as a girl, one that was based on Qiong Yao’s novel. If not, the only other possible places would be No. 10, Lane 11 of Qingtian Street or No. 4, Lane 9 or No. 1, across from it. (154-55)

This long paragraph is Miller’s “figurative mapping” par excellence, recording street names and landscapes, on the one hand, and illustrating how botany may be grafted to geography and personal story to history, on the other. Similar paragraphs appear frequently in “The Old Capital.” Some of the streets, like Rui’an Street or Roosevelt Road, appear more than once in the novella, indicating their importance in the narrator’s, and Chu’s, memory.

Each front yard or backyard in every home is a heterotopia of its own. Readers unfamiliar with the geography of Taipei may find the copious number of details unnecessary, but given their centrality in Chu’s rhetoric of urban wandering, the linguistic cartography performed in “The Old Capital” speaks to the notion of
heterotopia, where the proliferation of signs becomes the underpinning of the novella’s construction. The plants Chu’s narrator depicts are more than just markers on a map; each becomes a passageway through lived history and the flow of time. The knotted branches and roots, reminiscent of the tangled journeys they embody, mirror the routes of the pedestrians and the possibilities of the landscape, and form connections to the vestiges of history and the traces of memory. They temporalize varied spaces of heterotopia.

Imaginary Nostalgia

Coded by her imagination of the past, Chu’s figurative mapping traces memorable sites across the Taipei cityscape. The rift between the reality she sees when walking and its representation on a map produces a suggestive power of absence, which again helps to realize the author’s praxis of figurative mapping. Her critical reflection on the past and present relies on Kawabata’s *The Old Capital*. If “The Old Capital” constitutes a heterotopia in the Foucauldian sense, then the heterotopia Chu creates in “The Old Capital” frames in such a way as to suggest a *mise en abîme*; heterotopia enters an ongoing sequence of relationships within itself. Chu’s is a heterotopia *en abîme*.8

In his novel *The Old Capital*, Kawabata takes pains to recreate Kyoto’s exquisite landscapes, historic architecture, and prominent cultural events. Kawabata’s Kyoto is, Jen-yi Hsu writes, “an ideal landscape on which Zhu [Chu] can project her utopian yearnings” (556). Using a language of nostalgia, Kawabata embalms an old Japanese way of life that is quickly vanishing in the wake of the nation’s defeat in the Second World War. While continuing to deteriorate, Kawabata’s Kyoto still feels more like home for Chu’s narrator than contemporary Taipei, which is rendered almost uninhabitable by myopic politicians and greedy business conglomerates. Even the colonial version of Taipei, already gone save for the textual worlds of old maps and photographs, seems more attractive than the contemporary version.

---

8 My reading is inspired by David Carroll’s discussion of Foucault’s analyses of self-reflexivity in *The Order of Things*. To go back to Foucault’s reading of Borges’s imaginary encyclopedia: if each entry is in itself a heterotopia, then the entire encyclopedia as well as any complex literary work is a constellation of heterotopias. Foucault is well aware of the metarecursivity of heterotopias, and that is why he says Borges’s taxonomy shatters “all the familiar landmarks of [his] thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography” (xvi; emphasis in original).
Kawabata’s novel has the form of an organic cycle, moving from the opening chapter, “The Flowers of Spring,” to the closing chapter, “Winter Flowers.” The author also sees lasting value in seasonal change. Redolent of Japan’s traditional aesthetic sensibility, a kind of nostalgic mono no aware, literally “the sentiment of things,” Kawabata’s lyrical reflection on Kyoto prefigures a similar feeling of pathos in Chu’s discussions of walking in the city and writing about plants. As Lingchei Letty Chen explains, the “strategy of doubling Kawabata’s Old Capital (with a map included) allows Chu to indulge in nostalgia” (75). However, while Chen sees nostalgia as the desire to connect with and relate to the past, I would rather emphasize an anticipatory dimension of nostalgia that focuses on the future. This prospective, as opposed to retrospective, view of Chu’s nostalgia redirects our critical attention to the temporal possibilities unfolded through literary heterotopia.

As Stephen Owen has written, nostalgia, characterized and intensified by a sense of longing, has been a vital source of emotion for generations of Chinese poets and writers. In her book The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym sees nostalgia as being closely related to a structure of feeling that varies according to the historical moment. Her discussions of European cities show how a nation uses places and spaces to structure patriotic sentiments, during both revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras. For Boym, to “unearth the fragments of nostalgia one needs a dual archeology of memory and of place, and a dual history of illusions and of actual practices” (xviii). Her call for a duality of archeology and history is echoed in “The Old Capital.”

From a feminist perspective, such an archaeology would be carried out by a female narrator who is writing against the official history and political discourse, dominated as they are by a male perspective. Julia Kristeva argues that while the masculine conception of temporality tends to be linear and teleological, “women’s time” tends to return “to an archaic (mythic) memory as well as to the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements” (28). This non-linear movement of temporality is prominent in “The Old Capital” as Chu deliberately alludes to passages by male historians without providing specific context. Needless to say, this recontextualization as confusing as it may be also gives rise to new and creative interpretations of existing male-sanctioned historical material. However, instead of saying that a woman writer like Chu favors temporally disjointed narrative thereby

---

9 I appropriate Raymond Williams’s term “the structure of feeling” to elucidate Fred Davis’s view that nostalgia is a “social emotion,” an insight that has influenced Boym’s work. For Davis, nostalgia is structured socially, if not altogether ordered and constructed via political authority. See his Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia.
emphasizing a male-female bipolarity, I wish to highlight what Boym calls a “dual history of illusions and of actual practices” in Chu’s story. With her second-person narration, Chu brings together both male and female perspectives of time, of temporality, and of history.10

The daughter of a Nationalist soldier who came to Taiwan in the late 1940s, Chu inherited the nostalgia of the previous generation. After moving to Taiwan, the longing for their home on the mainland became an obsession for the Nationalist soldiers. Chu’s intimate familiarity with the unrequited dream of returning to the old country becomes a mode of remembering a place that, in reality, never existed for her. In Kyoto, Chu’s narrator reminds us of her nostalgia for an imaginary homeland:

The Shirakawa flowed past the back doors of the houses, which, if it had been Taiwan, would have been the perfect place to dump trash and dirty water. Koi lived in this stream, which was not quite two meters wide and less than half a meter deep, with willow and weeping cherry trees flanking the banks, toward which shop owners oriented their view, raising or lowering their bamboo curtains based on the intensity of the sun. You told your daughter that southern China was just like that. When had you ever been in southern China? (134)

Chu embeds her sharp critique of Taipei in her admiration of Kyoto. The flip side of her criticism, however, is her mournful sense of displacement and temporal irreversibility. The narrator comes to realize the fictitiousness of the homeland, and by extension her very own cultural identity, as she passes on this image of the homeland to her daughter. Ironically, her imaginary homeland cannot be found in Taipei but rather in Kyoto.

If we take into account the relationship between Kyoto and Chang’an, an additional layer of displacement is made clear. In 710, the Japanese imperial court was established in Nara, which remained the capital until 784. Weary of the clergy’s interference, the Emperor Kammu decided to transfer the capital to

10 It would be facile to label Chu’s writing as feminine writing simply because of her biological sex. As critic Ng Kim Chew has pointed out, while being a woman does give Chu and her sisters an advantage in writing about women, the feminine quality in both Chu’s and her older sister Chu T’ien-wen’s writings is related to their spiritual mentor Hu Lancheng’s understanding of Chinese history and philosophy. Curiously, Hu was partially influenced by Eileen Chang, one of the most celebrated woman writers of his time. See Ng’s “Shisu de jiushu.”
Nagaoka, an area about twenty miles northwest of Nara. A decade later in 794, the Emperor moved the capital once again from Nagaoka to Heian, a site in what is now the city of Kyoto, which remained the home of the Japanese imperial family for centuries to come. Although Edo (later renamed Tokyo) became the country’s economic, political, and imperial center in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Kyoto is still recognized as the source of much of Japan’s cultural heritage. Because both Nara and Kyoto were laid out on a grid pattern of square blocks modeled after the city of Chang’an in Tang China, Chu’s reference to an “old capital” is but one node in an ongoing chain of references: Kyoto, the old capital, is but a replica of an older capital, Chang’an. Furthermore, as an imaginary replica of Kawabata’s Old Capital, Chu’s story may be seen as a replica of a replica of a replica; again, a heterotopia en abîme.

The Nationalist soldiers are nostalgic for the familiar way of life which they are forced to leave behind. Their longing thus is tinged with a desire to restore origins and reconstruct their lost home. Chu has been taught since a very young age the national goal of “retaking the mainland” (fangong dalu), a slogan heard constantly when Taiwan was still under martial law and the rule of the Nationalist generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek. As she matured, Chu’s nostalgia began to acquire a reflective quality; she increasingly dwelled on “the ambivalences of human longing and belonging” (Boym xviii) rather than the lost object of home.

According to David Der-wei Wang, imaginary nostalgia “questions the ontological assumption often associated with the concept of nostalgia, and refers us to the intra- and intertextual dynamics that configures the yearning for home” (Fictional 253). In her writing Chu transforms a material absence into a textual presence, and through her story’s intertextual relationship to Kawabata’s novel her nostalgia is further displaced, becoming a memory of a memory. The past, as seen through the lens of imaginary nostalgia, does not exist except as narrative, creating an absent object of longing in the everyday operations of writing and reading. Though stemming from the complex interplay among writing, reading, and remembering, the emotive capacity of nostalgia utilizes the needs of the present to shape fantasies of the past and project them as future realities.

In his reading of “The Old Capital,” Chaoyang Liao notices this kind of future-perfect nostalgia that possesses the potential to turn absence into presence. Memory in Chu’s novella, Liao explains, “is not characterized by stability; on the contrary, it points to the anticipatory dimension of temporality: experience prefigures significance, the past is fulfilled when, futuristically, it enters comparison or forms mutuality with something from the present” (64). As the narrator’s
memories of colonial Taipei are superimposed on the images of the contemporary, or when her remembrances of Kyoto overlap with those of Taipei, a memory of the future begins to surface. That is, the utopic future that Chu anticipates may well be a restoration of the past, and of her memories of her own father’s experience.

Susan Stewart regards the ideological possibilities of nostalgia in relation to utopia: “Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality” (23). Similarly, Fredric Jameson introduces his *Archaeologies of the Future* by remarking that “Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form: yet just as the literary value of the form is subject to permanent doubt, so also its political status is structurally ambiguous” (xvi). While I hesitate to agree that nostalgia is “hostile to history and its invisible origins,” Stewart’s point on the future-past and Jameson’s reminder that utopia is an ambiguous coupling of the political and the literary are well taken. Chu’s nostalgic novella refigures the present moment as a double repetition, reenacting both her father’s sense of loss and her own sense of displacement. This refiguring is made most apparent in her superimposition of Kyoto and Taipei, where the past and the present become inseparable.

The design of the old capital of Kyoto is modeled after an equally old capital in China, the Tang city of Chang’an. This historical resemblance refigures Taipei as an imagined copy of Kyoto, as a copy of a copy. The way that Chu’s expressive nostalgia conjoins the past and the future finds an antecedent in her mentor Hu Lancheng’s politico-poetic imagination of a Chinese utopia. Hu is not the first Chinese to have ever praised Japan for retaining what is now lost in China. While in modern China Hu was infamous for his collaboration with the Japanese during World War II, he argued that collaborating with Japan would help China survive the war and return China to its glorious past because Japan had preserved certain virtues of ancient Chinese tradition.

Hu prides himself on being a visionary essayist. In such works as *Zhongguo de liyue fengjing* (*The Ritual and Musical Scenery of China*), *Jianguo xinshu* (*A New Book on Nation Building*), and *Geming yao shi yu xuewen* (*Revolution Demands Poetry and Learning*), Hu outlines his design and pursuit of a Chinese utopia.11 After her first meeting with Hu in September 1975, Chu was so charmed that she wrote the following to show her appreciation of his learnedness and her

---

11 For a discussion of Hu Lancheng’s poetic and political views, see David Der-wei Wang’s “Shuqing yu beipan.”
love for his homeland: “The heaven and the earth are on equal footing with you. The Yangtze River and the Yellow River throb in my blood. I am going to ride with the wind and fly to the summit of the sublime Tianshan . . . China, oh China!” (Jirang ge 253). The young writer’s vision transcends manmade boundaries as she wishes to merge with her imaginary homeland. Although Chu had never been to the mainland at that point, she did not shy away from showing her literary loyalty to the imagined homeland, even as late as the early 1990s. In 1977, encouraged by Hu Lancheng, Chu, her older sister, and their friends established the “Double-Three Club” (Sansan), a literary coterie that derives the first “three” from Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” and the second from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Together with the club’s other members, Chu began publishing works about Taiwan’s responsibility to recover China from the Communists, works which exhibit her longstanding imaginary nostalgia.

“The Old Capital” was published in 1997, a full two decades after the inauguration of the “Double-Three Club.” Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang correctly notes that Chu in this novella “imbues both Japanese flower rites and the colonial map of Taipei with a spiritual quality, as sites where history and memory are deposited, echo[ing] the way the Double-Three Club members had idolized ancient China” (120). That the older Chu still echoes her younger self reveals a preoccupation with this loyalist imagination of the homeland which, rather than subsiding with the passage of time, has grown more complex with the introduction of Japan into the contested relationship between Taiwan and China. Though Yvonne Chang specifically mentions “ancient China” in the above quote, the “ancient” is but a single aspect of the Chinese utopia Hu Lancheng describes. Hu’s Chinese utopia, transgeographical (because it is yet to be located on any maps) as well as transtemporal (because it is projected into both the past and the future), becomes a heterotopia that Chu continues to elaborate upon and deepen. Hu’s vision of ancient China directly corresponds with Chu’s order that is (dis)placed into the future.

From this perspective, Hu Lancheng is himself performing as a heterotopic agent, summoning a diversity of heterotopias from various places and times in order to construct his utopia. That Hu’s disciple Chu comes from a Nationalist military family background helps us to make sense of the way she inherits his stance as a cultural (post)loyalist, pledging eternal loyalty to an unfamiliar homeland. The imaginary nostalgia Chu utilizes in “The Old Capital” produces the structure of feeling or, in more political terms, the collective vision of a national culture; the future will be born from the defeat of the Communists and the restoration of
heavenly order and cultural glory. While Chu’s early writings reveal a nostalgia for the Chinese homeland the way it could (and should) have been, in a post-martial law era when the strong patriarchal figures in her life—her father and Hu Lancheng—had already passed away, Chu narratively prefigures a future that will have come true. When this future-perfect is realized, she can then indulge in looking back; she will have become a (post)loyalist in this future regime that is designed and constructed in accordance with the past. The utopian vision she has inherited from Hu Lancheng is now transformed into a heterotopic vision where the future and the past come together. Understandably, this utopic vision of the future-perfect may stay unrealized because, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, if a utopia comes into existence, all previously existing impulses and drives will disappear without a trace.12

**Conclusion**

I have explored Chu’s creative hermeneutics of the contemporary Taiwanese identity and history by virtue of a chain of reference: “moving,” “remembering,” “remaining/leaving behind,” “unique/hetero/countering,” all pronounced yi in Mandarin (albeit in different tones). Each of these terms corresponds to and highlights the dimensions of Chu’s novella as a heterotopia (and the narrator as a heterotopic agent) that I have discussed: walking in the city, botanical troping, and imaginary nostalgia. If, as Foucault writes, heterotopias are “counter-sites, a kind of effectively realized utopias in which . . . all the other real sites . . . are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (17), then the distinction between utopia and heterotopia is very fine indeed. As Chu suggests in “The Old Capital,” the link between the two may be a (pre)fabricated nostalgia. Whereas utopias continue to haunt us by virtue of their absence, heterotopias give us a new sense of agency in their spatialized temporalizing of places, cities, countries, and in their materialization of linguistic gestures that let us imagine future-pasts and past-futures.

---

12 In this sense, a heterotopia will never become a utopia. See Jameson’s discussion in “The Politics of Utopia.”
**Works Cited**


—. *Jirang ge (The Song of Tossing Sticks)*. Taipei: Sansan shufang, 1988.

—. “Liushui shijiunian (‘Nineteen Years of Life’)” *Youshi wenyi (Youshi Literary)* 76.2 (1992): 40-41.


About the Author
Chien-hsin Tsai is Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He has published essays on writers from colonial Taiwan and on contemporary Chinese literature in both Chinese and English. He is completing a manuscript tentatively entitled A Passage to China: Postloyalism and Writers from Colonial Taiwan, 1895-1945.

[Received 15 February 2012; accepted 17 July 2012]