

Walking or Reading the City (Thought Paper)

During the 1990s, cityscapes across and around China were changing more rapidly than ever before; it was a time when the construction of skyscrapers really caught on and transformed the image of the modern metropolis into that of the global megacity. The impact of these rapid material transformations on everyday life - along with the political and cultural developments of the period (Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the mainland, preparations and apprehensions for the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, post martial law democratisation in Taiwan) - are apparent in many works of urban fiction of the 1990s.

One thing that is affected by this restructuring of society for the future, is the individual's sense of connection with the past. When personal and collective memory loses its material grounding, how does this affect the relation between people and place? In Walter Benjamin's Paris of the 1890s, the streets lead "downward-if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private."¹ But when those streets can change both name and appearance from one day to the other, then where do they lead? Are memories strong enough to live on, or do they float away like fictions or ghosts severed from their mooring in reality. As some buildings remain while others are destroyed, the city becomes a spatio-temporal patchwork. This is no new state of affairs, but when changes happen from day to day and not just from generation to generation, memory and fiction, past and present, time and space become confused and enter a strange and co-productive relationship.

This comparative case study investigates two different approaches to complex narrative space-time in rapidly changing cities. The first approach is to read the city as a text, its signs, its stories, its names, by combining historical and geographical aspects of the textual city into fictional maps. The second approach is experiential and perambulatory; it attempts to engage the material as well as the imagined/remembered city of the past by walking through its streets in the present.

In his novel *Atlas* (地图集) from 1997, Dung Kai-cheung (董啟章) investigates the spatio-temporal foundation for a fictional city known as Hong Kong or Victoria. The novel

¹ Benjamin, Walter (1990): *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass. The Belkin Press: M1,2.

underlines the transient quality of a city on the brink of an uncertain future (written as it was immediately before the handover of Hong Kong to China), by thoroughly deconstructing its past. Through philosophical, anecdotal and pseudo-academic descriptions and discussions of historical maps of the area, the novel evokes a Hong Kong made up of equal parts historical fiction, wishful geography and deceitful symbolism. In my analysis, I look at how narrative superimposition of different spatiotemporal representations of Hong Kong (in the form of historical maps) on the contemporary cityscape conveys an image of the city as a huge, unstable text that can be read in millions of ways depending on the perspective of the reader.

Zhu Tianxin's (朱天心) novella *The Old Capital* (古都), likewise from 1997, is a story of slowly losing contact with the past through forgetting, loss and material erasure. However, far from obliterating the relevance of days gone by, this loss provokes a renewed interest, and, in a way, a renewed presence of that past in conscious remembering, literary evocation and engagement with material remains. The novella reads as a journey in time; back and forth between the 1970s and the 1990s, but also as a journey in space from Taipei to Kyoto and back. In my analysis, I will look at the narrative's trajectories through urban space-time and the parallel movement of the narrator/protagonist's physical perambulations through the two cities.

My comparison is inspired by de Certeau's influential essay 'Walking the City', in which he distinguishes between reading and walking the urban text. According to de Certeau, as a cartographer and city planner, one engages with city from above, as a 'voyeur', whose elevated position "transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it."² A completely different type of interaction comes from walking "down below" in the muddled midst of the city as "Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write *without being able to read it.*"³ My analysis, while departing from this distinction, follows the narrative patterns of 'reading' and 'walking' in the analysed works rather than strictly adhering to de Certeau's distinction, and demonstrates that both urban practises are equally enmeshed in the fantasies, histories and social geographies of the urban text.

² de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011: 93.

³ Ibid. (Italics mine)