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Travel, Spectrality, and the English Translation of Zhu Tianxin's "The Old Capital"

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Abstract. *Travel writing in the Taiwan region of China* was institutionalized in the 1990s as a genre that required the traveller to discover a landscape for himself. Zhu Tianxin's novella *The Old Capital* (古都, 1996) refuses that model: the journey never leaves the island, its destination is the narrator's own home city, and the tool of navigation is a colonial map. This paper examines how the novella's haunting quality survives translation, given that haunting stems not from plot but from grammar and typography. The study compares the Chinese source text with Goldblatt's English translation through close reading of parallel passages, informed by recent work in travel-literature studies and spectral geography. The analysis reveals that the English version foregrounds what the Chinese leaves implicit: it turns fused recollection into framed memory, restores an explicit addressee, and redistributes the text's strangeness from syntax into discourse and print. The paper concludes that translation relocates rather than erases haunting, and that the task is not to translate the ghost but to decide where, in the language, or on the page, it should live. This observation offers a reference point for translating fiction of this kind.

Keywords: Travel literature, Spectrality, Zhu Tianxin, Literary translation

1. Introduction

This paper studies one text and one translation: the novella "The Old Capital" (古都) by the writer Zhu Tianxin from the Taiwan region of China, and its English translation by Howard Goldblatt, published by Columbia University Press in 2007 as *The Old Capital: A Novel of Taipei* [1, 2]. The novella is built around a single situation: the narrator returns to Taipei after a trip to Kyoto, is mistaken for a Japanese tourist, and then revisits the places of her youth using a map from the Japanese colonial period.

This paper brings three fields together: travel literature, spectrality, and translation. This paper explores how a haunting that lives in grammar and typography is relocated, and understanding how this relocation happens offers a reference point for the translation of fiction of this kind.

2. Background: travel, ghosts, and this text

Travel literature in the Taiwan region of China was institutionalized in the late 1990s, when two airlines joined newspapers to run travel-writing prizes [3]. Su Shuobin has shown that this new

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genre was a literary response to the "banalization of travel": it demanded an "inner" unique gaze and an "outer" realistic description, and it asked the traveller to form an isolated, solitary subjectivity within the landscape [4]. "The Old Capital," written in 1996, follows none of these rules: the journey does not leave the island, the destination is the traveller's own home city, and the tool of navigation is a colonial map. It is, in effect, an anti-travelogue.

This is also where spectrality enters. Recent work on "spectral geographies" and "haunted landscapes" treats haunting as a way of understanding difficult heritage and, more specifically, "the strangeness that is encountered in something that should be familiar — such as local landscapes" [5]. That sentence describes the novella's core experience: the narrator feels strange in the city she grew up in. She walks through her own city the way a tourist would, and the more she recognises a place, the stranger it feels.

Scholars have already read the text in this direction. Wang Dewei describes Zhu Tianxin's narrators as "old souls" (老靈魂, *lǎo línghún*), figures who wander through historical ruins and cannot stop remembering; his essay on the novella appears as an appendix to the 2018 Chinese edition [6]. Liu Hsueh-chen analyses its narrative strategy, showing how intertextuality and genre-mixing shape the novella's complexity [7].

Chien-hsin Tsai has analysed the narrator as a "heterotopic agent," focusing on three acts: walking, seeing, and remembering [8]. Meanwhile, Astrid Møller-Olsen has written on the city as a journey in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* [9]. The closest translation-focused study, a 2019 master's thesis by Huang Hsin-pei, treats the English translation through intertextuality and Genette's idea of the palimpsest [10]. A 2026 article by Liao Shih-wen examines the chapter reordering in the Japanese translation of the same book (2000) [11, 12]. What these studies have not examined closely is the grammatical level, where haunting actually happens.

On the theory side, two ideas are enough. First, Freud showed that the uncanny (unheimlich) comes from the double meaning of *heimlich*: both "familiar, homely" and "hidden, secret." The uncanny is therefore not the arrival of something foreign; it is the familiar becoming strange [13]. Second, Derrida linked haunting directly to language and translation. In *Specters of Marx* he warns that translations often erase "the semantics or the lexicon of the spectre," replacing it with supposedly equivalent words such as "fantasmagorical" or "imaginary" [14]. In other words, the spectre lives in particular words, and translation is one of the places where it can be lost. Colin Davis's well-known essay "Hauntology, Specters and Phantoms" has since sorted this field into distinct kinds of haunting [15]. For this paper, the useful version of "spectrality" is the plain one: a haunting is something that lives in specific words and grammatical patterns, not merely in atmosphere.

3. The Inhabitation of the narrator by the past in Chinese texts

The novella opens with a run of sentences that begin with the time-word 那時候 (at that time). In the Chinese, at least five or six sentences in a row open this way, describing the sky, bodily fluids and tears, people, trees, and summer nights of the past [2]. For example:

那时候的天空蓝多了,蓝得让人老念着那大海就在不远处好想去,因此夏天的积乱云堡雪砌成般的显得格外白,阳光穿过未有阻拦的干净空气特强烈,奇怪并不觉其热,起码傻傻的站在无遮荫处,不知何去何从一下午,也从没半点中暑迹象.(Back then, the sky was much bluer, so blue that it made one keep thinking how the sea was not far off and one longed to go; and so the summer cumulus clouds looked especially white, as if built of snow; the sunlight, passing through clean and unobstructed air, was especially intense; and strangely, one did not feel its heat — at least, standing

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foolishly in an unshaded spot, not knowing which way to turn for a whole afternoon, one never showed the slightest sign of heatstroke.)

Several observations arise here. First, 那時候 (at that time) is not demarcated as a separate marker; it is fused into the clause. It does not say "at that time, pause, this happened." Instead, it functions "at-that-time-the-sky-was-bluer." The time-word is part of the picture, not a frame around it. Second, the sentences extend over long stretches without an explicit subject. In "奇怪并不觉其热" — "strangely [one] did not feel its heat" —no second-person "you" appears. The absence of a subject lets the narrator dissolve into the remembered scene. Third, the passage is a list without argument: one impression after another, held together only by the repeated 那時候 (at that time).

The second example concerns perception:

A向宋介绍你的时候,你只觉得宋的眼睛正注视着你,好大好黑好空洞.(When A introduced you to Song, you only felt that Song's eyes were fixed on you — so big, so dark, so empty.)

The phrase "只觉得 (only felt)" carries subtle nuance. It may appear to be an active, subjective phrase — "you only felt." Yet its effect is the opposite: the narrator does not choose to notice Song's eyes; the noticing happens to her, involuntarily, almost against her will. Moreover "好大好黑好空洞",(so big, so dark, so empty) is written with no punctuation at all. The three phrases flow together in a single breath, exactly mirroring how the perception hits the narrator: undivided, unbreakable, all at once.

Across these examples, the Chinese grammar operates in one consistent fashion: it lets the past live inside the narrator's sentences. The time-word is inside the clause, the subject is absent, the perception is involuntary, and the impressions remain unseparated by punctuation. The narrator is not looking back at the past; she is standing in it, or the past dwells within her. This is the grammatical form of being haunted.

4. Grammatical shifts in the English translation

Goldblatt's translation changes this grammar at almost every point. The same opening sentence is rendered as follows:

Back then, the sky was much bluer, so blue it made you feel as if the ocean were close by, drawing you to it, and making the cumulus clouds seem even whiter, like castles sculpted out of snow. The sun shone intensely through clean air that threw up no barriers, but strangely, you didn't feel its heat. You just stood there foolishly in an unshaded spot, not knowing where to spend the afternoon, yet showing no signs of heatstroke.

Four shifts appear.

First, fusion becomes framing. The Chinese 那時候 (at that time) sits inside the clause, whereas the English "Back then," is cut off by a comma. It becomes a discourse marker, a signpost indicating what follows is a memory. In English, "Back then, the sky was much bluer" is not a fused impression but a framed recollection. The comma creates a small but real boundary between the speaker and the past. A run of six Chinese sentences that all flow through 那時候 (at that time) becomes six English paragraphs each re-opened by "Back then," — six separate acts of going back. The past no longer inhabits the sentences; it is visited, sentence by sentence.

Second, absence becomes presence. Where the Chinese leaves the subject out — "奇怪并不觉其热" — the English must supply one: "you didn't feel its heat." Where the Chinese says "让人"(made one) the English renders it as "made you feel." English grammar disallows the unexpressed subject, so the narrator is put back into every sentence. The effect is double: the translation makes the narrator more present, and at the same time it gives the sentences a listener. Every "you" is an

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address. The dissolving, subjectless voice of the Chinese becomes a voice that is speaking to someone.

Third, involuntary perception becomes directed attention. "你只觉得宋的眼睛正注视着你" ("you only felt that Song's eyes were fixed on you") is translated as:

When A made the introductions, you were attentive to Song's eyes on you — very big, very dark, and very empty.

"只觉得"(only felt) carries passivity: the noticing happens to her, in the wrong moment, against her will. "You were attentive to" is the opposite: attention is something she gives, deliberately. The translation rewrites an experience the narrator undergoes as an action the narrator performs. Though this distinction is small in a single sentence, it lies at the heart of the scene.

Fourth, the unpunctuated string becomes a punctuated list. 好大好黑好空洞 contains no commas. By contrast, the English "very big, very dark, and very empty" adds commas, an "and," and repeats "very" three times. In stylistic terms, the Chinese is an example of asyndeton — items joined without conjunctions — while the English becomes polysyndeton [16]. The iconicity changes: the Chinese form imitates a single overwhelming blow while the English form imitates slow, deliberate emphasis. What hits the narrator all at once is given to the reader piece by piece.

Fifth, a transformation whose agent is left unexpressed in Chinese is given an empty grammatical slot in English. In the passage where the narrator imagines herself held on the beach, the Chinese runs 他把你拥抱得好温暖好安全,于是你甘心如此甜蜜的变成一个女人 (*tā bǎ nǐ yōngbào de hǎo wēnnuǎn hǎo ānquán, yúshì nǐ gānxīn rúcǐ tiánmì de biànchéng yīgè nǚrén*, "he held you so warm and so safe, and so you willingly, so sweetly, became a woman") [2]. Three things are folded into 甘心如此甜蜜的: 甘 (*gān*) names a taste — sweetness; 心 (*xīn*) names willing consent; and the whole phrase colours the transformation itself, not the subject's mood. The English renders it: "You'd feel so warm and secure in his arms that you'd happily be turned into a woman" [1]. The Chinese verb 变成 (*biànchéng*, "become") does not specify an agent; it leaves the mechanism of the change open. The English passive "be turned into" supplies an agent position and leaves it empty, so the context — "in his arms" — fills that position with the imagined boy. What the Chinese hold together in one word, "willing consent" and "being acted upon", the English splits into two poles: "happily" carries the subjective side, and the passive carries the objective side. The two sides are not lost; they are made visible as a contrast. This is the explicitation that Blum-Kulka describes: the translation does not say more about *who*, but it makes visible *that* an external force exists [17].

There is also a reverse example, which is worth keeping because it shows the shift is not mechanical. In the opening passage, the Chinese "那大海就在不远处好想去" (that sea was not far off, one really wanted to go) expresses an active wish — "one really wanted to go." The translation renders it as "the ocean was close by, drawing you to it," where the ocean pulls the subject. And the collective "人们比较愿意随它要落就落" is translated with "people were more willing to let them fall," keeping the plural, while the singular 让人 (making people) becomes "you." The translator's choices are therefore not uniform; they are a pattern of small decisions, and the pattern, not any single decision, is what matters.

5. The English translation on the page: the Peach Blossom Spring

Near the end of the novella, quotations from Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring" (桃花源記) are no longer set off as quotations but woven into the narrator's own sentences; the classical phrase 設酒殺雞作食 ("set out wine and kill a chicken for the feast") becomes 設酒殺人作食 ("kill someone for the feast") [2]. The substitution of one character, 雞 ("chicken") for 人 ("person"), turns the utopian feast into violence. A Chinese reader catches the change immediately, because the

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classical text is schoolroom memory. An English reader has no such memory, and the translation cannot supply it at the level of words; it supplies it at the level of print.

In the English version the classical fragments are italicised, and the two elements inserted by the translator stand in roman type: "not caring if she was invited to go to their house, where she would be served wine while they killed someone for a feast." In print, the italic runs "was invited to go to their house, where" and "served wine while they killed … for a feast," while "she would be" and "someone" are in roman [1]. The Roman "someone" sits exactly where the Chinese performs its one-character substitution. The English reader does not know that a chicken has been replaced — the content itself, killing a guest for a feast, is already irrational on its face — but the typography marks that word as not belonging to the classical text. Where the Chinese reader feels the breach through memory, the English reader is shown it through print. The haunting moves from the memory of a source text to the typography of the translation.

6. From haunting to revisiting

Taken together, these four shifts are one operation. The Chinese lets the past live inside the narrator's grammar: fused time-words, absent subjects, involuntary perception, and unpunctuated impressions. The English pulls each of these onto the surface: "Back then," frames the memory; "you" restores the narrator and creates a listener; "attentive to" turns undergoing into doing; commas and "and" turn one blow into a list; the passive supplies an empty agent; and the italic page supplies a substitute for the reader's missing memory of the classical text.

This is why the travel-literature frame and the spectrality frame belong together. The narrator is literally mistaken for a tourist in the story, and she walks her own city with a colonial map [1]. The translation performs upon these sentences what the narrator does to the city: it transforms dwelling into visiting. Being haunted by the past — living inside it — becomes, in English, the act of going back to look at it. The English text, one might say, is a more tourist-like text than the Chinese one. It keeps the interaction and the nostalgia, but it relocates them from the grammar into the discourse, from the inside of the clause into the rhythm of "Back then," "you," and the comma.

This is exactly what translation scholars call compensation: something lost at one level is restored at another [18]. The English loses the fused time-word and the subjectless voice, but it gains an explicit narrator, an implied listener, and a visible rhythm of recollection. The haunting is not destroyed; it is moved. At the same time, the shifts described above are forms of explicitation: the translation makes visible what the Chinese leaves implicit, not by adding information but by redistributing it across grammar, discourse, and print [17]. That is the central finding of this paper, and it is a finding about grammar, not about mood.

7. Conclusion

This paper argues that the haunting in "The Old Capital" is a grammatical phenomenon before it is a thematic one. In the Chinese, the past inhabits the narrator's sentences through fused time-words, absent subjects, passive perception, unpunctuated strings, and an agentless transformation. In Goldblatt's English, these are systematically foregrounded into framed memories, an explicit "you," directed attention, punctuated lists, a passive with an empty agent, and an italic system that stands in for the reader's absent memory of the classical source.

The study has clear limits, including a small sample consisting of one novella, one translation, and a few passages, examined qualitatively. A fuller account would need to count every instance of

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the relevant patterns across the whole text, and to check the English version against the Japanese version, which reorganizes the book at the level of structure.

Future research could take two directions. First, a systematic corpus study of time-words, subject omission, and punctuation across Zhu Tianxin's fiction and Goldblatt's translations of it. Second, a comparative study of the same novella in English, Japanese, and other languages, asking whether each translation moves the haunting to a different level — grammar, structure, or print.

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