Writing and Reflecting on the Imagination of the City – Interpretation of Calvino's Invisible Cities

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Abstract. Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino is a novel that depicts an imaginary city, explores the appearance of an ideal city, and ponders over modern urban problems. He used the dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan to write his imaginary city in a light tone. He skillfully constructed fifty-five different cities and described them from different specific angles, and the characteristics of each city represent a certain aspect of the city concept. People see the modern city in the imaginary city he has constructed and gradually reflect on the nature of the city.

1 Introduction

Invisible Cities is Calvino's masterpiece. The novel takes the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo as the narrative clue and the narration of various cities as the center to build a light novel world full of arrangement and order. This book belongs to the category of urban literature. Calvino uses unique narrative techniques to describe the imagined city, which is not only an attempt at new narrative, but also a writing of the city itself. A large part of his writing about the city is to express his views on the city itself and explore the appearance of the ideal city.

In the past, China's research on *Invisible Cities* mainly focused on narrative methods and writing characteristics. At the end of the 20th century, China began to study Calvino. Ai Xiaoming's The Wonder of Narration --- On Calvino's *Invisible Cities* [1] opened the study of *Invisible Cities* in the Chinese Mainland. He believes that the real protagonist of this book is narrative behavior, and the internal philosophy of writing is the uncertainty between listening and speaking. After entering the 21st century, the narrative study of *Invisible Cities* began. Chen Peihao's Novel Art of "Time Zero" in "*Invisible Cities*" [2] explains the concept of time zero and the application of narrative points in this book from the perspective of narrative time. Yang Lihong's On the "Crystal Pattern" of Calvino's Novels --- Taking *Invisible Cities* [3] as an Example explains the crystal pattern in Calvino's novels. Su Hongbin's *Invisible Cities* and Calvino's Narrative Art [4] analyzes the subtitle of the novel from the perspective of structuralism, breaking the diachronic nature of the novel.

There are also many aesthetic studies in this book. Yang Xiaolian's The Beauty of Lightness: Heavy Thoughts of *Invisible Cities* and Calvino's Lightness and Aesthetics [5] indicate Calvino's aesthetic pursuit of expressing heavy thoughts with the beauty of lightness and ease. Liu Hai's An Elegy for the City --- Interpretation of Calvino's Spatial Poetics of *Invisible Cities* [6] explains the inspiration of Calvino's spatial poetics to urban life from the perspective of urban text writing.

It can be seen that the previous research on *Invisible Cities* mainly focused on narratology and aesthetics, but lacked the analysis and research on the city itself. This article will use the method of close reading of the text to explore the connotation of the article from the city writing of the text, and try to answer the question of how people can better survive in the city.

2 The writing of imaginary city

Calvino has always used an objective and light tone to describe the city. Regardless of the city itself, he always writes from the perspective of the traveler Marco Polo. He does not judge these cities, but only objectively describes what they look like and writes about every aspect of them. He does not praise or accuse anything, but leaves room for reflection. In this book, his writing of cities mainly includes three aspects: the writing of urban history, the writing of urban humanity, and the writing of urban essence.

2.1 The writing of urban history

The history of a city is its past. The city in Calvino's eyes is like the ship of Theseus. The constituent elements of a city are constantly changing, and the experiences, inhabitants and abstract spirit that belong to a city always change over time. Although the location and name have not changed, the city itself has become something else. Besides, the memory of the city constitutes the history of the city. The city can't forget its history, but it also can't stay in a moment of history. The city can only develop and change constantly, otherwise, it can only solidify in time and be doomed to be forgotten in the future. Zaira, from *Cities and Memory. 3*, is like a sponge, absorbing the surging tide of memory. The whole city has traces of

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history and memory. Zora, from *Cities and Memory. 4*, has stored all its history. He is still in the moment of history, full of all the knowledge of that moment. But the history of the city will not stay, and Zora can only be forgotten.

Life and death are also important parts of urban history. Melania, from *Cities and the Dead. 1*, repeat the same scene of urban life, but the role players in it are changing all the time. The history of the city is constantly developing through the coming and going of people in the solidification of the scene. "Melania's population renews itself: the participants in the dialogues die one by one and meanwhile those who will take their places are born, some in one role, some in another." The life span of human beings is shorter than that of cities, and it is the change in human beings that makes the history of cities.

2.2 The writing of urban humanity

Calvino also pays attention to describing the desire, ideals and humanity of urban residents. In the city, people pursue love, reputation, and money. The form of the city stimulates people's desire, and people's desire also shapes the form of the city. The city contains all people's imagination. People are eager to meet their desires in the city, but they also dream of another ideal city.

People are eager to seek love in the city. Lust, love, and marriage are always important parts of city life. The people from *Cities and Desire. 5* gathered to chase the woman in the dream, built a city similar to the dream, blocked the way for women to leave, and looked forward to the reappearance of the dream. "In laying out the streets, each followed the course of his pursuit; at the spot where they had lost the fugitive's trail, they arranged spaces and walls differently from the dream, so she would be unable to escape again" But in the end, the city just became an ugly trap. People limit the freedom of love in the pursuit of that, which violates the essence of love, and the love of those who do not know how to love cannot be accepted by free people.

People in cities also pursue money. Anastasia, from *Cities and Desire. 2*, is a city full of desire. People's labor and hard work are just to buy high-quality rare goods. People who get the goods will feel satisfied and think they enjoy the whole Anastasia. "The city appears to you as a whole where no desire is lost and of which you are a part, and since it enjoys everything you do not enjoy, you can do nothing but inhabit this desire and be content." The city attracts and seduces all those who aspire to a material life with these precious material goods, but people who have been eroded by desire are actually her slaves.

In addition, reputation is also what city people pursue. Valdrada, from *Cities and Eyes.1*, has become the image of people in the mirror. Therefore, they never dare to neglect and live with a performing attitude. But in fact, the mirror is not a true representation. Urban residents lose the characteristics recognized by the mirror while pursuing the recognition of the mirror. They care more about others' views than the essence of life. "At times the mirror increases a thing's value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored." The reflection of the mirror and the

judgments of others on it have only become the shackles of the city dwellers. In this endless show, people can even pretend to have feelings for the sake of others' perceptions, even if it leads to no one really loving each other. On the contrary, in the big city of Chloe from *Trading Cities. 2*, people walking in the street do not know each other, but every time they meet, they imagine various scenarios about each other. "A voluptuous vibration constantly stirs Chloe, the most chaste of cities." People hypocritically pretend to be cold and unfeeling personalities, but inside they can't help but yearn for love and warmth.

But the nature of desire is neutral. Without people's desire, the charm of the city will also be reduced. The lightness and beauty of the city are also created by people's desires. Anastasia's chalcedony and beryl, Baucis's slender ladder leading to the sky, the city gate and glass villa in front of Moriana, and the beautiful young men and women who are praised repeatedly in different cities all reflect people's expectations and desires for the city. These desires drive the city's development.

2.3 The writing of urban essence

Calvino's writing on the essence of the city focuses on the thinking of city signs. The sign is a symbol, which refers to a certain meaning in a specific cognitive system. Each piece of goods, every place, even the language used, and the urban landscape in reality and memory are symbols of the city. The repeated appearance of these signs in different cities proves the existence of cities, and the differences in these signs make cities different. The complicated route of *Trading Cities. 5*: "In Esmeralda, city of water, a network of canals and a network of streets span and intersect each other."; the dust and desolation of *Cities and the Dead. 4*: "The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the rooms to the ceiling, on every stair another stairway is set in negative, over the roofs of the houses hang layers of rocky terrain like skies with clouds."; and the scaffolding of *Cities and the Sky. 3*: "Those who arrive at Thekla can see little of the cityy beyond the plank fences, the sackcloth screens, the scaffoldings, the metal armatures, the wooden cat-walks hanging from ropes or supported by sawhorses, the ladders, the trestles.", are all ways for people to distinguish these cities and the essence of these cities. Clarice, from *Cities and Names. 4*, has experienced several declines and revivals. The population and customs have also changed many times. Only names, places, and things that can't be broken have been preserved. It is believed that there was the first Clarice, but the first Clarice is no longer the same city as today's Clarice. This judgment of the essence of cities is actually based on the signs of the city.

3 Absence of the ideal city

While the narrator describes the city in words, the listener loses the right to imagine the city itself, so Kublai Khan liked Marco Polo's gestures, expressions, and eyes to express his knowledge. He found that Marco Polo's cities were almost the same, as if they didn't need to travel to

complete the transition between those cities, but only to change their combination elements, so he abstracted many symbols belonging to the city from them, and then he could describe a city of his own imagination from the symbols. However, Marco Polo's stories are far from the real city, more like an imagination of the city than a true representation. Marco Polo described the cities he visited as follows, you can wander and get lost in your thoughts, stop to enjoy the cool, or run away. The city he visited can be said to exist in the mind. In his narration, the real city is absent.

3.1 The real city that cannot be described

The only real city Marco Polo mentioned was Venice. But when Kublai Khan asked him to describe Venice, he didn't use the previous method to describe it. He thinks that once the image in memory is fixed by words, it will be erased. He doesn't believe in the reappearance of words and holds that words are limited, while imagination is real. When telling the story of a real city, you will definitely lose a part of it. However, the real city itself is mobile. After being written down with words, the city only exists at that moment. The real city can't be written, it is always hidden behind, while the imaginary city exists as its projection in the form of words.

"Its green border repeats the dark outline of the buried lake; an invisible landscape conditions the visible one; everything that moves in the sunlight is driven by the lapping wave enclosed beneath the rock's calcareous sky." This is the city described by Calvino in *Thin Cities. 1*, and it coincides with the content of this book. The urban life that people tend to take for granted is made up of components that they overlook, and unfortunately, people who ignore these are unable to understand the essence of the city. People who do not understand the nature of the city are not able to abstract the ideal appearance of cities, and it is also impossible for Marco Polo, who described the imaginary city, to describe the appearance of the real ideal city.

3.2 Thoughts evoked by the imaginary city

His description of different cities can be seen as his abstract segmentation of the concept of cities. Each city he describes represents a small part of the concept of city, and it can show a small aspect of the real city. However, all the cities he describes are divorced from reality and have fantasy elements, which cannot be summarized to form a real city. [7] This is the extension of his imagination, which makes Venice unique in everyone's mind, and this uniqueness endows Venice with an ideal element, in other words, everyone has his own ideal city.

This affirmation of imagination makes the imaginary city described in this article awaken the readers' experience of real cities. Readers can get a glimpse of modern urban life from these non-existent cities. It seems that a part of their life completely exists in an invisible city. Invisible cities cause visible experiences, while imaginary cities make modern people's understanding of real cities clearer.

4 Reflections on modern cities

In such writing, the book naturally leads to a proposition, that is, how should people in modern cities examine their own lives, and how should they survive in the existing life correctly and better.

Calvino's attitude towards cities is contradictory. "Sometimes I only imagine miserable cities, and sometimes I only imagine happy cities. At one time, I compared these cities to the starry sky, while at another time, I always talked about the waste that overflows from cities every day." But his contradiction reflects his love for the city. He wrote this book as a love poem for the city. He describes different cities, tells people the different roles of different themes he describes in cities, and guides them to reflect on cities.

4.1 The problems of modern cities

Among them, the most prominent is that in the cities written by Calvino, many cities have the symbols of modern cities. The problems of modern cities are exposed, which also shows Calvino's worries. [8] In *Thin Cities. 3*, Calvino describes Armilla, a city with only water pipes. Modern cities rely on water pipes for existence, which finally leads to the problem of water abuse, and the cities are abandoned as a result. However, the city is brighter and happier with the loss of its inhabitants. And in the real city, this huge waste of necessities is also happening all the time. In *Continuous Cities. 1*, people are constantly throwing away garbage, and a magic garbage bunker is gathered at the city border, and the final outcome of the city is to be flooded by garbage. As garbage producers, cities are constantly eroding people's living environment, and they will eventually become victims of garbage. And in the real cities, people are also creating huge piles of garbage, which has a very bad impact on the environment. And *Continuous Cities. 2* points out the problem of urban homogeneity. After leaving Trude, people will arrive at another Trude. "you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not 128 begin and does not end. Only the name of the air-port changes." Under the construction of countless similar symbols, the difference of modern city is so small that people can hardly distinguish different cities.

Modern cities have so many problems. Pessimists believe that the ultimate trend of the city is only hell, and this kind of scene is even created by the people who live here. People's desires and memory are condensed in the city, they shape the city and are also shaped by the city itself. People who are used to hell have blurred the distinction between happiness and misfortune. If the ideal city appearance is an imaginary space only existing in the crystal ball, the reason why people decide to live in an imperfect city should only belong to their memory and desire. People are attracted to the city because of their desire, but they are unwilling to leave because of their memory. At this time, the former desire has become the memory of the city, and people's desire to retain memory has promoted their desire to stay. In *Thin Cites. 2,*

although the current situation of the city named Zenobia has been completely cut off from the former desires, if you ask the person living here to describe the happy life in his mind, it must be like the current situation. People's desires are reshaped by the city, and in the process of shaping their memories, they can take what they thought was unhappiness before as happiness instead, and this is where the magic of the city lies.

4.2 The beauty of modern cities

However, the complexity of the city doesn't make it ugly. Calvino is still writing about the city in a light style, and the garbage, as well as decay in the city, seem to have been wiped out by this style. Even if the city is full of dirty symbols, we can still look at it from another perspective, exploring its beauty, and giving space to people and things that are not hell. And Calvino does not skimp on his depiction of the beautiful side of the city. He uses a unique spatial structure in describing the imaginary city. He frames time in an absolute moment [9], not discussing the future of the city, but only observing the real scene of that. This framed city scene is supposed to be beautiful. For example, in *Cities and Desire. 3*, he describes in detail how the city Despina looks like in people's fantasies: "he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a camel from whose pack hang wine-skins and bags of candied fruit, date wine, tobacco leaves, and already he sees himself at the head of along caravan taking him away from the desert of the sea, toward oases of fresh water in the palm trees' jagged shade, toward palaces of thick, whitewashed walls, tiled courts where girls are dancing barefoot, moving their arms, half-hidden by their veils, and half-revealed." In his writing, the city in people's mind presents this ethereal, attractive, pure appearance composed of various beautiful intentions. Even if the city is destined to have ugly parts, it will always be beautiful in people's fantasies.

The crystal structure used in this novel to describe the city also shows the beauty of that. *Invisible Cities* is a perfect example of the crystal structure. The novel is centred on the imagery of the city, and deals with eleven categories of cities; for each category of city, the text deals with it five times each. In this way, the novel forms a crystal structure with eleven small homogeneous planes, and for each of them, five different reflections are produced. [10] This orderly structure forms an intertextual relationship with the orderliness of the city itself. The refinement of urban structure and the stability of urban symbols are included in this orderliness. People's life in modern cities may be monotonous, and there may be no essential difference between cities, but these are precisely the other charms of cities. The order of the modern city itself also has a geometric beauty.

In short, even if Calvino points out the problems of the modern city, he loves the beauty of it. His reflections on the modern city are precisely rooted in his love for the city.

5 Conclusion

Calvino didn't define what the real city was, nor did he answer the question of where the city would go and what the ideal city would be. He just pointed out that Utopia and hell are both parts of the city, and what kind of images the different parts of the city play in them. People living in modern cities are just like living in the labyrinth of symbol construction. But they can still live in such a world with lightness, give up their desire for hell, and give the utopian side living space.

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