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THE URBAN HETEROTOPIA CONSTRUCT IN SELECTED BRITISH TRAVEL WRITING ABOUT CHINA IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how early twentieth-century British travel writing constructs Chinese urban space as heterotopia, focusing on representations of Beijing and Shanghai in selected texts by Juliet Bredon and Christopher New. While existing scholarship has examined Orientalist discourse and narrative strategies in Western travel writing, it has rarely treated urban space as a structured, meaning-producing field. This study addresses that gap by operationalizing Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia through two key functions—spatial isolation and spatial juxtaposition—to analyze how these cities are not simply described but actively produced as ideological spaces. Drawing on post-Foucauldian spatial theory and postcolonial criticism, the paper demonstrates that Beijing is constructed as a heterotopia of ritualized isolation, while Shanghai emerges as a heterotopia of colonial juxtaposition. The study argues that spatial heterotopia functions as a narrative technology through which British travel writing organizes imperial vision, cultural difference, and political hierarchy.

Keywords: Heterotopia, British Travel Writing, Colonial Space, Beijing, Shanghai

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on British travel writing about China has produced valuable analyses of narrative strategies, exoticism, and mobility [4]. However, most studies either focus on Orientalist discourse at the level of representation or provide broad surveys of travel texts without sustained spatial-theoretical engagement. What remains underexplored is how urban space itself functions as an active ideological structure through which imperial imagination is produced.

In particular, the heterotopic representation of Chinese cities in British travel writing has not been systematically theorized. Existing studies tend to treat cities as background settings rather than as spatial technologies that organize

knowledge, power, and vision. This paper addresses this gap by proposing that Beijing and Shanghai function as heterotopic urban formations that structure British colonial ways of seeing China.

The study argues that heterotopia is especially suited to analyzing colonial travel writing because such texts are inherently concerned with spatial difference, access, exclusion, and juxtaposition. By applying a refined heterotopia framework to extended travel narratives, this paper demonstrates that the British imagination of China is spatially organized through two dominant heterotopic logics: isolation (Beijing) and juxtaposition (Shanghai).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Foucault's concept of heterotopia provides a heuristic model for analyzing real spaces that operate according to contradictory or exceptional logics. Rather than mechanically applying all six of Foucault's principles[8], this study selectively operationalizes two functions most relevant to colonial urban travel writing: isolation/segregation and juxtaposition/heterochrony. These functions capture the ceremonial enclosure of Beijing and the layered colonial simultaneity of Shanghai.

Later scholarship has significantly refined Foucault's original model. Johnson (2006) reconceptualizes heterotopia not as a fixed typology but as an interpretive orientation toward spatial difference[17]. Dehaene and De Cauter (2008) situate heterotopia within political economy and urban governance, emphasizing its material entanglement with power[5]. Genocchio (1995) highlights the performative and discursive production of heterotopic space, stressing that such spaces are not merely built but narratively enacted[11].

These insights allow heterotopia to be theorized simultaneously as an epistemological frame (how travel writers see) and as a political-material formation (how imperial power spatializes difference).

A growing body of scholarship applies heterotopia to diverse literary genres. The most extensive use of heterotopia occurs within novel and film studies, particularly concerning American cities, South and Southeast Asian cities[12,23,24,25].

Research on further enriches the field. Sur (2022) discusses how heterotopian spaces mediate ecological discourse in contemporary fiction, while Du (2023) identifies crisis heterotopias in narratives of civilizational conflict[20,7].

A substantial corpus examines heterotopia within Chinese literary and cultural contexts. Chen and Jin (2025) interpret Wang Zengqi's wartime Kunming as a harmonious ecological heterotopia grounded in everyday life. Du (2020, 2023) explores heterotopias at the urban–rural fringe and within repurposed industrial or religious structures, emphasizing spatial exclusion, refuge, and liminality. Jiang (2022) introduces the notion of "spiritual heterotopia" in Song-dynasty huaben, where fictionalized urban settings foster both realism and escapism. Liu (2022) highlights the marginal spaces inhabited by migrant workers as heterotopias reflecting structural inequality. Additionally, Xiang's (2021) imagological study of Shanghai Dream reveals how heterotopic constructions mediate identity and memory through a dynamic interplay between Self and Other[3,6,7,13,15,23].

Together, these studies illustrate that heterotopia serves as a productive framework for analyzing Chinese urban spaces across genres and historical moments. Yet, this body of work remains overwhelmingly focused on Chinese authors or Sino-centric cultural production; examinations of how foreign writers construct Chinese urban heterotopias are less common.

Travel writing—despite its inherently spatial nature—has received comparatively limited attention within heterotopia studies. Nonetheless, recent research indicates growing scholarly interest. Tian (2021) argues that eighteenth-century British accounts of Beijing significantly shaped the heterotopian imaginary of the city in early comparative literature, circulating global images of a declining imperial capital. Zhang (2022) demonstrates how heterotopic sites in V. S. Naipaul's travel writing—such as prisons, missionary stations, and cruise ships—expose colonial tensions and critique spatial politics[22,25].

These studies suggest that travel writing offers fertile ground for heterotopic analysis, particularly because it foregrounds encounters with cultural difference through spatial representation. Yet, research remains sparse, especially regarding early 20th-century British travel writing about China, a period marked by intense geopolitical transformation and heightened colonial imagination.

While heterotopia has been widely applied in studies of contemporary literature, film, and modern urban theory, its application to early 20th-century British travel writing about Chinese cities is still underdeveloped. Existing studies

either focus on Chinese-authored texts, Western fictional cities, or other literary genres, leaving unanswered questions about how British travellers constructed cities like Beijing and Shanghai as heterotopias during a period of imperial expansion, diplomatic tension, and cross-cultural encounter.

The existing scholarship demonstrates the versatility of heterotopia as a spatial analytic across multiple genres and geopolitical contexts. However, its application to British travel writing about China remains limited, particularly concerning the construction of urban heterotopias in Beijing and Shanghai. Addressing this gap not only enriches heterotopia studies but also deepens our understanding of how spatial discourse mediated cross-cultural perception and imperial imagination in the early 20th century.

The present study therefore situates British travel narratives within this broader intellectual lineage, aiming to show how urban space operates as a central mechanism through which heterotopian otherness—and ultimately, British colonial imagination—is produced.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive textual methodology grounded in close reading and thematic spatial analysis. Two primary texts were selected: Juliet Bredon's Peking: A Historical and Intimate Description of Its Chief Places of Interest (1922) and Christopher New's Shanghai (1985)[2,18].

The selection of these two texts is theoretically and historically motivated. First, both authors had extended residence in China and wrote for British metropolitan audiences, positioning them within imperial circuits of knowledge. Second, Beijing and Shanghai represent structurally contrasting urban formations: the former imperial-ceremonial, the latter treaty-port and semi-colonial. Third, the comparative focus allows the study to identify differentiated heterotopic logics rather than offering a diffuse survey.

The analytical procedure involves:

1) coding recurrent spatial motifs (walls, gates, concessions, commercial streets);
2) tracing narrative patterns of access, exclusion, and juxtaposition;
3) mapping these patterns onto heterotopic functions;
4) interpreting their ideological implications through postcolonial theory.

To enhance analytical rigor, the study triangulates narrative description, rhetorical strategies, and historical context. Reflexivity is also maintained: the analysis acknowledges its position within contemporary critical scholarship and does not presume transparent access to either "China" or "Britishness," but treats both as discursive constructions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The chapter explores the representation of the urban cultural landscapes and spatial layout in Peking and Shanghai to examine how the urban heterotopia is constructed.

As a representative of traditional Chinese urban culture, Beijing had a strong allure for foreigners. In Bredon's Peking, the enchanting charm of Peking is primarily reflected in its ancient urban cultural landscape and its inward-looking, enclosed urban spatial structure.

The most frequently described cultural landscape in British travel writing is the central area of Peking—the Forbidden City. Bredon also paid special attention to this mysterious region. She(1922) commented, "To have seen this Forbidden City, therefore, is to have seen something much more wonderful than noble buildings" [2]. Bredon believed that the Forbidden City was a quintessential architectural complex that bore witness to Beijing as a medieval city. For example,

"the Forbidden City is therefore just what its name indicates—a miniature city within a city, with streets of state apartments, dwelling rooms, women's quarters, store houses, theatres, libraries, temples and dependencies—the whole complicated machinery of living required for a sovereign shut up by convention like a Buddha in his temple, and of his court" [2].

The description of the Forbidden City as "a miniature city within a city" highlighted its role as a heterotopia of isolation, in Michel Foucault's terms—a space physically and symbolically separated from the rest of the urban

environment, governed by a distinct logic of access, hierarchy, and ritual [8]. With its streets of state apartments, women's quarters, temples, libraries, theatres, and storerooms, the Forbidden City formed a self-contained world that replicated and heightened the order of the imperial cosmos.

Foucault observed that heterotopias of isolation are spaces of confinement and exclusion, such as monasteries, prisons, or even colonial enclaves[8]. The Forbidden City clearly exemplifies this: although located in the centre of Beijing, it remained inaccessible to the general public, enclosed both physically and ceremonially. It was not only a seat of political authority but also a ritualized space of withdrawal, where the emperor was "shut up by convention like a Buddha in his temple". This metaphor of sacred seclusion emphasizes the idea of the sovereign as both central and absent—visible as a symbol, but inaccessible as a person.

Moreover, the complex spatial divisions within the Forbidden City—between public and private, male and female, administrative and spiritual—highlighted a system of controlled movement and exclusion. Inside the Forbidden City, the movement and activities of individuals of different identities, genders, and ranks were strictly regulated, reflecting a spatial arrangement based on hierarchy and order.

As the seat of supreme power in feudal China, foreigners could only walk around its walls and moats or stand atop the high city walls, gazing from afar to explore its mystery. For example,

"To appreciate the fullest beauty of the whole Forbidden City lifting its yellow roofs to the sun we should be able to approach it, as the old sovereigns did, up the long avenue from the Chung Hua Men(the Dynastic Gate), passing freely through all the intervening barriers. Unfortunately this is not permitted" [2].

The excerpt reveals the core characteristics of the heterotopia of isolation, as theorized by Michel Foucault. Although the Forbidden City occupies the geographic center of Beijing, it remains spatially and symbolically inaccessible, simultaneously present and absent.

Foucault points out that heterotopias of isolation are often spaces designated by society for specific and exceptional functions, such as prisons, psychiatric hospitals, monasteries, or, in the case of traditional imperial systems, royal palaces [8]. The Forbidden City belongs to this category: it is not only a symbol of political power, but also a space whose sacredness and mystery are maintained through successive layers of spatial exclusion. The idea of "passing through all the intervening barriers" signifies a privileged pathway into the heart of power, one that is now entirely closed off to ordinary people. Consequently, the spatial order of the Forbidden City has been transformed into a historical and symbolic system of enclosure.

In Peking, Beijing exhibited an introverted and enclosed spatial layout, with the most common spatial imagery being "gates" and "walls". Bredon devoted an entire chapter, titled "The Wonderful Walls of Peking", to describing Peking's city walls and gates. When discussing the layout of the Forbidden City, she penned,

"In the centre lies the Forbidden City — the innermost heart of them, soaked in history and mystery — surrounded by two miles of massive pink-washed walls of its own with four picturesque pavilions at the corners and four gates, the southern, the Wu Men, the northern, the Shen Wu Men, the eastern, the Tung Hua Men, and the western, the Hsi Hua Men" [2].

In this excerpt, the Forbidden City is enclosed by two miles of pink-washed walls, with pavilions at each corner and four systematically arranged gates. This spatial design reflects a structure of self-enclosure and external isolation. The massive walls symbolize a rupture from the everyday urban space, while the limited number of gates and their ritualistic naming—such as Wu Men (Meridian Gate) and Shen Wu Men (Gate of Divine Might)—demonstrate a precise control over access mechanisms. This aligns with what Foucault describes as mechanisms of access: a heterotopia is not entirely closed, but one that requires specific forms of authorization and power to enter [8].

Foucault describes heterotopias of isolation as actual spaces that are physically and symbolically separated from mainstream social life, such as prisons, monasteries, asylums, and palaces [8]. These spaces are not openly accessible; instead, they are managed by mechanisms of controlled entry, often using walls, gates, and boundaries to retain separation. In Beijing's case, the increasing number of gates and walls clearly indicated this spatial logic of limited permeability and enclosed authority.

Thus, the "closed gates" and "barring walls" symbolized the mechanisms of maintaining order and hierarchical power relations. This grid-like spatial arrangement shaped social groups through geography, creating an urban landscape full of boundaries—a society spatially organized around separation and exclusion.

In Bredon's Peking, Beijing is constructed as a spatial regime of enclosure. The Forbidden City appears not simply as a monument but as a spatial technology of exclusion. Walls, gates, courtyards, and inner/outer divisions organize vision through distance and prohibition. The narrative repeatedly dramatizes blocked access and ritualised separation, constructing the imperial city as a space that is simultaneously central and unreachable.

Besides, the study examines Shanghai's urban landscapes in the early twentieth century—including the British consulate on the Bund, Nanjing Road, and Chinese districts in Christopher New's Shanghai (1985)—to investigate how Shanghai, as a treaty-port city, is represented and constructed as a heterotopic urban system in British travel writing. Rather than treating these sites as isolated descriptions, the analysis foregrounds their relational arrangement within a semi-colonial spatial order shaped by imperial power, racial hierarchy, and uneven modernity.

In Shanghai, the Bund emerges as the most iconic and symbolically charged urban space. Situated on the west bank of the Huangpu River, this approximately 1.5-kilometre stretch of European-style architecture functions not merely as a port or scenic promenade, but as a spatial exhibition of concessionary authority. British imperial presence is materialized through a sequence of monumental buildings—the British Consulate, Palace Hotel, Shanghai Club, Sassoon House, the Customs House, and the HSBC Building—whose architectural coherence and visibility transform the Bund into a performative façade of colonial order and confidence. For example, in Shanghai, Christopher New repeatedly describes the scenery of the Bund, one instance through the eyes of the protagonist, Denton, focusing on a series of consulate buildings,

"First the Russian consulate, tall with turrets and spires, then the German with its colonnaded verandas, then the smaller ones, Dutch, Portuguese and Belgian. Each one seemed to assert, by its size and position, its country's stake in Shanghai. The most stately of them all was the British, he felt with a throb of pride. Its architecture was not grand like the Russian or German, but it stood in the most dominant position near Garden Bridge, set in wide rolling lawns like a country house at home. It didn't have to clamour for attention by making grandiose gestures. It merely stood there, serene and slightly remote, secure in the knowledge of its own preeminence. The other consulates you could almost mistake for business houses or clubs. But the unpretentious British consulate couldn't have been a vulgar hong. It was the manor house round which the city had developed" [18].

In the above excerpt, New repeatedly stages the Bund through the gaze of the protagonist Denton, whose perception is shaped by a distinctly British imperial sensibility. In his panoramic observation of the foreign consulates, architectural difference is translated into a hierarchy of national power. While the Russian and German consulates are described as grand and ornate, and the smaller consulates as less imposing, the British consulate is marked by spatial dominance rather than visual excess. Its location near Garden Bridge, its expansive lawns, and its resemblance to an English country manor project an ethos of quiet authority and naturalised supremacy. The narrative voice does not simply describe the building; it affirms a worldview in which British power is presented as stable, self-evident, and culturally superior, requiring no ostentatious display. This mode of representation reflects both the author's imperial background and the expectations of a British readership accustomed to reading colonial spaces through assumptions of administrative competence and moral legitimacy.

In sharp contrast, Chinese urban spaces are constructed through a rhetoric of degradation and disorder.

For example, when Denton approached a Chinese tailor's shop, he discovered,

"The tailor's was a dingy narrow room without windows, reaching back from an unpaved street into ever darker and mustier gloom…Scraps of cloth lay scattered on the floor, which looked as though it had never been swept…On a bare round wooden table near the back of the room stood several bowls with greasy chopsticks beside them…there was a smell of engrained dirt mingled with the heavy scent of incense"[18].

In this excerpt, when the narrative enters a Chinese tailor's shop, the spatial register shifts dramatically: the shop is described as narrow, windowless, dark, cluttered, and unhygienic, saturated with smells of dirt and incense. This portrayal does not merely individualize poverty; it spatially codes Chinese life as cramped, chaotic, and pre-modern, thereby reinforcing a colonial dichotomy between British-controlled order and Chinese marginality. The juxtaposition between the serene openness of the consulate lawns and the oppressive interiority of the tailor's shop exemplifies what Michel Foucault terms a "heterotopia of juxtaposition"—a space in which incompatible sites coexist within a single real location.

Crucially, these spaces do not exist in isolation. Their co-presence within the same urban fabric reflects the structural logic of the treaty-port city. Shanghai's semi-colonial condition produced a spatial system in which imperial sovereignty,

commercial modernity, and indigenous urban life overlapped without integration. The British consulate symbolized legal extraterritoriality and political dominance, while the Chinese district was relegated to spaces of invisibility and neglect. Together, they materialized a spatialized hierarchy of power, identity, and belonging, transforming colonial Shanghai itself into a heterotopia of juxtaposition.

This logic is further reinforced through panoramic scenes that expose the city's divided structure at a glance. For another example,

"They swung slowly round another bend and all at once they were in the middle of the city. On the starboard side, large stone buildings with colonnaded facades lay back behind a wide green park. On the port side a dirty grey slum of houses, factories and godowns sprawled, all crammed together" [18].

In this excerpt, when the boat rounds a bend and the city suddenly comes into view, the narrative presents two sharply contrasting urban realms within a single visual frame: on one side, monumental stone buildings set behind green parks; on the other, a dense grey slum of factories, godowns, and overcrowded housing. The immediacy of this contrast underscores the violence of spatial segregation in the colonial city. Order and squalor, monumentality and congestion, coexist physically yet remain socially irreconcilable. This moment functions as a heterotopic snapshot, revealing how colonial space is organized through division rather than cohesion.

Nanjing Road offers a further example of heterotopia-as-juxtaposition, where consumer modernity and extreme deprivation are spatially entangled. The following describes Nanjing Road.

"He walked down Nanking Road, past the jewellers and the silk shops, past the legless shoe-polish boys banging their brushes on their wooden boxes to attract his attention, past the beggars with their tin mugs and their borrowed or dead babies" [18].

"He sat silent for some minutes, gazing out at the new Chinese department stores along Nanking Road, their imposing windows crowded by Chinese staring acquisitively at the glittering goods inside" [18].

In the above excerpt, as Denton walks past jewellers and silk shops, he simultaneously encounters disabled shoe-polish boys and beggars holding tin mugs and borrowed or dead babies. The street thus stages wealth and destitution side by side, exposing the underside of colonial capitalism. In a later scene, new Chinese department stores—with their glittering displays and imposing windows—become sites of frustrated desire, as crowds of Chinese onlookers gaze longingly at goods they cannot afford. The transparent shop window operates as a spatial and symbolic barrier, making exclusion visible while preserving the illusion of accessibility. Jesus and Catchuela (2026)

Ultimately, New's Shanghai does not merely describe the treaty-port city; it actively produces it as a heterotopic urban formation. Through sudden shifts in perspective, sharp spatial contrasts, and ideologically charged juxtapositions, the narrative assembles Shanghai as a fractured collage rather than an integrated whole. This spatial logic reflects a British imperial worldview shaped by semi-colonial history and directed at metropolitan readers, for whom Shanghai appears simultaneously fascinating, chaotic, and governable. In this sense, heterotopia functions not as a passive metaphor but as a narrative-spatial technology through which colonial urban experience is organized, interpreted, and legitimized.

New's Shanghai constructs the treaty-port city as a space where incompatible spatial orders coexist. The Bund, foreign consulates, department stores, slums, and Chinese quarters are arranged not as a coherent whole but as a fractured collage. The city is narrated through sudden panoramas, sharp contrasts, and visual shocks.

This spatial logic corresponds to heterotopia-as-juxtaposition: colonial sovereignty overlaps with Chinese urban life; modernity coexists with destitution; spectacle borders degradation. The narrative does not merely depict these contrasts; it actively stages them as the defining structure of colonial urban experience.

5. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS: BEIJING AND SHANGHAI

A direct comparison reveals that the two cities function as complementary heterotopic imaginaries within British travel writing.

Beijing is constructed through distance, ritual, and enclosure. It represents a fantasy of timeless, static, and sacralized China—an empire imagined as spatially sealed. Authority is located in the inaccessibility of space.

Shanghai, by contrast, is constructed through simultaneity, disorder, and visual collision. It represents a fantasy of modern, unstable, and hybrid China—an empire in crisis and transition. Authority here is unstable, negotiated, and performed through spatial proximity.

Together, these heterotopias reveal that British travel writing does not simply reflect China; it spatially produces "China" as a divided object of imperial knowledge: one part monumental and sealed, the other chaotic and entangled.

6. CONCLUSION

By applying a refined heterotopia framework, this study demonstrates that British travel writing constructs Beijing and Shanghai as distinct, ideologically charged spatial formations. These heterotopias organize imperial vision, encode hierarchy, and structure cultural difference. Urban space therefore operates not as background, but as the primary medium through which British colonial imagination of China is produced.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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