Exploring Infinite Experiences through Finite Language in Invisible Cities

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Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a complicated yet fascinating book. When I first read the book, I was impressed by his diverse storytelling in depicting and reimagining the possibilities of cities. At the same time, the dominance of structuralism in the novel introduces a mathematical and conceptual calculation that seems to be at odds with the visual imagery typically associated with literature. However, upon revisiting it, one can perceive the profound literary reflections concealed within this structure. For instance, the constant swirling vortex and the repetitive countdown of chapters themselves serve as representations of the literary imagery of "infinity". Furthermore, through the blending of multiple narrative approaches, the novel expands the potential of both fiction writing and the imagination of cities.

In Calvino's book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he introduced certain literary qualities that could be seen in correspondence with his novel. For example, when he brings up the quality of "exactitude", Calvino presents two directions of writing: one involves conceptualizing things and reducing them to abstract theorems, while the other aims to depict the multiple perceptible facets of things through the accurate use of language. (Calvino: 1988) At first glance, these two directions may seem contradictory: one is a path towards *simplification*, by placing infinite aspects within specific frameworks, while the other leads towards *complexity*. However, in reality, these two directions run parallel and are intertwined: They both represent linguistic and literary attempts to describe the boundless nature of the surrounding world, and they continue to explore the infinite possibilities of human experiences as well as urban experiences, even while acknowledging their inherent impossibility.

Therefore, in *Invisible Cities*, two seemingly contradictory narratives are often seen to be juxtaposed. For example, on one hand, the author questions the limitations of words in describing our infinite perception of reality, by Marco Polo saying, "Memory's images once they are fixed in words, are erased." On the other hand, he mentions that memories would be lost without words,

as said in the chapter of *Cities and Names 1*, "And even I, who would like to keep the two cities distinct in my memory, can speak only of the one, because the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost."

He also combines two storytelling approaches: one involves the narrative dialogues between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, and the other consists of poetic prose descriptions solely focused on the cities. The two different ways of narratives are interwoven, bringing the infinite imagery of cities back into the confined framework of human experiences. Additionally, he metaphorically equated cities with humans, particularly women, emphasizing cities as the embodiment of subjective entities, which are to be desired, imagined, remembered, pursued, and possessed, rather than objective existences that are external to us. Besides, in terms of identity, both Khan and Polo are strangers in a foreign land, one being a traveling merchant from Venice, and the other being the Mongol ruler of the Han (漢) Chinese lands. Their roles as foreign observers provide the narrative with the potential to represent diverse and heterogeneous spatial re-imaginations, and offer two distinct visions of cities: one as a wanderer and the other as a ruler, each has different desires, perspectives, expectations, and imaginations when considering the representations of cities.

(549 words)