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INTRODUCTION

Words and visions around/about Chinese transnational mobilities: Italy and Beyond

Valentina Pedone, Miriam Castorina

This collection gathers the contributions of ten scholars on the topic of mobility from China and the cultural representations linked to it. Following the new mobility turn in the social sciences (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007), which led to the conceptualization of movement as constitutive of economic, social and political relations, this book aims primarily at opening a conversation among Chinese studies scholars on the impact of movements of people from China to Italy on various cultural systems. Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, in their influential article “Mobility and the Humanities” (2017), stressed the importance of the role of the arts and the humanities in investigating mobilities. According to the two scholars, the analysis of textual representations can fill in important gaps left by methodologies that are more typical of the social sciences. Bearing this idea in mind, we have selected ten essays that provide original insight into various examples of mobility from China. We focus primarily on flows of people, texts and ideas between China and Italy, but we also include specific case studies from other mobility routes that are significant from a methodological point of view.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to four different types of mobility of people from China to Italy, namely tourist mobility, labour mobility, student mobility and mobility of social elites. The second part is dedicated to examples of reverse mobility from Italy to China. The third part focuses on case studies based on mobilities from China to territories different from Italy. The following is a brief description of the content of each essay.

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In the first essay, Miriam Castorina presents a case study on tourism from China to Italy through the analysis of the travel writings of Zou Taofen, a prominent journalist of the Chinese Republican era, who travelled across Italy extensively. By analyzing the descriptions of Italy that Zou Taofen left, the author stresses how the peculiar mobility of the author is the driving force of an original approach to Italy which inspired descriptions, and therefore conceptualizations, that had a great influence on the Chinese readership of the time. The essay by Valentina Pedone centers on another type of mobility from China to Italy, that of individuals who move from Southeast China (especially Zhejiang) to Italy following the demand for unskilled labour in enterprises run by other Chinese migrants. By presenting the writings of Fujianese migrant Deng Yuehua, who entered Italy clandestinely in 1991 and has since then been working in sweatshops and factories run by other Chinese immigrants, the essay shows how textual analysis can cast a light on specific aspects of this mobility flow that otherwise can hardly surface when using other research methodologies. Hao Xu focuses on the so-called “international” university students’ mobility, i.e. that of Chinese college students who spend one or more years in foreign universities. Besides presenting some general features of students’ mobility from Chinese to Italian universities, the author describes how this specific group coped with the Covid-19 pandemic. To do so, she provides the results of a research exercise carried out through a questionnaire submitted to 100 such students and then discusses some cultural productions by the Italy-based art collective WUXU, formed by ex-international students. The first part of the book is closed by the essay by Andrea Scibetta, in which the author presents the mobility of privileged elites who arrive in Italy to work as professionals, in Italian or Chinese Institutions or educational structures. Scibetta uses the graphic novel *La macchina zero* (*Machine n. zero*) by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte to tell the story of Mario Tchou, an extremely talented Chinese-Italian electronic scientist, who lived across China, Italy and the USA and contributed to the global success of the Italian computer company Olivetti. The graphic novel itself is the combined work of an Italian illustrator of Chinese heritage (Demonte) and his partner, a detail which provides the author with a further reason for reflection on mobility and textual representation.

The second part of the book is opened by Changxu Gao, who presents the story of Tian Dewang, who was one of the first Chinese to win a scholarship from the Chinese government to study Italian literature in Italy in the 1930s. In his essay, Gao focuses on how the ideas and knowledge that Tian Dewang acquired when living in Italy were later on circulated and transmitted to his students once he moved back to China. In particular, the experience of study of Tian Dewang in Florence is reconstructed through archival research, while his contribution to the popularization of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in China is presented also in the light of his relationship with the Italian professor Attilio Momigliano. Chiara Lepri similarly follows the reverse direction of China-Italy mobility by presenting the case of the TV series *Marco Polo*, by Giuliano Montaldo, which was produced in 1982. She describes in detail the process of ideation and production of

the series and, by including an interview with the director, contributes to creating a memoir of that experience, which represents the first Italian and Chinese film co-production and an important step in the establishment of new cultural relations between the two countries after the end of Mao era. In Giuseppe Rizzuto's essay, we go back to Chinese international students, but this time we observe how they use and share the knowledge and experience gained in Italy with the rest of the Chinese community upon their return back home. Rizzuto focuses specifically on Italian Opera students, investigating how differences between Italy and China in terms of musical technique are framed within this mobility.

The last part of the book is dedicated to case studies on global cultural mobility from China. The three essays that constitute this part are all positioned within the discipline of literary studies and focus on how literary production is influenced by mobility. The opening essay of this part is written by Rebecca Ehrenwirth and focuses on Sinophone poetry in Thailand. After an overview of the phenomenon of Sinophone literature in Thailand, the author shows how the recurring theme of migration became a trope for Sinophone Thai writers who never actually experienced migration in their lives. Ehrenwirth argues that this imagined migration is in fact a way for these writers to represent a fluctuating cultural identity. In the following essay, Martina Renata Proserpi analyzes the use of language in the works of Yiyun Li, a Beijing-born author who moved to the USA to pursue scientific studies but instead started a career as an English language writer. Proserpi argues that, by engaging in exophony, i.e. writing in a language that is not one's native language, Yiyun Li finds a way to escape cultural labelling and achieves another level of creative freedom. The book is closed by Giulia Rampolla's essay, which is dedicated to the Chinese writer Xue Yiwei, who migrated to Canada in 2002. His work is characterized by a high level of "literary hybridity and cultural intermingling", in Rampolla words, that reproduces his highly cosmopolitan and nomadic life trajectory, thus providing an interesting case of a textual representation of complex mobility patterns as well as an example of overcoming culturalist boundaries in literary production.

We hope this collection will be just one starting point for a line of transdisciplinary research on the textual and visual representation of China-Italy mobility (and beyond). At the moment in which this introduction is being written, little to no mobility between the two countries has yet been restored after the measures adopted following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As we firmly believe that progress can only derive from contact and exchange among people, we hope we can soon go back to researching interesting cultural phenomena linked to a new season of mobility between China and Italy.

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PART 1

Unending Wandering: visions of mobility in Zou Taofen's Italy

Miriam Castorina

Abstract: This paper focuses on visions and representations of Italy that emerge from the travel writings and narrative intersections of Sino-Italian mobilities. Taking its primary example from the travels of Zou Taofen (1895–1944), who enshrined his memories of Italy in *Pingzong jiyu* 萍踪寄语 (*Messages from an unending wandering*) while exiled from China, this critical exploration of mobility traces the spread of ideas between the Italian Peninsula and the Republic of China. Zou's new and original visions of Italy reached a broad readership during the republican period, spreading widely and making Zou a "central figure of the New Culture era." Despite his place as one of the most successful and influential journalists in the history of the Republic of China, Zou has not yet "received his full due" (Mitter 2004, 55).

Keywords: Zou Taofen, Chinese travel literature, Republican China, Italy, China, Mobility, Exile.

1. Introduction

As new technologies and global perspectives have given rise to new forms of travel and mobility in the 21st century, the emerging paradigm of New Mobility Studies has encouraged interdisciplinary discussions about human movements and the resulting cultural exchange and transmission. This critical perspective can apply to the past as well as the present, situating travel and mobility as fundamental activities of cultural construction. The New Mobility paradigm allows for us to observe and study social and other phenomena with a keen focus on the movement of human bodies (Sheller and Urry 2006).

Many of ancient literature's highest forms have a real or imagined journey at the center of their narration, such as the epic of Gilgamesh or the mythical journey of Ulysses. Still, much work is to be done to acknowledge the culture-forming importance of travel within academic scholarship. As Eric Leed laments in *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (1991, 4):

Travel has not yet been claimed as a field of history, nor is it clear that it need be, that an understanding of how mobility transforms individuals, social relations, cultures would add significantly to our understanding of the past and the present.

Elsewhere, Merriman and Pearce (2017) have enriched the incipient field of Mobility Studies by highlighting how much a humanistic approach to mobility (which also includes travel) can help better understand human dynamics.

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Recognizing multiple forms of expression and different types of mobility, this paper focuses on travel writing. Taking as a point of departure the journey of an important historical figure of the New Culture era —Zou Taofen 邹韬奋 (1895–1944)—this exploration of narrative travel presents material from Zou’s influential text *Pingzong jiyu* 萍踪寄语 (*Messages from an unending wandering*). A writer, publisher, and entrepreneur, Zou is considered one of the most successful journalists in the history of the Republic of China and probably one of the most read (Coble 1985, 294).

Zou Taofen made a trip to Europe between 1934 and 1935 and began to publish his travel experiences in *Shenghuo zhoukan* 生活周刊 (*Life Weekly*), a widely read weekly of the period. The final three volumes of his journey abroad—recounting travels in Europe, and the Soviet Union—had a decisive influence on Chinese youth of the time, as evidenced by a survey carried out by Olga Lang before the Second Sino-Japanese war and later reported in Gewurtz (1975, 7).¹ Zou Taofen’s (forced—as we will come to see) mobility and overseas travel account are taken here as a case study to examine how a mobility perspective is enriched by the valuable contribution of humanities in this field.

The choice to concentrate on Zou is particularly significant given the high number of his readers, his great influence on 1930s youth and the urban middle class, and the peculiarities of his writing. Laughlin confirms that Zou’s travel writings are “among the most widely read works of nonfiction in modern China” (2022, 53), while Gewurtz underlines that “the portion of Tsou’s writings that probably contributed the most to student radicalism in the mid-thirties was his travel books” (Gewurtz 1975, 23). Xu Xinmin (1999, 25) shares the same opinion and emphasizes how Zou’s reportage from abroad played a crucial role in the knowledge of the world and China, even among ordinary people. Zou’s movement from and within China not only shaped his creative expressions but also influenced Chinese public opinion, providing an original vision of Italy that so far has not been analyzed.

2. Zou Taofen’s life and career²

The life and works of Zou Taofen remain marginalized outside China despite his popularity and influence during the Republican period. Several works on the National Salvation Movement or essays dedicated to the history of journalism and publishing in China, especially in Shanghai, mention Zou’s contribution; however, his literary works, articles, and essays are rarely studied outside of the country.³ His political activism during the last years of his life and his role in

¹ In this survey, Zou ranked third among the students’ favorite non-fiction writers after Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) and Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895–1976).

² The biographical data on Zou Taofen are mostly taken from Chen (2009), Zou’s autobiographies (Zou 1937 and 1946), and partly from what he writes in his *Messages from an unending wandering* (Zou 1934, Ch. 2).

³ An exception is found in the monographs by Gewurtz 1972 (*non vidi*); 1975.

founding the National Salvation Movement and opposing Japanese aggression made him well-known in China (not to mention his deathbed desire to join the Communist Party). In addition, his name is closely bound to the Sanlian bookstore chain he established and is in “the list of martyrs commemorated on China’s National Memorial Day since 2014” (CGTN 2018).

Born as Zou Enrun 邹恩润 in 1895 from a poor literati family in decay, he spent his childhood in Fujian, where his father held a minor office in the administration of salt. The first of 15 children—six sons and nine daughters the father Zou Guozhen 邹国珍 (1876–1948) had from his wife and two concubines—Zou received a traditional education at home with his father and a private tutor. Due to the family’s economic constraints, his father decided to send him to one of the new “Western schools” opening up everywhere in the country, particularly in South China. There, pupils learned new and “modern” subjects, such as math, foreign languages, chemistry, and physics. In 1909, Taofen was accepted into the preparatory course at the Cangxia Public Middle School (Gongli cangxia Zhonxuetang 公立苍霞中学堂) in Fuzhou. Three years later, in 1912, he entered the *Nanyang gongxue* 南洋公学—today’s Jiao Tong University (Jiao Tong Daxue 交通大学)—founded in 1896 by an imperial edict to teach engineering and transportation science. While his father was nurturing the idea of having an engineer son, Taofen already knew this was not his future since math class “was simply like going to the guillotine” (Zou 1946, Chap. 2). Despite his dislike for scientific subjects, he committed himself to the course of study and emerged as one of the most brilliant students. At the same time, he realized his true passions lied elsewhere.

He was a passionate reader of *Xinmin congbao* 新民丛报 (*New Citizens’ Miscellanies*, published between 1902–1907) and a fierce admirer of Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), of whom he read the biographies published in the periodical.⁴ Thanks to these readings, he also learned about Italy, as he recounts in this passage of his autobiography:

According to the rules, we had to turn out the lights at ten o’clock in the evening and go to sleep. I, on the contrary, secretly lit a candle and secretly read under the covers, often till three o’clock in the morning, when I finally blew out the candle and went to sleep. In my dreams, I kept seeing the three Italian heroes⁵

⁴ The journal is one of the most important of the period for its reformistic ideas and its political concerns. It had an enormous impact on the intellectual society of the time and was published by a group of reformers led by Liang himself. The journal’s pages discuss, above all, democracy and modernizations of China. Among the scholarship on the subject, see Ma 2020.

⁵ Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Cavour. On the three heroes of Risorgimento, Liang Qichao wrote many times, and they are also the protagonists of his drama *Xin Luoma* 新罗马 (The New Rome). On the importance of these figures in Liang’s political ideas, see Li (2014). Italian scholarship also dedicated several works on this issue, see for example Borsa, and Beonio Brocchieri (1984); Bertuccioli (1981; 1984); Masini (2012; 2017).

and Madame Roland!⁶ [All realistic biographies written by Liang Rengong⁷ in *New Citizens' Miscellanies*.] With such premises, hopes of becoming an engineer were indeed very few! (Zou 1937, Ch. 2).

Zou decided to change his major and moved to St. John University in 1919, a missionary institution among the most exclusive in Shanghai (Mitter 2004, 56), where he graduated in July 1921 in literature and English language. After graduation, he went to work in the commercial field while still collaborating with some minor periodicals.⁸ Two events changed the life and career of Zou Taofen: first, an encounter with Huang Yanpei 黄炎培 (1878–1965)—one of the forerunners in the education of modern China; second, a proposal to work part-time at the *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* 教育与职业 (*Education and Vocation*), a journal linked to the Chinese Vocational Education Association (*Zhonghua zhiye jiaoyu she* 中华职业教育社) with a “limited circulation” (Gewurtz 1975, 4) and an audience mainly of teachers and educators.⁹

This opportunity allowed him to finally engage in professional writing and get closer to the aspirations and issues of Chinese youth. He also worked as an editor and translator of many books dealing with vocational training and testing, such as John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Additionally, his relationship to Huang Yanpei resulted in the invitation to be editor-in-chief of the new journal of the Association, founded in October 1925, entitled *Shenghuo zhouban* 生活周刊 (*Life Weekly*) or simply *Shenghuo* 生活.¹⁰ The magazine was suppressed multiple times, but ultimately “Zou's publications proved unsuppressible,” even when he was arrested upon return to China in 1936 (MacKinnon 1997, 11).

At the outset, Zou worked practically alone at the periodical; he alone was responsible for writing articles and essays, proofreading the contents, and managing all the processes, which he did using many pen names (Yeh 2007, 103–4). Zou recalls:

During that time, I often gave solo performances. First, only some friends in the cultural circles could help me; second, the remuneration for authors was zero, and the people from the Vocational Education Association were busy with their original jobs. The ridiculous thing was that I took six or seven different

⁶ Marie-Jeanne Philippon Roland (1754–93), whose life was narrated by Liang Qichao in *Jinshi diyi nüjie Luolan furen zhuan* 近世第一女杰罗兰夫人传 (*Biography of the most eminent modern heroine, Madame Roland*) in 1902. Mme Roland's life was illustrated to fully explore Liang's idea of *geming* 革命, revolution (Tsui 2015).

⁷ Liang Rengong 梁任公 is another name for Liang Qichao.

⁸ He collaborated with *Xuesheng zazhi* 学生杂志 (*Students Magazine*), published by the Commercial Press, and *Ziyou tan* 自由谈 (*Free Talk*), a supplement of the *Shenbao* 申报 (*Shanghai Journal*), one of the first and most famous newspapers of China.

⁹ On the history, development, and ideas of the Association, see Gewurtz (1978).

¹⁰ Yeh underlines that the magazine's mission was “to convert young urbanites, unhappy or otherwise, to the unique relevance of vocational education in connection with current concerns and future prospects” (Yeh 2007, 103). On *Shenghuo* and its editorial line, see Huang (2007) and Zheng and Cheng (2007).

pen names for myself and assigned a particular type of article to a particular pen name! For example, pseudonym A was responsible for biographies; B for self-cultivation; C wrote articles concerning health; D superintended the discussions; E was in charge of essays, and so forth. Simply put, each pen name developed a specific disposition. Nevertheless, this did not depend on my being omnipotent, for I worked hard only to collect every kind of material to fit each pseudonym's disposition. Much of this data was searched and found in various English language periodicals. [...] (Zou 1937, Ch. 27).

One of these pseudonyms was “Taofen 韬奋,”¹¹ the name he is often referred to, especially by his affectionate readers. He started to use it in November 1928 in another of his successful columns titled *Xiao yanlun* 小言论 (“Humble opinions”).

From January 1, 1933, the writer began to sign his articles with the name “Zou Taofen 邹韬奋.”¹² In *Life Weekly*, Zou's approach was innovative and fresh. He chose a smaller format, used a more informal style, and inserted photographs and pictures into the periodical. Zou also recruited overseas students to be correspondents from abroad (Gewurtz 1975, 5; Zou 1936, Ch. 27). His “revolution” yielded benefits; from 2000 copies per week in 1926, the weekly grew to sell 200,000 copies in 1933 (Chen 2009, Ch. 8; Mitter 2004, 56–7). This growth made the magazine one of the most read of the time and “the most influential journal among Shanghai's ‘petty urbanites’” (Yeh 2007, 102).

Life's readers particularly loved the *Duzhe xinxiang* 读者信箱 (“Readers' Mailbox”), where Zou answered many questions young men and women asked him about education, love, gender relations, new mores, and much more (Mitter 2004, 80–90). The column was so popular that Zou received from 20,000 up to 30,000 letters annually (Coble 1985, 295). Thanks to his experience in the publication field and the growing number of readers, Zou also decided to start his own enterprise, founding a society for subscriptions to newspapers and books in 1930. Later, he also founded the publishing house Shenghuo shudian 生活书店 (from 1948 Sanlian shudian 三联书店 or Sanlian Bookstore), which remains one of the most important Chinese publishing houses and book chains today.

¹¹ The first character *tao* 韬 could refer to the expression in the *Daodejing* 道德经 “*taoguang-yanghui* 韬光养晦,” hide one's light (i.e., talent) and bide one's time. The second character refers to “*qinfen* 勤奋,” to be diligent or assiduous. Taken together, the pseudonym invokes someone who hides his capacity to be diligent.

¹² Zou contributed to the special issue of *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志 (*The Eastern Miscellany*) entitled *Mengxiang de Zhongguo* 梦想的中国 (*The China of your dreams*). Chen Hui erroneously dates the article to 1931 (Chen 2009, 1). This special issue was published after the editor Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之 (1896–1986) had posed two questions to the readers: 1. “What does the future China of your dreams look like? (Please describe a sketch or an aspect of the future China.) What dreams do you have for your individual life? (Of course, these dreams do not have to be feasible)” (Spakowski 2019, 92). One hundred and sixty people answered the questions among which—apart from Taofen—some of the most illustrious writers and intellectuals of the time can be found such as Ba Jin 巴金, Yu Dafu 郁达夫, Mao Dun 茅盾, Lao She 老舍, and others (Spakowski 2019; ESSRA 2022).

Zou had a liberal approach to politics, but after the Manchurian Incident of September 1931 and the January 28 Incident in Shanghai in 1932, he became increasingly radicalized like many other intellectuals of that time. Zou began to call for resistance to Japan from the pages of *Shenghuo*.¹³ He wrote more than a few inflammatory editorials and joined the League for the Protection of Civil Rights (*Zhongguo minquan baozhang tongmeng* 中国民权保障同盟) in January 1933, together with some prominent figures of the time such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) and Song Qingling 宋庆龄 (1893–1981), the wife of Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925). The secretary of the League, Yang Xingfo 杨杏佛 (1893–1933), was shot to death in June 1933. In July, realizing his life was in danger too, Taofen decided to flee abroad or, as he writes, to go into exile (*liumang* 流亡) (Zou 1946, Ch. 1.1). A few months later, in December, *Shenghuo* was closed by the government.

The magazine changed its name first to *Xinsheng zhoukan* 新生周刊 (*New Life Weekly*, February 1934, suppressed in July 1935). Later, the periodical was named *Dazhong shenghuo* 大众生活 (*Life of the Masses*, November 1935–February 1936), and soon after became *Yongsheng* 永生 (*Eternal Life*), only to be suppressed three months later (Coble 1985). During this extended period of volatility, Zou was actively involved in the anti-Japan movement. He participated in the foundation of the Shanghai section of the National Salvation Association (*Jiuguo hui* 救国会) and was among the “Seven Gentlemen” arrested on November 22, 1936.¹⁴ Released in July 1937, he continued to oppose Japanese aggression and flee persecution throughout China, especially in the South. He was forced to live an “unending wandering” (i.e., exile) in China for most of the rest of his life. Finally returning to Shanghai in 1943, he died of cancer a few months later, in July 1944. His tomb is currently in Shanghai at the Longhua Martyr Memorial Park (CGTN 2018).

3. An “unending wandering”: exile and narrative resistance

As we have now discovered, Zou Taofen’s travel abroad was a form of exile and not a leisure trip to the West. Nevertheless, the journalist was able to turn necessity into an opportunity. Thanks to a loan of 3,000 yuan from friends and supporters, on July 14, 1933, he boarded the *Conte Verde*—one of the first Italian ocean liners of Lloyd Sabauda—and began weekly dispatches of his journey. The first of this bulletin was published the very next day (July 15) in a special column of *Shenghuo* entitled *Pingzong jiyu* 萍踪寄语 (“Messages from an unending wandering”).

Given the difficulties the magazine was experiencing, Zou soon decided to gather his travel writings in a volume with the same title.¹⁵ This intention is ex-

¹³ On his activism in these years and his calling for democracy, see Chen (2009), especially Chapter 11.

¹⁴ It was in prison that Zou compiled most of his first autobiography (Zou 1937).

¹⁵ According to Zhang (2019, 76) and Laughlin (2002, 54), after the suppression of *Life* at the end of the year, the column continued to be published first in *Xinsheng* and then in *Shijie zhishi* 世界知识 (*World Knowledge*).

pressed clearly in the Preface of the first volume, written six months later. Here he states that, having compiled 51 articles and written about 105,000 words, he would end the first volume. His travel account was later published in two different works: one titled as the column, i.e., *Messages from an unending wandering*; the other titled *Pingzong yiyu* 萍踪忆语, *Memories from an unending wandering* (1937).¹⁶

The first of his travel accounts, *Messages from an unending wandering*, is in three volumes published by the Shenghuo Shudian publishing house. The first volume was published in June 1934 and contains a Preface and 51 articles/chapters covering the period from July 14, 1933, to February 7, 1934. The first chapters are dedicated to travel at sea and coastal cities (Hong Kong, Singapore, Colombo, Suez), while the second part describes a few western Europe countries: Italy, Switzerland, France, England, and Ireland. The second volume was published in September 1934 (Preface and 14 chapters) and narrates the journey in eastern European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany), with a particular focus on Nazism. The last volume was released in October 1935 (Preface and 66 chapters) and exclusively covers the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Messages is a work of difficult classification. Xu Ximin, for example, finds it problematic to label it as a piece of travel literature (*youji* 游记), arguing that the work must be analyzed as a sub-genre and considered as “literature in the form of travel reportage” (*youjiti baogao wenxue* 游记体报告文学) (Xu 1999, 26). The argument, according to the scholar, is that very little space is dedicated to the actual journey; i.e., the descriptions of places and observations on customs and traditions. Such narrative omissions make the work stylistically distant from the coeval travel literature. Another difference is due to Zou’s journalistic writing style, which is more concise and shorter than a strictly “literary” one—a style that, from the first to the third volume, gradually changes in parallel with progressively broadening insights and analyses (Xu 1999, 26).¹⁸

I partially agree with this view: first, because a journalistic style can be compatible with a literary one; second, because his observations, even if not focused on places, are very centered on people and their mores and customs, despite what Xu writes. The observations reveal a keen and profound sensibility, laid bare in Zou’s descriptions of Europe’s social conflicts and hypocrisies (Castorina 2022). In addition, Zou’s literary style was deeply influenced by his experience as the editor-in-chief and columnist of the *Readers’ Mailbox*, which allowed him to be in continuous and direct dialogue with his numerous readers.

¹⁶ The change in title is due to the fact that the book was written not during the journey but after the author’s return to China. It recalls Zou’s sojourn in the United States.

¹⁷ The work has been digitized and is available online: <<https://www.xuges.com/xdmj/ztf/index.htm>>. The internal references to Zou’s account in this article are from this digital version, with the indication of the chapter.

¹⁸ In *Chinese Reportage*, Charles Laughlin is also uncertain about the classification. He first classifies Zou’s work as travel literature and then states that it “must remain at the fringes of what I am classifying here as reportage literature” (Laughlin 2022, 62).

Aside from the question of how the work must be classified, Taofen's writing certainly has elements that make it particularly compelling and original. Zou's prose is immediate, fresh, and easy to grasp. He eludes any form of erudite expression or elegant quotation—a temptation few modern Chinese writers have been able to escape—always using simple and straightforward vernacular Chinese. The tone is informal, subtly humorous, and often moving. Zou also introduces a linguistic peculiarity in his account: he often inserts sources and English words to be as clear and detailed as possible, as can be seen in the following examples, given also in Chinese:

本年二月六日—就是记者执笔作此《弁言》的前一天—在英国销路最广的一种日报《每日传知》(*Daily Herald*)上面载有一段新闻, 标题是《母亲为着子女饿死》(“Mother starves herself for children”), [...].

On February 6 of this year—the day before the journalist wrote this preface—the *Daily Herald*, one of UK's best-selling newspapers, ran an article entitled “Mother starves herself for children.” (Zou 1934, Preface)

八月六日下午四点钟佛尔第号到意大利的东南海港布林的西 (Brindisi), 这算是记者和欧洲的最初的晤面。

At four o'clock in the afternoon of August 6, the *Fo'erdi* [Conte Verde] arrived at Brindisi, a seaport in southeast Italy. This was the first encounter between this journalist and Europe (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

As can be seen from the excerpts above—although for the most part Zou addresses himself as the “journalist” (*jizhe* 记者) instead of using the first-person singular *wo* 我, maybe to convey a certain distance and objectivity—he continually addresses his words to “all his friends and readers” (*duzhe zhu you* 读者诸友), making them participate emotionally in his travel adventures. Furthermore, with the innovative use of English words, foreign sources, and place names in transcription, his Chinese readership found, for the first time, exotic writing to decipher in their favorite weekly.

2.1 Zou Taofen in Italy: Venice and Florence

Zou toured Italy from August 6–17, 1933. He arrived in Brindisi and then visited Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Pisa, Genoa, and Milan before leaving for Switzerland. The account of his sojourn in Italy can be found in five chapters (15–9) titled: “End of the sea journey,” “Venice,” “Florence,” “Outside and inside: Rome and Naples,” and “Random thoughts after leaving Italy.”¹⁹

According to Zou, Brindisi is the place where he first “encounters Europe.” In fact, Zou encountered a few Europeans before arriving in Italy; the ocean liner was full of people from all walks of life and different nationalities. For example,

¹⁹ So far, chapters 16–8 have been partially translated in Brezzi (2014) and Castorina and Pedone (2022).

while in Port Said, Zou met a large group of young Italians (“five hundred children between 8 and 20 years old”) coming from the Italian schools in Egypt, belonging to the Fascist youth and heading for Rome to celebrate the anniversary of the Fascist Party. The Chinese reporter admires their strong physique and good health, but after pressing them to define Fascism, he finds they cannot answer. They only know that “Mussolini is great” and “will make Italy richer and stronger” without knowing why. “As a matter of fact,” states Taofen, “not even their forefather Mussolini knows what exactly Fascism is, so we cannot blame these innocent young people” (Zou 1934, Ch. 15).

The very day he writes down this note (on August 6, 1933), the ship arrives in Brindisi; here, the journalist is in for a great shock:

[...] The ship stopped there only for two hours therefore, together with several travel friends, I went ashore and walked not a few streets. There is only one decent street, the rest are for the most part small lanes. Despite the tall monument built on the seaside, we found most of the people on the street to be in rags and could hardly find any with a proper tie. We passed through many lanes and there the poor aspect [of the people] was even more extreme. In front of several front doors sat an old woman, a flowered curtain hanging inside the door [behind her]. From time-to-time young half-naked women poked their heads out the curtain and smiled at the travelers or sang loudly. We had a pretty clear idea of what their intentions were (Zou 1934, 1, Ch. 16).

The following day, the liner ends its journey in Venice. Here the journalist joins a group of countrymen who wanted to visit Italy before other European destinations, where most of them were supposed to study.²⁰

The report on Venice was written some days later, on the morning of August 11, 1933, when the author was already in Rome. Writing about Venice, which “can simply be called the ‘City of water’ [shuicheng 水城],” the author observes the grandiosity of its past (before the Pacific Ocean robbed the Mediterranean of its primacy) and calls into question its presumed resemblance with the Chinese city of Suzhou—a literary *topos* in China since Matteo Ricci compared the two cities for the first time in the 17th century (Beltrame and Maggi 2022).²¹ In Zou’s eyes, the cities are not so much alike since “although in Suzhou there are many waterways, [it is not like here] because there is not a waterway at each door” (Zou 1934, Ch. 16). Even if Suzhou is not very similar to Venice, there are many other elements taken as an example to domesticate this exotic scenario.

²⁰ According to the report, Zou Taofen travels with some fellow countrymen: Li Ruliang 李汝亮, Guo Rutong 郭汝桶 (both from Canton) and Zhou Hongxi 周洪熙 (from the province of Jiangsu) “who are going to study in Germany.” In Venice, Li Ruzhao 李汝昭, Ruliang’s elder brother, joined the group to visit Italy.

²¹ On this subject, the University of Venice and Suzhou University organized an online exhibition (September 30–December 31, 2022) titled *Venezia and Suzhou. Water Cities along the Silk Roads* (see the news here: <<https://www.unive.it/data/agenda/1/63816>>. Accessed 9 Oct. 2022).

Gondolas (*xiaoting* 小艇), therefore, look like “the dragon boats of the Dragon Festival, with both ends upward, but not as long,” while the vaporetos (*gonggong qichuan* 公共汽船) are “like the tramcars or buses in the street of Shanghai, and the ships’ siren sounds like the buses’ horn in Shanghai” (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

Zou goes on briefly describing St Mark’s Square and then concentrates on the Lido (*Lidou* 利都):

We also went for a tour of the Lido, a small island located southeast of the city of Venice, where there are worldly famous swimming pools. Their backyards are beautifully decorated with flowers and plants, and many people walk down the streets. Most women wear very large trousers and a thin shirt on their upper parts. Some only wear one pair of these big trousers hanging with suspenders and, except for these two braces, the upper body is simply naked to the waist, [nevertheless] they shake and sway on the streets with their trousers barely kept up! (Zou 1934, Ch. 16)

Clearly captivated by the visual stimuli of his foreign surroundings, the journalist also observes beyond the superficial surface of things to analyze Italian society:

Of course, these men and women [at the Lido] are not ordinary Italians but a minority belonging to privileged classes of this country and of various countries of Europe and the United States. Only they have the opportunity to enjoy such a life. This venue is designed for the leisure class²² that has free time, and it goes without saying that the luxurious restaurants and hotels are well stocked with everything (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

Again, Zou’s attention goes beyond the surface; the simple observation of the “leisure class” having free time is an opportunity to disclose the inequalities and deformities of the capitalist system. The passage also suggests that the comfort derived from capitalism accompanies a lack of morality, a concept that returns many times in his description of Europe (Cfr. Castorina 2022).

The chapter closes with a comparison with Florence and, again, a comment on the poverty of the common people:

Is Venice beautiful? Indeed, it is! Florence, which is described by this journalist in the next chapter, also has its beauty, yet it is an Italian antique handed down from something like five, six hundred years to a thousand years ago, and therefrom we cannot make out any new construction achievements in this country. In Venice, [a city] that so many people endlessly praise, we also went to take a look at the area where the majority of poor people live; there is not one difference from what we saw in Brindisi (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

Since Florence’s “imposing old buildings and works are too many, this journalist is ashamed of not being an artist and does not have a way to give a de-

²² Using this term, *youxian jieji* 有闲阶级, Zou most probably refers to the theory of the leisure class of Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929).

tailed account to all our friends” (Zou 1934, Ch. 17). He turns, instead, to the account of Italy by Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927), published 30 years before, and gives a “meager description” of the city. It must be noted that Kang did not even get off the train and limited his notes on Florence to some historical data, but he was the first among the Chinese travelers to link “the city to Italian art” (Castorina and Pedone 2022).²³ Without questioning Kang’s opinion, Zou dedicates but a few meager lines to art and buildings (he only cites the cathedral of Florence and Palazzo Vecchio). The journalist is much more interested in Italian customs and mores:

In front of Venice and Florence’s major churches, there are notices listing prohibitions in English, German, French, and Italian. Especially interesting and laughable are those regarding women. For example, women wearing clothes with sleeves above the crook of their arms are not allowed to enter. Those with more than two inches of flesh exposed on their necks are not allowed to enter. Those whose skirts and clothes are not longer than the knees are not allowed to enter. Those who wear transparent [clothes] are not allowed to enter. Very likely, the so-called modern women, once they arrive here, must have some complex problems, and perhaps have no choice but to blame God for disapproving of modern women! The prohibition for men is only to take off their hats—they [enjoy] much more freedom (Zou 1934, Ch. 17).

3.2 Zou Taofen in Italy: Rome and Naples

The evening and the morning after their arrival in Rome, the travelers are exhausted and decide to take a break and rest. This is the occasion for Zou to record some first impressions of Italy before concentrating on the capital city:

1. As I am writing this article, I have visited four places in Italy, Brindisi, Venice, Florence, and Rome. Yet I do not know how they come [the Italians] to feel so surprised at the yellow race. When we walk on the street, they always glance at us several times. Some even exchange whispered comments saying that we are Japanese. In our group, someone got angry when he heard [such comments], but since we cannot make clear to everyone [that we are from China], we can’t help but listen and forget about it. Why do they think only of Japan and not of China? Some say that they think that the Chinese are just those ragged Chinese street traders who lead a wandering life abroad in poverty, while those all-dressed-up yellow men are Japanese. I heard this old saying in elementary school from people who studied abroad, and, to my surprise, after so many years, the idea still exists that the above assumption is right. Yet I think that it would be too trifling if the Chinese tried to make a good showing only by dressing up.

²³ The account on Italy is in Kang’s famous travel account entitled *Ouzhou shiyi guo youji erzhong* 欧洲十一国游记二种 [Two diaries of journeys through eleven European countries]. In Zou’s account, the record on Florence was written the night of August 12, 1933.

2. Italian women's occupations are more advanced than those in our country, although I have heard that they are far from being as good as in the rest of Europe. In hotels, restaurants, and general stores, many positions are held by women. When this journalist sent some letters to a post office in Venice, he saw that all the workers were women, most wearing black garments with white collars. They were all neat and tidy. Almost all the "waiters" in the hotels are women; some are still-attractive women of middle age who look fairly pretty: they look like schoolgirls. Every day, after the guests go out, they enter the room to clean up and change the sheets.

3. In many of the hotels where this journalist stayed, he perceived a big difference compared to the Chinese ones; they are very quiet, and there are no cries or loud voices. There are also very few attendants, only one or two people in the account's office; otherwise, you often never see a soul. [...] (Zou 1934, Ch. 17).

As seen from the above record, Zou Taofen is much more interested in people and their lives than in tourism, art, or scenic spots. This peculiarity of Zou's account becomes increasingly more evident in his notes; Italy—with its ancient history and miserable present—is a good starting point for making reports about the European way of life.

Writing about Rome and Naples, Zou does not focus much on places and things but tries to go deeper in his understanding of the *Bel Paese*. For example, in Chapter 18—written on the 20th of August by candlelight when Zou is already in Berna—he finally has time to reflect on what he has seen and asks his readers permission to "talk about Rome, brilliant from the outside, and about Naples, which fully reveals its misery... The so-called outside and inside" (Zou 1934, Ch. 18). Despite the abundance of ancient beauty in Rome, Zou's visit is too strongly influenced by the Fascist regime to indulge in any other kind of observation than admiration for its architecture. Naples, on the other hand, reveals the blatant hardships and poverty of Italian society.

After a brief description of the glorious past of ancient Rome, Zou complains about a false advertisement that promised a discount on the train ticket but actually took people to a Fascist exhibition—a "real extortion," according to the journalist. The exhibition is nothing but a bunch of "photographs of murders" perpetrated by fascists, guns, and flags.

The small group of countrymen visit the Colosseum, a monument they "already encountered in the past, thanks to the photographs and illustrations in our elementary textbooks." Arriving there is "like meeting an old friend" (Zou 1934, Ch. 18). The group also visits St. Peter's Basilica and a catacomb, a very thrilling and comical experience for all of them. In the dark and cold of the underground paths, they fumbled for their way forward. Then, after Mr. Zhou believed he saw a will-o'-the-wisp, everyone rushed outside without checking.

Naples, where the group arrived on August 13, looks immediately very dirty and populated by "a multitude of beggars." As soon as they arrive, a man, who "looks like a beggar," cheats Zou and his companions and takes them to a different hotel than they booked. Reading what Zou recorded, the inn is an absolute hovel, looking more like a brothel, and situated in the slum area:

Needless to say, the streets are filthy, and the tumbledown houses are no less filthy than those seen in the slums of Mumbai, India. What strikes the most are the streets and lanes full of unkempt, emaciated, ragged, and dirty kids, boys and girls, who run up and down all day long with nothing to do. (Zou 1934, Ch. 18)

Neither Naples nor even Pompeii really appeals to the Chinese travel group, who are also disturbed while eating by a couple of musicians playing the most “unpleasant to the ears” Mengdelin 孟德林 at their table without the guests’ consent. Furthermore, insisting the group was from Japan, they played the wrong national anthem to the extreme disappointment of the Chinese travelers!

The final part of the narrative dedicated to Italy is Chapter 19: “Random thoughts after leaving Italy.” The first part is a brief account of what the reporter saw in Pisa (the Leaning Tower), Genoa, (where Colombo was born), and Milan (where the “Blackshirt Party” led by Mussolini set off for Rome). Pisa is the most appealing for Zou Taofen, who heard of it when “studying physics at the elementary school,” while Milan’s streets are compared to Nanjing Road in Shanghai. In the second part of the chapter, Zou tries to sum up his experiences in Italy and “narrate the random thoughts I have had after leaving Italy” (Zou 1934, Ch. 19).

The observations on the political and livelihood aspects of Italy were briefly mentioned in the last report. The impression [I had] on the aspects related to the habits and characteristics of ordinary people is not good either. Each time this journalist had the opportunity to come into contact with the people, for the most part, it was with people from the cities. Therefore, I do not dare to judge the situation in the countryside. No matter the country, it is not always possible to distinguish good from bad [aspects]; it is a mere question of degree, so it is not possible to generalize either. However, speaking of what I have detected, Italians’ negligence can be seen everywhere. (Zou 1934, Ch. 19)

The main object of this critical statement is the negligence of the Italian barbers, first on the Conte Verde and then in a barbershop in Naples. Similarly, the author notices the same careless manners when the group buys tickets at a travel agency in Venice and the clerk makes an error, giving them the wrong tickets. The judgment about Italy and its inhabitants in general is very harsh:

On Swiss trains, some notices prohibit smoking, i.e., smoking is not allowed. In Italy, [everything] is neglected: despite the no smoking signs on the train walls, everyone still carelessly smokes. Except for a few cities, almost everywhere in Italy is dirty for no other reason but negligence. Before leaving my country, several friends of mine who had been to Europe said that Italy was the most difficult [country] to travel to since you are often fooled or deceived (Zou 1934, Ch. 19).

In addition, the group was deceived twice, not only in Naples but also on a taxi in Milan. Nevertheless, Italy still has one advantage compared to China according to Zou. There is no doubt that their “transportation system is more convenient than China” (Zou 1934, Ch. 19). This comment, however, is not to praise Italy but to underline China’s backwardness, as the author reiterates the

trope a few lines below: “Italy is a ‘beggar’ compared to other European countries, and still, it is better than ours; what a shame to say!” (Zou 1934, Ch. 19).

4. Conclusions

As illustrated above, Zou Taofen was one of the most-read writers of his time, whose full impact and influence has only been partially considered. The visions and representations in Zou’s work spread widely in China thanks to his popularity, significantly affecting public opinion. Aside from the popularity of his journalistic work, Zou Taofen’s originality lies in his sensitivity to issues linked with human welfare and in his “search for solutions to China’s historical predicament” (Laughlin 2022, 53). His impressions of Italy are critically distinct from other writings by his contemporaries, which generally praise the country for its cultural heritage and for being the “cradle” of the European spirit thanks to the Renaissance (Castorina and Pedone 2022; Jin 2015).

This idea was particularly conveyed by Sheng Cheng 盛成 (1899–1996) in his *Yiguo liuzong ji* 意国留踪记 (*Traces from Italy*, 1937). Other travelers, such as Huang Juesi 黄觉寺 (1901–1988), exalted Italian art and its masters, praising Italy’s genius in his account titled *Ouyou zhishen* 欧游之什 (*Writings on my European travel*, 1944). Still others, like the former general of the Nationalist Army Cai Tingkai 蔡廷楷 (1892–1968) in his *Haiwai yinxiang ji* 海外印象记 (*Impressions from abroad*, 1935), focus on Italian politics, showing great admiration toward the Fascist regime. Unlike the traveling writers just cited, some peculiarities distinguish Zou’s prose.

The content and style of Zou’s writing contributed to the interest of past readers, regardless of their age and nationality. These narrative characteristics continue to attract new readers to this day. Moreover, despite the lack of realistic descriptions or the abundance of political consideration related to China’s situation, a vital asset in Taofen’s prose is that “his attention is always directed to people: to individuals as well as to society as a whole” (Xu 1999, 25). The exiled status of Zou affects his mobility as well as his writing. In going into exile, he is forced by circumstances to develop his capacity for looking beyond the superficial observations of many travel narratives, leading to direct encounters with the real social circumstances of human suffering. If humanities “can examine how movement is enacted, felt, perceived, expressed, metered, choreographed, appreciated and desired,” as Merriman and Pearce write (2017, 493), Zou’s travel account offers an excellent opportunity to further explore the relationship between exile and mobility. By chance, the author clearly expresses his ideas on mobility in the opening of his last autobiography:

On the surface, I seem to be very fluid, and seem to be very active. My first exile was in 1933 (the 22nd year of the Republic of China). Starting from Shanghai, I moved out from the Atlantic Ocean and came back from the Pacific Ocean in 1935. I just circled the earth once, moving around such a big circle! In the following ten years, except for the time I spent with a few comrades who helped

save the country in the prison of Suzhou, which cannot be considered exile, there was the second exile, the third, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth! It might seem like I never get bored! [But] Exile involves mobility, and actually, I am terrified of mobility (Zou 1946, 1.1).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to pass a comment on Zou's idea of Italy, but it is certain that Zou's exile and forced mobility influenced his perceptions of the Peninsula. These creative visions and representations reflect a unique voice, which spread widely among established and emergent Chinese audiences.

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Representations of labour mobility from China to Italy by worker writer Deng Yuehua

Valentina Pedone

Abstract: Within the many typologies of mobility between China and Italy, labour mobility is the one that is numerically most important, constituting over 80% of Chinese citizens living in Italy. In terms of cultural productivity, however, it is the one that is least represented. While Chinese international students who live in Italy are very active in the visual arts and individuals who reached Italy through other forms of privileged mobility are also well represented by their literary production in Italian or Chinese, immigrants who work in sectors that require lower skills appear to be under-represented as far as their cultural production is concerned. In this chapter, I introduce the work of Deng Yuehua, a migrant from Fujian who arrived in Italy in 1991. Since then he has been working in different factories and sweatshops run by other Chinese migrants while constantly publishing his writings. In the mid-2000s, he started publishing works in Chinese in local Sinophone magazines and newspapers, as well as on the web. I observe how his production revolves around the trope of the *youzi* 游子, the wanderer, which has a long tradition in his area of origin. Moreover, by drawing on the new mobility studies paradigm, I highlight how through textual analysis of the production by mobile subjects, we can infer knowledge on the implications of specific mobilities that would be hard to gain otherwise. Specifically, Deng Yuehua's work casts an important light on the private and personal dimensions of individuals who are involved in labour mobility flows from Southern China to Italy.

Keywords: Chinese migration, Sino-Italian writers, China-Italy labour mobility, Sinophone Italy.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had a deep impact on many types of mobility globally. Although it is too early to predict in detail what the long-term consequences of the sudden change in individual mobility habits are, we can already see that the process of de-territorialization of many social and cultural practices initiated with the first lockdowns and quarantines will probably continue. Before the sudden immobility generated by Covid-19, however, we had witnessed an exponential growth of all types of mobility for several decades. In the China-Europe relations of the last 20 years, for example, there has been a steady increase in the number of Chinese visitors, who have entered, visited and stayed in the old continent for the most varied reasons (tourism, study stay, work).

If we focus on Italy, the most substantial form of mobility from China is the one originating from Southeast Zhejiang, especially from the Wenzhou area. The mobility from these areas to Italy can be characterized as a kind of labour

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mobility since it is constituted by mostly unskilled workers who choose to reach Italy to work in enterprises run by other former migrants who moved to Italy from China before them. This migration chain has the longest history when compared to the other significant forms of mobility between China and Italy¹ and, as a result, today roughly 70% to 80% of Chinese citizens permanently living in Italy come from Southeast Zhejiang (Ceccagno 2017).

Although the first modest migration flow from Southeast Zhejiang to Europe started in the first half of the XX century, it only began to increase significantly in the 1980s with the opening of China following Deng Xiaoping's reforms, and it gained substantial momentum after China's entry into the WTO in 2001, peaking around the end of the 2000s. Since the 2010s, while the flow of workers from China continued to some extent, more and more small entrepreneurs are choosing to return to China from Italy, while, in general, the pace of new arrivals is slowing down (Pedone 2013). In fact, the economic crisis that hit Europe in the mid-2000s made it increasingly less attractive for Wenzhounese small entrepreneurs to go to Italy searching for a business, whereas the quick development of the sending areas made it more convenient to invest at home.

The typical Wenzhounese migration project towards Europe of the 1990s and 2000s, however, shaped the Chinese minority in Italy as we still know it today. The migrants who undertook its path were aware of its dark aspects but confident of the final results. Before leaving, the first stage involved raising a small capital to pay relatives, fellow villagers or acquaintances who were already in Italy and who would have welcomed the migrant upon arrival. This sum constituted the migratory debt that the newcomer had to pay back through their own work in the following few years, once in the new country. Generally speaking, part of this debt was paid before departure as a form of deposit which was collected through informal loans, usually from within the migrant's family. The rest of the debt was instead paid off with one's work once the newcomer reached the migratory destination. The employer, relative or acquaintance who invited the newcomer offered food and accommodation from the very first day in Italy while withholding a certain amount from the employee's salary until the debt was paid off. Usually, the whole process took three to four years of hard work, after which the migrant could finally begin to accumulate capital to open a business and, in the future, possibly invite new migrants. The extreme flexibility and harshness of the working conditions faced by the newcomers were made clear to them before departure and were accepted as a necessary, but transitory, phase of the migration project (Benton and Pieke 1998).

Besides the larger flow from Southern Zhejiang, another migratory flow developed from Fujian, in particular from the Sanming district, towards the end of the 1990s. The Fujianese arrived in Italy through traditional migration channels, following the same migratory project as the Zhejiangese, to the point that

¹ While it is not the oldest form of migration from China to Italy, it is the one that consistently grew in numbers throughout the years and became thus significant in a relatively short time.

at some point it became common among Fujianese to marry people from some parts of Southern Zhejiang in order to enter the kinship network that allowed them to leave the country legally. Fujian has a rather long migratory tradition, dating back to the Tang dynasty (618–907). The province is also home to two of the five ports that were forcibly opened to trade with the West during the Opium Wars: Xiamen and Fuzhou. Many indentured labourers recruited by Western powers at the end of the XIX century came from this province and today a large number of Fujianese still live in different parts of Southeast Asia (where many Fujianese had already moved in the 17th and 18th centuries) and in the USA. Despite the long migratory tradition of the inhabitants of this province, the movements from Fujian to Italy did not involve the historical areas of migration but concerned the internal areas of the western part of the province, especially the city-prefecture of Sanming. With the era of reforms and opening up inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping, the Fujian coast developed faster than its interior. Sanming had been artificially transformed into a center of heavy industry during the Maoist era but with the advent of the new economy, based largely on the development of trade and light industry, the area quickly lost its wealth, which spilled over to coastal areas and left many workers in former state industries unemployed (Pieke et al. 2004). Today, the Fujianese in Italy often occupy the lowest position within the Chinese migrated group, working mainly as a low-cost labour force under very harsh conditions in enterprises run by Zhejiangese.

Inspired by the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006), which, despite its origin in the social sciences, advocates a transdisciplinary approach to investigate the relationship between movement, meaning and power (Cresswell 2006), I consider the labour mobility from China to Italy both in its entanglement with the economic and social contexts the mobile subjects experience and in the representational texts and cultural products created within it. When discussing migration studies as a crucial part of mobilities research, Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) address the role of literary and cultural studies' potential to highlight the migrant subjectivity and 'nomadism' in the contemporary world. Merriman and Pearce (2017), on the other hand, focus on the specific contribution of the humanities in understanding mobility. They observe how, for instance, issues of temporalities and our perception of time and distance are often topics of discussion in literary analyses of chronotope and studies on migrant subjectivity, as well as in works by cultural geographers and studies of roads and experiences of travel. They argue that textual analysis, which typically constitutes the favored methodology within the humanities, can open new perspectives on how mobility is experienced since interview-based research often struggles to capture its unconscious and retrospective aspects. In the case of Sino-Italian textual production, the few works produced within labour-based mobility are especially significant because although the majority of Chinese in Italy arrived through this kind of mobility, the cultural production by Chinese or their descendants in Italy is almost exclusively published by a small elite of people who arrived through other privileged patterns. This leaves the experience of labour mobility from China to Italy short of "internal" representations.

The following pages will present how this experience is represented in the writings by one of the few such authors, the Fujianese factory worker Deng Yuehua.

2. Factory worker and writer Deng Yuehua 邓跃华

Although almost no proper research exists on Deng Yuehua, his detailed autobiographical works offer us a glimpse into the main events of his life. The third of five children, he had a difficult childhood which was first marked by health problems that prevented him from finishing compulsory school, leaving him illiterate until an advanced age, and then by the premature death of his father who was killed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which forced Deng Yuehua to leave his beloved Sanming to work as a woodcutter on the neighboring mountains at only 16 years of age. The solitude of the woods inspired him to study literature, which, in turn, uncovered his unstoppable creative vein. In 1989 he got married, but he left China shortly afterwards to try his luck in Europe, leaving his wife and their newborn daughter behind. He arrived in Budapest clandestinely in 1991, but he was soon expelled from Hungary after unwillingly getting involved in illegal activities. Taking advantage of a network of new acquaintances, he then moved to Prato, Italy. In 1996 he obtained the coveted residence permit that made him legal and allowed him to reunite with his wife. After three years, in fact, she rejoined him while the daughter remained in China with her grandparents to finish her studies until 2003, when she finally reunited with the rest of the family in Italy. Today Deng Yuehua lives in Montebelluna, an industrial town in the Veneto region with a large Chinese population employed in small garment factories run by Chinese. He works in a factory and in his spare time he writes and regularly publishes his works on the web.

To date, Deng Yuehua has only published online and in the Sinophone press in Italy. As will be shown in more depth later, since he writes exclusively in Chinese, his work has been published, often in installments, in some of the most popular Chinese language magazines and newspapers that are based in Italy and cater to Chinese immigrants. Besides in the paper version, all the works have also been published online, sometimes on multiple websites. The digital works obviously address Sinophone readers all around the globe. The websites that Deng Yuehua uses to publish his work are literary websites for self-publication (such as Jiangshan Wenxue 江山文学: www.vsread.com) or the web community of “Overseas Chinese” (such as huarenjie.com).² He also regularly participates in specialized literary contests held in China and Italy and occasionally won a few prizes.

His most representative works are the novels *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* 我在欧洲的日子里 (My days in Europe) (Deng 2005), which was serialized in the

² He also opened several accounts on WeChat, Weibo, sina.com and similar platforms, to communicate with other netizens and share his writings. However, these accounts appear to be very unstable and change constantly.

Sinophone newspaper based in Milan *Ouzhou huaren bao* 欧洲华人报; *Dou xiang you ge jia* 都想有个家 (Everyone wants a family) (Deng 2007) also published in installments in another Sinophone newspaper based in Milan *Yidali Ouzhou qiaobao* 意大利欧洲侨报; and *Zhongguoren zai Yidali* 中国人在意大利 (Chinese in Italy) (Deng 2021), self-published on the literary platform *QQ yuedu*. In addition to the novels, Deng Yuehua has also published hundreds of essays, poems, and short stories in various paper and electronic magazines, blogs, and websites.³

Deng Yuehua certainly uses digital platforms and web communities to publish his work for their accessibility. The benefits of self-publishing his work online, however, do not end with the fact that the process is almost costless and immediate. Most of the platforms he uses also allow for comments and feedback from readers, a feature which becomes an especially important factor for works like those of Deng Yuehua that focus on the sense of nostalgia and on the premise of an ‘imagined community’ of compatriots who share his ideals and values. The many comments of praise and compassion from the readers echo his love songs for the homeland, contributing to the articulation of a collective expression of similar sentiments. Moreover, by making his writings available at no cost online, he naturally increases the number of readers who can potentially access his work, regardless of where they live, a feature which particularly resonates with Chinese migrants all over the world. While this process of de-territorialization of some creative practices has been an increasingly global phenomenon, it is especially embraced within contemporary Chinese society, as is evidenced for instance by the huge popularity of the so-called web literature in China (Hockx 2015). The transnational and mobile dimensions of the author, then, so important both in his life experience and in his production, find a perfect outlet in social media which are by their nature placed between the local and the global. On the other hand, when Deng Yuehua searches for recognition outside the web, he finds a suitable arena in very localized contexts, such as that of Chinese immigrants in Italy represented by the local Sinophone press based in Northern Italy (with a rather limited circulation) or in the various cultural events organized in his hometown Sanming, in which he participates by sending his writings celebrating local folk culture. The tension between the sense of belonging to a localized cultural community that has its epicenter in Sanming, different from the idea of a generic Han culture imposed from above, and the identification with the *youzi*, the wanderer, whose chosen destiny lies in intentionally being far from ‘home’, refusing to grow roots anywhere else, constitutes the thematic core of Deng Yuehua’s written production.

³ It was not possible for me to find the original issues of the newspapers where the works were published. However, I am in possession of the digital texts provided by the author. The quotes from the works come from those digital texts, unless specified differently. A selection of his works is today available on the webpage: <http://www.vsread.com/index.php/space/myspace?uid=34658&lm=1>. Accessed November 1, 2022.

3. Tailoring the working-class heroes

Deng Yuehua's production ranges from non-fiction and fiction prose to poetry. His non-fictional production has mostly been published on *Cina in Italia* (a Chinese-Italian bilingual magazine based in Rome) throughout the late 00s and early 10s and on *Ouhua shibao* 欧化时报 (aka *Europe Chinese News*, a Sino-phone newspaper based in Milan) when online communities such as huarenjie.com were not still as popular. Today, he posts his non-fictional essays on various blogs and platforms. In his early non-fictional essays and articles, Deng Yuehua focuses mostly on the difficulties encountered by Chinese immigrants in Italy regarding their social integration into Italian society. For instance, in a long article published in three instalments on different issues of *Cina in Italia* in 2007, he analyzes how a conflict between Italian police and about 300 Chinese nationals that happened in an area of Milan that was at the time defined by the media as a "Chinatown", represented a missed opportunity for both Italians and Chinese to start a real dialogue on integration. Although the theme of the social and cultural integration of Chinese in Italy is dominant in this early non-fictional production, it is surprisingly not particularly prevalent in his fiction, as will be seen further on. The same applies to the theme of ethnic or cultural identity, that is the theme of celebrating, defending and/or preserving Chineseness in a foreign context; even though such a theme is an absolutely prominent topic in the majority of Sino-Italian literature, in Deng Yuehua's writings it does not seem to have any relevant position. To be precise, the theme of cultural identity can be found in the aforementioned early non-fictional texts, and it even becomes crucial in the more recent non-fictional productions which, however, do not concentrate on a generic Han cultural identity but on the very specific Hakka Fujianese one, or better yet Sanming's cultural identity in its specific difference with the rest of Chinese cultures. These more recent essays are mostly published online on the author's page on the literary platform Jiang Shan wenxue and generally focus on folk music and traditions from the area of Sanming. In fact, the author feels very influenced by his sense of belonging to the local popular culture of his town of origin.

As for his novels and short stories, besides the autobiography narrated in first person entitled *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li*, they represent fictional characters who live through adventures resembling those experienced by the author. In fact, the stories Deng Yuehua crafts are inspired exclusively by the world of Chinese immigrants in Italy which he has come to know during the many years he spent in the country. *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* tells the story of the author's travels from China to Hungary, which he chose as his first European destination for the specific policies in place in the early 1990s that allowed Chinese to easily enter the country without a visa (Moore and Tubilewicz 2001). In the novel, he explains how he was thrilled to be in Hungary as he had always been an admirer of the poet Sandor Petofi (1823–1849). Petofi seems to be an important life inspiration for the author as he mentions him in several of his writings, fictional and non-fictional. He feels especially influenced by the Hungarian poet's love for freedom, which Deng Yuehua considers an important value for himself too. For instance,

to explain his desire for travelling and exploring new places in contrast with his attachment to his homeland, in *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* he mentions Petofi's famous lines: "Liberty and love/ these two I must have./ For my love I'll sacrifice/ my life./ For liberty I'll sacrifice/ my love".⁴ Once in Hungary, the author was the victim of a judicial error and was temporarily jailed. He managed to leave Hungary and reached Italy, first working in Prato's clandestine sweatshops for a few years and then, after obtaining the much-coveted residence permit, he moved to Northern Italy and was finally allowed to invite his wife first and later his daughter to live together, united as a family again.

Dou xiang you yi ge jia is the story of a Fujianese woman who decides to move to Italy after she finds out that her husband cheats on her. She leaves China seeking freedom and a new life, along with her daughter. In order to legally enter Italy, she needs to get married to another Fujianese who arrived in Italy long before, after having left his first wife in China with the plan of waiting for an amnesty in Italy to get a residence permit that would allow him to finally be rejoined with her. However, the delayed amnesty caused the first wife to start an affair with another person in China, which in turn led her to divorce her migrated husband. The man, now alone in Italy with his son, decides thus to marry the protagonist in exchange for money to pay for the lawsuit with his ex-wife, who wants to be paid to allow her child to stay in Italy with his father. The rest of the novel is about how these two strangers, belonging to different classes (the protagonist is a rich woman moving to Italy looking for independence, while the "husband" is a man of humble origin who moved to Italy in search of better economic conditions), face the many difficulties encountered by Chinese lower-income workers in Italy, helping each other as if they were old friends. At the end of the novel, after having gone through all sorts of painful events together without ever considering themselves as a real married couple outside of their fake marriage, they realize they have grown feelings for each other and decide to spend the rest of their lives as a real couple along with their children.

Zhongguo ren zai Yidali follows a young woman from Fujian who clandestinely arrives in Italy hoping to make some money by working in illegal sweatshops run by Chinese entrepreneurs from Zhejiang. In Italy, she becomes close to another man from Fujian who also arrived as a clandestine from Hungary. He teaches her how to survive the very hard life of illegal sweatshop workers. At the very beginning of the novel, for instance, a sudden police raid at the sweatshop causes all the workers to flee in the night and hide in the fields soaked with rain. The protagonist and her friend find refuge in a cave, where they spend the night hiding in the cold winter. She has just arrived and is terrified of being found by the police, but since it is also her birthday, her new friend who is hiding with her manages to sneak a piece of cake with a candle to eat with her in the wet and dark cave in the middle of nowhere.

⁴ I report the most widespread English translation of the famous poem. Petofi's poems and "Love and Liberty" specifically have been extremely popular in China, as he was admired by Lu Xun (Chen 2021).

The other novels and short stories all deal with the same kind of situations and characters, showing the reader a world of mutual help, trust, betrayal, sacrifice, intimacy and hope: a world that never surfaces in Italian language representations of Chinese immigrant workers.

Besides essays and novels, Deng Yuehua also authors many poems. He not only publishes his poems in Chinese language press in Italy and on various websites, but he also often includes poems in his non-fictional and fictional prose. Sometimes, he accompanies the poems with an essay (called by himself *suibi* 随笔, a specific kind of essay in Chinese literary tradition) in which he describes when and how the poem was composed and what it refers to. He explains how his compositions are mostly thought of as folk songs, in the vein of traditional folk songs of the area of Sanming. Especially in the past years, he has been producing poetic songs that are influenced by the tradition of Dragon boat songs, which is very deeply felt in the Sanming area. Another cultural element that has a powerful influence on the poetic production of Deng Yuehua is the trope of the *youzi*, the wanderer. The culture of the *youzi* is popular in the areas of migration of Southern China and it is celebrated in Zhejiang with a specific literary festival, the *Zhonghua youzi wenhua jie* 中华游子文化节 (China wanderer culture festival). The festival takes place in Deqing, the home town of Tang Poet Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814), whose poem *Youzi yin* 游子吟 (The wanderer's song) is considered to be the starting point of such a tradition. The poems of Deng Yuehua are mostly intended as celebrations of his wanderlust; he sings about the urge to leave what is familiar to discover the world, but also about the disrupting nostalgia the wanderer feels along the way for his hometown and family left behind. In *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li*, Deng Yuehua inserts his poems in the text as a further lyrical comment to the events narrated in the novel. It should be noted that by referring to a specific traditional sub-culture of Southern China that is particularly connected with the history of Chinese migration, Deng Yuehua, once again, does not focus on the central Han culture and does not seem interested in the debate about Chineseness intended in its patriotic or even nationalist sense, which is quite common in the writings by other Chinese in Italy. He feels a stronger sense of belonging to Sanming, to the Hakka culture of migration, and to an imagined community of travelers who cannot help but go far.

4. Tales from the margin

The style of Deng's works is realistic and the language is simple and direct. Overall, he does not indulge in sentimentalism; the characters seem focused on forging their destiny more than chasing their feelings. We follow them in their daily struggles, which are described with no glamour, to the point that descriptions of private aspects of daily life like their bodily functions are included in what at times turns into almost hyperrealist writing. The atmosphere Deng manages to evoke in his stories is that of an underworld where moral degradation is common and fate is always behind the corner ready to frustrate all the

efforts made by the characters to improve their social status. Against this backdrop, Deng Yuehua's characters endure all sorts of hardships in order to fulfil their ambitions, which are framed as legitimate desires of self-developing and independence. This way, the reader cannot help but sympathize with the characters, who never lose their humanity throughout their adventures and, in a way, maintain a certain romantic carefreeness.

In the following excerpts, Deng Yuehua emphasizes the inhuman hours that the workers do at the sweatshops:

When everyone had gone to bed to sleep it was already dawning. At most, they would sleep four hours, after which they would have to wake up to go to work again. They had almost turned into machines now (Deng 2007).⁵
 Having to work, the workers had absolutely no time to go out, just like caged birds. They spent the monotonous life of irregular workers: they ate, slept and only sewed, just like machines (Deng 2007).

While it is common knowledge that work shifts are unbearable in clandestine workshops, what Deng Yuehua's writings reveal is that the workers are fully aware of what they will face in these contexts and even appreciate the flexibility of a job that does not require any specific skill and can be dropped at any time. The following is a dialogue between a migrant who spent enough time in Italy to be finally able to open their own sweatshop and a newly arrived migrant:

"We intend to open our own factory and everything is already in place, but we just can't find a house to rent".

"How is it possible that you can't find even one?"

"Many Italians find the smell of fried food when we make sautéed foods unbearable, and they also complain that we work over ten hours a day, disturbing their rest. For these reasons, some Italians prefer to keep their houses vacant rather than rent them to us Chinese".

"He [*another long-term migrant*] also told me that working for the Italians is not bad at all, while running a sweatshop is hard, so why would you want to do it anyway?"

"Working for Italians does not allow you to put any money aside and the reason why we emigrated is precisely to make money. We must take advantage of the fact that we are still young and give our all, because once we get older, even if we wanted to, we could no longer do it".

"So having a factory here is very profitable?"

"If unforeseen events do not happen and there is work, you certainly earn well. Around here there are many who have made a fortune by running a home sweatshop" (Deng 2007).

What generates the sense of desperation and frailty, in fact, are not the working conditions offered by the *laoban* 老板, the owner of the sweatshop. Most of the time, the owner is just somebody who arrived a few years before and went

⁵ Original texts in Chinese, all translations are mine.

through the same path. It is the Italian police and institutions that create a sense of imminent tragedy in Deng Yuehua's stories. The police arrive at night and close the sweatshops where illegal immigrants work and live. The owners get fined and sometimes lose all their money and their dream of accumulating wealth reaches a sudden halt. This event is portrayed as a tragedy for both the *laoban* and the workers. According to Deng Yuehua's novels, the workers are brought to jail and then released right after, but their jobs are lost at that point. Sometimes they also get fined. So when the police come, the workers usually run away and hide, possibly for days, with no money or documents. This scenario is presented several times in Deng Yuehua's works. The characters in his stories shiver any time they hear a siren, even if it is far away, even when they are not at work:

"My cousin told me that once, in the middle of winter, the factory was checked by the police and she had nowhere to go, so she was forced to sleep at the station," Wei Caiyun replied.

"Being able to sleep at the station is already a good result, because in many cities they are closed at night. That year, Chen Xinming and I also slept in a park and it was so cold that we could no longer feel our hands or feet. "

"How did you manage to endure such a tough situation?"

"I just can't remember how many times I cried in that period... once you have chosen this path you can only go on. When you are forced to, you just go on and everything passes." (Deng 2007)

News came from every direction of factories controlled by the police, where machinery had been sealed and employers and workers had been taken to the police station. Since many similar events occurred, everyone understood that in the area around Florence the police were hunting down illegal workers. At that time, even in the small town, the flashing lights of the police were often seen and their sirens were heard, so much so that everyone jumped in fear at the first sign (Deng 2021).

It was dusk when their employer got back in the car and, on his way to the kitchen, he turned to his wife, who was preparing the food: "A little while ago I heard that in the southern part of the city, old Li also underwent an inspection of the police." "It looks like we have to keep a low profile too, until things have calmed down," the woman replied. "Once this load is over, we will take a few days off and tell the workers to go into hiding," the man decided. He had just finished speaking when the doorbell rang. So he went to the side of the door and took the intercom to hear who it was. He found out so that the police were already at the entrance. He then put down the intercom and ran to tell the workers that the policemen had arrived and to escape through the back door. Then, they all put down what they had in their hands and they all poured out. Just outside the door there was a small clearing and in all directions there was only emptiness, which gave no way to hide. The clearing was surrounded by an iron net and outside of it there was the countryside. Someone opened the gate and everyone ran away into the fields in search of a place to hide (Deng 2021).

While Italian institutions appear as a continuous threat to the characters, there are neither anti-Italian sentiments nor any evident patriotic celebratory remarks in the writings of Deng Yuehua. The characters struggle to learn Italian, a competence that is depicted as incredibly hard to achieve as well as strategic in uplifting one's economic conditions. The workers in Deng's stories listen to Italian courses throughout the day in their earphones while they work at the sewing machines, resting exclusively to eat and sleep.

Lastly, another interesting aspect that comes out of these stories is the role played by the *laoban*. In these stories (and in reality) they are usually from Zhejiang, while the characters come from Fujian. This difference of origin sets a distance between the *laoban* and the protagonists, leaving the latter in a special form of isolation. Nonetheless, the novels portray the owners of the sweatshops as extremely caring and loved by their workers, a dynamic that is completely unknown by the general Italian readers. The *laoban* and his wife not only provide work (hence money) and a place to stay to the workers (usually a mattress with other workers in a room inside the sweatshop), they also cook every meal for them, sometimes work with them, and even take care of their recreational needs.

That *laoban* knew how to deal with his workers, he had extraordinary managerial and psychological skills. Twice a month he took us to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. I remember that we also went out for dinner that year to celebrate the mid-autumn festival. During the banquet, our glasses filled, the *laoban* stood up and, with a solemn voice, proposed a toast to our health: "Today is the mid-autumn feast, a joyful occasion that brings us together in front of this table, an excellent opportunity to tell you that in reality we are a big family: we work together, eat together and live under the same roof! Let's drink together for our health!"

That night, in a foreign country, far from our homes, we all celebrated together, drinking one glass after another. During dinner I drank a lot, but I was not drunk, I was happy to be able to share that moment of joy with others. We went home and all my companions collapsed to sleep. I laid down on the bed but could not sleep (Deng 2005).

It is in fact in the moments of joy and sociality among workers, in the friendship that blossoms in terrible conditions, that the world narrated by Deng Yuehua offers its more powerful revelation. By painting the warmth of solitary souls getting together, he restores a sense of humanity in the representation of a group, that of clandestine immigrant workers, which is otherwise only represented from the outside and only as a subaltern indistinct collectivity, deserving pity at the best. The following is the description of one such moment. Christmas is near and Italians will not need more clothes manufactured in the sweatshops run by Chinese immigrants for a while. It is one of the few periods in the year when the Chinese workers, who do not celebrate Christmas at home, can finally relax together, under the warm encouragement of the *laoban*:

Chen Xinming loved to drink, but even though he sometimes did it with Li Zhixiong, he had never played those drinking games. That day was a holiday and the atmosphere was more lively than usual, so the two started to play: they won and lost in turn, so neither of them was able to get the better of the other. It was very hot in the house and the four adults drank so much that their faces turned red and covered with sweat. Outside, on the other hand, an icy and pungent wind blew, while large flakes of snow slowly descended from the sky, which went to settle on the roof of the house, on the branches of the tree, on the large open space and on the road, thus giving Christmas that extra touch. The snow fell all night and the next day, when everyone got up and went out of the house to take a look, it was all covered in white and extremely beautiful. Since a thick blanket of snow had settled both in front of and behind the house, Li Zhixiong took a shovel and shoveled until the snow was all in one place. Then everyone went out of the house to make a big snowman. The one to have more fun was Tingting: it was in fact the first time she made a snowman (Deng 2007).

These images of warmth and affection among Chinese workers and with their *laoban* and *laobanniang* 老板娘 (female boss) are common in the world that Deng Yuehua creates in his writings. It is a world where new, unusual forms of familial ties are intertwined among strangers who are united by a similar destiny and who share dreams of freedom and emancipation. In this lays the evocation of the epos of the wanderer who creates new families and communities in a suspended time and space. These encounters are defined by their remoteness from home on one side and by the mobility of their subjectivities on the other. They represent the crossing of two or more mobility paths, ephemeral and intense: a moment of mooring along a path of incessant drifting.

5. Conclusion

In Deng Yuehua's novels, short stories and poems, the theme of migration is treated in two main tropes which in China, as elsewhere, have a consolidated tradition: the trope of nostalgia for the homeland and that of fascination for wandering. The author explores both to reveal how they constitute two forces that, by pulling him in opposite directions, tear apart his inner self, forcing him into a perennial melancholy. While the being pulled in different directions is in itself a trope of literature of Chinese migration, as far as Sino-Italian literature is concerned it is usually referred to a cultural conflict between the Italian and Chinese value systems that are generally depicted as being in open opposition. In Deng's writings, however, what is foregrounded is not the clash between two static sets of values and qualities, but the sense of belonging to a specifically situated cultural identity within China, that of Fujianese/Hakka travelers and migrants, which is in itself rooted in the tension between the desire of leaving and that of going back. In this perspective, the writings of Deng Yuehua incarnate what Clifford defines as routes that become roots (Clifford 1997).

The epos of the *youzi*, the wanderer, has a literary tradition in China that traces back to Tang poetry, if not before, when literati would write about their trav-

elling aimed at passing imperial exams or fulfilling bureaucratic tasks of various kinds. In recent times, this same epos has been recovered by a different class, that of the many migrant workers in China. A manifestation of such epos can be detected in the popularity of the so-called *liulang ge* 流浪歌, song of the vagrant, a type of pop music that became famous in the 1990s. Taking its name from Chen Xing's most famous song, *Liulang ge* (1997), this pop phenomenon had a great influence in inspiring and then consolidating a contemporary migrant worker culture in China. In these songs, travelling is not glamorized, as it is told from a "subaltern", a *diceng* 低层, grassroots position. However, while in the *liulang ge* phenomenon the attention is primarily focused on nostalgia and the desperation of being away from home, in Deng Yuehua's work there is the distinguishing layer of the untamed desire to leave, something comparable to an unquenchable thirst for cosmopolitanism. The dialectic between these two foci is what makes Deng's work an original case in transnational mobility representation.

In a recent article by Daniela Carmosino (2020), the scholar observes how the novel *Hong bai hei* 红白黑 (Red white black) by Chen He 陈河 (2012) shows how within the China-Europe mobility "a tourist can become a migrant and a migrant can become a tourist" (Carmosino 2020, 230). Just like those by Deng Yuehua, the novel she analyzes tells the intricate stories of several migrants from Zhejiang who travel to Europe in search of a better life. The scholar underlines how the theme of social mobility is dominant along with that of territorial mobility and identity mobility. In Deng Yuehua's work, we do find references to social mobility and, to some extent, it is also the same dream of social upward mobility that pushes the protagonists of his stories. Nonetheless, there is very little desire of patriotic/collective redemption in the patterns of social mobility followed by Deng Yuehua's characters. While in Carmosino's analysis the role of enfranchisement from a post-colonial identity in *Hong bai hei* is strong, the characters in Deng's stories do not seem to embody any specific national craving for global recognition, nor carry any prejudicial rancor against Italians. The people depicted in *Zai Yidali de Zhongguoren*, therefore, do not resemble the West-hating characters of *Beijingren zai Niuyue* 北京人在纽约 (A Beijinger in New York), the very influential Chinese TV series of the 1990s on the difficult parable of a Chinese trying to "make it" in New York. Although Deng's characters do struggle and in most cases only manage to survive without reaching the success hoped for, in their process of wandering they also open themselves up to "homing", they create unusual families, and they participate in transitory, yet welcoming, fluctuating communities of peers.

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Fears and hopes: Chinese university students in Italy during the first wave of Covid-19

Hao Xu

Abstract: In recent years, Chinese students have enjoyed a prominent presence in the Italian higher education system. A recent survey conducted by Uni-Italia shows that Chinese students account for 24% of non-EU students in Italian universities. When the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) erupted in Italy at the beginning of 2020, panic spread quickly through social media; numerous fears, generated by the tide of information available online, permeated the Chinese university student community in Italy. This chapter first analyses the problems encountered by Chinese university students in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic, and then introduces the artistic and cultural response from within that same community. Such forms of creative response also shine light, more generally, on a growing Anti-Asian sentiment in Italy. Despite the enormous challenges posed by Covid-19, Chinese university students in Italy have developed a mode of communication that builds bridges between different cultures—quite different from “mass media” or “major news outlets”—because it is personal, honest, and intimate.

Keywords: Covid-19, Chinese student, Italy, art, anti-Asian racism, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

By any measure, 2020 was extraordinary. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019 soon spread to all countries across the planet. The pandemic disrupted people’s pace of life: factories shut down, schools closed, planes were grounded, and so much more. The pandemic forced people to enter a state of isolation with little warning or any clear sense of when that isolation might end. At the same time, digital technology and social media was being used on a large scale to help people understand the pandemic and to fight the spread of the virus. From smart working to distance learning, the pandemic brought people into a new state of digital life (Vargo et al. 2021). The kind of spatial isolation caused by pandemics not only means that the pace of daily lives changes completely, but also that people’s usual social habits and ways of being in the world are dramatically interrupted, inevitably leading to increased anxiety and other troubles for all who are impacted (Zhai and Du 2020).

When Covid-19 broke out in Italy, misinformation caused panic to spread among Chinese students living abroad (Depoux et al. 2020). There was discrimination against Chinese and a recognition of the differential treatment, by Ital-

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ians, of people from other countries. There was the relatively optimistic attitude towards the virus at the beginning, followed by a rising pessimism as the country went into a policy of national lockdown. The young Chinese university students in Italy, far away from their homeland, endured a series of unprecedented difficulties.

This research will examine the *liuxuesheng* 留学生¹ in Italy during the pandemic. This group was chosen as the object of research because they responded in a remarkably creative way, despite experiencing severe adversity during the Covid-19 pandemic, to make their voice heard to the Italian society in which they live. Primary examples of this response, explored in the proceeding pages, include videos recounting their experience during the lockdown in Italy and art documentaries showing the attitude they adopted in dealing with discrimination.

The cultural responses of Chinese students in Italy demonstrate the importance of international students and their unique capacity to contribute to intercultural communication in a range of ways. Simmel introduced the concept of the “stranger” in 1908, arguing that the “stranger” is not someone who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but is, rather, someone who comes today and stays tomorrow. The “stranger” is not a native of a particular group yet continues to engage with that group, gradually spreading her own culture of origin (Rogers 1999). This viewpoint establishes an important foundation for intercultural communication by emphasizing the various ways that different cultural identities interact with and influence one another. The Chinese *liuxuesheng* 留学生 in Italy described in this chapter are part of this group of “strangers.”

Furthermore, looking closely at various channels of communication, we find overseas Chinese students communicating in largely interpersonal ways, which has distinct advantages. This kind of communication is characterized by spontaneity and autonomy. It is naturally relational, and its naturalness can ensure that information is transmitted effectively (Caughlin and Basinger 2016).

2. Being *liuxuesheng* in Italy during Covid-19

In recent years, the number of students studying abroad has been on the rise. In 2011, the number of Chinese students studying abroad ranked first in the world, up to 339,700, accounting for 14% of the global total (Liu 2016). Since then, China has maintained its position as the world’s largest “exporter” of foreign students. China also enjoys a prominent position in the Italian higher education system (Song 2013). A recent survey conducted by Uni-Italia shows that Chinese students account for 21,81% of the number of non-European students in Italian universities (Naldi et al. 2022).

During the pandemic, Chinese students in foreign countries experienced spatial isolation, leading to feelings of anxiety and helplessness. In addition

¹ In Chinese, the term *liuxuesheng* is used to indicate Chinese students studying abroad, foreign students, or exchange students. In this chapter, *liuxuesheng* refers to Chinese university students in Italy.

to general worries about the pandemic, they had specific concerns about how Covid-19 would impact their life and studies abroad, not to mention the difficulties they faced in returning to China. On top of these mounting anxieties, Chinese students also experienced discrimination in Italy and were marginalized on Chinese we-media² (Liu 2020).

When the epidemic first broke out in China, some Chinese students in Italy immediately faced discrimination and exclusion. By February and March 2020, when the situation in China had improved and the infection levels in Europe were high, many foreign students decided to return to China. This move to return home to China, along with certain behavior³ exhibited by some Chinese students who had re-entered China from other countries, was the primary cause of the criticism and marginalization of the group of Chinese *liuxuesheng* in we-media. Given this, Chinese students faced a double pressure, both abroad and at home (Chen and Ju 2020).

From the outbreak of the epidemic in China at the end of 2019 until today, the experience of overseas Chinese students can be divided into three stages.

1) The first stage lasted from the end of 2019 until the beginning of 2020. When the epidemic broke out in Wuhan and attracted global attention, a host of Chinese *liuxuesheng* and overseas Chinese did everything they could to find and buy pandemic prevention supplies in Italy, which they tried their best to transport back to China.

2) The second stage started in March 2020. At this stage, the situation in China had improved, but the virus suddenly began to break out in European countries and in America. In just a few weeks, the epidemic became a pandemic, spreading from Spain and Italy to the whole of Europe and the United States, which became the hardest hit area of all. At this time, Chinese *liuxuesheng* in Italy suddenly realized that the threat of the virus was close to them. From the temporary suspension and postponement of classes at the beginning, universities quickly moved to remote teaching. Many Chinese students in Italy were at a loss, and their parents, who were far away in China, were very worried, calling for their children to quickly return to China. To prevent the cross-border spread of the disease, however, European countries closed their borders and reduced or even cancelled international flights, making it difficult for Chinese students to

² “we-media (also known as self-media) is an Internet platform. It allows users to write articles and publish videos, each with their own identity. we-media platforms are classified into three types based on their content format: text-based, video-based, and audio-based. Aside from traditional we-media platforms such as blogs, live streaming platforms and self-made funny video platforms are gaining popularity.” Definition provided by Research and Market 2021. Commonly used Chinese we-media platforms include DouYin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu, etc.

³ After returning to China in February 2020 some students did not actively comply with the rules imposed during quarantine, thus creating numerous conflicts with medical personnel on duty at the quarantine facilities. For example, some students asked to go out for a run during the quarantine, and some complained that bottled mineral water was not provided in the quarantine hotel. See Shishixin (2020).

return home. Whether to pay sky-high prices and take risks to return to China, or to stay in Italy, became a dilemma for many Chinese students. The *liuxuesheng* who chose to return to China at this stage caused heated discussions on Chinese social media, especially when the parents of 166 Chinese students in the UK jointly asked China to send a special plane to pick up their children and when individual overseas students did not abide by the quarantine regulations after entering China. Chinese social media was rife with criticism for those who had returned. For a time, the group of *liuxuesheng* was labeled and marginalized (Lin and Zhang 2022).

3) Spanning the second half of 2021 until the present day, the third stage has been characterized by seeking a balance between pandemic prevention and control, on the one hand, and a return to learning and life, on the other. As COVID-19 continued to persist throughout the world, rules to ensure its prevention gradually became the norm in many countries. Italian universities released enrollment plans for the new semester, and all of them offered the possibility to take in-person classes. Chinese students faced new problems: could those students who had returned to China continue their studies if not physically in Italy? How would students who had been staying in Italy arrange their future studies and life? Some *liuxuesheng* initially had the possibility of working part-time while in Italy, but because of the impact of the pandemic, it was very difficult to study and work at the same time.

Along with the pressures and difficulties cited above, instances of racial hatred and discrimination also occurred (Ho 2021). As we will see in the following section (3), from the beginning of 2020 until today, many *liuxuesheng* are concerned about ongoing discrimination. Many who suffered racial profiling during the pandemic believed that the malice brought about by their 'Asian face' was not caused solely by Covid-19. Chinese students consistently reported that many people who already harbored anti-Chinese emotions took advantage of Covid-19 to express their prejudices openly.

Despite this direct expression of racism, Chinese students in Italy did not keep silent but spoke out, building their self-image in various ways: through diaries, videos, we-media cultural works, documentaries, and more. Many students recorded their own personal experiences of Covid-19 and the global public health crisis it caused. By increasing understanding and raising awareness, more people could reflect on and even participate in the social conditions of Chinese people living overseas. The works conveyed by *liuxuesheng* through we-media reflect their personal lives, unique attitudes, and intimate thoughts. Their offerings provide a revealing glimpse into the perspectives of many Chinese students on China, Italy, and the world at large.

3. Questionnaire and analysis

To investigate the problems encountered by Chinese students in Italy during the two years of the pandemic, I developed a questionnaire survey in the fall of 2021 at the University of Florence and Campus CIELS in Padua. Completed ques-

tionnaires were submitted anonymously and included a total of 20 questions in Chinese. They were divided into four parts: basic personal information (name, age, etc.), experiences during the pandemic, details about student life, and confrontations with discrimination. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice and open-ended questions; the latter allowed respondents to participate more actively and make nuanced reflections on the phenomena under exploration. Among the 100 Chinese students who participated at the two universities, 67% were female and 33% were male. Undergraduate students accounted for 78% and graduate students accounted for 22%. The students were between the ages of 19 and 29.

March 2020 marked the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy that led to the closure of the whole country. At the time, I was an adjunct professor at two different Italian Universities. As I have a Chinese ethnic background, I suddenly received a large number of emails from Chinese students asking about distance learning, exams, graduation, and even about the urgent need to return to China (thus reflecting their concern about their situation in Italy). To have a clear understanding of the practical difficulties and specific needs faced by Chinese students in Italy during the pandemic, I conducted the survey described above for Chinese students at the two Italian universities where I was working.

The survey results showed that during the first and second stages of the pandemic, the most common concerns of overseas Chinese students were:

- 1) being infected with the virus (93% of the total number of participants);
- 2) that the pandemic would affect their study plans (85% of the total number of participants);
- 3) being unable to return to China (80% of the total number of participants);
- 4) being subjected to racial discrimination (76% of the total number of participants). Their answers are listed from the higher to the lowest concern.

In terms of the first concern, “infection with the virus,” the vast majority of Chinese students felt tension and anxiety; they expressed concerns about the prevention and control measures taken by the Italian government. These fears tended to emerge in the following respects:

- 89% of Chinese students did not know much about the health system in Italy;
- 79% of Chinese students were worried about the high number of new infections per day as the pandemic continued;
- 28% of Chinese students believed that Italy’s control was not strict enough, leading to pandemic rebound.

“Academic impact” ranked second, with 75% of surveyed Chinese students expressing worry that their studies would be affected. This was seen in the following ways:

- 86% of students were worried the pandemic could not be effectively controlled in a short period time and that the resumption of classes was distant. Additionally, it was difficult for them to adapt easily to remote teaching because of the language barrier, so they could not keep up with the progress of their courses.
- 39% of students were worried the pandemic would affect their graduation plans.

In third place was “unable to return to China.” From the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy in early 2020 to the survey conducted in 2021, the pandemic had reached several peaks and the state of emergency had been prolonged again and again. Therefore, most overseas students hoped to return to China as soon as possible where they could join their families. The rising cost of airline tickets, however, and the cancellation of many flights during the pandemic period created significant hardship for Chinese students trying to return home. Among the students who participated in the survey:

- 64% had a strong desire to return home;
- 23% of students worried about the change in Italian immigration policy, which would lead to their inability to return to Italy to continue their studies as scheduled. This made many reluctant to return to China;
- 13% of students believed that choosing to return to China when the world was not completely out of the pandemic would cost a lot in terms of both money (sky-high airfares) and time (extensive quarantine after entering China), so they had no intention of returning to China soon.

The fourth issue was discrimination. Chinese students studying abroad feared they would face increased discrimination during the pandemic; unfortunately, this worry proved well-founded. In fact, more than 60% of Chinese students surveyed said they had been discriminated against to varying degrees during their pre-pandemic lives in Italy. This phenomenon became more apparent and widespread after the Covid-19 outbreak. In response to this phenomenon, Chinese students actively and creatively constructed their self-image through art and other cultural forms of expression: they published diaries, filmed videos, and made documentaries so that their voices could be heard and prejudiced assumptions about them might be effectively challenged. As we will see in the next part of this chapter, it was also during the first two years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021) that young Chinese students living in Italy expressed their identities by drawing on their own cultural values and traditions.

The questionnaire asked specifically about the help that Chinese students most need now, in the fall of 2022. The problems that they deemed most urgent are: 1) increasing the number of flights to China to help *liuxuesheng* return home; 2) offering more academic and administrative guidance and assistance at universities; 3) providing psychological counseling and support.

The results of the questionnaire also reveal that overseas Chinese students, who have little knowledge of the Italian university system, want more help and clearer guidance from universities when it comes to the complex administrative aspects of admission, registration, and so on. The approach taken by the University of Padua is highly commendable; the registration office at the University of Padua has a desk dedicated to Chinese students, and since 2004, the University of Padua and the Provincia di Padova have signed a formal cooperation agreement to establish SAOS (Servizio Accoglienza Ospiti Stranieri), which creates an accessible path for immigration matters to reach

the university administration—a great convenience for both international students and academics.⁴

The psychological problems of Chinese students cannot be ignored, especially in the context of Covid-19. The results of the questionnaire demonstrated that very few of the Chinese students surveyed had taken advantage of the counseling services offered by the University of Florence, and more than 80% of participants were not even aware of its existence, this means that there was a gap in the available services and the outreach of the universities to make them more accessible to foreign students

4. Italy-based Chinese artist collective: WUXU

When compared with the SARS era of 20 years ago, we see that the development of the Internet, the rise of social media, and we-media has not only accelerated the spread of information but has undoubtedly played a positive role in promoting freedom of speech for every citizen (Guo et al. 2017). At the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese Italian minority made a loud appeal through social media, trying to expose the plight of racial discrimination faced by overseas Chinese and their community response. The hope was to help people understand the extent of this widespread problem (Pedone 2020). In addition to raising awareness within Italian society, encouraging people to confront the spread of Covid-19 directly and objectively, the Chinese in Italy also responded to the situation through art.

Liuxuosheng in Italy organized a powerful cultural response to Covid-19. The 4xDecameron *Sishi ri tan* 四十日谈, created by WUXU,⁵ is a group of Chinese students and young artists living in Bologna who joined together at the beginning of 2020 to establish a cultural association. WUXU's homepage describes itself as follows:

WUXU is a research non-profit association founded in Bologna in 2017. WUXU focuses on the realities of Italian social life, Europe-Far East cultural exchanges, interdisciplinary research, and contemporary art practices. WUXU aims to build an independent researcher's alliance which is well-connected and inclusive. At the same time, through its work, the organization aims to establish its own distinct and active role in the workings of Italian society.

When a Chinese speaker sees the two Chinese characters for the word *wuxu* 务虚, meaning “utopian” or “abstract,” another word that often comes to mind is the opposite of *wuxu*: *wushi* 务实, which means “pragmatism.” In Chinese, the word *wushi* has two meanings: one is to devote oneself to real or specific things, and the other is to be practical. People who have studied contemporary Chinese

⁴ Università degli Studi di Padova. [N.d.]. “SAOS Desk.” <<https://www.unipd.it/saos>>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

⁵ WUXU. [N.d.]. “Homepage.” <www.wuxu.info>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

literature may associate the word *wuxu* with *Wuxu biji* 务虚笔记 *Notes on Principles*, the first novel published by contemporary writer Shi Tiesheng 史铁生 (1951–2010) in 1996. This novel is composed of 22 paragraphs and describes the impact of social changes in China since the 1950s on its fictional characters: disabled C, painter Z, teacher O, poet L, doctor F, director N, etc. (Chen 2017).

5. 4xDecameron

According to the description of WUXU's founder, Zheng Ningyuan 郑宁远 (1989), 4xDecameron 四十日谈 is a project meant to "let more and more people participate in and reflect on the events and phenomena caused by the emergency of Covid-19." The name of the project 4xDecameron was inspired by Boccaccio's Decameron, which literally means "work of ten days." The 4xDecameron is a "work of forty days" relating to young Chinese people during the pandemic. The project uses a famous portrait of Boccaccio in medical protective clothing as its logo. 4xDecameron is addressed to all Chinese people living in Italy who do not understand Italian and therefore could not acquire information from the local media.⁶

The 4xDecameron project also highlights the psychological vulnerability among people of Chinese origin during the spread of Covid-19 and creates a narrative by linking individual experiences. A project of this kind could be considered as a social activity that disseminated values and useful information by taking advantage of social media and organizing volunteer groups. After Covid-19 broke out in Italy at the beginning of 2020, participants in the project spontaneously translated news and policies relating to the Italian situation into Chinese and disseminated the information to Chinese people in Italy through their official WeChat account. This community activism provided psychological comfort to people of Chinese origin who were in a state of greater fragility, precisely because of their Chinese origin, during the spread of Covid-19.

As the project developed, the 4xDecameron team collected diaries, videos, and other original works of Chinese students living in different Italian cities and made public the fears, difficulties, hopes, and feelings of Chinese students trapped in Italy. The purpose of this form of artistic expression was to reach out to Italian society and raise awareness so that people could empathize with the plight of Chinese students and overseas Chinese immigrants in general.

To facilitate this empathetic goal, the 4xDecameron project produced a series of videos, most of which were vlogs shot by Chinese students in various Italian cities, each one averaging about two minutes in length. They show the daily life of Chinese *liuxuesheng* during quarantine in Italian cities. The authors of the videos are Chinese *liuxuesheng* living in Milan, Florence, Bologna, Rome, Naples, Pisa, Ferrara, and Prato. In their vlogs, these Italian cities are no longer

⁶ 四十日谈 4xDecameron. "Homepage" [Facebook page]. <<https://www.facebook.com/4x-Decameron>>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

represented through their famous squares, grand cathedrals, and popular tourist attractions; instead, the videos portray scenes of “everyday life,” dramatically restricted by the rules in place to end the pandemic. Viewers see deserted streets, empty stores and restaurants, long lines at the entrance of the supermarkets—and everywhere, passers-by wearing masks. Chinese students from all over Italy actively participated in sharing these powerful images.

Through this artistic expression, students recorded their “normal” life turned upside-down because of Covid-19, out of which, a distinctive view of Italy under lockdown emerged. In this way, Chinese university students in Italy, a group of “strangers,” communicated to Italian society their attitude toward and experience of the pandemic, as well as their concrete practices while living in lockdown. These artistic representations, in turn, built a bridge of intercultural communication. Young Chinese students in Italy used self-media as an innovative element in making their voices heard—a mode of communication proving to be very effective and widely accepted, especially by young audiences who are now used to transmitting and receiving information via the Internet.

One video in the series collected and produced by WUXU for the 4xDecameron project, “Stuck with the body, prostheses in the soul: Chinese *liuxuesheng* under the pandemic” (2020),⁷ attracted widespread attention. This 17-minute video is a collection of remote interviews with eight students who returned to China immediately after the outbreak and eight Chinese students who chose to stay in Italy. The interviews are conducted in Chinese and the video is subtitled in Italian. The following is a brief part of its introduction:

In February 2020, COVID-19 broke out in Italy. Various forces emerged during the pandemic which created a thick barrier between those foreign students who stayed in Italy and those who returned to China. Students who stayed chose to wait and see how the world would change in Italy, while students who returned home took on the risks entailed with such a long and fraught journey. It is difficult to say whether this barrier is a means of isolation or protection—and indeed, this remains unclear. Information and security relate not only to the virus but also to our future. 4xDecameron invited students from both sides of this barrier to answer 12 questions. Let’s listen to their thoughts and hear about their experiences.⁸

The students who participated in this interview lived in Italy for a period ranging from 6 months to 7 years. There is no detailed introduction to the city where interviewees are now living nor do we learn of their academic disciplines; what we do know is that all the students who chose to stay in Italy are studying or working at home, and the students who chose to go home to China are quarantined in hotels.

⁷ The original title in Italian is “Studenti cinesi ai tempi del Corona: Incastrati con il corpo, protesi con l’anima;” in Chinese is *Gekong qunuan yu wuchu taoli* 隔空取暖与无处逃离.

⁸ Videoavailableonline: <<https://www.facebook.com/4xDecameron/videos/247820976358972>>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

The questions posed in the video can be divided into three categories. The first category of questions is directed to those students who returned to China (e.g., did they receive strict health examinations on their way back? What are their feelings after returning?); the second category of questions is directed to those students who chose to remain in Italy (e.g., Did they stockpile disinfection supplies, food, etc.?); the third category, the one with the most questions, is for all the Chinese students interviewed. From the answers to these questions, we see some clear differences between the answers given by the two types of students. For example, when students are asked to use three adjectives to describe their mood, the most frequent words among students who stayed in Italy are: nervous, uneasy, and anxious; among the students who returned to China, the most common words are calm, relaxed, and warm. Most of the students who returned to China left Italy at the end of February and early March 2020. The students who stayed in Italy say they are very homesick, and when the outbreak began, they all planned to return home—some even bought tickets—but later, for various unexpected reasons, the flights were cancelled, and they could not leave.

The two types of students also give significantly different answers to questions about concerns surrounding the pandemic: students who stayed in Italy are worried about the health of their classmates and friends; they express worry about supply chain issues and resulting shortages of resources; they worry that they will not be able to go home for an extended period; they worry that Italy will be trapped by the pandemic for a long time; and they worry that the pandemic will have an impact on Italy's already fragile economy. The students who returned to China, conversely, are not worried because one person's strength cannot change anything. They just hope everyone will work together to overcome the pandemic as soon as possible.

The interviews take place in March 2020, as Italy began to shut down and implement various laws to stop the pandemic. This was a time of great tension across the country. In stark contrast, many cities in China had no new cases and were slowly returning to normal life. The different attitudes in the video are obviously caused by the different national contexts in which the students find themselves. On some other issues, however, the views of all the interviewed students are roughly the same. For instance, on the closure of Italy, all the Chinese students say it is the right decision and that the closure is long overdue, as it is the only way to end the pandemic. The policy to lockdown affirmed the Italian government's determination to fight the pandemic, which influenced the decision of some students to stay in Italy, momentarily giving up the idea of returning to China. The students agree that the pandemic prevention measures taken up by the Italian government are both strict and reasonable, but they also believe that Italian people are generally not taking sufficient responsibility.

In universities, most of the Chinese students interviewed do not demonstrate any enthusiasm for online classes and many even express resistance. They believe that online classes are a superficial and ineffective way of learning. Some

students think it is inconvenient to use a VPN for online classes in China, and some students think that online classes cannot meet their learning needs because of the particularity of their majors (for instance, art majors).

The most common sources of information for Chinese *liuxuesheng* used in the video are WeChat, Weibo, Huarenjie,⁹ translations published on the official account of the Chinese Students and Scholars Union in Italy (CSSUI), and some WeChat public accounts, such as the translation of Italian official documents by 4xDecameron and official media outlets. Analysis of the data generated by the project reveals that “official media” refers to China’s official media. Participants believe that the Italian and Chinese media adopted different perspectives and attitudes in reporting. In their view, “foreign media” (that is, Western media), writes groundless stories and publishes news that discriminates against the Chinese, resulting in a higher degree of trust in the Chinese media. The theme of ethnic prejudice also emerges in the video, if indirectly, when all the interviewed Chinese students express that their greatest wish is to have more tolerance and understanding, and less prejudice and discrimination. Anti-Chinese prejudice, we will see, is the main theme of another project by WUXU: the documentary, *Racism is a Virus* (2021).

6. *Racism is a Virus*

Discrimination against different groups triggered by Covid-19 has been a topic of concern for the media and the public. The Secretary General of the United Nations pointed out in the “Policy Brief on Covid-19 and Human Rights” that since the outbreak of the pandemic, the instability and fear caused by it are intensifying existing human rights issues, such as discrimination against certain groups (*UN News*, 2022). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, E. Tendayi Achiume, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minorities, Fernand de Varennes, also reported a rise in attacks on minority groups worldwide due to Covid-19.

In a creative response to discrimination, Chinese students produced an art documentary entitled *Racism is a Virus*, developed within a bigger project called VulCa2021. VulCa2021 is the nickname of the project: “Documenting Vulnerability and Care during Covid-19-induced Anti-Asian Racism and Violence in Italy and Canada.” This was created and developed by Chinese Studies scholar, Valentina Pedone (University of Florence), along with Italian Studies scholar, Zhang Gaoheng (University of British Columbia). The project was funded by the Canada Italy Innovation Award (received by Pedone). The production of the documentary was entirely delegated to a team of artists from the WUXU group (Jin Fansong, b. 1994, Wang Yihan, b. 1995, Zheng Ningyuan, b. 1989) along

⁹ The website Huarenjie.com, founded in Paris in 2006, has expanded its business to Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. It is a website aimed at sharing resources and content with the broader Chinese community in Europe.

with a team of students from the two universities involved. The team of students included individuals of Chinese descent from different cultural backgrounds.

The documentary is based on interviews with people of Chinese heritage in Italy and Canada. Some of the selected subjects are *liuxuesheng*, some are Chinese born but raised in Italy or Canada, and some are children who emigrated to Canada or Italy with their parents. Interviewees speak Chinese, Italian, or English and their majors, educational backgrounds, and social contexts are different. What they have in common are Asian features—features that make them equally subject to prejudice and discrimination.

At the beginning of the film, the team of students developing the project agree on which topics are most relevant and plan together what materials to gather. The content collected by students is divided into two types: interviews and self-narrations. The students interview their friends and classmates, but unlike traditional interviews, the people they shoot do not face the camera directly while speaking, nor are they answering an explicit question. Instead, they tell their stories naturally and informally, expressing their ideas as if the camera did not exist.

The videographers carefully record the characters' small movements, the surrounding environment, and all the elements of scenes they believe to be worth recording (e.g., shots of a rainy day somewhere in a city). Some students also chose to be part of their own creations and themselves become the narrative's protagonists. Starting from their own experiences and emotions, they use a first-person perspective to tell their stories and those of their families and friends around them. By describing their individual experiences of discrimination and their particular modes of resistance to it, their videos offer practical strategies to viewers that might help to guide actions in the future.

Members of WUXU participated in the post-production of the documentary and helped to edit the stories recorded by the students, a collaboration that resulted in a powerful documentary. The students who shot the material were not professional filmmakers and had no prior training. They merely accepted some suggestions put forward by WUXU at the beginning of the project.

Although it is difficult to compete with the knowledge and skill of professionals, after months of effort and cooperation, their production screened in October 2021 and was extremely well received. This short documentary film has no single director nor a single author. Each creator independently chose his or her own focus, narrative rhythm, and heart. As an honest and humble production, the documentary resonated powerfully with its viewers. The topics were full of emotion and authentically portrayed; without fixed or prescribed requirements for how it was shot, the creators could narrate and edit freely based on their own ideas, their individual experiences, and available resources.

This freedom allowed distinctive and heartfelt stories to emerge. The students who created this documentary were in different countries and different cities, but the documentary revealed the common threads connecting the lives of all Chinese students; despite the different locations, the individuals often seem to be caught in the same context, the same time and space. This generated a remarkable sense of integration and aroused empathy in the audience.

The short film produced within the 4xDecameron project and the one produced for VulCa2021 are very different in terms of theme and form of expression. The former revolves around the theme of “pandemic,” while the second around discrimination, labels, and anti-Asian hate. However, it is not difficult to see from the words of the Chinese students in the two works that the shadow of prejudice is everywhere. This theme is the common ground between the two works. Ethnocentrism is a form of prejudice. Recall that many Chinese students believed that the reports from China’s official media outlets were true and reliable during the pandemic, while those from Western media were “groundless.” People see other people and foreign cultures through glasses tinted by their own cultural milieus and tend to evaluate them from within their own frames of reference. This results in distortion, misunderstanding, conflict, and the isolation of one culture from another (Elias et al. 2021). From the descriptions given by Chinese students in Italy, we can see that prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination have existed for a long time, but the pandemic made all this more evident and far more serious.

7. Conclusions

Forms of intercultural communication and collaboration, such as those considered in this chapter through projects of exchange and resistance, provide critically relevant responses to anti-Asian racism in Italy and elsewhere. Through cultural and artistic expression, Chinese *liuxuesheng* in Italy actively raised their voices during the pandemic, participating in the ever-important process of cultural production and transmission. As the research presented in the preceding sections has explored, creative responses to Covid-19 provide nuanced opportunities to better understand the significance and influence of contemporary Chinese students studying abroad.

First of all, international students combine the roles of communicator and receiver. Their dual identity makes the interaction between two different cultures clearer and more broadly representative. Although the group of Chinese university students in Italy are beginning to trend younger, most still complete higher education in China and average between 20-30 years old. Most grew up in China, within a traditional Chinese culture; Chinese is their mother culture, and they identify strongly with its core values.

When these students study abroad, they move from their native culture to a foreign one. As representatives of Chinese people, their words and deeds, as well as any communication and exchange with local residents, constitute cross-cultural communication. In order to adapt to foreign life, integrate into the local culture, and communicate with local residents, foreign students must be familiar with local language ideas, customs, preferences, taboos, and other cultural expressions. Their extended experience in two cultures, home and host, makes their understanding of cultural differences more acute. Their dual identity of communicator and receiver allows them to spread their mother culture naturally and easily through interpersonal interaction. In addition, due to the dual

identity of Chinese *liuxuesheng*, the transmission of what they see, hear, and feel is based on first-hand experience and thus the content of the dissemination is more authentic and vivid (Wu 2021).

Studying abroad, at its apotheosis, is inherently open and inclusive. The studies and general life of foreign students in a multicultural society require them to become accustomed to putting themselves on the line, taking risks, and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, this communication must be guided by the language and culture of the country where the foreign students are living. Foreign students need to adapt their ways of thinking and means of emotional expression. This can lead to tolerance and increased empathy in interpersonal communication.

One finds Chinese *liuxuesheng* throughout all levels of society. In daily life they have relatively equal status of others with whom they have developed relationships and made friends. The individual role of *liuxuesheng* is distinguished in important ways from that of the Chinese government; the information they convey will not be immediately labelled as “propaganda,” and people will be more willing to accept what’s conveyed as legitimate and trustworthy. Therefore, interpersonal communication is more powerful and effective than many more formal and established news outlets.

Our data shows that the audience of Chinese *liuxuesheng* is mainly composed of young people who have long been used to accessing news and information via the Internet. Their media habits make them the group with the most active thinking; they are the most capable of integrating new information and ways of understanding, and they tend to be the ones with the broadest and most international point of view. Young audiences increasingly rely on the Internet for information, and teenagers especially prefer social networks to traditional news outlets. The use of social networks is an extension of interpersonal communication and a virtual form of it. Chinese *liuxuesheng* communicate their feelings through the Internet; online they can share with people what they care most about and convey their own culture and values, in both explicit and subtle ways.

In this kind of special cultural exchange, those involved tend to be relatively open. Internet users freely choose the topics or news in which they are interested. They not only pay attention to the people immediately around them, but they also pay attention to news in the larger world, often brought to their attention by online personal connections to friends across the globe. They are open to and actively participate in the spread of culture through online means.

The fear and confusion that people feel in the face of the unexpected and the unknown—manifested in recent years by Covid-19—has increased misunderstandings and conflicts between cultures. At the same time, by way of virtual storytelling and different means of connecting online, intercultural communication has thrived and been an important factor for mitigating increased fear levels. From 2020 onwards, offline activities were subject to various restrictions, and we lost many opportunities for intercultural exchange. Luckily, through creative projects developed and shared via the Internet, Chinese university students in Italy have made meaningful contributions to intercultural communication.

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The life of Mario Tchou in the graphic novel *La Macchina Zero*. A transnational Sino-Italian scientist

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Abstract: The current contribution aims at describing some key aspects in Rocchi and Demonte's graphic novel *La Macchina Zero*, published in 2021. This is Rocchi and Demonte's third work narrating stories of Chinese migration to Italy, after *Primavera e Autunno* (2015) and *Chinamen* (2017). Differently from the first two graphic novels, *La Macchina Zero* gives back to collective memory a new glimpse on the history of Chinese in Italy, focusing on the role of Mario Tchou, a brilliant Sino-Italian electronic scientist, and his contribution both to the economic growth of the Olivetti enterprise and to the creation of one of the first new generation computers, ELEA 9003. The first part will highlight the main events narrated in the graphic novel. After that, some specific considerations about the structure and style, semiotic aspects and communicative functions of *La Macchina Zero* will also be provided, also in comparison with the previous two works. The third paragraph will specifically focus on Mario Tchou, his life and his crucial contribution, as a transnational scientist, to the ascent of Olivetti worldwide.

Keywords: Graphic novel, Mario Tchou, Sino-Italian scientist, technological innovation.

1. Introduction. *La Macchina Zero*: an original glimpse on the history of Chinese people in Italy

Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte are authors of graphic novels and video-makers. Since the very beginning of their careers, they have chosen to pay particular attention to one specific topic in their works, the history of Chinese people in Italy. Their first relevant graphic novel in this domain is the 2015 *Primavera e Autunno*, published by Becco Giallo. It narrates the personal and familiar events of Wu Lishan, Matteo's grandfather, from 1931, the year of his arrival in Milan, until the birth of his grandson. Two years later, with the same publisher they released *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano*, a graphic novel that aimed at reconstructing the history of Chinese migration to Italy, with specific regard to Milan, through the narration of heterogeneous single and familiar stories of different characters.

Various scholars, mainly in the Italian academia, have emphasized the importance of these two works in order to gain insights into more multifaceted and detailed aspects of Chinese migration to Italy (Scibetta 2019, 2020), particularly as regards the accurate reconstruction of the founding process of a century-long Chinese "community" like that of Milan (Giuliani 2019). Other scholars

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compared the contents of both works with the world-renowned graphic novel *American-born Chinese* (Yang 2006) in terms of (re-)definition of pathways of diasporic identity (Caschera 2020). As regards the genre of *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, both were conceived in contiguity to Sino-Italian literature (cf. Pedone 2014) in a third space (Kramsch and Uryu 2012) where the boundaries between literature of migration and literature on migration become fuzzy.

Rocchi and Demonte's latest relevant work in the history of Chinese in Italy and Sino-Italians is titled *La Macchina Zero* and it was published in 2021 by Solferino. In the same period, as for the previous two works, the authors produced a web book-trailer made public through YouTube.¹ Unlike *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, this novel focuses on the life of Mario Tchou, a Sino-Italian scientist who decisively contributed both to the economic ascent of the Olivetti enterprise² at an international level and to the invention and the commercialization of the first prototypes of modern electronic calculators. As will be extensively discussed below, the main points of originality and innovation of this novel concern the focus on a subject, Mario Tchou, who cannot be understood with the common stereotypical idea of Chinese/person of Chinese descent in Italy, usually associated with a series of negative common representations and distorted hetero-perceptions. First, differently from the characters represented in the other novels, he belongs to a wealthy *milieu*, since he is the son of a Chinese diplomat based in Rome (Tchou Yin). Moreover, he lives a life of mobility between different international social settings since his youth, across Italy and the United States. His life mainly spent in two "Western" countries, albeit with a transcultural background based also on a Chinese symbolic heritage, makes the narration of his story different from those of the main characters portrayed in the other two works. However, like Wu Lishan in *Primavera e Autunni* and the various protagonists of *Chinamen*, the example of his life helps overcome the "orientalizing" stereotype according to which Chinese are "closed to the outside world and self-referential" (Dervin and Machart 2017), as well as the Oriental view of minoritized people coming from other socio-cultural models (cf. Said 1979, and Shi-xu 2014 in the frame of the concept of "othering" in postcolonial studies, with a specific focus on the Chinese context).

2. Main contents of the graphic novel *La Macchina Zero*

This paragraph contains some basic information of the main events narrated in the *La Macchina Zero*. Although the authors based their writing on research carried out by collecting interviews and various authentic materials, readers have to be aware that some specific parts of the graphic novel do not rely on archival

¹ The book trailer can be watched at the following link: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dVHc9AGXHY>>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

² Founded in 1908 in Ivrea (northern Italy), Olivetti has been (and still is) a worldwide famous enterprise specialized first in the production of typewriters and in the past few decades in the production of computers and electronic accessories.

or primary sources, so the work is a balanced mixture between historical and fictional reconstruction (this latter being a minor aspect, understood mainly in terms of re-elaboration of direct speech in the balloons, given the historical accuracy of the authors' research at the basis of their work).

The story starts with the arrival in 1918 in Rome of Tchou Yin (Zhu Ying 朱英), Mario Tchou's father, as one of the secretaries delegated to trade affairs within the Embassy of the Republic of China. Instead, Evelyn Wang, his promised wife, reached him in Italy through the Lloyd ferry via Trieste, three years later.

Mario was born some years later, on the 26th of June 1924. At that time, the Chinese *Guomindang* 国民党 and the Italian Fascist Party were having positive international relations. Afterwards, however, Italian society was subject to serious limitations to freedom and rights due to the gradual affirmation of the fascist dictatorship. When the first groups of Chinese peddlers reached Northern Italy through France, local artisans showed their discontent, blaming the Chinese for unfair competition. This caused a sharp reaction of the Italian government, which declared Chinese merchants as "undesired guests" through specific laws (Brigadoi Cologna 2020).

At the end of the Twenties, Mario and his sisters lived their first experience in China, where they met their maternal grandmother, who welcomed her grandchildren with enthusiasm, praising the choice of their parents to go to live abroad, and reminding them at the same time of the importance of defining themselves as "Chinese" and not "Italian". As reported in the graphic novel, in fact:

For her, those children were the future she had always dreamt of. Growing up abroad, they could well represent China in the West. Other grandchildren were born in America and in Australia. Grandmother Wang saw a favorable future for her lineage. "Grandma, are we Chinese or Italian?" "Chinese, Chinese. You were born in Italy, but you are still Chinese, China is your homeland, you don't have to doubt it, your strength comes from your clan" (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 53).³

They went back to Rome with their mother in 1932. In the meantime, Tchou Yin was nominated Consul for Chinese people in Italy, gaining more importance in his diplomatic role. In 1935, the year during which Galeazzo Ciano (1903–1944), general Consul of Shanghai, went back to Italy from China, together with the pressing Japanese threat to China, things changed very quickly in terms of diplomatic relations between Italy and the Republic of China. Intolerance and racism grew rapidly in Italy during the second half of the Thirties, reaching the point of the institutionalization of racial laws on the 5th of August 1938. From that moment, Chinese became enemies of Italy and the bilateral relationships

³ Original version: Per lei, quei bimbi erano il futuro che aveva sognato. Crescendo all'estero avrebbero poi reso la Cina grande in occidente. Altri nipoti erano nati in America e in Australia. Nonna Wang vedeva un futuro prospero per il suo lignaggio. "Ma noi, nonna, siamo cinesi o italiani?" "Cinesi, cinesi. Siete nati in Italia, ma restate cinesi, è la Cina la vostra patria, non abbiate mai dubbi su questo, la vostra forza viene dal clan."

between Italy and China were totally interrupted by the involvement of Italy in World War II on the side of Germany and Japan.

Mario and his sisters kept attending the well-known “Liceo Tasso” in Rome in those years, whereas most Chinese people residing in Italy were imprisoned in concentration camps in the center (Abruzzo) or in the South (Calabria) of the country. At the end of the war, the Chinese embassy was finally re-established in its original seat in Rome. Tchou Yin did his best to provide Chinese victims of fascist dictatorship and of war with some necessary compensations to start a new life. However, most surviving Chinese decided to travel back to China.

Right after the end of the war, Mario enrolled at the University in Rome, studying industrial engineering. In 1946 he left for the United States, after being awarded a scholarship by the Catholic University of America in Washington. After spending some time with his Chinese relatives and friends, he decided to move to New York, where he accepted a job as a teacher at Manhattan College. At the same time, he enrolled at the Polytechnic Institute of New York to attend a Master of Science.

Mario had to face various hardships in those years due to the lack of money. Therefore, he also started to work as an electrician at night at the Brooklyn harbor. As reported in the graphic novel:

Life started to be hard. Mario used to sleep and eat less, he rationed his earnings to pay the rent and could not afford to heat up his house (...). In the coldest and darkest moments, he used to go out for long walks through the city. Punctually, one of his mothers' common saying used to come to his mind: *Yī nián zhōng zhīyǒu liǎng tiān nǐ néng bù gōngzuò, yī ge jiào zuótiān lìng yī ge jiào míngtiān* “一年中只有两天你能不工作，一个叫昨天另一个叫明天” (“There are only two days during the year, when it is possible to do nothing: one is yesterday, the other one is tomorrow”) (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 69).⁴

After a while, he fell in love with Mariangiola Siracusa, an Italian student of Political Science attending Columbia University thanks to a scholarship, and they decided to start living together in Greenwich. In 1949, the same year in which Mario ended his studies, they got married. In the summer of 1949, they went back to Italy for two weeks, so Mario had the opportunity to introduce Mariangiola to his family. During their trip back to the States, Mario got sick with pneumonia. He had to be treated by a private doctor, because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, institutionalized in 1882, according to which his Chinese passport did not allow him to be hospitalized.

⁴ Original: La vita aveva incominciato a farsi dura. Mario dormiva e mangiava poco, razionava la paga per l'affitto e non poteva permettersi di riscaldare la sua abitazione [...]. Nei momenti più freddi e bui, usciva di casa e faceva lunghe camminate per la città. Puntualmente gli tornava in mente uno dei modi di dire della madre: *Yī nián zhōng zhīyǒu liǎng tiān nǐ néng bù gōngzuò, yī ge jiào zuótiān lìng yī ge jiào míngtiān* “一年中只有两天你能不工作，一个叫昨天另一个叫明天” (“Ci sono solo due giorni all'anno in cui si può non fare niente: uno si chiama ieri, l'altro si chiama domani.”).

In 1952, thanks to the intercession of Enrico Fermi (1901–1954), he started to teach in the Marcellus Hartley Research Laboratory at Columbia University. As written in the novel, in fact, “it was a golden age and the new inventions were rapidly broadening Mario’s universe: transistors, electronics, digital, computers... and he was there, right at the source were the new science gushed out” (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 81).⁵

In those years, during a visit to the Olivetti factories in Ivrea (Northern Italy), Enrico Fermi persuaded Adriano Olivetti (1901–1960) that the future of science was in the development of electronics. For this reason, Dino Olivetti (1912–1976) (Adriano’s brother) decided to inaugurate a laboratory for electronic research in New Canaan, Connecticut. In 1952, Mario Tchou introduced himself to Dino Olivetti in person, and it was the beginning of a long-lasting relationship of mutual understanding. Unfortunately, this was also the year in which Mariangiola had to go back to Sicily to assist her mother and definitively left Mario.

During the Fifties, in Italy attention was being paid to the possibility to design and build an electronic calculator. The University of Pisa decided to invest a significant amount of money, in collaboration with the Olivetti enterprise, which was already worldwide famous for its high-quality typewriters, to this purpose. As reported in the novel,

Olivetti in those years was a worldwide known enterprise. It had seats in London, New York, Buenos Aires. It produced typewriters and calculators, which were famous both for their technology and for their design. In 1952 the MoMa in New York dedicated an exhibition to it, celebrating the aesthetic qualities of the brand and the lesson taught by Olivetti to the industrial world of that time with its first example of coordinated image, a factor that would become central for the communication of all the enterprises. (...) But Adriano Olivetti knew that such a technology had its limits and that the future was in electronics. Its vision was strategic: the matter was not just to switch from mechanics to electronics, but also to switch from isolated machines to integrated systems of elaboration with centers connected with peripheral units (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 88).⁶

Adriano had various contacts with his brother Dino in the US, to define the concrete aspects of his ambitious projects. After some consultations with several

⁵ Original: Era un’epoca d’oro e le nuove invenzioni stavano rapidamente allargando l’universo di Mario: transistor, elettronica, digitale, computer... e lui si trovava lì, proprio alla fonte da cui sgorgava la nuova scienza.

⁶ Original: La Olivetti di quegli anni era un’azienda nota a livello mondiale. Aveva sedi a Londra, a New York, a Buenos Aires. Produceva macchine da scrivere e da calcolo famose tanto per la loro tecnologia quanto per il loro design. Nel 1952 il MoMa di New York gli aveva dedicato una mostra che celebrava le qualità estetiche del marchio e la lezione che l’Olivetti impartiva al mondo industriale dell’epoca con il primo esempio di immagine coordinata, un fattore che sarebbe divenuto centrale per la comunicazione di tutte le aziende [...]. Ma Adriano Olivetti sapeva che questa tecnologia aveva i suoi limiti e che il futuro era nell’elettronica. La sua visione era strategica: non si trattava solo di passare dalla meccanica all’elettronica, ma di passare da macchine isolate a sistemi integrati di elaborazione con centri collegati a unità periferiche.

experts, in 1954 they decided to let Mario go back to Italy to open and manage a laboratory for electronic research, with the financial support of Olivetti enterprise.

After defining the details of his work with Adriano Olivetti, Mario started leading a team of young scientists in Pisa, supported by the University. That period was not only the beginning of a new incredible working experience, but it was also the moment when Mario met Elisa Montessori, a young artist: he fell in love with her and they got married in Rome, at the Chinese Embassy, in 1955.

Mario worked hard with his team of experts in an autonomous laboratory set up for them in Barbaricina, in the suburbs of Pisa. The team was completed at the beginning of 1956 and was composed by physicists, experts in electronic engineering and mathematicians; in any case, regardless of their educational background, they were going to work on something new, constructing a product which required interdisciplinary approaches as well as completely new skills. After three years, the small laboratory of Barbaricina had grown and had new requirements. For these reasons, Adriano Olivetti decided to invest new funds to move the team of experts to a new, bigger and better equipped seat, in the suburbs of Milan.

It was the 12th of April 1959 when the output of years of research and hard work was introduced to the public: it was the ELEA 9003, the first Italian electronic calculator and modern prototype of the personal computer. This instrument was able to put in practice three programs simultaneously, gathering, processing and storing data with an incredible speed. It was so innovative that it could challenge the products of the world-famous American brand IBM.

ELEA was advertised by the Italian national television RAI through specific broadcasting events, as well as by daily newspapers like *Paese Sera*, which conducted an interview with Mario Tchou. After a short time, the calculator was purchased by subjects like the Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank, the car industry FIAT, the hydrocarbon national industry ENI and the national institute for social welfare INPS. The Olivetti enterprise became so famous that Adriano Olivetti asked architect Le Corbusier to design a new worker-friendly factory for him, and decided to buy the American enterprise Underwood, with its 10,000 workers, for 76 million dollars.

A new project was launched at the beginning of 1960 aiming at constructing a new product, ELEA 6001, which would be specifically addressed to universities and research institutes, as IBM was doing in the same period with its "1620" calculator. Unfortunately, Adriano Olivetti died unexpectedly at the end of February 1960: Italy lost one of the most illuminated and talented entrepreneurs of its history, and plans had to slow down because of the need for internal reorganization of the enterprise.

Nevertheless, Mario was able to successfully conclude the work on ELEA 6001 in the same year. He introduced it to the public in April 1961 at the fair in Milan, and he was just ready to start developing a new ambitious project.

At the end of 1961, pretending to spend a holiday with his family in Hong Kong, Mario managed to organize a working trip to China with Roberto Olivetti (1928–1985), Adriano's first son. They planned to cross the border and meet

a delegation of Chinese politicians in Shenzhen, to talk about the possibility of exporting their products to China. It might have been a great opportunity to open a new market in the “place of origin” of Mario; nevertheless, scared by the idea that Mario could be detained in the People’s Republic, Elisa persuaded him and Roberto to abandon their plan. Therefore, they decided to turn down the offer and fly back to Italy.

Despite the failure of the trip to China, in 1961 Olivetti was still one of the most modern and up-to-date enterprises in the world.

On the morning of the 9th of November 1961 Mario had to travel to Ivrea, where the main seat of the Olivetti enterprise was located, and he would have been back home the same day. However, in Santhià, halfway between Milan and Turin, Mario and his driver were involved in a serious car accident and Mario never made it back home to his wife and his daughters. Nobody ever knew whether the accident was just an unlucky event or was the result of a plot. Undoubtedly, Italy lost one of its most talented scientists.

3. General structure and main characteristics of the graphic novel

The graphic novel starts with a flash forward portraying the last moments of Mario’s life in a few pages, ending up with the fatal car accident that caused his death. After that, the work proceeds chronologically from the transfer of Tchou Yin, Mario’s father, to Rome to hold a job within the Chinese embassy, and then narrating the entire life of Mario from his birth.

One graphic detail, which immediately becomes visible to the reader, is the division of different time spans with the use of one chromatic choice in the background. The very first pages, after the initial flash forward, are in light orange and yellow, and focus on the very first information involving the transfer of Tchou Yin to Italy. In the following part, the recurring color is green, as this section is dedicated to the narration of the first period of Tchou Yin in Rome until the birth of his second child, namely the protagonist of the story. Afterwards, a new longer part in light orange and yellow portrays the most important happenings in Mario’s childhood, adolescence and youth. It starts with the first trip to China to visit his grandmother, together with his mother Evelyn and his two sisters, it goes on reporting the hardships lived by Chinese people during the Fascist dictatorship and World War II, and it ends up with Mario’s life and study experience in the USA. We can doubtlessly say that this second orange section is the most “transnational” one, since it deals with a very dynamic phase of Mario’s life, mainly across Italy and the United States. During this time he was able to complete his scientific profile, becoming a very influential scientist, despite the hard times due to the lack of money and to his need to earn a living.

A final, quite long section is represented by a blue background and mainly deals with Mario’s commitment to the Italian project, led by Adriano Olivetti, to create an electronic calculator, his work with a team of experts first in the laboratory in Barbaricina (Pisa) and then in the suburbs of Milan, the creation

of ELEA 9003 and ELEA 6001, his trip to Hong Kong, and the last moments of his young life.

The three images in Figure 1 provide a clear idea of the chromatic difference of the sections present in the graphic novel.

After the end of the graphic novel there is a series of interesting contributions, which include considerations of Mario's colleagues and collaborators as well as remarks about his role as a transnational Sino-Italian scientist.

The first contribution is written by Ciaj Rocchi, one of the two authors, and is entitled "Quell'attimo prima di morire..." ("That instant before dying"): it contains some relevant considerations about the symbolic influence of Mario Tchou. Emphasizing the uniqueness of the personal history of this "unconventional" Sino-Italian, in fact, Rocchi writes that

[...] the history of Mario Tchou is symbolic. He was the very first Sino-Italian, coming from the upper middle class, witness and participant in a time span which was opening to the future without any hesitancy. The encounter with Olivetti was surely fundamental, but the family context, the diplomatic environment, Chinese culture, classical studies, the scientific specialization in the United States are all elements which contribute to define a personality with unique traits, able to learn and bring together different aspects and to experiment (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 163).⁷

The second one is a contribution of sinologist Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, who also gave his scientific support to the production of *Primavere e autunni* and *Chinamen*. Here, he focuses on the importance of the diplomatic role of Mario's father, Tchou Yin, both in his strenuous opposition to the imprisonment of his compatriots in fascist concentration camps and in the operations of acknowledgment, certification, money compensation and repatriation of Chinese people in Italy at the end of World War II, when most of them were still displaced in refugee camps.

The last two texts belong to Francesco Wu, honorary chairman and founding partner of the Union of entrepreneurs Italy-China, and to Roberto Natalini, Director of the Italian Institute for the Applications of Calculation.

As concerns the visual style adopted in the graphic novel, we can identify very similar visual-iconic patterns with the previous two works. As already reported in Scibetta (2019; 2020), and as Ciaj Rocchi explained in her final contribution in *Primavere e Autunni*, the authors write "we kept distance from comics as we usually understand them, to switch to a hybrid type which uses the graphic sign, but in most cases framing it within a video format. Wide. Horizontal" (Rocchi

⁷ Original: La storia di Mario Tchou è simbolica. È stato il primo italo-cinese in assoluto, di estrazione alto-borghese, testimone e partecipe di un'epoca che si apriva al futuro senza remore. L'incontro con Olivetti è stato sì fondamentale, ma il contesto familiare, l'ambiente diplomatico, la cultura cinese, gli studi classici, la specializzazione in campo scientifico negli States, sono tutti elementi che concorrono alla definizione di una personalità dai tratti unici, capace di metabolizzare e poi miscelare diversi ambiti, di sperimentare.



Fig. 1 – Examples of chromatic choices reflecting the internal articulation of the graphic novel.

2015, 136).⁸ Also in *La Macchina Zero*, the impression a reader can have while consulting the tables is therefore to be looking at video sequences.

As regards the presentation of the contents, particular attention is dedicated to the scientific aspects involved in the works and in the experimentations of Mario. In the section with blue background the reader can learn about specific details related to the construction of a prototype of an electronic calculator. We shall argue that this focus on technical and scientific issues was intentional, to make the readers aware of the complexity of Mario's work and of the primary importance of this aspect in his life.

Moreover, we notice various recurring and important references to historical events throughout the graphic novel, both in relation to Italian history and in relation to the history of international relations from the 1930s to the 1960s. As far as the first aspect is concerned, different tables are focused on historical events, including the persecutions carried out by fascists, the publication of racial laws in 1938, the imprisonment of Chinese people in Italian concentration camps, and, after World War II, aspects involved in the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Italy and economic growth. Other tables concern Italian key figures in the scientific domain (for instance, Enrico Fermi), besides Adriano Olivetti, who can be considered one of the main characters of the graphic novel. As regards international relations, some tables underline the effects of Italy's alliance with Germany and Japan, which implied a total suspension of international relationships with the Republic of China, or the tension between the two blocks during the fifties and the sixties, as well as the role of the People's Republic of China as a third world power besides the US and the Soviet Union. Figure 2 shows two tables reflecting these two aspects: the first one represents the massacre of "Fosse Ardeatine", committed by Nazi soldiers in Rome after 33 of them were killed by Italian partisans in 1944; the second one portrays some key leaders during the Cold War, namely John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Nikita Chruščëv and Mao Zedong.

As extensively done by Scibetta in his two previous essays about "Primavera e autunno" and "Chinamen" (2019, 2020), also *La Macchina Zero* deserves some considerations about its language contents. Once again, in this case there is a visible focus on Chinese language, both from a translation and from a pedagogical perspective, as if the writers were committed to teaching some specific Chinese characters to a wide public. While such a focus becomes evident in the first sections, when describing Mario's work to construct ELEA 9003 and ELEA 6001, the presence of Chinese characters appears instead to be marginal. Despite that, very interesting references to onomatopoeias transcribed in Chinese characters appear to be present throughout the work. As confirmed by Matteo Demonte, the presence of Chinese onomatopoeias is the result of personal

⁸ Original: Ci siamo allontanati dal fumetto così come siamo soliti intenderlo, per passare a un ibrido che usa sì il segno grafico, ma la maggior parte delle volte lo inquadra in un formato video. Largo. Orizzontale.

linguistic research he conducted before writing the novel. A concrete example is provided in Figure 3, where the characters reproducing the sound *peng peng* 砰砰 of clapping hands (used also for representing the sound of something falling heavily on the ground) are added in the foreground.



Fig. 3 – Table representing the Chinese onomatopoeia for clapping hands.

As far as the multilingual dimension of the graphic novel is concerned, further words and/or expressions in other varieties appear on different tables. Besides Italian and Chinese, in fact, it is possible for example to read some short dialogues in Roman dialect. This is especially present at the beginning, when the arrival of Tchou Yin to Rome is illustrated. Furthermore, several pages obviously report short contents in English, especially when dealing with Mario's life experience in the US, and even words in Spanish and Russian appear on some tables (see for instance the one portraying the international tension at the beginning of the 60's in Figure 2).

4. *Primavera e autunni*, *Chinamen* and *La Macchina Zero*, a Sino-Italian trilogy: similarities and points of divergence

As Rocchi and Demonte chose to entitle a public lecture held at the University for Foreigners of Siena in May 2022, their three main works, namely *Primavera e autunni*, *Chinamen* and *La Macchina Zero* can be defined a “Sino-Italian trilogy”. However, if the first two works present similarities in terms of contents and historical contexts, the latest graphic novel has some points of thematic and symbolic divergence with the other two.

As already mentioned in Scibetta (2020), “*Primavera e Autunni*” was published in 2015 with the publisher Becco Giallo. Its title draws its inspiration from

the *Spring and Autumn Annals*,⁹ traditionally attributed to Confucius, and the protagonist of the story is Wu Lishan (originally 吴翼山), Matteo's grandfather, who decided to migrate from Qingtian (Zhejiang) to Europe, arriving in Milan in 1931. The work represents the most important personal, familiar and social events in Wu Lishan's life in Italy, until the birth of Matteo in 1973. A web book-trailer was published to describe the contents of the story with some animations.

The second graphic novel, *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano* (i.e. *Chinamen. A Century of Chinese People in Milan*) was published in 2017, still with Becco Giallo. Although the keyword of the title, namely *Chinamen*, has traditionally approached negative connotations of Chinese migrants, especially in the North American context (Zhang 2019), and thus might appear as semantically ambiguous, the authors' intention is simply to underline that until the fifties Chinese migration to Italy consisted exclusively of men (Rocchi 2017, 142). As in the previous work, also *Chinamen* was published together with an animated book trailer containing the same title and a similar graphic layout compared to the other one. Both the graphic novel and the book trailer were presented with in a special exhibition on Chinese migration to Italy at the Museum of Cultures (Museo Delle Culture – MUDEC) in Milan (Scibetta 2020). *Chinamen* narrates some of the most important events in the history of Chinese migration to Italy, especially to Milan, from the beginning of the 20th century until the Sixties. Both works were translated into Chinese and published and commercialized in China, albeit with some changes in a few tables regarding the history of the People's Republic of China.

By comparing the first two novels with *La Macchina Zero*, the points of major similarity can be detected in the visual part, especially in the technique of structuring the tables, portraying characters and representing dialogues and narrations, as well as in the chromatic choices. As concerns these last aspects, in fact, different tables with one-color backgrounds are present also in *Primavera e Autunni* and in *Chinamen*. Moreover, there are similarities in the use of terms or short expressions in Italian local dialects and in the use of Chinese characters both as a linguistic support to the scripts and to convey culture-specific concepts and ideas. However, this bi-multilingual dimension (mainly composed by Italian and Chinese) is more visible and well distributed in the first two works, whereas in *La Macchina Zero* there are only some hints to Chinese words and brief expressions, especially when the authors deal with scientific and disciplinary contents. Nevertheless, as already mentioned in the previous paragraph, the innovative point in the latest work is because particular attention has been paid to onomatopoeias transcribed in Chinese characters, especially regarding mechanical sounds. References about disciplinary discourses (mainly related to electronics and information technology), in fact, are much more present in *La*

⁹ The book known with the title *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) is one of the five Chinese Confucian classics. It is a historical account of the events that happened in the state of Lu from 722 to 481 BC.

Macchina Zero, whereas they appear more rarely in the other two graphic novels, where they might regard other issues (e.g. the production of textile goods or the management of restaurants).

Besides the aspects highlighted above, the main differences between *La Macchina Zero* and the other two graphic novels concern their contents. Although the time lapses taken into consideration in the three works partly coincide, the main contents of *La Macchina Zero* describe a different history, both in relation with the main character(s) and with macro-historical events. *Primavera e Autunno* and *Chinamen*, in fact, mainly narrate stories of Chinese migrants moving to Italy, as well as stories of people with Chinese descent growing up in Italy, concentrating on multiple aspects involved in their migratory experiences and in their affirmation in Italian society. Examples of entrepreneurial success, like that of Wu Lishan in *Primavera e Autunno* or Mario Tschang in *Chinamen*, of resilience in a new and sometimes hostile environment are portrayed, or stories of integration through marriage of Chinese men with Italian women are mainly described, together with a kaleidoscopic focus on the history of Chinese in Italy, on Italian mainstream history and with a particular glimpse on Chinese-Italian relations. *La Macchina Zero*, however, mainly focuses on one transnational story of personal affirmation in the international scientific field. In addition, the socio-economic conditions of Mario's family (an upper middle-class family, already living in good conditions in China) differ from the ones of the protagonists of the two other graphic novels, since characters like Wu Lishan and others were migrants in search for better life quality.

In any case, regardless of the differences of the lives of the characters described in the three works, one common point doubtlessly links them together. In fact, thanks to the accurate historical reconstruction of the narrated events, as a result of detailed research carried out by the authors, they all contribute to bring back to collective memory events and personalities partly or totally ignored by mainstream discourse and historiography.

4.1 Mario Tchou: a transnational Sino-Italian scientist

As mentioned above, the profile of Mario Tchou is the one which makes the narration of the story contained in *La Macchina Zero* original and unique in comparison with the previous two. Mario, in fact, is an “unconventional” Sino-Italian, because he does not respect the stigmatized (and often distorted) image of Chinese migrants moving to Europe for economic purposes, nor does he reflect the common representation of a stereotyped person with Chinese descent experiencing hardships in his social integration in the Italian environment. Secondly, Mario Tchou might also be considered as a migrant, but his migration experience, conversely to the ones of the main characters of the other two graphic novels, is directed from Italy to the United States. Moreover, it is a migration of the son of an upper middle-class family, who intends to conduct higher-level studies to specialize in the field of electronic engineering. Nevertheless, during his stay in the US, Mario felt several hardships due to the lack of money, bad life

conditions related to his commitment to study and work at the same time, and to the social stigma of people with Chinese descent in the American environment (e.g., the effects of the “Chinese Exclusion Act” on his personal health).

Furthermore, the experiences of Mario in the homeland of his family are limited to a restricted time span during his childhood, together with his mother and his sisters. There could have been a further opportunity for him to bring China back to the foreground of his life during his trip to Hong Kong, which should have kept on within the borders of the People’s Republic: however, in agreement with the worried opinion of his wife, this trip ended in Hong Kong.

In any case, although Mario can be defined as a Sino-Italian, since he was born in Italy and spent the most relevant part of his life there, having also continuous and intense social relations with Italians, he was certainly influenced by his Chinese origins. In fact, especially during his stay in the United States, he systematically put into practice the principles of *chiku nailao* 吃苦耐劳, which means working with resilience without giving up because of various hardships. Moreover, his educational background, which brought together classical studies conducted during high school and scientific studies at the university, resembles a typical Chinese traditional view of the powerful and effective synthesis of complementary opposites.

Lastly, one more issue deserves to be pointed out, which helps us transcend overly static and simplistic views on “Chineseness vs. Italianness” (Dervin and Machart, 2017), especially in relation to Mario’s transnational life. Mario’s contribution to the ascent of Olivetti at an international level, through the experience of the teamwork in Barbaricina, teaches us that science transcends interpersonal differences, including those related to geographical and cultural origins. Mario and his colleagues, in fact, worked as a cohesive team, neglecting and deleting all the differences and highlighting the talent of each member.

4.2 Wu Lishan, Mario Tschang and Mario Tchou: three protagonists, three different transnational experiences

It is possible to identify three main characters in the “Sino-Italian trilogy” composed by *Primavera e Autunni*, *Chinamen* and *La Macchina Zero*, who can represent three different faces of Chinese presence in Italy, namely Wu Lishan, Mario Tschang and Mario Tchou. As concerns the first graphic novel, the main character is doubtlessly Wu Lishan, Matteo’s grandfather, who emigrated to Europe from the city of Qingtian and arrived in Milan in 1931. Married to Giulia Bazzini, a girl from the countryside around Cremona, he had four children who grew up in Italy across two cultural universes. He started from being a peddler, selling simple artifacts on the streets, and fully reached his economic affirmation in the Italian society after the end of World War II, when he was able to found the WLS, an enterprise specialized in leather goods, which even managed to produce leather bags for the Italian fencing national team during the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Within this trilogy of protagonists, he can be understood as a self-made man in the Italian context, counting on his own

resources and being able to establish a network of *guanxi* 关系¹⁰ with his compatriots in Milan.

As regards *Chinamen*, among the different characters portrayed in the graphic novel, Mario Tschang deserves particular attention. Born in Milan in 1933 to a Chinese father and an Italian mother, he can be considered the first Sino-Italian child ever born in Italy. The turning point of his life was in 1963, when he decided to carry out a business trip to Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, with the aim of searching for innovative products that would have contributed to his economic success in Italy. Fascinated by the Japanese stationery products of the famous brand Mitsubishi, thanks to the intercession of the Taipei branch, during his short stay in Taiwan Mario managed to import in Italy marker-pens, ballpoint pens and pencils with innovative designs. His economic activity was so successful that in 1967 he was able to found one of the most distinguished enterprises producing stationery in Italy (still today), i.e., the brand Osama (cf. Scibetta 2020, 105). Thanks to his strong will to restore productive connections with East Asia, Mario Tschang can be considered to be a transnational self-made man. Differently from Wu Lishan, he made his economic fortune not only in Italy, but also, and most of all, establishing transnational economic networks.

Most of the stories of Chinese or Sino-Italians narrated in *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* regard people who moved to Europe from Chinese areas historically involved in international migration (mainly Zhejiang province), to look for better life conditions. The story of Mario Tchou, however, is different from various points of view. First, the *milieu* of Mario's family, both on the father's and mother's side, was already wealthy before Tchou Yin's departure to Italy. This allowed Mario to live in well-off conditions since his childhood. In addition, the story of Mario is also in part a story of emigration, but his destination was represented by the United States. Like Wu Lishan and Mario Tschang, also Mario Tchou managed to achieve full affirmation, not only from an economic but also from a scientific point of view, through his hard work and personal resilience in a foreign country. Furthermore, as in the story of Mario Tschang, also for Mario Tchou the transnational trait is predominant; nevertheless, they tended to move in two opposite directions to make their fortune. In fact, Tschang found the way to his transnational success by moving to the East, whereas Tchou achieved his full scientific expertise in the West, attending courses of specialization in some of the most relevant American institutions.

Besides all the differences between these three characters, it is important to remember that they all built up a kaleidoscopic and multifaceted view on the history of Chinese in Italy and Sino-Italians, which unfortunately has been neglected for too long by collective memory and mainstream discourses.

¹⁰ The term known in Chinese mainstream culture as *guanxi* 关系 (which can be generally translated "relations") reflects the importance to establish positive connections with relatives, friends and compatriots in order to possibly rely on a network of relationships in time of hardship and need.

5. Concluding remarks

On the occasion of the 150-year anniversary of the founding of united Italy, referring to Italian emigration worldwide, Massimo Vedovelli wrote:

1861-2011: 150 anni di storia unitaria italiana, ma nelle molte manifestazioni celebrative che si sono tenute quest'anno sono state poche quelle che hanno avuto come tema l'emigrazione italiana nel mondo. Dimenticanza? Forse, ma più probabilmente, a nostro avviso, rimozione. Si è trattato di una rimozione vissuta in Italia a livello istituzionale e sociale, segnale di un processo che ha coinvolto le zone più profonde della nostra personalità collettiva, là dove si colloca l'essenza generatrice della nostra identità (Vedovelli 2011, 33).¹¹

As Vedovelli emphasizes, in fact, discourses on Italian emigration worldwide have never belonged to mainstream ones. At the same time, we might affirm that most of the discourses on immigration that managed to achieve a certain degree of media relevance reproduce stereotypical representations and prejudices on the “otherness” (cf. Gallissot et al. 2001; Mahmoud and Al Atrash, 2021). Moreover, some pages of the history of immigration to Italy have been too often hidden or even repressed. As specifically regards Chinese migrants and Sino-Italians, Scibetta underlined the symbolic importance of *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* in giving “back to common knowledge a precise and accurate historical reconstruction of Chinese migration to Italy”, making the readers “aware that such a collective history of migration is the result of many different single histories which, for a long time, had been either repressed or neglected” (2020, 96).

In the case of *La Macchina Zero*, another step has been taken in two directions. First, a personal story of success of a Sino-Italian, who risked being forgotten by public discourses, has been given back to the public. In addition, Mario's story reminds us of the various implications and hardships experienced by Italians emigrating abroad. It is a story about an extraordinary personality, living a transnational life, taking advantage of his own cultural background to shape his existence across different symbolic universes.

As the authors say, it is this co-existence of cultural models (and, in particular, his Chinese heritage) that facilitates Mario's dynamicity in moving across different countries and that allows him to achieve a personal and professional affirmation in different environments. Therefore, it shall be argued that Mario's mobility is multifaceted, since it is not only spatial and temporal, but it is also and most of all symbolic and cultural. In fact, it is an experience of “othering” in a foreign country, where Mario sometimes felt minoritized, whereas it was also the opportunity for him to start his brilliant career. Moreover, it was also

¹¹ EN: “1861-2011: 150 years of history of united Italy, but among the multiplicity of celebrations held this year, just a few were dedicated to Italian emigration worldwide. Forgetfulness? Maybe, but most probably, in our view, it is repression. It is about a repression experienced in Italy at an institutional and social level, sign of a process that involved the deepest areas of our collective personality, where the generative essence of our identity is collocated”.

journey from the West to the West, differently from that of several Sino-Italian characters portrayed in *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, who traveled back to China in order to discover their place of origin and to recover part of their hybrid identities.

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PART 2

Study in mobility: Tian Dewang and his experience at the University of Florence (1935–1937)

Changxu Gao

Abstract: It is commonly known that Italian departments, or at least Italian literature courses, were inaugurated in Chinese universities in the 1980s. Less known is the period of the 1930s, in which a Chinese student who specialized in Foreign Literature at Tsinghua University obtained a scholarship by the Italian government to study in Italy for two years: Tian Dewang 田德望 (1909–2000) was the first Chinese student to study Italian literature in Italy. In the 1980s he became a famous professor and translator of Italian literature, and was the first to complete an entire translation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* into Chinese. This paper is aimed at reconstructing the relation between the Chinese student and his Italian professor, Attilio Momigliano, and how the 'mobility experience' of Tian Dewang in Italy inspired and influenced his future academic career.

Keywords: Tian Dewang, Attilio Momigliano, Vittore Branca, Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Mobility experience.

1. Introduction

Throughout such a long period of study, I have always had a strong desire to translate *The Divine Comedy*, an heirloom work, from the Italian language after I have completed my studies. *The Divine Comedy* was like a bright light that inspired me to study and inspired my growing desire to translate it and introduce it to China. For this reason, during my studies in Italy, I paid attention to collecting those editions of *The Divine Comedy* that had been proofread by experts and had incisive commentaries (Tian 2005, 4).¹

Tian Dewang 田德望 (1909–2000), the well-known Chinese translator and scholar, was the first to accomplish a complete translation of *The Divine Comedy* from Italian directly into Chinese.² In the history of Chinese literature in trans-

¹ Originally written in Chinese, translated here into English by the author. The citations following this article, in which the original text is in Chinese, have also been translated into English by the author.

² Until October 2021, this was the state of our knowledge. In 2021, several private documents of Agostino Biagi (1882–1957) were unearthed, which include three different translations of the *Divine Comedy* in verse (quadrisyllables, pentasyllables and septenaries) from Italian into Chi-

lation and in Sino-Italian literary relations, some studies have examined Tian Dewang's translation of *The Divine Comedy* (Brezzi 2011; Li Bingkui 2016). These studies provide the basis for this study, which also examines their limitations. Among the existing research, some scholars have only analyzed Tian Dewang's translation of *The Divine Comedy* in comparison with other Chinese translators. There is also a lack of research on Tian's early study of Italian language and Italian literature. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this translator, it is necessary to conduct a more targeted study of Tian.

As Tian Dewang informs us, he studied in Italy and was an avid reader of Italian literature. No study to date, however, has been conducted on Tian Dewang's mobility. This chapter is aimed at reconstructing the relation between the Chinese student and his Italian professor, Attilio Momigliano (1883–1952). It also explores the cultural atmosphere of the time, and how the 'mobility experience' of Tian Dewang in Italy inspired and influenced his future academic career. This includes the encounter in China in 1981 with Vittore Branca (1913–2004), an expert of Italian literature who also studied with Momigliano.

By analyzing the courses Tian took at the University of Florence, we will try to answer the following questions: how did Momigliano exert an influence on his Chinese student? What 'cultural luggage' did Tian Dewang bring back to China? Which Italian literary works or authors did he present to Chinese readers in the following years?

2. Study in mobility: from Tsinghua University to the University of Florence

Born in Wanxian 完县, Hebei province—a small city 162 kilometers from Beijing—Tian Dewang was admitted to Baoding Yude Middle School (Baoding Yude zhongxue 保定育德中学) at the age of 12, where he studied English and started falling in love with reading masterpieces of foreign literature. Baoding Yude Middle School was a modern high school where Chinese intellectuals attended classes in preparation for studying and working abroad during the New Culture Movement, such as the politicians Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898–1969) and Li Fuchun 李富春 (1900–1975) (Chen and Wu 1990, 261). From August 1918 to July 1921, Liu Xianzhou 刘仙洲 (1890–1975), a famous scientist and later vice president of Tsinghua University, taught at this high school (Zhou 2012; Feng 2018). There is a connection between Liu Xianzhou and Tian Dewang because both came from Wanxian. Liu Yujuan 刘玉娟, the daughter of Liu Xianzhou, married Tian Dewang in the 1930s (Feng 2018, 238). Tian Dewang read Qian Daosun's 钱稻孙 (1887–1966) *Shenqu yiluan* 神曲一齣, a translation of the first three cantos of *The Divine Comedy*, when he was studying in Baoding Yude Middle School in the 1920s. He recalled this episode in his "Wo yu Shen Qu 我与《神曲》" ("The Divine Comedy and I"):

nese. Luca Pisano states that Biagi could have started translating from 1920 onward, yet we have scant information about Biagi's translation work (Ferretti 2021). Due to the lack of information on these versions, I have chosen not to examine and treat this translation. The detailed analyses of Biagi's three versions may allow us to rewrite the history of Chinese translations of the Comedy.

I got to know this magnificent epic [i.e., *The Divine Comedy*] as early as I was in middle school. At that time, the translation *Shenqu yiluan* by Qian Daosun was popular. Although it was merely a ‘small slice,’³ I was deeply impressed by Dante and began to pay attention to the progress of the translation of *The Divine Comedy* in China (Tian 2005, 3).

Tian Dewang showed high appreciation for Qian’s work and for Dante’s poem.

In 1927, Tian enrolled in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Tsinghua University, which was at that time one of the most “modern” and innovative Chinese universities. His four years as an undergraduate student (until 1931) were spent diligently studying. In the following table, we show the courses that Tian took during his undergraduate studies.

Table 1 – Undergraduate Programs at Tsinghua University⁴

Year	1927–28	1928–29	1929–30	1930–31
Course	Chinese	2nd year English language	1st year German language	2nd year French language
	1st year English language	General study of the history of Western literature	Classical Chinese Literature	Dante. ⁵
	Economy	English Romantic poets	Western literature of the 18th century	Medieval literature
	1st year German language	2nd year German language	Western literature of the 19th century	Renaissance
	Method to study history	Logic	Western drama	Introduction to English philology
	High school physics	History of Western Philosophy	Literary criticism	4th year of German language
	Physical education	Military training	History of the Western Novel	Contemporary Western Literature
			1st year French language	Shakespeare
			Physical education	Principles of the Chinese National Party
				Physical education

³ “Small slice” because the title which Qian chose to present his translation was “Shenqu yiluan 神曲一齋”, where *luan* 齋 means a slice of meat.

⁴ In the archives of the University of Florence, I found this material in the file of Tian Tewang [In the 1930s, Tian’s name was spelled using Wade-Giles romanization]. See Tian (1937), Appendix page.

⁵ The course content was: “A major component of the course is the reading of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the *Hell*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise* being read over the course of a year. The professor reads them verbatim along with commentary and criticism, and each student discusses them individually with the professor once a week.” See Li Sen (2017, 329).

Tian Dewang's undergraduate studies were completed in 1931. He then enrolled in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Tsinghua to specialize in Western literature and to pursue his master's degree. Tian's master's courses are listed in the table below.

Table 2 – Master's Program at Tsinghua University⁶

Year	1931–32	1932–33	1933–34
	Selected Readings of Chinese Poetry	Comparative Study of Western Poetry and Chinese Poetry	Chinese legends of Indian origin (first semester)
	Chinese Phonetics (1st semester)	Art of Translation	German lyrics
	German Symbolic Poets	Elizabethan Poetry	French literature (mainly focused on Baudelaire)
	Aesthetics	Goethe's <i>Faust</i>	

In 1934, under the guidance of the American professor Rupert D. Jameson (1895–1959), who taught at Tsinghua University during that period, Tian Dewang completed his master's thesis, *A Comparative Study of the Metaphors of Milton and Dante* (Qinghua daxue xiaoshi yanjiushi 清华大学校史研究室 1991, 660–61). This was the earliest master's thesis with Dante as the theme in China. Furthermore, while conducting research on the teaching of Italian literature in China in the 1930s, I discovered that from 1932 to 1934, a colleague of R. D. Jameson at Tsinghua University, Pollard Urquhart (1894–1940), gave a course on Dante and the history of Western literature; Tian was one of his students.⁷ We can suppose that Tian was fascinated by this course, and therefore decided to dedicate his thesis to the father of Italian literature and one of the greatest British poets. Tian Dewang also attended the course offered by Pollard Urquhart together with Zhao Luorui 赵梦蕤 (1912–1998), who in her biographical essay wrote: “I learned Dante's *Divine Comedy* in both English and Italian with teacher Pollard Urquhart together with my senior [colleague] Tian Dewang, my only classmate. I gained most while studying with him in the three years at Tsinghua” (Zhao 1996, 2).

Stronger evidence on the existence of Italian studies in the 1930s in China can be found in the memoirs that Li Funing 李赋宁 (1917–2004), an expert of Western literature who was Tian Dewang's classmate and Pollard Urquhart's student, wrote in 1980. He spoke highly of Urquhart and recalled the early school experience of Tian Dewang, who was his schoolmate at Tsinghua. In the chapter “Jinru daxue xuexi 进入大学学习” (Entering University Studies), he recalls the years of his studying at Tsinghua:

⁶ See Tian (1937), Appendix page.

⁷ For more details, see Gao (2022, 121–36).

Tsinghua also selected some graduate students to study abroad. Mr. Tian Dewang, majoring in Italian literature, was one of them. Mr. Tian studied under the British Professor Pollard Urquhart when he was a graduate at Tsinghua University. Pollard Urquhart had taught English to an Italian aristocrat in Florence, so he learned Italian and began to study Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. After graduation, Mr. Tian Dewang was sent to Florence for further study. A year later, he transferred to Heidelberg University in Germany to listen to Dante-related lectures, so he had an in-depth study of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's masterpiece. He also studied German literature there and was proficient in it as well (Li Funing 2005, 26).

What is remarkable is that in the same year Tian Master's thesis was approved, he also had the opportunity to study abroad. On September 17th, 1934, the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (i.e. "IsMEO": Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente), through the Consulate of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Shanghai, invited the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to commission the Chinese Ministry of Education to select two outstanding students to study in Italy. The Chinese Ministry of Education then asked the National Central University in Nanjing (Guoli Zhongyang daxue 国立中央大学), Tsinghua University (Qinghua daxue 清华大学), Peking University (Beijing daxue 北京大学) and Wuhan University (Wuhan daxue 武汉大学) to select one or two qualified and interested students to study in Italy by October 15 (Jin 2020).

Research into the archives of Taiwan's Academia Sinica shows the four schools had a total of more than 100 students interested in applying to study abroad in Italy. Tsinghua University submitted 11 applicants, including Sun Yutang 孙毓棠 (1911–1985), the first translator of a part of *The Divine Comedy* into modern poetry (Alighieri 1933), and Wan Jiabao 万家宝 (i.e. Cao Yu 曹禺, 1910–1996), later a famous modern playwright (Jin 2020). After an internal selection process at Tsinghua University, Tian Dewang from the department of Foreign Languages and Literature and Wang Shide 王世德 (1910-2005) from the department of Political Science were selected and recommended by Tsinghua University as two outstanding students. Finally, after the selection by the Chinese Ministry of Education, Tian Dewang from Tsinghua University and Gao Jian 高睿 (1910-1949) from National Central University were awarded scholarships to study in Italy.

In 2020, Jin Fujun 金富军, the deputy director of the Tsinghua University History Museum, and a researcher of the history of Tsinghua University, published an article that discusses the study of Chinese students sponsored by the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East, specifically mentioning Tian Dewang. According to Jin Fujun's findings, in the archives of Tsinghua University, there is a collection of Tian Dewang's research plans that were prepared for the IsMEO scholarship application for studying in Italy. Two crucial pieces of information are contained in this collection. Tian Dewang wrote that he would have liked to go to Italy to study Dante, saying: "The student's ambition is to go to Italy and study the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with par-

particular emphasis on Dante's writings" (Jin 2020). Additionally, Tian explained why he chose the University of Florence: "The city was the political and literary center of Renaissance Italy, and it was also Dante's hometown" (Jin 2020).

Next, I will provide an overview of the procedure through which Tian Dewang was granted the scholarship by the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East. On the Bulletin of the *Tsinghua fukan* 清华副刊 (*Tsinghua Supplement*), I was able to find an announcement stating:

In 1934, the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East of the Italian Prime Minister Mussolini informed us through his Minister in China that he intended to grant two Chinese students the opportunity to study in Italy in the next semester. The scholarship will be 5,000 lire for each student for one year. One of them will be designated for philosophy and literature, and the other for political economy or chemistry or engineering or mathematics and physics. [...] They have selected Mr. Tian Dewang, a third-year student in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, and another student from the Department of Political Science Studies. The curriculum vitae and transcripts of these two students will be submitted to the Ministry of Education along with supporting documents for approval. After examining the results of the students sponsored by the four universities, the Ministry of Education found Mr. Tian's grades were the most satisfactory and he was granted permission to study philosophy and literature in Italy. It is a great honor for our university to have been the first to do this, as only two students from the whole country will be sent to Italy (Jizhe 1934, 22–3).

We can see in *Qinghua daxue xiaoyou tongxun* 清华大学校友通讯 (*Tsinghua University Alumni Newsletter*) that in 1935 Tian Dewang recorded his arrival in Italy:

I arrived in Venice on the morning of August 31, stayed for three days, and then moved to Rome on September 3. I intended to study Italian at the "Real University for Foreigners" in Perugia, and then enter Florence University next spring, but the beginner's course at the university in Perugia has already ended, which means I have to change the plan, so I am planning to study Italian in Rome and go through the admission procedures. I will go to Florence at the beginning of October to study at that university and find a host family to live with and talk to. I hope to be able to perform well in the three aspects of "writing", "reading" and "speaking" in the three years (Tian 1935).

From the Archive of University of Florence we learn that in 1936, Tian Dewang completed his registration in the School of Literature and Philosophy of that Institution. Tian had previously obtained his undergraduate and master's degree in China; he was, therefore, admitted to study directly from the third year. The following table shows all the courses that Tian attended during two years in Florence.

Table 3 – Courses at the University of Florence⁸

1935–1936		
Course	Professor	Course content
Italian Literature	Attilio Momigliano	The Carducciano period. Commentary by contemporary poets. Summary of the literature of the first half of the sixteenth century. Reading of <i>Gerusalemme Liberata</i> and a critical essay on Tasso.
German Literature	Guido Manacorda	The Edda (continuation and terms of the previous course). Frederick Nietzsche. Contemporary writers (continuation of previous course). Exercises.
English Literature	Gian Napoleone Giordano Orsini	Italian influence on English Renaissance literature. Reading of poets.
History of Philosophy	Paolo Lamanna	The aesthetic problem and Kant's Critique of Judgment. The philosophy of the Presocratics. Exercises on the two topics of the course.
Modern History	Niccolò Rodolico	(a) The reign of Charles Albert from 1831 to 1843. (b) General history of Europe in the 17th century.
Medieval History	Nicola Ottokar	The Tuscan municipalities (Florence, Lucca, Pistoia, Pisa). The Republic of St. Mark's.
Art History	Mario Salmi	General course: Sienese Gothic painting. Monographic course: Luca Signorelli. Exercises and visits to the Florentine Galleries, Siena and Monteliveto maggiore.
History of Italian languages	Francesco Maggini	Reading and commentary on Dante's <i>Rime</i> . The question of language from Cesarotti to Manzoni.
1936–1937		
Course	Professor	Course content
Italian Literature	Attilio Momigliano	Narrative literature from 1880 to 1920. Commentary on poets of the 15th century. Student's personal preparation: exposition of De Santis' <i>Critical Essays</i> , analysis of three tragedies by Alfieri.
English Literature	Gian N. G. Orsini	1st Preparatory Lessons. 2nd Course on W.Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i> .

⁸ See Tian (1937, 1–6).

English Language	Arturo Sleigh	1st Course Pronunciation: Elementary grammar: reading and translation of easy texts. 2nd Syntax: Translation: reading and commentary of modern English texts.
German Literature	Guido Manacorda	1st Frederick Nietzsche. 2nd The speculative problems of Goethe's <i>Faust</i> . 3rd Exercises.
German Language	Hans Wildt	1st course a) Otto-Sauer's Elementary Grammar of the German Language. b) Reading: C. Brentano: <i>Vom braven Kasperl und den schönen Annerl</i> . 2nd course a) W. v. Humboldt: <i>Über Schiller und den Gang seiner geistesentwicklung</i> . b) Schiller: <i>Wallensteins Tod</i> .
Art History	Mario Salmi	General course: The artistic environment in the centers where Giotto worked (Florence, Rome, Assisi, Padua, Naples, Milan). Monograph course: Giotto painter, sculptor and architect. Various exercises, views at the Uffizi Gallery, Accademia Gallery.

According to the recollection of Tian's student, Xu Dumei 许杜美 (1932–2014) (Xu 2011, 11), Tian's supervisor (Prof. Attilio Momigliano) originally wanted him to write about Marco Polo in relation to China. To test Tian's writing skills, he was asked first to write a report on the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). At the same time, Tian rented a room in the Via dei Servi, No. 6, near the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Flower. He heard from his landlord that Italians read *The Divine Comedy* as early as high school and this made him realize he had to improve his Italian language skills (Xu 2011, 11). In order to write his thesis, he hired a tutor for two hours a day to improve his reading and writing skills and to learn conversational skills. In the meantime, he worked on an academic paper about Croce, which was soon appreciated by his supervisor.

From then on, Tian was able to follow Momigliano's lessons and to improve his academic and research abilities. He began to concentrate on the life and work of Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494) and researched writings and literary historians' commentaries on Poliziano (Xu 2011, 11). Poliziano, a poet and famous Italian humanist, was first introduced among Chinese intellectuals in the diary of Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) in 1917, although he did not gain much attention at that time (Xie and Zhong 1994, 385–86). Tian received his degree after two years of study, with a thesis titled *A Study of the Comments of Angelo Poliziano*. In 1940, after returning from Europe, Wu Mi 吴宓 (1894–1978), Tian Dewang's teacher during his Tsinghua period, helped him not only by recommending him for a position at the University of Zhejiang (Wu Mi and Wu Xuezhao 1998, 22), but also by suggesting he research

and study Dante. In his diary, Wu Mi wrote: “On November 11st 1940, I wrote to the British Consulate to order a copy of the *Divine Comedy* in Italian recommended by Pollard Urquhart readability for Tian Dewang” (Wu Mi and Wu Xuezhao 1998, 22).

Unfortunately, we do not have any diaries or memories on Tian’s life in Florence or cities he may have visited. We can get only a little information from the travelogue of a Chinese writer, Qian Gechuan 钱歌川 (1903–1990). Qian wrote in “Feilengcui de yiri 翡冷翠的一日” (A day in Florence) in September of 1936:

Florence, what a poetic name for a place! This is the home of the great poet Dante.

Ever since I read Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the *New Life*, and saw the famous painting of his meeting with Beatrice, I have wanted to visit Florence, to visit the monuments, and to pay homage to the spirit of poetry.

It took at least thirteen or fourteen years for this desire to come true, until this trip to England, when I first visited Italy on my way. In Rome, we met Tian Dewang, who, after graduating from Tsinghua, had come to Europe to specialize in Italian literature and was now living in Florence. We talked with him about the tour and decided to take the 6:30 p.m. train to Florence the next day (Qian 1995, 328).

What we know for sure is that Tian Dewang studied very hard and was able to read Italian very well. Either he did not leave a diary, or he had written one which was lost or destroyed during the later turbulent years. A similar fate happened to his thesis, which unfortunately we cannot read, because it was destroyed by the flood in Florence in 1966, along with many other important materials.⁹

3. Tian Dewang’s first translations of Italian literature in the 1940s

In 1940, Tian Dewang began to teach Western literature at the Zhejiang University and also started to publish his translations and academic works. His first publications about Italian literature appeared in the periodical *Liming* 黎明 (Dawn) in early 1944. This periodical, founded by the students at Zhejiang University, spearheaded a literary association called the *Dawn Society* (*Liming she* 黎明社), whose aim was to introduce foreign literary works, especially poetic works, to Chinese readers. *Dawn Society* was intended to facilitate the exchange and discussion of literature among Zhejiang University students (He 2018, 23). In this publication, Tian Dewang published his translations of Italian poetry, such as “La voce” (“The voice,” translated as *Shengyin* 声音) by Arturo Graf (1848–1913) and two poems “Nella macchia” (*Zai congman zhong* 在丛莽中) and “La servetta di monte” (Shanzhong Shinü 山中使女) by Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912) (Graf 1946; Pascoli 1946), which is the only literary work we can find translated by Tian during the Republican period.¹⁰

⁹ This information has been given to the author by the Librarian of the Humanities Library of the University of Florence.

¹⁰ In the process of searching for information, I checked the history of Zhejiang University and all the materials of the journal *Dawn*, and found no other translations by Tian.

Why did Tian choose the works of Arturo Graf and Giovanni Pascoli? We can only suggest some hypotheses because Tian Dewang did not leave us any comments or suggestions. Certainly, Tian had been exposed to the works of these two poets when he studied in Italy through his professor Momigliano, who was a student of Arturo Graf (Ghidetti 2011). In Momigliano's *Anthology of Italian literature*, Momigliano selected and proposed "La voce" by Graf (1937, 658–59), along with "Nella macchia" and "La servetta del monte" by Pascoli (1937, 664–65, 667–68). When Tian translated these three poems, there were not any English or German translations—two other foreign languages in which Tian was proficient—of such poems (Shields 1931; Felcini 1982). In addition, Graf and Pascoli were two writers who were very interested in Dante; they both conducted some studies and research on the Medieval poet.

Besides translating Italian poetry, Tian also taught Italian literature at Zhejiang University and Wuhan University. We learn about the teaching activities of Tian Dewang during the 1940s from the memoirs of his colleagues and students respectively. According to the memoir of his colleague, Zhang Junchuan 张君川 (1911–1999), Tian taught courses on *The Divine Comedy* in both Zhejiang University and Wuhan University. As recalled by Zhang in "Zhejiang daxue waiwen xi zai Zunyi 浙江大学外文系在遵义" (Department of Foreign Languages of Zhejiang University in Zunyi):

Zhejiang University moved from Yishan, Guangxi to Zunyi, Guizhou in 1939, where the teaching and research was developed under very tough conditions. Students of liberal arts at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of Zhejiang University used foreign literature and languages as the tool for literary and linguistic studies all along.

[...] The Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of Zhejiang University took English as their first foreign language, and German, French, Russian, Italian, Japanese, Greek or Latin as their second foreign languages. Students studied European and American literature through learning English. Professors at the Department of Foreign Languages were all famous scholars at home. Head of the department was Mei Guangdi, who held a concurrent post as Dean of Arts and taught British literature of the 18th century. Guo Binhe taught Greek and Latin literature; Tian Dewang taught British literature and Dante; Zhang Junchuan taught Shakespeare's plays and novels; She Kunshan taught English poetry; Xie Wentong taught English prose. They also gave English and German language classes (Zhang 1990, 78).

Chi Panyuan 齐邦媛 (1924–), the Taiwanese writer and student of Tian Dewang, who was a student at Wuhan University from 1943 to 1947, wrote about Tian's course on *The Divine Comedy* at Wuhan University in her autobiographical essay *The Grand Flowing River*:

Shortly after classes resumed, a notice was pasted up outside the classroom stating that Dr. Tian Dewang, who had recently returned from Italy, was offering an elective course on Dante's *Divina Commedia* for the third- and fourth-year

students. [...] I clearly remember the class that semester in which both teacher and student played their respective parts. Professor Tian diligently guided my reading of the most important parts of the *Commedia*. Of course, the focus of the class was not unlike other literature classes. More time was allocated to the *Inferno* than to the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, and special importance was attached to the beauty of the meter and rhyme and power of the imagery. In the second circle of hell, the story of the lovers Paolo and Francesca is heard amid the whirlwind. Dante writes: “I fainted with pity, as if I had been dying; and fell, as a dead body falls” (Chi 2018, 229–31).

From this recollection we can conclude that in Chinese universities in the 1940s, Chinese teachers offered special courses on Italian literature for the first time, which is of pioneering significance. More importantly, at that time Dante and his *Divine Comedy* was not a common or popular text. In a time when the historical issues required writers to be ‘political’ and committed, few students chose to dedicate themselves to a foreign author of the Medieval era.

4. The encounter between Tian Dewang and Vittore Branca in China

Cultural mobility continued to play a role in diplomatic relations between China and Italy into the early 1980s. In that period, in fact, one of the students of Momigliano, Vittore Branca, a scholar of Italian literature, was invited to lecture in China by the vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Xu Dixin 许涤新 (1906–1988), and by Professor Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书 (1910–1998) of the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His talk at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was about Boccaccio and *The Decameron*, as we can see in the article titled “Yidali xuezhe Bolangka zai Hua zuo xueshu baogao 意大利学者博朗卡在华作学术报告” (Italian scholar Branca gives academic lecture in China):

Professor V. Branca and his wife came to China on October 12, 1981, at the invitation of Xu Dixin, Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Professor Qian Zhongshu of the Institute of Literature. He has studied Italian language and literature, especially Boccaccio’s masterpiece *The Decameron* of the Italian Renaissance. He is currently a professor of literature at the University of Padua, Italy, and president of the International Federation for the Study of Italian Language and Literature. He is a member of the Linguistic Academy of Rome and the American Academy of Sciences, and he is also an honorary doctor of the universities of New York, Budapest, and the Sorbonne. In his academic presentation, Branca talked about the life of the outstanding Renaissance humanist writer Boccaccio and his world classical masterpiece *The Decameron* in terms of its period, characters, plot, structure and influence on modern literature and realism. Also, slides introducing Boccaccio’s handwriting and illustrations of *The Decameron* by the excellent Renaissance painter Botticelli were shown (Yang 1982, 35).

The annual report of the Venice Academy also reports and informs about Branca's visit to China, highlighting the ties and contacts between the different cultural institutions in the two countries:

The President then briefly reports on his recent trip to China where, designated to do so by both the Ministry of Culture and the Accademia dei Lincei, he had numerous contacts with the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, where he also had the satisfaction of being able to see that the Veneto Institute is among the few Academies that have maintained an uninterrupted exchange of publications with the Academy in Beijing since 1958 (Branca 1982b, 62).

While the institutions of the two countries made the trip possible, once it was made, it was the scholars from the two countries who wove and established lasting relationships. During Branca's visit to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905–1993), the director of the Institute of Foreign Languages, introduced him to Tian Dewang. Tian Dewang admired the work of Branca, and on that occasion he asked and obtained some information about the recent studies and research on Dante in Italy (Tian 2005, 6). After returning to Italy, Branca kindly sent the last critical edition of *The Divine Comedy*, edited by Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio to Tian Dewang, who carried out his interpretive and translation work using exactly this edition, as he stated in his introduction (Tian 2005, 5).

Another Chinese Italianist was introduced to Branca during his sojourn in China, Professor Lü Tongliu 吕同六 (1938–2005). This encounter also was very productive. Lü is considered the father of Italian literary studies in China. He went to listen to Branca's lecture and found it very stimulating for him (Branca 1982a, 33). Branca proposed to the Chinese Italianist to write a paper on *The Decameron* in China, which was later published in the Italian periodical *Studi su Boccaccio* (Branca 1982a, 33). Branca explained the reasons for his request, writing: "The urge to ask distinguished Chinese Italianist Lü Tongliu to quickly outline a review of *The Decameron* in China arose in the course of lectures and seminars on Boccaccio, given by me in October 1981, in the Institute of Literature of the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing" (Branca 1982a, 33).

If in the 1930s young Chinese students reached Italy to study, opening the field of Italian studies in China, in the 1980s cultural mobility between the two countries also involved Italian professors who traveled to China bringing knowledge and books that, once translated, began to circulate among Chinese readers. At the same time, these Italian scholars brought back new information about Italian studies in China, strengthening cultural relations between the two countries that will be further developed in the 21st century.

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Marco Polo returns to China: Giuliano Montaldo's TV series (1982)

Chiara Lepri

Abstract: In 1982, the Italian television network RAI produced a TV series by Giuliano Montaldo on the travels of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo. Broadcast in forty-six countries, the Emmy Award-winning cinematic project, which involved partners from the United States, Japan, Germany, and France, stood as the first film co-production between Italy and China and represented a relevant step in the consolidation of the Sino-Italian friendship after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1970. This paper aims to research the transnational dynamics enacted by *Marco Polo* during the Sino-Italian co-production and presents the making of the TV series in China from ideation to distribution. The study includes an original interview with the director Montaldo (2022).¹

Keywords: Marco Polo, Giuliano Montaldo, TV series, film co-production, Sino-Italian transnational relations.

1. Introduction

In 1982, the Italian television network Radio Televisione Italiana (RAI) participated in the production of a TV series on the travels of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, which was filmed by the director Giuliano Montaldo (b. 1930) (*Sacco e Vanzetti*, 1971; *L'Agnese va a morire*, 1976; *Gli occhiali d'oro*, 1987) and broadcast in forty-six countries (RAI 2022). The cinematic project, which also involved partners from the United States (Procter & Gamble and the National Broadcasting Company – NBC) and Japan (Tokyo Broadcasting System – TBS) and received funding from France and Germany, stood as the first film co-production between Italy and China (China Film Coproduction Corporation – CFCC, *Zhongguo dianying hezuo zhipian gongsi* 中国电影合作制片公司). The resulting series, titled *Marco Polo*, represents an important step in the consolidation of the Sino-Italian friendship, uniting the two countries after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1970.

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to director Giuliano Montaldo for sharing his memories of the filmmaking of *Marco Polo*. This endeavor would not have been possible without Maria Barbieri and Susan Xu, to whom I dedicate a heartfelt thanks for their precious insights on the series.

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With reference to the RAI series, which has been filmed in several countries, such as Italy, Morocco, and China, the Chinese journal directed by Xinhua News Agency *Liaowang* 瞭望 issued two articles, “*Make Boluo chongfan Zhongguo* 马可·波罗重返中国” (“Marco Polo returns to China,” Yang 1981) and “*Make Boluo chongyou shijie* 马可·波罗重游世界” (“Marco Polo travels again the world,” Ren 1982); these titles suggest the transnational essence of the project bound with the figure of Polo. In fact, with the 1982 TV series the Venetian merchant made his ‘return’ (*chongfan* 重返) to China, the place where he and his story belonged to a certain extent, and from there ‘traveled again the world’ (*chongyou shijie* 重游世界). From this perspective, Montaldo’s series has spun the wheel of Polo’s multi-dimensional journey both in time and space, giving birth to a new product within the tradition of adaptations of Polo’s story. Being the first TV series to cover this topic, Marco Polo’s travels up to the 1980s had only been adapted into literary or audiovisual forms, which are worthy to be mentioned here.

As far as literature is concerned, the travel of the Venetian merchant to the court of Kublai Khan was first transformed in the travelogue collated by Rustichello da Pisa *Il Milione* (circa 1298), whose Franco-Venetian version known as *Devisement dou monde* was translated into many European languages. Hence, it inspired literary adaptations by different authors (Akbari and Iannucci 2008). Italo Calvino himself recognized the debt owed to the travelogue when writing *Invisible Cities* (1972), also recalling Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Kahn*, Kafka’s *An Imperial Message*, Buzzati’s *The Tartar Steppe*, as well as *The Arabian Nights* (Calvino [1972] 2012, VIII). With reference to the audiovisual dimension, prior to 1982, there had been quite a few cinematographic adaptations of Polo’s story, such as *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938) directed by Archie Mayo, and Piero Pierotti’s *Marco Polo* (1962), which was supervised by Hugo Fregonese. The theme was central also in the Afghan-Egyptian-French-Italian-Yugoslavian co-production *La Fabuleuse Aventure de Marco Polo* (1965) by Denys de La Patellière and Noël Howard, and in the Australian animation *Marco Polo Junior* (1972) directed by Eric Porter. The latter was reedited in 2001 as *Marco Polo: Return to Xanadu* (*Make Boluo hui Xiangdou* 马可·波罗回香都) and broadcast on Chinese television at the end of the year. Among the Chinese-language products there is also *Make Boluo* 马可·波罗 (1975), the Hong Kong *wuxia* film directed by Chang Cheh.

In this context, the present paper aims to research the transnational dynamics enacted by the production of RAI’s Emmy Awards-winning *Marco Polo*, with specific reference to the Sino-Italian co-production (as per Di Chiara 2014; Bona 2016, 2018; Fu and Indelicato 2017). By investigating the filmmaking of the series in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), from production (ideation and realization) to distribution, *Marco Polo* is thus presented from a transnational perspective.

As for the theoretical framework, this work elaborates on the concept of ‘transnational cinema’ and the relative debate around it (Lu 1997; Berry 2010; Higbee and Lim 2010), enhancing a ‘critical transnationalism,’ which “interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels—

from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation's image of itself" (Higbee and Lim 2010, 18). The term 'transnational' embodies here the plurality of filmic discourses created through the negotiation and constant mediation of values between two or more cultures, business models, and film production practices.

Along with Chinese-language sources on the 1982 production of *Marco Polo*, namely academic papers and journalistic articles of the time, this chapter is based on archival material from the National Museum of Cinema of Turin and on interviews with Chinese cinema experts and filmmakers that took part in the *Marco Polo* project, like Maria Barbieri and Susan Xu.² Excerpts from an original interview with the director Giuliano Montaldo (2022) are included in the following paragraphs. The semi-structured interview, which was conducted in Rome on June 16, 2022 (duration 1-hour, Italian language), stands as historical and first-hand testimony of *Marco Polo's* transnational filmmaking. It provides precious insights on ideation, filming, and circulation of the 1982 TV series behind the Great Wall.

2. Sino-Italian co-productions and the ideation of *Marco Polo* (1982)

On November 5, 1970, the representatives of the Italian and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) ministries of foreign affairs signed in Paris a joint communiqué for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The agreement took effect on November 6, thus paving the way for the strengthening of bilateral economic relations (Samarani and De Giorgi 2011, 136). To this extent, culture represented a strategic field to enhance Sino-Italian cooperation. However, it was only after the launch of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and opening-up policy at the end of 1978 that the relationship between Italy and China became more intense, particularly after the visits to Rome in 1979 by the Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (1921–2008), and to Beijing in 1980 by the Italian President of the Republic Sandro Pertini (1896–1990) (Samarani and De Giorgi 2020). In this framework, cinema stood as one of the most efficient cultural areas to develop the friendship between Italy and China.

Previously, except for the case of Amerigo Enrico Lauro (1879–1937), who founded in Shanghai his own production company at the beginning of the 20th century (Bernardini 1982; Fu and Indelicato 2017), there have been some documentary-genre limited works by Italian filmmakers who stayed temporarily in China. Specifically, Mario Craveri (1902–1990), an Italian cinematic propaganda 'Istituto L.U.C.E.' camera operator who went to China in 1926 and 1932

² Both Maria Barbieri and Susan Xu, who worked as interpreters for the production teams of *Marco Polo*, have dedicated their careers to Chinese cinema since the late 1970s. Maria Barbieri, together with Maria Ruggieri, is programmer and consultant of the Chinese section at the Far East Film Festival (FEFF) of Udine. Susan Xu (Xu Shujun 徐淑君) is vice-president of China Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC). For details about the interviews see note 10.

to film newsreels on the geopolitical situation (Craveri 1936; Savio 1956), and Carlo Lizzani (1922–2013), director of the first travel reportage by Italian filmmakers during the Maoist era *La muraglia cinese* (*Behind the Great Wall*, 1958) (Bonzi 1959; Lavagnino 2003; Bona 2016, 2018; McDonald Carolan 2022).

After the establishment of Sino-Italian relations in 1970, the first experiment of collaboration in the cinematic field was set. In July 1971, the Italian national radio and television network RAI promoted Michelangelo Antonioni's (1912–2007) visit to China (Di Chiara 2014, 385). The award-winning director of *Deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964, Golden Lion) and *Blow-up* (1966, Palme d'Or) was supposed to film a documentary about post-Mao PRC. The output was a four-hour-long documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (*China*, 1972), which premiered on United States' TVs in 1972. However, the film did not gain positive reviews from critics. As Marco Dalla Gassa (2014, 70) stated, one of the main reasons for the “lukewarm, if not negative, reception” of the documentary was due to the conflict that the film had “with the authorial idea that has become intertwined with Antonioni's name.” The documentary did not win any national or international prizes in Europe or in US, falling short of the expectations bound with Antonioni's filmography.

A similar fate awaited *Chung Kuo* in China. The documentary was heavily criticized for its misrepresentation of the country. As stated in an article issued by the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 1974, 7): “[it] puts together many viciously distorted scenes and shots to attack Chinese leaders, smear socialist New China, slander China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and insult the Chinese people. Any Chinese with a modicum of national pride cannot but be greatly angered on seeing this film.” The article led to a political campaign against Antonioni (Brezzi 2010; Liu 2014), and the documentary was thereafter banned from Chinese screens—but for appearing again as part of the documentary *I Wish I Knew* (*Hai shang chuanqi* 海上传奇, 2011) by Jia Zhangke (b. 1970) in the China Pavillion at 2010 Shanghai's EXPO. Despite the critical reception, *Chung Kuo, Cina* marked an important step for the development of Sino-Italian film co-productions, paving the way for *Marco Polo*'s (1982) transnational project.

The idea of producing a film on Marco Polo's story to enhance Sino-Italian relations, equally for political and cultural reasons (Montaldo 2022), originated from the visit of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Arnaldo Forlani (b. 1925) to Beijing and the province in 1977 (June 12–17) (Ministero degli Affari Esteri 1979, 161–67; Gambetti 1983, 100). As recalled by the producer Vincenzo Labella (Gambetti 1983, 47), it was thanks to the “increasingly warm and enthusiastic interventions” of the Italian Ambassador in China Marco Francisci that the work started to take shape.³

³ According to Giuliano Montaldo (2022), Ambassador Marco Francisci exerted a central role in the promotion of the *Marco Polo* project on several occasions throughout the whole production process. Francisci not only worked on Sino-Italian relations from a diplomatic and political perspective but also enhanced the bilateral cinematic collaboration by providing practical help on production issues. Recalling the preliminary discussions on the

Up to now, forty years since the first broadcast of the series (US premiere May 1982),⁴ the reason why Marco Polo's travels were chosen as the main topic of the Sino-Italian collaboration has become part of the storytelling about the very production of the film. On one side, it seems to be embedded within the formula used to toast during the diplomatic meetings in China in the 1970s: “*Ganbei Marco Polo*” (Cheers to Marco Polo!). To this extent, the director Giuliano Montaldo wrote:

At a dinner at Angelo Guglielmi's, a wonderful friend and legendary TV presenter of Rai Uno, he told us that a delegation of Italian members of the Parliament, visiting China for the first time, had been impressed by the beauty of the country and the warm welcome of the Chinese hosts. Many of them had noticed that the phrase “*Canbè Marco Polo*” was often repeated. They discovered that it was a heartfelt thanks to the great Venetian. At the end of his story, Guglielmi announced that the director of Rai Uno [Mimmo Scarano] would have called me to study how to portray that character (Montaldo 2021, 91).⁵

As stated by the film director, during the late 1970s, Marco Polo was perceived in China as the symbol of Sino-Italian friendship. Surprisingly, even more than in Italy. To this extent, the Venetian merchant represented the perfect character for a new film co-production project, promoting PRC and Italy's political and cultural relations.

On the other side, according to the words of the assistant of RAI Uno's director Umberto Andalini, sixteen flights in three years (1977–1979) between Italy and China were needed to find an agreement about the co-production. The RAI delegates needed to convince the Chinese partners to produce a series about Marco Polo set in China, as they were wondering why a film on Marco Polo, and why in China, indeed (Gambetti 1983, 100–1). The transnational project was realized *also* in China, however, thanks to the close collaboration of the Italian Ambassador Marco Francisci with the vice-director of the Film Bureau of PRC Ministry of Culture Ding Qiao 丁峤 (1924–1995) (Gambetti 1983, 100–1), who promoted the strengthening of bilateral relations through diplomatic dialogue and the cultural liaison of Marco Polo.

filmmaking, Montaldo (2022) stated: “Back then, there was a delicate moment, because the Chinese partners had found an American price list for which they were asking for very high compensation, for example, 30 thousand dollars to shoot on the Great Wall. ‘This time, the film cannot be made anymore!’ we thought. We went to the Italian Ambassador, and he helped us to find a common language. We tried to lower the prices, and finally, we found an agreement. We were the first foreign troupe to shoot inside the Forbidden City and we received a lot of help from our Chinese partners. They gave us everything we needed.”

⁴ For further details about the distribution of *Marco Polo* see paragraph 4.

⁵ Where not else indicated, the following translations from Italian and Chinese into English are by this paper's author.

While Vincenzo Labella, Giuliano Montaldo, and David Butler edited the treatment elaborated by Anthony Burgess⁶ and completed the script of the eight-episodes-long *Marco Polo* (Gambetti, 1983, 48), the preliminary and crucial diplomatic dialogue activated in 1977 led to the formalization of the Sino-Italian cinematic collaboration. After a long process with many discussions on production issues (*The New York Times* 1982), several visits to both famous and remote Chinese sites for the location scouting (Bona 2018, 141–42), and the approval of the script (Di Chiara 2014, 387), the first co-production agreement was signed on December 12, 1979, by RAI and the China Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC, *Zhongguo dianying hezuo zhipian gongsi* 中国电影合作制片公司).⁷ The latter was founded in August 1979 thanks to the intervention of Chinese authorities (Huang 2000, 30) with the specific purpose of enhancing international collaborations in the cinematic field, thus abiding with the opening-up policy⁸ and “marking an important momentum in the development of Chinese film industry” (*woguo dianying chanye fazhan dailai qiangda houjin* 中国电影产业发展带来强大后劲) (Huang 2014, 4).

The co-production agreement was followed at the end of 1979 by a note containing Ding Qiao’s observations on the script, and by another one from Beijing Film Studio (*Beijing dianying zhipianchang* 北京电影制片厂), which was selected for the practical filming of *Marco Polo* in PRC (Gambetti 1983, 102–7). The two notes underlined a few aspects of the scenario that misrepresented historical elements of Polo and the Chinese Empire.

This December 1979 document, the first in a series,⁹ formally started the Sino-Italian project and broadened the extent of the *Marco Polo* TV series as a transnational co-production, wherein the filmmaking choices were negotiated by the production teams through the filters of intercultural dialogue.

3. The transnational filmmaking of *Marco Polo*: production practices and filming in PRC

Marco Polo was created as an Italian-based transnational film project that soon involved partners from the United States, China, Japan, France, and Ger-

⁶ *Marco Polo* was but the first Anthony Burgess’s work on a TV drama screenplay co-produced by RAI. The writer of the novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), of inspiration for Stanley Kubrick’s homonymous film (1971), had already participated in writing the script of the British-Italian TV series *Gesù di Nazareth* (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977) together with the director Franco Zeffirelli and Suso Cecchi d’Amico.

⁷ The agreement was signed by RAI television’s first channel director Mimmo Scarano and the Vice Minister of Culture of PRC Wang Lanxi 王闾西 (Gambetti 1983, 101–2).

⁸ The first film co-produced by CFCC was *Tenpyō no Iraka* 天平之甞 (1980), the cinematic adaptation of the homonymous novel by Inoue Yasushi 井上靖 (1907–1991) directed by Kumai Kei 熊井啓 (1930–2007).

⁹ From December 12, 1979, the Chinese and Italian production teams of *Marco Polo* signed several agreements, dated May 10, 1980, July 7, 1980, and July 21, 1981—to mention some.

many. As far as Sino-Italian co-production is concerned, the TV series activated transnational filmmaking practices, both for the production and practical filming in PRC. The 1979 agreement between RAI and the CFCC, discussed above, marked the establishment of a doubled and mirror-like production structure, which included different professionals from both Italy and China.¹⁰

On the Italian side, RAI was represented in China by Paolo De Andreis and Paolo Pioggia; the former was in charge of the production and administrative procedures, while the latter worked on the set—Lucia Pinelli was assisting the production team from Italy. The production was in the hands of Vincenzo Labela and Franco Cristaldi. Cristaldi's company, Vides International, replaced Sky Cinematografica after the economic problems that occurred in the first months of 1981, when the troupe was filming in Morocco (Di Chiara 2014, 390).¹¹ Alfredo Bini¹² was the executive producer, sent to China by Cristaldi to follow the set and the negotiations with CFCC; as of July 21, 1981, a new co-production agreement was signed (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino n.d.). Mario Mariani was the production supervisor, who substituted Mario Cotone.

On the Chinese side, CFCC managed the bureaucratic work, supervising both the production (accommodations for the Italian troupe included) and the set. A relevant figure in the CFCC delegation was Xu Chunqing 徐春青, an interpreter and officer of the Ministry of Culture who was fluent in Italian. CFCC was also represented by Zhang Liangbin 张良彬, while Mariani's counterpart production supervisor was Cai Rubing 才汝彬 from Beijing Film Studio. The latter was directed by Li Weicun 李惟存 and represented by the vice-director Shi Ping 史平.

¹⁰ Where not else indicated, the following paragraphs are based on the interviews with Maria Barbieri (2022, semi-structured interview, Rome, duration 2 hours, Italian language) and Susan Xu (2022, e-mail interview, English language), who worked for *Marco Polo* as interpreters and production assistants.

¹¹ The production of *Marco Polo* was in the hands of Sky Cinematografica. However, a change occurred when filming in Morocco. During the first months of 1981, while the filmmaking expenses kept rising due to inflation, no extra funds were provided by the production company (Montaldo 2022). Sky Cinematografica went over budget, and the *Marco Polo* project was suspended for two and a half months (Di Chiara 2014, 390). The troupe was stuck in Morocco and the flight tickets to Italy had to be paid with the money collected from the actors and the professionals on the set (Gambetti 1983, 69). Later on, thanks to the intervention of Franco Cristaldi, Vides International took the place of Sky Cinematografica, and production resumed.

¹² Alfredo Bini (1926–2010) had worked also on the sequel of *Marco Polo*, “Il ritorno di Marco Polo. Il viaggio delle meraviglie” [The Return of Marco Polo. The Wonder Voyages], a film and a seven-episode mixed-technique animated TV series about the return of Polo to China, which had never been filmed. The production papers dated 1994 are available in the Alfredo Bini fund at the National Museum of Cinema's historical archive (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino – Archivio Storico n.d.). As far as sequels to *Marco Polo* are concerned, there is another cinematic project which to some extent resembles Bini's subject. In 2006, the concept of a Chinese-French-Italian co-production animated series was presented at the Festival of Annecy; in 2013, however, the project was still in the making (Di Chiara 2014, 392).

The Sino-Italian mirrored production structure worked very efficiently¹³ and granted the filmmaking team the authorization from the Chinese authorities to film inside the Forbidden City (Montaldo 2022)—the first time for a foreign troupe since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. However, the doubled intercultural production impacted several aspects of the practical filming of the series, regarding both the transnational troupe formation and its management.

In an original interview conducted for this paper, director Giuliano Montaldo confirmed the *Marco Polo* TV series was conceived as a ten-hour-long film. Montaldo noted “[...] for me it is a film, not a television series” (2022). With this aspiration, the troupe and filmmaking team were created according to the best practices of cinema. In the nearly all-Italian *équipe*, Montaldo was assisted by his wife Vera Pescarolo, beloved companion to many cinematic adventures, and by Fabrizio Castellani. The Oscar-awarded Pasqualino De Santis (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1968, d. Franco Zeffirelli) was the director of photography, while Luciano Ricceri and Enzo Sabatini were the art director and the costume designer (respectively). The editing had been assigned to Nino Baragli, and John A. Martinelli, while the music was composed by maestro Ennio Morricone.

In China, the troupe was merged with a production team from Beijing Film Studio composed of 86 people, whose roles were defined by Annex 3 to the “Additional protocol between RAI and CFCC,” August 22, 1981 (Table 1). The Italian troupe members were appointed supervisors of the different departments (photography, sound, lights, etc.) and paired with their counterparts from Beijing Film Studio, while the staff was composed of workers from Beijing (Barbieri, 2022). Table 2 shows the names of the Chinese troupe members credited in the *Marco Polo* TV series, as per the version in two parts available on the streaming platform Tencent Video (2022a, 2022b).

Table 1 – “Additional protocol between RAI and CFCC”¹⁴

Department	Number of members
Administrative	2
Directing	4
Production	8
Sound	1
Make-up	3
Hair Stylists	3
Special Effects	2
Armorer-Acrobat	2
Track and dolly	5

¹³ See note 3.

¹⁴ August 22, 1981, Annex 3 (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino n.d.).

Electricians	5
Drivers	16
Set designers	7
Costumes	8
Doctor	1
Choreographer or Musician	1
Interpreters	16
Various Assistants	2
Total	86

Table 2 – Chinese troupe members credited in *Marco Polo*¹⁵

Department	Chinese troupe	
	Name	Chinese characters
Directing		
Film directors	Du Min	杜民
	Yang Chengchun	杨成纯
First assistant directors	Li Hongsheng	李洪生
	Wang Biao	王彪
	Luo Hangmin	骆航民
	Ren Shen	任申
Screenplay and dubbing		
Translators and Editors	Ai Min	艾敏
	Ying Ruocheng	英若诚
	Yi Xin	一新
	Xu Chunqing	徐春青
	Shanghai dianying yizhichang	上海电影译制厂
Production		
Production supervisor	Cai Rubin	才汝彬
Production	Yang Keping	杨克炳
	Zhang Liangbin	张良彬
	Wang Yuchang	王玉昌
	Song Bingzhen	宋炳振

¹⁵ Tencent Video (2022a, 2022b).

	Zhang Yuming	张玉明
Make-up artist		
Make-up artists	Sun Yuemei	孙月梅
	Wu Yan	吴燕
	Liu Qiuchun	刘秋春
Set design		
Assistant set decorators	Yang Yuhe	杨予和
	Song Hongrong	宋洪荣
Costumes		
Assistant costume designers	Gong Zhanjing	弓占经
	Sun Huanxiang	孙焕香
	Wang Keyi	王可意
Editing		
Editing	Fu Zhengyi	傅正义
Sound		
Sound technicians	Lan Fan	兰帆
	He Zukang	何祖康
Lights		
Lights	Xu Heqing	徐和庆
Props		
Property master	Ma Qiang	马强
Assistants	Xu Xiaoqing	徐晓青
	Zhang Xianchun	张先春
	Ma Shouyi	马守义
Fireworks	Wu Zhensheng	武振声
	Yang Jingguo	杨敬国
Construction		
Manufacturers	Wang Zesheng	王泽生
	Wang Chunbu	王春补
	Cui Xiurong	崔秀荣
	Zhang Ruihe	张瑞和
Choreography and music		
Choreography	Jia Zuoguang	贾作光
Choreography and music	Mo'erjifu	莫尔吉夫

Marco Polo was filmed in English; thus, the actors were chosen to abide by this standard. Kenneth Marshall, Anne Bancroft, Leonard Nimoy, Denholm Elliott, and Burt Lancaster, to name some of the film stars that acted in the TV series, were part of the agreement with the US partners, while the Chinese actors were chosen on-site. In this context, a relevant figure was the actor and translator of Manchu origins Ying Ruocheng 英若诚 (1929–2003). In fact, before being appointed vice-minister of Culture of PRC (1986–1990), Ying was “a perfect Kublai Khan” (Montaldo 2022) in the *Marco Polo*’s series, bringing his experience of theatrical translations of Shakespeare’s and Miller’s plays from English into Chinese onset,¹⁶ and helping with the casting of Chinese actors in Beijing and Shanghai (Gambetti 1983, 136). His contribution, together with that of Chinese and Italian students trying their hands at translations in this vast cinematic production, was crucial for the troupe management to overcome the difficulties of a transnational working environment that could resemble the Tower of Babel.

On set, there were speakers of different languages, mainly Italian, English, Chinese (standard language and dialects), and Mongolian. In addition to the background actors, provided by some sections of the PRC army, many of them were chosen from groups of Mongolian-language-speaking shepherds, who happened to be close to the set when filming on the Mongolian plateau. As a consequence, despite the combination of several languages with multiple communication strategies (acting skills, facial expressions, and hand gestures included), a few misunderstandings due to cultural differences took place, too. Among these Montaldo recalled:

[...] the worse part [of the filmmaking] was the enlistment of the Mongols, the locals. We had no choice. There was a huge plateau, where you couldn’t see anything. [...] It was immense, just immense. We built our camp behind a little hill, otherwise, we would have slept on the ground or inside the yurts. We began to look for some Mongols. My girlfriend [Vera Pescarolo], who was my collaborator, went riding along with the Mongol women looking for where they lived, where they were... Looking for them even far away. Finally, after a few days of searching, we arrived at 300 background actors, as many as we needed to do the battles. Then a tremendous thing happened.

There was a big tent where there was the tailoring team. A Mongolian went in, the first one. The women started to undress him, alas! Beastly screams! He wanted to leave. A complete mess! Anyway, some men started working on the tailoring and the situation was calmed again. That Mongol had never seen a

¹⁶ Ying Ruocheng was suggested to Vincenzo Labella to play the role of Kublai Khan by Arthur Miller. After seeing Ying acting at People’s Art Theater in *Measure for Measure* and meeting him backstage, Labella stated, “His mind is so rich with ideas that it became a pleasure to work with him. It was my best act of casting and my most difficult” (*The New York Times* 1982). Thanks to Ying’s brilliant performance in *Marco Polo*, he was then selected by Bernardo Bertolucci for *The Last Emperor* (1987), and *Little Buddha* (1993) (Ying and Conceison 2009, 169).

mirror before. After he had seen himself in the mirror, dressed up and bearded as the Mongols probably were, and as somehow, they still are, with the sword, and everything... *Ah!* [Montaldo mimics the actor, surprised and satisfied] He came out and showed the dress to the group. *Ooh!* Everyone wanted to get in then. After a day of hard work, they were all ready. However, they jumped on their horses and left abruptly. They wanted to show the dress at home. They were gone for three days! I cried like a calf: “The film is finished!” Then they returned. After three days. One, two, three... they all came back.

This is to tell you about some of the adventures we had, but the one of three days without the Mongols... believe me, the film was over! Gone were the Mongols, gone were the clothes: everything! Make-up, clothes, everything! It was tough! (Montaldo 2022).

The result of the formation and management of a transnational troupe, which also included herds of animals such as horses, camels, cows, and sheep, and sometimes was even doubled into second units, was a huge group that traveled through China to film *Marco Polo*—from the mountains of Inner Mongolia to Beijing (Forbidden City, Summer Palace, Ming Tombs, Great Wall), Hebei (Chengde Temples), and Guangxi (Guilin), to mention some of the set locations. With reference to the huge scope of production, Alfredo Bini (2018, 102) wrote: “At the time, no one, not even the Chinese, was allowed to travel freely through the country; we crossed it with sixty-two trucks, thirty caravans, three field kitchens, six generator sets, workshop trucks, cranes, and tractors.”

Except for the location scouting, which took place in the second half of 1979 (Gambetti 1980, 13–37), the filming of *Marco Polo* in China lasted almost eight months, from July 13, 1981, to February 18, 1982 (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino n.d.). It was one of the biggest transnational film productions in which PRC ever participated.

4. Marco Polo on screens and its reception in China

After the conclusion of the shooting, the editing, and the post-production work, completed between Italy and the United States, *Marco Polo* was ready for the broadcast. The eight episodes and ten-hour-long TV series premiered in the USA, with a four-day TV marathon by NBC (May 16–19, 1982) (Shales 1982). The epic was later broadcast in more than forty countries, winning the Emmy Awards for best miniseries and best costumes in September 1982. The Italian airing on RAI TV was from December 5, 1982, to January 23, 1983. However, the Chinese distribution of *Marco Polo* followed a different, slower path. While the filmmaking of the series was accompanied by several articles in the *People's Daily* and film journals, and by the commercialization of posters and photo-novels (*lianhuanhua* 连环画) inspired by the movie, three years had passed before the series was screened in PRC.

Dubbed in Chinese by the Shanghai dianying yizhichang 上海电影译制厂, department of Shanghai Film Studio (*Shanghai dianying zhipianchang* 上海电影制片厂), the series was edited into four episodes (tot. 318 minutes):

1. “*Gaobie Weinisi* 告别威尼斯” (Farewell to Venice);
2. “*Zouxiang dongfang* 走向东方” (Towards the East);
3. “*Dadu dao Yangzhou* 大都到扬州” (From the Capital to Yangzhou);
4. “*Zuihou de lücheng* 最后的旅程” (The Last Journey).

As Montaldo noted, some scenes regarding religious issues (e.g., the sequences in the first and second episodes about the papacy and the Blood of Christ) were removed from the final version (2022).

Marco Polo was then screened for the first time in Beijing at the end of January 1985 in a shortened two-episode version. The event was organized by the PRC Ministry of Culture and was attended by an Italian delegation composed of Ambassador Raffaele Marras, Cultural Attaché Sandra Marina Carletti, Emanuele Milano (director), Umberto Andalini from RAI Uno, and the film director Giuliano Montaldo (Andalini 1985, 36).

Even though *Marco Polo* was created for television, little information is available on the actual commercial airing and projection of the series on Chinese TVs or in movie theatres in the 1980s. As reported by oral history (Xu 2022), *Marco Polo* was screened as a cultural exchange program in schools, universities, and public institutions—e.g., in the auditorium of Beijing Foreign Studies University in May 1985. As far as contemporary China is concerned, the TV series is now available in two parts (four episodes total) dubbed in Chinese language on the streaming platform Tencent Video (2022a, 2022b).

Despite the limited data on its availability and reception in China, *Marco Polo* was and still is regarded in PRC as a project which helped to “strengthen China’s relationship with the West” (*jiaqiang Zhongguo tong xifang de guanxi* 加强中国同西方的关系) (Ren 1982, 45) and “a milestone event for Chinese film and television” (*Zhongguo yingshi de lichengbei shijian* 中国影视的里程碑事件) (Zhou 2019, 86). Together with *Tenpyō no Iraka* 天平之薨 (1980, d. Kumai Kei) and *Mikan no taikyoku* 未完の対局 (1982, d. Satō Junya and Duan Jishun) (Huang 2014, 4), *Marco Polo* remains one of the first yet most relevant transnational cinematic co-productions of post-Reform and opening-up policy China. Moreover, it stands as “the greatest testimony of the friendship between Chinese and Italian filmmakers” (*Zhong Yi liang guo yingren youyi de zui hao jianzheng* 中意两国影人友谊的最好见证) (Zhou 2019, 86), which enhanced China-Italy cinematic projects, of which Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1987) was the next successful example.¹⁷ *Marco Polo*’s experience paved the way for more Sino-Italian film projects in the first decade of the 21st century (Di Chiara 2014; Fu and Indelicato 2017) and led

¹⁷ Originally, *The Last Emperor* was meant to be filmed by Giuliano Montaldo, who refused the offer due to the hard work connected with the production of *Marco Polo*. The filmmaking was then assigned to Bernardo Bertolucci, who “made a beautiful, stupendous film” as per Montaldo (2022). However, Bertolucci’s movie shared with *Marco Polo* many elements of the production in the PRC, including some members of the teams and the shooting material, which was left on site in 1982 (Barbieri 2022).

to the signing on December 4, 2004 of the “Agreement on Film Co-production between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People’s Republic of China.”

5. Conclusion

Giuliano Montaldo’s *Marco Polo* (1982) was a huge film production in terms of investments and international resonance, marking the first successful cinematic project to strengthen the friendship between Italy and China after the formal recognition of the PRC in 1970. Moreover, as far as the Sino-Italian co-production and the filming in China are concerned, the series also stood as a fruitful project which was characterized by the enhancement of transnational practices through the different phases of filmmaking, from production (ideation and realization) to distribution.

Firstly, as far as the preliminary coordination work is concerned, the *Marco Polo* project was shaped as a Sino-Italian co-production thanks to the close cooperation between the diplomatic and cultural public authorities of Italy and China. This diplomatic dialogue was crucial for organizing part of the filming in PRC, and for the collaboration between RAI and CFCC, which was finalized in 1979 with the signing of a bilateral agreement (the first in a series). Such positive and historic diplomatic collaboration led to great results for Sino-Italian cultural relations, giving birth to one of the first yet most relevant transnational cinematic co-productions of post-Reform and opening-up policy China. This led to a great result for Italian film history and international cultural relations with PRC, as the *Marco Polo* team was the first foreign troupe to be allowed by Chinese authorities to film inside the Forbidden City since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 (Montaldo 2022).

Secondly, the filmmaking stage of the series provides a rich archive of transnational dynamics. Within the general co-production, a doubled Sino-Italian organizational structure was created that mirrored Italian and Chinese production teams, which had to negotiate choices about the overall filmmaking. In addition, when in China, the troupe which had worked for the shooting in Morocco was merged with professionals by Beijing Film Studio, and with Chinese and Mongolian actors selected on-site, leading to the formation and management of a transnational filming troupe. This combined multi-cultural and multi-lingual working environment required the definition of strategies for intercultural communication (e.g., interpreters, negotiations of working plans, etc.), both for the production teams and on set.

Thirdly, the distribution stage of *Marco Polo* in China was also defined by transnational practices. After the eight-episode and ten-hour-long English-language original version had been completed for worldwide screening, Montaldo’s TV series was dubbed in Chinese and edited into four episodes by Shanghai Film Studio. This process eliminated some sequences to abide by cultural differences with the Chinese public and led to a delayed release in China. Despite the intention of television broadcast (US world premiere May 1982 on NBC),

Marco Polo was screened in an event for Chinese and Italian authorities in January 1985 and then presented as a cultural exchange program in PRC's public institutions, such as schools and universities, in the first half of the same year. The overall value of the movie was thus shifted from commercial to cultural product, being received in PRC as positive example of Sino-Italian filmic collaboration for the national industry, which had just started international co-productions with *Tenpyō no Iraka*, and *Mikan no taikyoku* after the Reform and opening-up policy.

Finally, the transnational filmmaking (ideation and realization) and distribution of *Marco Polo* in the PRC had important effects not only on the national film industry of the countries which participated in the co-production project, but also on Sino-Italian relations, promoting all-around international cooperation. It reinforced *Marco Polo's* trademark for Italy and China's bilateral collaboration, as seen in the Marco Polo educational exchange program and the Sino-Italian production of *Marco Polo* opera (2018),¹⁸ by China Arts and Entertainment Group and Genoa's Carlo Felice Theatre.

In addition, with specific reference to the cinema, *Marco Polo* paved the way for the shooting in PRC of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) and for the signing of the first co-production agreement between Italy and China in December 2004 (ratified in 2012). The latter version included the production of two comedies (Fu and Indelicato 2017), among which *Caffè* (*Coffee*, 2016. Chinese title, *Kafei fengbao* 咖啡风暴) by Cristiano Bortone was a positive model. The latest Sino-Italian co-production project, which also relates to *Marco Polo's* transnational film legacy, has been produced by Bortone, namely, the romantic comedy *The Italian Recipe* (*Yujian ni zhi hou* 遇见你之后) (2022) directed by the Chinese pop star Hou Zouxin 侯祖辛.¹⁹

To conclude, the co-production of 1982's *Marco Polo* was a milestone in the development of Sino-Italian international relations since the last decades of the 20th century, showing how cinematic cooperation can implement multifaceted collaboration projects within the framework of transnationalism, thus promoting intercultural dialogue. As Giuliano Montaldo noted when filming in China in 1982 and reported in the Chinese journal *Zhongguo minzu* 中国民族:

Already as a boy, Marco Polo, looking out over the harbor of his city, Venice, dreamed of meeting different peoples, civilizations, and cultures. We made this film to tell that today—as then—knowing and getting to know each other is a heritage for friendship and peace (Xiao 1982, 35).

¹⁸ The opera, sung in Chinese, is composed by Enjott Schneider and written by Wei Jin 韦锦, while the *mise en scène* is by the Danish director Kasper Holten (*Xinhua* 2019).

¹⁹ The film was released in China on June 3, 2022, while the European premiere was on April 22 at Udine's Far East Film Festival (FEFF).

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Chinese returnee students and cultural production: the case of ex-students of Opera in Italy

Giuseppe Rizzuto

Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to point out the connection between mobility and cultural activities of Chinese returnee opera students. Many Chinese students in Italy attend cultural and artistic university courses. They may be considered significant in analyzing Chinese reverse migration from Italy. The examined connection involves several dynamics, including artistic aspects, historical reasons, social and economic changes, public policies and consumerism styles. Mobility and cultural production may be analyzed through both a structural and imaginative dimension. The structural dimension is composed of international agreements, global mobility law conditions, social and economic changes, and private investments in education to accumulate cultural capital that produce (or reproduce) certain social structures and experiences. On the other hand, the imaginative dimension is shaped by the lifestyle adopted by middle class families, including their work activities and cultural consumption. Returnee students are both the subjects who promote this process and the object of this dynamic. Chinese singers of Italian opera, upon graduating university in Italy, join the possibilities of the work field—in Bourdieu's perspective—which is formed by the two aforementioned dimensions. Finally, perceived differences between Italy and China in terms of musical technique and culture are reworked according to contemporary cultural policies.

Keywords: mobility, opera, Chinese returnee students, cultural production, Italy.

1. Mobility, imagination, and cultural production

Chinese international student mobility is not a contemporary phenomenon. The first phase of this specific mobility can be traced back to the mid-19th century; the second phase can be traced from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1920s. In these phases students moved to US, Japan, UK, French and Germany. The third phase then occurred during the first half of the 1950s, as students moved towards the USSR and a few other communist countries; and the latest phase started with Deng Xiaoping's 'open door policy' and is still ongoing in present day (Liu 2021). An increasing number of Chinese students have moved abroad to attend bachelor's, master's or doctoral courses. Some then returned to China looking for job opportunities created by globalization and the highly competitive Chinese labor market. The central aim of this chapter is to point out the connection between the mobility of Chinese returnee opera students who attended university courses in Italy and their cultural and artistic activities in China. Which social, political and econom-

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ic elements influence cultural production of these returnee students? What is the perception of these returnees regarding the contribution of mobility to their cultural activities in China?

Many Chinese students in Italy attend cultural and artistic university courses such as art, music, or design, thus they're significant in analyzing Chinese reverse migration from Italy. The connection between mobility and cultural activities involves several dynamics, including artistic aspects, historical reasons, social and economic changes, public policies and consumerism styles. While surveys have been conducted to learn more about returnee entrepreneurs or scientific and technical students (Wang and Bao 2015), it's difficult to find any inquiries about Chinese music students returning from Italy in international literature. While this chapter cannot nearly fill this gap, it outlines some preliminary reflections.

Observations on these Chinese students and their cultural production focus on three main points: 1) mobility between China and Italy; 2) the diffusion of interests in music that later influence everyday activities regarding education, work, lifestyle, leisure, consumption, social relationships and future imagination; 3) cultural production as a multi-level activity, from personal experiences to international economic and social issues. This interpretation is based on Urry's views of mobility (Urry 2007), Appadurai's vision of imagination (Appadurai 1996) and Bourdieu's approach to the social dimension of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993).

Mobility is one of the most important issues in today's world. Technological discoveries, globalization and worldwide connection continue to cause large scale movement in terms of people, objects and meaning. Migration represents just one part of these movements. According to the World Migration Report 2020 (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2022, 23), nearly 281 million people lived in a country other than their country of birth in 2020, most of whom were labor migrants. Asylum seekers, students, tourists, businessmen and businesswomen, refugees, and cultural, political or economic stakeholders also move to other places for climate change, war, severe economic and political instability or business opportunities. What they all have in common is the experience of mobility that affects people and both their places of origin and destination in different ways. This chapter looks at this phenomenon through the lens of "new mobility paradigm" (Sheller and Urry 2006). According to this approach, it is possible to study social and cultural space as a mix of physical, material and symbolic mobility. Therefore, the concept of mobility is useful to understand a person's long-term residency, daily urban movement, material mobility place and immaterial meaning diffusion. Urry himself notices some reasonable critiques to this approach, including the risk of idealizing people's movement, which is shaped from a privileged point of view over global phenomena (Sheller and Urry 2006, 211). Historical and power connections produce different kinds of discrimination (gender, political, religious, ethnic, and economic), while the concept of mobility looks to conserve an implicit sense of freedom that currently only few people can actually experience. Schiller and Salazar (2013), in

fact, speak about the ‘regime of mobility’ by writing, “However, we postulate that there are several different intersecting regimes of mobility that normalize the movements of some travelers while criminalizing and entrapping the ventures of others” (Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189).

Mobility of people and mobility of ideas and imagination are strictly connected. Appadurai (1996), for example, explores the concept of imagination in a global migration context. He argues that “the work of the imagination is a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (Appadurai 1996, 3). Imagination is described through three important distinctions:

1. Imagination is not just practiced by artists but, when linked with new media diffusion, is a constitutive feature of everyday life. “The imagination has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies” (Appadurai 1996, 5);
2. Imagination is also important in distinguishing between fantasy (seen as a private act) and imagination, which is viewed as a starting point of action;
3. Imagination is a property of collectives, and not only considered a faculty of the individuals close to a romantic vision. Thus, imagination is a social practice.

Cultural production is also a social practice. Bourdieu (1993) argues that when writers or artists produce work, they always do so within a context structured in specific ways. Artistic production is not necessarily autonomous, but is instead a result of a specific set of historical conditions. This does not mean that artists have no function and thus cultural products are just determined by structural forces.

The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art. Consequently, in order to escape from the usual choice between celebratory effusions and the reductive analysis which, failing to take account of the fact of belief in the work of art and of the social conditions which produce that belief, destroys the work of art as such, a rigorous science of art must, pace both the unbelievers and iconoclasts and also the believers, assert the possibility and necessity of understanding the work in its reality as a fetish; it has to take into account everything which helps to constitute the work as such, not least the discourses of direct or disguised celebration which are among the social conditions of production of the work of art qua object of belief (Bourdieu 1993, 35).

Observations in my analysis lean towards the process of cultural production, not only cultural products. Points taken into consideration include how the international mobility of Chinese students can influence cultural production, looking for a connection between these two fields. The risk of this perspective is in portraying Chinese international students as an undistinguished monolith, or in a culturalist view (Xu 2022). To avoid this, I connect the themes stemming from literature review with the opinion of three students who returned to China after

studying Italian opera in Italy. Interviews¹ may be useful in outlining a few main points for this paper and forthcoming research, although they must be considered in their own singularity. These do not indicate any standard experiences or common opinion of international students, but rather offer a few subjective positions that may reveal how mobility and cultural production affect each other.

2. Chinese students and international mobility

2.1 Historical outline

In 1847, the first documented group of Chinese students was sent to the United States (Dervin 2015, 216). They were students of a Missionary school—quite widespread in China in that period—and were led by the pastor of the Mission (Rhoads 2011). It represents the first step of a collective program of student mobility, even though it was not under State control but instead motivated by personal initiative.

The Chinese Empire's defeat during the Opium Wars exposed the military and technological gap with Western countries. Many intellectuals adopted the idea of “Chinese learning as foundation, Western learning for application” (*Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用), which meant maintaining the Chinese traditions and vision of the world while using scientific and technological Western knowledge. Mobility of students was identified as a tool to reduce this gap: students went abroad to learn from Western countries and then came back to China to innovate Chinese infrastructure, factories and the Chinese army. Rong Hong² 容闳 (1828–1912), also known as Yung Ming, became the first Chinese graduate of Yale University in 1854 after attending missionary school in China and later migrating to the United States. He was also the first returned student who committed himself to growing student exchanges between the two countries. Yung Ming pushed for the approval of the Chinese Educational Mission (C.E.M.) in 1871, which resulted in 120 young Chinese going to the United States to study Western science, engineering and technologies with the Chinese government's approval, all while attempting to avoid Western culture. In the last half of the 19th century, only a few students could go abroad, due in part to the hesitation of conservative Chinese families who felt afraid of the cultural differences of foreign countries (Liu 2021). The program, in fact, was criticized by conservative groups because of the influence of Western ideas and customs on Chinese students. In 1881, all students had to return to China and the program ended. The returned students went on to work

¹ Interviews were released online in Italian or Chinese according to the preferences of interviewees. The interviewees are Italian opera students who returned to China after graduation and now work in the music field. The English translation is by the author.

² In this chapter, the Pinyin system is used for words and names in Chinese language. The only exception is for those names commonly recognized by using other systems, such as Sun Yat-sen or Chiang Kai-shek.

in education, diplomacy, administration, business, the Navy, telegraph operation, mines, and railroads in China (Hu 2004, 93; Liu 2021).

In 1905, the abolition of imperial examinations was declared, and the Qing government required all regions to set up new kinds of schools to reform their education to match that of the West. A large number of Chinese people planned to study overseas at their own expense because students who had returned from studying abroad could typically obtain important positions in civil and military administration (Liu 2021), which were considered the most prestigious positions for the Chinese upper class for centuries. Many students chose to go to Japan due to proximity, cultural similarities and the conservative nature of Meiji education. In 1904, there were 1,400 Chinese students in Japan. By 1906, there were more than ten times more, with 15,000 reported Chinese students in the country (Pepper 1996, 57–8). In the following years, many students moved to America or Europe to learn not only technical knowledge, but also philosophical, artistic, pedagogical and political issues. Many of them returned with the primary purpose of influencing Chinese culture and politics. In the first part of the century, the influence of returnee students on the Chinese political, cultural and social landscape was relevant. The May Fourth Movement is only one example (Wu 1988). Among the main promoters were some of the most important intellectuals of Chinese modern history: in literature there were Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) and Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936); in politics there was Sun Yat-Sen—also known as Sun Zhongshan 孙中山 (1866–1925); in education there were Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) and Tang Guo'an 唐国安 (1858–1913); in art there was Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 (1895–1953); in law there was Tu Tingfang 伍廷芳 (1842–1922). Even Chiang Kai-Shek 蒋介石 (1887–1975), Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) and Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997) spent time abroad.

During the 1950s, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, students could move to other communist countries to study engineering in a state agreement framework. During the 1960s and 1970s, after the break of China-USSR cooperation and during the Cultural Revolution, all kinds of “Western tide” (Chiang 1947) ceased. This meant that the flow of returnee students also stopped (Liu 2021). In 1978, on the eve of the resumption of diplomatic relations between China and the West, Deng Xiaoping's strategy was once again to directly involve students in the modernisation of China. Educational exchanges with the West, like the Westernisation movement a century before, aimed to introduce modern technology to China's context and thus improve Chinese social and economic conditions. Similar to a century before, Chinese university students abroad were a key feature in opening China up to the international landscape. In 1979, the Ministry of Education, the National Science Committee and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China issued the first document regarding the regulation of Chinese students overseas and established strict rules according to which those who did not return on time would be punished (Xiang and Shen 2009, 515). The reform and open-up policy of China began by adopting a new economic development strategy. During the early 1980s, it also involved cultural fields. Beyond technical knowledge, Chinese students studied and dis-

cussed Western artists, philosophers, writers, and musicians. The 1980s, “cultural fever” or *wenhua re* 文化热 created an open space for cultural exchange and a renovation of Chinese art, literature and music (Zhang 1994). In these years, the communist State’s changed stance on legitimate ideology coincided with the expansion of university student enrolment, the growing cost of living in Chinese cities and the increasing difficulty for young urban postgraduates to get a job (Zhao 1996, 149–50; Cheek 2008). These social and economic conditions contributed to pushing many students abroad. For example, the number of mainland Chinese students in the United States increased from nearly zero at the beginning of 1978 to a total of approximately 20,030 by 1988 (Kun 2017, 8; Xiang and Shen 2009, 515). Mobility also was encouraged by new policies. At the end of 1984, the State Council of China stipulated that anyone who had been admitted by a foreign institution and had received foreign financial support or any other kind of assistance was eligible to apply to go abroad self-funded. Since then, the number of non-government-sponsored Chinese students has rapidly increased and now represents a large majority of the Chinese students on American university campuses (Kun 2017, 11).

Haigui 海归 is a term that modernly refers to a person who has returned to the country after having studied or worked abroad. In English, such people are called “sea turtles,” using *haigui* 海龟, a homophone. Between 1978 and 2006, those who returned to China on a long-term basis accounted for less than 26% of all people who went abroad (MOE 2007). A new policy focused on encouraging Chinese people abroad to return home is summarized as the ‘Twelve-words Approach’: *zhichi liuxue, guli huiguo, lai qu ziyou* 支持留学, 鼓励回国, 来去自由, “support study overseas, encourage returns, guarantee freedom of movement” (Xiang and Shen 2009, 516). In 1992, during the 14th Congress of Party, Jiang Zemin’s speech was clear:

We appreciate it when our people studying abroad show concern and support for the drive to modernize the motherland and become involved in it in various ways. When they come back to participate in socialist construction, they will be warmly welcomed no matter what their political attitudes were in the past; proper arrangements will be made for their employment, and they will be allowed to come and go freely and easily (Jiang 1992).

Many members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, academic leaders of universities under direct control of the Ministry of Education and academicians at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, participated in international educational experiences (Welch and Hao 2017). Gradually, the Chinese strategy regarding students abroad shifted and became more complex to match to global changes (Wang 2020, 89–98). Even though an increasing number of students chose to return to China, since 2001, the State policy has encouraged Chinese people who remained abroad to engage in several types of activities that could help China from afar (Zweig et al. 2008, 9–11; Lai 2015, 87–91).

Even in the last decade of the 20th century, Chinese students continued going abroad. Young Chinese people stepped away from politics and looked to-

wards material wealth. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of People Republic of China, about 90% of internationally mobile students from China are self-funded; in 2018, those who returned to China on a long-term basis accounted for 84.49% of all of those who went abroad (Yang 2022, 313). The growing number of returnee students in recent years is likely due to many factors. Undoubtedly, there are also individual reasons due to personal, family and psychological experiences, but there are also common factors: returnee post-graduates have advantages in terms of work opportunities, salary and careers (Du et al. 2021); graduate students can find haigui-friendly regulations, such as household registration (Xiang and Shen 2009, 520); and a rising numbers of graduates who inevitably cannot all be absorbed by the host country labor markets (Yang 2022, 314). The diffusion of Covid-19 also caused many students to come back to China (Qi et al. 2020).

2.2 Mobility to Italy: Chinese music students

At the beginning of the 20th century, the first Chinese sellers, originating from the Zhejiang province, arrived in Milan and Bologna by way of France. Some of them married Italian citizens, opened their own enterprises and put down roots in Italian society (Brigadoi Cologna 2017; Chang 2012). Despite the number of Chinese people living in Italy remaining only in the double digits, they were able to improve their social and economic position in Italian society due to their hard work in growing their economic activities. Between the foundation of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949 and Deng Xiaoping's "open door policy" in 1979, formal relationships between China and Chinese immigrants in Italy were interrupted, even though family and informal relationships never completely broke off. At the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, due to globalization and favorable conditions of Chinese and Italian law, many Chinese people came to Italy. Leveraging family networks, enterprising capability and world trade flow, Chinese immigrants further enlarged their economic activities. In 1998, there were 70,000 Chinese people living in Italy. By 2011, there were 300,000 (Latham and Wu 2013, 27). During the 2000s and 2010s, the social and economic conditions of Chinese immigrants diversified in terms of geographic origins, work activities and socio-cultural milieu. Workers came from several provinces, including Zhejiang, working not only in manufacturing, but also in trade and services (Ceccagno 2017, 171). Many of them came for family reunification or to study at Italian Universities (ISTAT 2018, 18).

The category of university students represents one of the more innovative groups in Chinese mobility to Italy. According to the Statistics Office of the Ministry of University and Research of Italy, from 2010 to 2021, there were 663,506 Chinese students in Italian universities; among them, 57,459 were in the AFAM network.³

³ AFAM (*Alta Formazione Artistica e Musicale*) is part of the Italian higher education system and includes: state and public Academies of Fine Art (*Accademie di Belle Arti*); state Music Conservatories (*Conservatori di Musica*) and other public Music Institutes (ex *Istituti*)

In the 2020–21 academic year, there were 1,793,210 total students in Italian universities. Among them, 101,091 were foreign students, of which 8,319 were Chinese students, 8.2% of the enrolled students. Likewise, in the 2020–21 academic year, there were a total of 80,671 students in the Italian AFAM institutes network. Among them, 12,587 were foreign students, and 7,873 were Chinese students, 8.2% of the enrolled students.

Table 1 – University and AFAM students in Italy

2020–21	University students	AFAM institute students
Total number of students	1,793,210	80,671
Number of foreign students	101,091	12,587
Number of Chinese students	8,319	7,873
Percentage of Chinese students among total foreign students	8.2%	15.6%

Chinese students can apply as ordinary foreign students or participate in the Marco Polo and Turandot programs. To apply for a student visa, there are a list of conditions that must be met:

1. B2 level competency in the Italian language according to QCER;
2. Economic resources to live in Italy (467.65 euros per month, or 6,079.45 euros per year) and the availability of the necessary sum for repatriation;
3. Suitable accommodation;
4. Insurance coverage (Naldi et al. 2022).

The Marco Polo Programme was launched in 2004 by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) at the direct request of the Presidency of the Italian Republic to strengthen scientific collaboration with China and increase the presence of Chinese students on Italian campuses. With the same aim, the Turandot Programme was launched for art, music, design and ballet students in 2009. Due to an intergovernmental agreement between the two countries, Chinese students who apply for pre-enrolment in a Bachelor's or Master's degree programme at an Italian university or an Italian performing arts academy and music institute can more easily obtain a student visa to Italy and earn a degree recognized both in Italy and China. In 2005, only 32 Universities participated in the Marco Polo programme. However, by 2021–22, there were 65 universities, 15 higher schools of language mediation, and 108 AFAM institutes (Naldi et al. 2022, 18).

Marco Polo and Turandot students must abide by specific conditions. For example, while they are not obliged to obtain an Italian language certificate prior

Musicali Pareggiati); state Design colleges (*Istituti Superiori per le Industrie Artistiche – ISIA*); the National Academy of Dance (*Accademia Nazionale di Danza*); the National Academy of Drama (*Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica*); Private institutions authorized to award qualifications of Higher Education in Art, Music and Dance.

to going to Italy, they can attend an Italian course while in Italy and obtain an Italian language certification six months before starting academic courses. They must also have earned a *gaokao* 高考⁴ score of at least 400/750. Turandot students, in particular, must earn a *gaokao* score of at least of 300/750 and a *yikao* 艺考⁵ score of at least of 100/750 (Naldi et al. 2022, 18–19). These programs represent an opportunity to simplify access to Italian universities, but they are not without their critiques: the gap between growing numbers of students and the quality of the accommodations provided to them; the connection between degrees and job opportunities in the Italian labor market; and the bureaucratic and institutional complexities of the Italian university system (Bagni and Scibetta 2018, 61–5). According to the ‘VII Convegno sui Programmi Governativi Marco Polo e Turandot’ from the 2013–14 academic year, the number of Turandot program students was higher than that of the Marco Polo students (Naldi et al. 2022, 5). This often depends on the attractiveness of Italian art and music (which are very well-known in China), the lack of high-level institutions in these fields in China, and the growing cultural and entertainment sector in the Chinese economy that require professionals with international level competences (Naldi et al. 2022, 7). The flow of Chinese art and music students in Italy grew continually until 2017 when, due to the opening of university courses in China and the new ranking of *gaokao* required to access these programs, there were roughly 10% less students.

When the Marco Polo program was first launched, Lavagnino (2005) cited an article by Shi Kedong 史克栋 (2005), a Chinese journalist working in Italy, in a paper about this program. Shi Kedong explained the advantages of moving to Italy to study to Chinese students: low university fees, low living costs expenditure, and students can both study and work; the author also outlined the best Italian degree courses: design, architecture, fine arts, music, and visual arts.

This short list can be seen as an example to divide the connection between mobility and cultural production into two dimensions: structural dimension and imaginative dimension.

The structural dimension is linked, for example, to economic resources. Most Chinese students abroad are ‘*zifei* students’ (*zifei liuxuesheng* 自费留学生). In other words, they receive strong family economic support (Li 2021, 30–1). The China Scholarship Council (CSC) has identified key funding areas for overseas study with priority support including communication, information technology, agricultural, new technology, life science, population health, material science, new materials, energy, environment, and engineering science (Li 2021, 113):

⁴ *Gaokao*, or National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), is a standardised college entrance exam held annually in mainland China. It is required for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level.

⁵ *Yikao*, or National College Entrance Exam for Art Students, is a parallel to *gaokao*. *Yikao* tests students on their artistic skills through three main subjects: graphite drawing, acrylic painting, and fast sketch.

Among college students, those who have the intention of going abroad have stable incomes of their parents, and the majority of them live in cities. This shows that although the big prospect of studying abroad is very good, individuals are still closely related to their family economic situation and ideology. Among college students who do not want to go abroad, the cost of studying abroad is the key to hinder them from going abroad (Li 2021, 29).

Even if the appreciation of RMB represents an incentive worth mentioning, social and economic backgrounds still represent a key element for Marco Polo and Turandot students. In fact, most parents of these students have a high or medium-high level of education (Scolaro 2020, 143). Comparing domestic and international students' mobility, it's easy to see that mobility patterns are influenced by and contribute to China's growing inequalities. International graduate students generally had more privileged family backgrounds, coming from China's highly developed core cities, while domestic graduates tended to work and live in less affluent medium-sized cities around these regions (Zhai and Moskal 2022). Mobility, in this case, has a strong connection with Chinese economic development and the privileges—and discrimination—that it inevitably produces.

The second dimension pointed out by Shi Kedong's paper can be seen as the “transnational construction of the imaginary landscape:”

The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense), and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media (Appadurai 1996, 31).

Art, music, design, and fashion are considered as symbols of Italian and Western culture. Chinese middle-class families, and especially young people, look at these symbols that contribute to establishing “a constructed landscape of collective aspirations” in terms of consumption, and cultural choice.⁶

It is also noted that many middle class individuals embrace and appreciate Western high culture, such as opera, art, and classical music as they swarm to exhibitions of French Impressionists, Italian Renaissance, and American Art in China. The inclination for materialistic possession and cultural consumption of middle-class cultural forms confirms their social status and cultural tastes (Hulme 2014, 18).

⁶ The definition of middle class in the Chinese context is a complex operation that cannot be explored at length in this text. The chapter does not refer to “middle class” as a determined social group, but rather as a heterogeneous and dynamic group that organizes and shares consumption styles as a result of recent economic development (Tsang 2014).

3. Cultural production and Chinese returnee opera students⁷

The two levels of analysis —the structural and imaginative one— may be connected through the concept of mobility. Urry notes that there are four main interpretations of the term ‘mobile’ or ‘mobility’:

1. something that moves or is capable of movement, objects and people included;
2. mobile as a mob, a rabble or an unruly crowd. It is not fully fixed within boundaries and therefore needs to be tracked and socially regulated;
3. social mobility as a vertical hierarchy of positions where individuals may be situated by comparison with other positions within such hierarchies;
4. mobility in the sense of migration or other kinds of semi-permanent geographical movement through a country or continent, often in search of a ‘better life’ or to escape from drought, persecution, war, famine and so on (Urry 2007, 7–8).

In the case of international music students, it is possible to notice how the different interpretations interact with each other.

3.1 Mobility and social hierarchy

ZY is a 34-year-old tenor⁸ from Henan, a province in the center of China. ZY studied at Henan University for his Bachelor’s degree and later came to Italy in 2010. After many bureaucratic challenges, he obtained a Bachelor’s and master’s degree in opera from the Conservatory of Palermo. In 2018, he returned to China and began working as a singer, opera producer and is presently a chorus director of an important theater in Shaanxi. ZY began studying music at 14 years old. His father, a lawyer, is a non-professional but highly talented multi-instrumentalist of Western and traditional Chinese instruments. When ZY told his parents that he wanted to study opera, they supported him. He had a promising voice and they had the necessary economic resources, unlike his father’s family. After several years of private lessons, during the last academic year before concluding his Bachelor’s degree in music at Henan University, ZY attended a master class with a Chinese singer who had graduated in Milan and now works in the National Centre for the Performing Arts of Beijing, the most important opera house in China. In ZY’s story, this was the first time that he had thought about going to Italy. At the time of the master class, the Chinese teacher asked ZY two questions: “What would you like to do after your degree? What about your family?”

⁷ In this section, the text will cite interviews with three Chinese students who have graduated from an Italian conservatory: ZY, a male who lived in Italy from 2010 to 2018; LC, a male who lived in Italy from 2013 to 2018; and XM, a female who lived in Italy from 2013 to 2019. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online in Italian and Chinese languages according to the preferences of the interviewees.

⁸ Tenor, baritone and soprano are types of classical singing voices of opera.

ZY: He meant, is your family rich or poor? I said, “I came from a small city, my family is normal, neither rich nor poor.” He told me, “I suggest going directly to Italy, because the truth is there. There is the home [of opera, N.d.A], there is opera, and original technique. Don’t study any further in China. Here, it is difficult to study with a good teacher. Italy is the home of opera, the home of technique, there is a world!” At that moment, I hadn’t thought about going abroad. I had never thought about leaving China, ever. My dream was to attend a Master’s program at a conservatory or my university. After that, I could find a job at a university. Even if it were not at the highest level, I would still be able to find a job. I could marry and have a child. You know, being a university teacher, all over the world it’s a good job, so that was my idea [...] This teacher gave me this idea: if your family can support you every year for 6,000 yuan, the expenses aren’t too much. In Italy, university is also free. You only have to pay a tax. It’s different from England or the USA, where it is more expensive. Every city has a theater, and every city has a conservatory. Also, you have to study the Italian language because it’s the mother tongue of opera, so you have to choose Italy. Don’t think about other countries. Italy is your dream. Italy is your future.

ZY’s family “is normal, neither rich nor poor.” They belong to the new Chinese middle class. His parents studied at a university just after the Cultural Revolution and, through hard work, built a solid economic and social position in society. Even though ZY’s voice was suitable for studying opera, going abroad was only possible with financial support from his family. Mobility to Italy also means social mobility, as Urry suggested, as it is a sign of position in a social and economic hierarchy where some students can go, while others cannot (Yang 2022, 310). Schiller and Salazar argue that mobility may be understood in the connection between mobility and immobility, as ‘motility’ scholars outline (Flamm and Kaufmann 2006; Tomlinson 2001): freedom of movement of people, objects, and ideas that characterized globalization influence and is influenced by a nation-state’s international order. Going beyond the distinction of opposites—mobility versus sedentism—could help in the understanding of social, cultural and identity change.

3.2 Mobility, imagination, and consumptions

LC is a 34-year-old baritone. He was born in Ningbo, in the Zhejiang province. Since childhood, he has studied music as a personal passion. His school results were better in music than other subjects, thus he prepared for admission to the Tianjin conservatory, where he studied to earn a Bachelor’s degree. In 2013, he traveled to Italy to study opera at the Conservatory of Parma, where he lived for four years. In 2019, he then moved back to China, but returned to Italy many times to study, work or for leisure activities.

LC: Gradually, more and more people are interested in opera music.

Interviewer: Why?

LC: Because we are richer than before. If you have no money, how can you study music? You must have money. This is a very simple problem. If you have money,

you can study music, you can buy a piano or a violin, or you can go to the theater to listen and watch a piece.

Chinese economic development, in LC's view, is directly connected to the spread of interest in music. Public investments sustain music consumption by new theaters. In fact, there are estimated to be roughly 50 new theaters in the last ten years (Giordano 2017, 29). The Chinese investment in new theaters, located in first-level cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, or Hangzhou, represents a new image of society in architecture—cosmopolitan and of high culture—as opposed to a small town with a less fashionable appeal. In the last twenty years, home ownership has been the most effective symbol of social status (Tsang 2014, 39–44). Likewise, living in a city with an opera house and consuming opera music could project symbolic wealth and social status.

“The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between agency sites (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996, 31). Thousands of returnee Chinese music students back in China contribute to building this imaginary landscape via their jobs or sharing experiences online, as in the words of ZY, CL and XM.

XM: Opera in the past was not very popular in China, maybe because on the Internet there are not so many things about it. Now, there are many students who have studied in Italy and are back in China. They bring Italian music to China. They can put this stuff online.

The growth of the Chinese economy drives the growth of cultural consumption, such as music, based on the ‘work of imagination’ and pragmatic reasons. If people have more economic resources, they can study music as a personal passion. It can also become a profession in the entertainment market, as emerged from the interviews. These experiences, shared also on the web, help to build a favorable cultural environment for new students who aspire to follow the same way. Interviewees confirm that before leaving, international students have different aims: to find a creative and expression space, artistic success, job assurance or social hierarchy climbing. The music education market is one place where these ideas may be converted into reality.

3.3 Mobility and music education market

XM, 33 years old, was born in Liaoning, in Northeast China. Today, she is a soprano despite never wanting to study music or opera before turning 17 years old. During secondary school, she looked at other school subjects as “too normal,” and she wanted to study something different from other students. A teacher suggested studying music. When XM met a student who had just come back from Italy, she likewise chose to go to Italy to attend university, where stayed from 2013 to 2019 at the Conservatory of Parma, obtaining both a Bachelor's and Master's degree. Now she is a soprano in the chorus of an important theater in Shaanxi, where she found the job a few months after returning to China. She spoke to me the opportunities for Chinese opera students to find work in Italy:

Interviewer: For those who studied in Italy, is it easy to find a job?

XM: It is not difficult, but finding a good job is difficult. There are so many opportunities, but not every opportunity is good. [...] Some of the students [who have studied in Italy], like me, work in theater. Also, there are many people who work in conservatories in China. For example, in Zhejiang, Wuhan, Beijing, Many, many people do this. Others work at secondary schools. Not just as singers, but also as pianists.

In fact, according to Daxue Consulting, the music education market is on the rise: “With a market size of 75.7 billion RMB in 2016, China is a rising market for music education. This may be attributed to government support, China’s booming economy, and the upgrading of citizens’ consumption. Another factor not to be overlooked is the importance of music certifications to Chinese families” (Daxue consulting 2020). In other words, studying music abroad is a private investment (Tsang 2014, 63), and students, after completing their degree in China or other countries, can more easily find a job in schools or universities.

LC: Now it is more difficult to find a job in music. Big cities—for example Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Ningbo—are very rich. There are so many people and there are so many musicians that want to come here to work. But in other cities that are not so big, rich and important, there is still a lack of music teachers and musicians.

Interviewer: Would a student who graduated in Italy and one who graduated in China have different opportunities in finding a job?

LC: This is difficult to explain, because musicians or singers have to sing well. It does not depend on whether you studied in Italy or China. If you sing well, or if you teach well, you can find a job. There are so many students who went to Italy, graduated in Italy and then came back to China but they cannot speak Italian. I cannot understand how they graduated! Not all students went to Italy to study, others also went for shopping or traveling reasons.

The consumption of music and its market follow the dynamics of Chinese urban development (Wang 2016). The biggest and most important cities have a good music market, but a more competitive one, as XM and LC say. Not every degreed student—including those who have degreed abroad—have enough skills to enter these music markets but they have the opportunity to find jobs in second or third level cities. In this sense, the music market and interest in music reach its public in smaller urban contexts. Musicians follow this market evolution.

3.4 Mobility and performance

Interviewer: Would a student who graduated in Italy and one who graduated in China have different opportunities to find a job?

XM: Those of us that came back from Italy have the advantage of the Italian language.

The Italian language is not just a factor that helps to find a good job, but it is also, in this specific cultural and artistic context, an element that influences musical performance. It is because of the phonetic structure of the Italian language—specifically, vowel stress and few oxytones—and the repertory of opera that Italian operas hold such an important position.

ZY: The first difficulty, and the most important one, is the language. If you can speak Italian, you can study and pass exams. It is not so difficult. At that moment, for me the biggest difficulty is the language because I cannot understand it. When studying history, I have to use grammar points I've never used before.

Interviewer: But today, knowing Italian, does it help you in your job?

ZY: It helps me so much! My Italian, [it helps me] chant and know about Italy. I won't say that I'm better than others. There are so many better than me, but I know many people who have been in Italy many years and they cannot speak Italian, nor do they know Italian traditions. [Italian people] tell me the importance of their culture in opera. If you don't understand these things, even if you speak Italian, you can not sing opera well. It is because the roles of opera are Italian, French or German. There are no Chinese roles—ok, there are some—but they don't matter. For me, I speak Italian, I know Italians, and I have an Italian friend who explained a lot to me. I know what you [Italians] think, your philosophy, how people are in relationships. On stage you are no longer Chinese. [...] On stage, the movement that you have to do, you must be Italian, not French.

Learning Italian, for my interviewees, is a great obstacle. However, back in China, it is an important resource. Italian language competency directly influences artistic production: Italian opera has Italian rules. Singers who have a kind of familiarity with Italian culture—thanks to mobility—can better interpret certain roles. The singers on stage “are no longer Chinese.” In this interpretation, there are two premises. On the one hand, opera singers must have the ability to overcome national identities. On the other hand, this vision is supported precisely on a culturalist perspective of opera. Italian opera has ‘typical’ national characteristics, and its roles express their own ‘Italianness.’

The Chinese technique for singing Italian opera is different from the Italian one. Learning a new technique is an obstacle and, at the same time, a resource for students. It depends on the influence of Chinese music technique and knowledge sharing from the West to China. In my interviewees' words, they can find the original and pure technique of voice in Italy. This impression is confirmed as soon as they arrive in an Italian conservatory, where they must start studying music again. In that moment, they understand the perception of the gulf between Italian and Chinese opera. This view could be seen as a ‘pedagogic’ relationship in which Chinese singers lack knowledge while Western ones have knowledge (Xu 2022, 152). But if opera in China is seen as a complex and multi-level process, the condition of Chinese students abroad becomes part of a bigger frame. The innovative impact of this process is due to Chinese public investment in terms of new theaters and conservatories, the private investment in studying music in China or abroad and the new productions of opera by Chinese compos-

ers in the Chinese language. An example of this process is the “I sing Beijing”⁹ program *Guoji qing nian shengyuejia hanyu gechang jihua* 国际青年声乐家汉语歌唱计划, which is financed by the former Hanban¹⁰ and promoted by the famous Chinese singer Hao Jiangtian 田浩江 who studied in the United States and performed in many important theaters in America and Europe. The program, launched in 2011, included scholarships for young European and American opera singers who came to China to study opera in Chinese with Chinese maestros. The project can be easily inscribed in Chinese soft power strategies because of its content and because it was planned and organized directly by the Chinese government through Hanban.

The aforementioned four main interpretations of the concept of mobility can also be found in the personal stories of the interviewees. ZY, LC, and XM physically moved to Italy and spent some time there. After that, they returned to China with new relationships, knowledge, skills, and intercultural competencies. All these acknowledgments are important to work in music and to be competitive in a growing market. Mobility is governed and promoted by international state agreements, also in the university context. XM has been a student in the Turandot program, which gave her favorable conditions to study abroad. On the other hand, mobility is pushed by social and labor conditions, as LC described in his personal relationships with music and teaching. Personal attitude and wishes are also involved in this process. Social hierarchies are conferred or built according to these mobility flows, as in the case of ZY’s family, which could financially support their child’s desire to study and work in music.

Connecting all of these levels may outline a field of practice that, in this new perspective, can change the opera world landscape. The case of Chinese opera students challenges the subjective and national identity in the experiences of international mobility, performing and public cultural policies.

4. Conclusion

In China, students in international mobility have been a tool for cultural and social innovation for over a century. In some cases, it was a process organized and planned by the government, while in others it was promoted by social and economic changes. In general, the returnee students were called upon to make a contribution to the modernization of China. A work of art, like opera, is the result of a series of conditions of possibility (Bourdieu 1993, 30).

My analysis has outlined two main dimensions which describe the connection between mobility and cultural production: structural dimension and imaginative dimension. The structural dimension is composed of State international

⁹ <<https://www.isingfestival.org/>>. (Accessed September 11, 2020).

¹⁰ Now Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEd) *Zhongwai yuyan jiaoliu hezuo zhongxin* 中外语言交流合作中心, till 2020 also known as Confucius Institute Headquarters or simply Hanban. <http://www.chinese.cn/page/#/pcpage/mainpage> (Accessed November 28, 2022).

agreements and general mobility law conditions. Institution is an important stakeholder. For example, it operates through the Marco Polo and Turandot programs, state-national agreements that improve mobility towards Italy in both an Italian and Chinese higher education strategy in a worldwide market, or through the number of government policies promulgated between 1986 and 2003 to attract the return of Chinese students (Xiang and Shen 2009, 520). This level is also compounded by social and economic changes in the Chinese context. The highly educated middle class can invest large sums of money into the education of their children to cultivate ‘human quality’ (*suzhi* 素质) and ‘civilization’ (*wenming* 文明), which are considered two key elements in securing the feeling of belonging by the middle-class in China (Ponzini 2020; Tsang 2014, 69–73). Human capital, as an individual attribute, can be converted to financial, social and political capital (Xiang and Shen 2009, 520–21). Going abroad to study is one way to accumulate the needed cultural capital to produce, or reproduce, certain social structures and experiences (Yang 2022, 311). Music, in Confucian tradition, is an indispensable way to train cultivation of self (Hao 2011, 172). It could also be a way to obtain university access more easily. Students who achieve the high-level certificates in music are regarded as ‘special-skill students’ and are given priority for university admission with a gaokao score lower than other majors, including in high level universities (Xie and Wah 2011, 63; Bai 2021). Social class, then, uses education to preserve its class position.

The second level is shaped by the lifestyle, work activities and cultural consumption of middle-class families. Education, both formal and informal in nature, may shape taste, consumption, behavior, social differentiation and class boundaries that are also based on the sharing symbols that portray an imaginary landscape (Tsang 2014, 31–2; 63–9). After the Open Door policy, and specifically in the last ten years, consumption patterns have changed, going in the direction of recreation and cultural services like musical ones (Daxue consulting 2020), including Western opera (Giordano 2017, 29).

In 1986, Luciano Pavarotti with the Opera House of Genoa went on tour to Beijing.¹¹ It is not the first time that an opera singer has visited China since 1979, but the event was regarded and represented as extraordinary. In a documentary of the tour,¹² two frameworks may summarize the two levels identified in this analysis.

The first one involved Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989), the secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, who personally invited Pavarotti to give a concert at the Great Hall of the People, the first time for a Western artist. Pavarotti’s tour in China shows how the work is produced within a Chinese national cultural policy plan that invests resources in productions and study in China. Opera became an

¹¹ <<https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1986/07/01/pavarotti-conquista-la-cina.html>> (Accessed September 11, 2020).

¹² <<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/04/movies/film-pavarotti-in-china-in-distant-harmony.html>> (Accessed September 11, 2020).

instrument of national representation, with the production of ‘Chinese’ works to be combined with Western works. Chinese students abroad are among the protagonists of this transition, as many famous Chinese opera singers have all studied abroad, such as Gregorio Wu Pak Chiu, Yang Yang and Hao Jiangtian.

The second framework regards the final concert. On the evening of Pavarotti’s concert at the Great Hall of the People, the inhabitants of Beijing attend the show in short sleeves and shorts. The organization had some trouble due to the enthusiasm of Beijing inhabitants who, in the previous days, filled the theatres even for rehearsal sessions. The warm response of the audience to Pavarotti’s visit may also represent a non-institutional level of production. The work spreads to a new audience that identifies with high-level consumption in which to cultivate *suzhi* and *wenming*, or consumption with which to be able to distinguish oneself in social hierarchies and create belonging with other high social groups. Studying abroad is one of the ways to achieve this. In addition to social prestige, studying abroad may contribute to integration in the labor market, training activities or teaching.

In this chapter, cultural production is understood as a field of practice, not as an individual artistic act. In the same way, mobility is not understood as a romantic ideal, even if motivated by music interests or an artistic dream, but rather as the result of complex social, economic and cultural dynamics. The cultural production of opera is therefore a collective phenomenon in which the singers and listeners (consumers in the global market in which opera lives) both participate in the production.

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PART 3

Journey to a foreign land: imagining migration in Sinophone Literature from Thailand

Rebecca Ehrenwirth

Abstract: Sima Gong and Zeng Xin are two of the most prominent contemporary Sinophone writers in Thailand. Although they were born in Thailand, they frequently write about migration. In this chapter I want to ask why the motive of migration is so prominent in their works and how they write about it. I argue that their ancestors' quest from China to Thailand is indeed not the focus of attention but the wandering between these two places. Although they did not physically migrate from China to Thailand, these authors use literature as a means to travel mentally between the two countries, and "re-live" the migratory experience through their texts. Analyzing these selected texts offers a unique insight into the authors' floating identity, one that is constantly migrating between China and Thailand.

Keywords: Migration, Sinophone, Thailand, Identity, Literature.

Migration is not only something definite and physical, something that comes to an end when the person arrives at the desired place; oftentimes it is also a psychological experience that includes "wandering" between places, sometimes without end. In Chinese, this is reflected in the three different terms: *huaqiao* 华侨, *huaren* 华人 and *huayi* 华裔. While *huaqiao* originally referred to all Chinese migrants who stayed in a foreign country for a while but never became permanent residents, this term eventually came to designate all Chinese living in another country who still have Chinese citizenship.¹ *Huaren*, on the other hand, are all those Chinese who have permanently settled in another country and adopted the respective citizenship. Finally, *huayi* are those with Chinese ancestry who were born and raised outside of China (Li Minghuan 2004, 1). While there is no adequate translation for *huayi* into languages such as German or English—we can only add "of Chinese descent"—the Chinese term implies a relation to the land of origin, China, as well as a psychological connection to the native land.

¹ Since the widely used English term "Overseas Chinese" is a direct translation for *huaqiao*, Wang Gungwu's suggests to use the term "Chinese Overseas" for all ethnic Chinese, who adopted another nationality (Wang 1995, 274–75). In many examples mentioned here, it is unclear, whether the person has the Chinese citizenship or not, so I will mainly use the term "Overseas Chinese," except when it is clear that the person has adopted another citizenship.

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In Thai, there are also only two expressions: *chinkao*, who are Chinese (born in China) living in Thailand, and *lukchin* (born in Thailand) living in Thailand as first-generation Thai. Second- or third-generation Thai, such as the Sinophone authors Sima Gong and Zeng Xin, are simply called Thai.

Although Sima Gong and Zeng Xin were born and (partly) raised in Thailand, they frequently write about the topic of migration, either past or present. They do not belong to the generation of Chinese migrants who came to Thailand to find work in the hope of one day returning to China. Their ancestors did, however; they belonged to a wave of Chinese immigrants who moved to Thailand between the 18th and 19th century and became part of a Sino-Thai community, which Brian Bernard (2015, 165) calls “a successful, nonviolent, and nonsegregationist example of immigration integration in Southeast Asian history.”

In this chapter I want to ask why the motive for the migration is so prominent in their works and how they write about it. I argue that their ancestors’ migration from China to Thailand (Siam), which the authors themselves did not experience, is indeed not the focus of attention so much as the wandering between these two places. Although they have “landed” in Thailand, and the physical migration is therefore complete, these authors use literature as a means of travelling between China and Thailand and “re-living” the migratory experience through their invented characters. Therefore, they sometimes recreate the harsh conditions under which Chinese migrants came to Southeast Asia in the past. Further, by writing from Thailand in the Sinitic script, they have chosen to “write back” to the perceived center: China. This not only enables them to reach a broader readership, but also serves as a means of performing their “Chineseness.” In the first part of this article, I will describe Chinese migration to Thailand and focus on the shifting Thai policy on Chinese immigrants in the 20th century. In the second part, I will use close readings of selected texts to highlight the authors’ intentions to commemorate the migration and to express their floating identity.² I will briefly discuss the authors’ feelings of Chineseness and their sense of belonging to an “imagined community.”

1. Migration and nation

Migration is always strongly attached to the idea of nations and nationalism. This is reflected by terms such as *huayi*, which entails a direct attribution to China as a nation, and also in many cases leads not only to a split but also radicalization in societies. As Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006, 7) has stated, “The nation is imagined as *limited*” (emphasis in the original) and “No nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind,” which means that there will always be “the other,” the outsider, the immigrant, who is not part of this imagined community. As China does not accept dual citizenship, on the one hand, it forces

² With “floating identity” I mean that they do not feel attached to one certain place, but are still wandering between China and Thailand. They identify as Thai and Chinese.

“Overseas Chinese” to choose between being a Chinese national and being an “alien,” while on the other hand—on a linguistic level—the Chinese language has a word underlining people’s Chinese descent (*huayi*) even though they are foreign nationals. As a result, an imagined community is created, a community for those who are not Chinese nationals, but who feel strongly connected to China. The term is therefore including as well as excluding. It brings these “foreign nationals” together, those who are of Chinese descent, but in a way it also distances them from the nation and society they were born in—they are the *huayi*, the outsider, “the other.”

At the same time, a *huayi* is always floating between two nations and different feelings of belonging. They are not Chinese, but also not Thai, Malay or Indonesian. According to Li and Li (2013, 20), the number of Chinese emigrants (Overseas Chinese) reached approximately 39.5 million in 2009, living in approximately 130 countries and five regions across the globe, 75% of whom are in Asia. Southeast Asia is the main destination for Chinese migrants; almost all of these migrants moved to 23 countries in Southeast Asia, in particular Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (ca. 55%). The numbers regarding Chinese immigration to Thailand, however, vary greatly: Richard Coughlin (1960, 13) states that the first statistics date back to 1918/1919, registering Chinese nationals entering Thailand through the port of Bangkok, yet there is no distinction made between people staying in Thailand and those who are only passing through.

According to Wang Gungwu (2003, 2), the diversification of modern transport and the improvement of the communication system have led to people moving faster, more easily and more often from one place to another, not only once, but several times, either to settle down or to take off again after a while. Autonomy and freedom are associated with this “new” feeling of space: advances in transportation and communication help people to stay in contact with “home”, with friends and family. Since the start of the 20th century, in many cases migration has been seen as a rather positive thing, no longer necessarily associated with force and escape as it was in previous centuries.

The main reasons for migration are diverse and also key to understanding such movements on a political as well as a cultural level. Chinese from China are one of the biggest migration groups. Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, as well as the migrants’ assimilation to their new homelands, is strongly connected to the formation of nations, which took place at different points in time in the various Southeast Asian countries. While Thailand has always been an independent kingdom, nine other states in Southeast Asia only gained their independence after the Second World War, Timor-Leste just in the 21st century (Suryadinata 2015, 1). This is one reason why the Chinese assimilation in Thailand has been easier and faster than in other regions in Southeast Asia. In many countries, the Chinese experienced oppression by the respective governments and societies. Bernards (2015, 164) attests to this assumption by stating that “In Southeast Asian historiography, the Kingdom of Thailand is commonly portrayed as a ‘success story’ for its integration of Chinese immigrants and settlers into the national culture.”

2. Chinese migration to Thailand

According to Baker and Phongpaichit (2022, 4), the first Tai-language groups settled South of the Yangzi in the 6th century BCE, before the Chinese started to spread from the North. However, it took a couple of centuries before Tai-speakers settled near the Chao Phraya River—probably only in the 13th century when they were pushed further South by the Mongols. In the 13th century, small Tai-states and principalities began to develop, amongst them the first Kingdom of Sukothai (1238–1583), which was founded in the city of Sukothai in central Siam (Sng and Bisalputra 2015, 19). The most important federation was, however, Ayutthaya in central Siam, which gained strength in the 14th century and gave the country its name: “The Chinese called the city [Ayutthaya] Xian, possibly based in Siam, an old term for the Tai. [...] The Portuguese who arrived in the 16th century reported that the country was called Siam” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2022, 9).

Under the rule of King Ramkhamhaeng (1279–1317), Siam had its first heyday: he contributed to the expansion of the land and established good relations with the neighboring regions, in particular with China, with which he had “diplomatic relations.” The first wave of Chinese immigrants can therefore be dated to the 13th century: it was mostly peasants, craftsmen and merchants that came from the Southern regions of China to Siam (today’s Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces).

In 1351 Ayutthaya subdued the Kingdom of Sukothai. The trade between China and Siam had been interrupted by the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, so the newly established Kingdom of Ayutthaya took up the offer of establishing a tribute system after the Ming Dynasty was established in 1368 (Sng and Bisalputra 2015, 20; Skinner 1957, 7). Unlike the foreigners from countries such as France, Britain or Japan, the Chinese were never seen as “foreigners” by the Siamese. They therefore enjoyed great privileges, especially with regard to trade (Skinner 1957, 11). However, the Chinese did not only migrate to Thailand for economic reasons, but also because of political factors. Therefore “[...] in spite of certain restrictions imposed on overseas trade and emigration by the authorities in China, Chinese immigrants were attracted to Siam in ever greater numbers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century” (Skinner 1957, 11). When the Manchus took over in 1644 and established the last dynasty of the Qing, a new wave of Chinese immigrants came to Thailand: “Tradition among the Chinese in Bangkok today has it that two main groups of refugees from the Manchus came to Siam: those from Ch’ao-chou (Teochius) to Southeast Siam, [...] and those from Southern Fukien (Hokkiens) to South Siam” (Skinner 1957, 12).

The Kingdom of Ayutthaya finally came to an end when the Burmese destroyed Ayutthaya under King Hsinbyushin in 1767 in the Burmese-Siamese War (1765–67). The Chinese helped the Thai with their defense against Burmese attacks and showed their loyalty to their adopted homeland. During the war, Phraya Tak or Taksin (1734–82), who was the son of a Thai woman and a Chinese immigrant from Chaozhou, became one of the most important military

figures in Siam. He became King of Siam in 1767 and established the new capital in Thonburi. The Kingdom of Thonburi lasted until Taksin's violent death in 1782. Baker and Phongpaichit (2022, 28–9) describe him as follows:

His [Taksin's] origins are obscure. Possibly he was the son of a Teochiu Chinese migrant gambler or trader and his Thai wife. Possibly he became a provincial cart trader and bribed his way to governorship of the border town of Pak. Though he had no traditional claims to rule, he was a leader of great charisma, who gathered around him other Chinese traders, sundry adventurers, and minor nobles.

However obscure his background may have been, Taksin was pivotal to the assimilation of the Chinese in Siam. He encouraged immigrants in particular from the Chaoshan region³ to come to Siam because he spoke the same dialect and wished to foster the development of a Chinese community in Siam: "The Chinese of Taksin's time were known as Chinluang [...] or 'royal Chinese'" (Bao 2003, 131). According to Chansiri (2008, 27), this wave of immigrants arriving in Siam because of Taksin is special because it was the first wave of Chinese to settle permanently in Siam. They enjoyed many privileges and became the most flourishing community in Siam (Skinner 1957, 21).

Taksin's reign was followed by the establishment of the Chakri Dynasty in 1782 with King Rama I, who transferred the capital across the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok:

He [Rama I] established a new capital in Bangkok, across the river from Taksin's palace, on the site of the Chinese port and trading center which had developed during the 1770s. The Chinese market was moved bodily to the Wat Sampluem area outside the southeast gate of the royal city. This newly located market came to be called Sampheng, and that quarter today is still the Chinese center of Bangkok. Thus it was the new capital, destined to grow into the greatest metropolis ever seen in Siam, had from the beginning a strong Chinese element (Skinner 1957, 24).

The trade between the two countries flourished in the next couple of years. Due to the many privileges the Chinese enjoyed in Siam, more and more merchants flooded the kingdom. Bao Jiemin (2003, 134) notes that opium and sex work were not forbidden to the Chinese in Siam in the 19th century; on the contrary:

Chinese were also encouraged to smoke opium freely while Siamese were legally prohibited from doing so. [...] By providing Chinese immigrant labourers access to brothels and legal opium, the monarchy [King Mongkut (Rama IV), 1851–68] increased its revenues and reduced the amount of money the immigrants might otherwise send back to China.

³ Chaoshan is a region in Guangdong Province and consists of the cities Chaozhou, Shantou and Jieyang.

The Siamese did not like working as merchants and traders. If they were able, they would rather become government officials or remain peasants. Therefore, “Southeast Asia became a land of promise for the poor peasants from South China, and in steadily increasing numbers they streamed out of China to Thailand and other countries of the Nan-Yang (‘Southern Ocean’)” (Coughlin 1960, 16). The Chinese in Siam became important intermediaries between Western importers and exporters, and Siamese peasants.

Almost all Chinese emigrants were male and migrated without their wives to Siam. Their goal was to earn money and then return home: “During that time, local Chinese lineage councils did not allow wives to leave the village for fear of losing the entire family. Families often engineered marriages before men migrated abroad.” (Bao 2003, 127). A system developed in which the men had a “breadwinner role” and while many returned home, some also had second families in Siam and became what Bao calls “transnational polygynist[s]” (Bao 2003, 138), while the wives in China were “widows of the living ones” (*huo guafu* 活寡妇) (Bao 2003, 128) who patiently waited for their husbands to return. This was how, in the early 15th century, the first *lukchins* (children with Chinese fathers and Thai mothers), were born (Skinner 1957, 3). From the middle of the 19th century, Chinese women also began to come to Siam, most of whom were either merchants’ wives or sex workers (Bao 2003, 135).

While China had always been seen as a rich and mighty country by Siam, in the second half of the 19th century this perspective changed as the two Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion weakened China’s position in the world. A significant increase in the population, in particular in coastal areas such as Fujian and Guangdong, due to an economic boom in the 18th century, also put further pressure on the Qing government. As such, there were many reasons for the Chinese to leave their homeland. Bernards (2015, 166) calls this a “mass migration” between China and Southeast Asia at the turn of the 20th century: “[...] the Swatow-Bangkok corridor that facilitated the migration and settlement of predominantly Teochew-speaking immigrants in Siam.” The Thai government encouraged Chinese immigration during the 19th century because it fostered the trade between the two countries, as well as tax increases.

The year 1910 is generally described as a turning point for Chinese immigrants in Siam. After the fall of the Qing government in 1911, the number of Chinese immigrants rose drastically due to the unstable political situation in China. At that time, women in particular sought refuge in Siam (Skinner 1957, 126–27). In 1910, upon his father’s death, Vajiravudh followed his father to the throne, becoming King Rama VI (reign 1910–25) and a period of severe nationalism with anti-Chinese sentiments began. After Vajiravudh’s coronation, the Chinese protested for five days in Bangkok against the raising of taxes. Tensions rose between the Chinese immigrants and the Siamese government. As a reaction to the Chinese nationalism, Vajiravudh fostered Thai nationalism and “he made the Chinese immigrants, whom his father had deliberately imported, the target of nationalism, rather than complain about the influence of Britain, which controlled 90 per cent of Siam’s trade” (Bao 2003, 138). Intended as a

racist and antisemitic denotation, he called the Chinese the “Jews of the East.” Nonetheless, there were no anti-Chinese measures or massacres comparable to those in other Southeast Asian countries and the number of Chinese immigrants continued to rise.

In 1932 King Prachadipok (Rama VII, reign 1925–33), who had followed Vajiravudh to the throne, was overthrown by the military and Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram took over as Prime Minister (1938–44 and 1948–57). As a result, Chinese immigration sank to a minimum, especially when he introduced a series of anti-immigration laws in 1937. In July 1938 the famous author, journalist and moderator Wichit Wathakan reminded Thai society of Vajiravudh’s words regarding the “Chinese threat” and compared the Chinese in Siam once again with Jews: “He added that the Jews had no homeland, whereas ‘the Chinese cannot be compared to them; they come to work here but send money back to their country; so we can say that the Chinese are worse than the Jews’” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2022, 143).

In 1939, Phibun renamed Siam Muang Thai or Thailand in order to strengthen Thai identity and emphasize the independence of the country, its culture and traditions. Assimilation measures, which forced the Chinese to talk in Thai and to dress like they were Thai, soon followed. Their children had to attend Thai schools and many Chinese schools were shut down; loyalty was demanded towards the Thai government, Buddhism and the king. Similar to Wichit Wathakan, Phibun also fostered Thai nationalism, which made it difficult for the Chinese to preserve their national identity. In 1939 a new national law was introduced that made naturalization more complicated for the Chinese. The new conditions included: first, abandon the feeling of belonging to China and turn towards Thailand; second, change all Chinese names to Thai names; third, Chinese children must attend Thai schools; fourth, they must speak Thai. More Chinese schools were closed and contact with the homeland was prohibited. The Thai government wanted to establish a Thai identity and as it saw language as a key for archiving this goal, it tried to stop the spread of Chinese languages. Due to fear of a communist take-over, a law issued in 1948 also limited the number of Chinese immigrants to 200 per year (before this it had been 10,000) (Coughlin 1960, 25).

One of the results of this was that many Chinese were forced to assimilate to Thai society. However, as Jamie Mackie (2003, 18) notes, “most Sino-thai have not become monolingual speakers of Thai; nearly all of them speak a Chinese language also, as well as Thai.” Leo Suryadinata (2015, 181) assumes that today about 75–80% of the society in Thailand is Thai and around 10–14% are Chinese. However, they have been assimilated and integrated into Thai society and probably only a handful of second and third generation Thai now see themselves also as Chinese.

3. Sinophone stories about the ancestors’ quest

Among these second and third generation Thai who still feel a relatively strong connection to China are Sinophone authors such as Sima Gong and Zeng Xin.

Sima Gong was born in 1933 in Bangkok. His ancestors came from Chaoyang (today's Chaonan) in Shantou, Guangdong Province. In his family, all the men had been merchants for many generations and had strong connections to China. When Sima Gong was six years old, he was therefore sent to Shantou to attend school and he only returned to Thailand when he was 20 years old. After his return, he started writing but since it was not possible to sustain a living from his writing, he turned to the family business. It was only in the 1980s that he picked up writing again. Sima Gong is today one of the most famous and prolific Sino-phone writers in Thailand. He was one of the first Sinophone writers to join the Society of Sinophone Writers in Thailand (*Taiguo huawen wenxue zuojia xiehui* 泰国华文文学作家协会) after its establishment in 1986 under Fang Siruo's direction and he became its president in 1990.

While Sima Gong focuses on writing short stories and flash fiction,⁴ Zeng Xin concentrates more on poetry. Zeng Xin was born in 1938 in Bangkok. His ancestors came from Puning in Guangdong Province. He grew up in Bangkok and attended a Thai school without learning any Chinese. Since his parents did not speak Cantonese/Teochew with them at home, he started to learn Mandarin on his own. In 1956, he was able to go to China to attend a school for Overseas Chinese in Shantou. In 1962, he took the college entrance exam and was admitted to study at the Institute for Chinese at Xiamen University. He developed an interest in writing, took part in several writing competitions and received a couple of prizes. When he returned to Thailand in the 1980s, he continued writing and soon after joined the Society of Sinophone Writers in Thailand. In 2006 he co-founded the Little Poetry Mill (*Xiaoshi mofang* 小石磨坊), a small community of poets within the Society of Sinophone Writers in Thailand. Despite his advanced age, he is still very active in promoting Sinophone literature from Thailand.

Sinophone literature in Thailand began to develop at the start of the 20th century, when the Chinese-language newspapers first began to publish literary supplements (*wenyi fukan* 文艺副刊). Zeng Xin and Sima Gong belong to the third wave of Sinophone writers in Thailand, which began to flourish in the 1980s. Unlike previous generations, they see Sinophone literature in Thailand as independent from Chinese literature (in China). While previous generations of writers still wish to return to China one day, Sima Gong and Zeng Xin see Thailand as their homeland and have no such desire. This is reflected in the following poem by Sima Gong:

老华侨	The Old Overseas Chinese
祖国强盛	The homeland is powerful and prosperous
老华侨乐了	The old Overseas Chinese are happy
改革开放	The reform and opening up

⁴ Flash fiction is a very short short-story, which usually consists of less than 300 Chinese characters. Sima Gong is famous for introducing the genre of flash fiction to the Sinophone writers' community in Thailand.

拜会邀请纷纷而来 Invites to visit; they come in droves
 老华侨眼都花了 The old Overseas Chinese vision is blurred
 祖国 老华侨火化了 Homeland The old Overseas Chinese is cremated

The poem is set during the reform and opening-up of China in the late 1980s (l. 3⁵), during which the Overseas Chinese were able to see their friends and families from China after a long period of isolation under Mao Zedong. Therefore, the old Overseas Chinese in Sima Gong's poem is happy (l. 2), but he also starts to reflect on his idea of the "homeland" (l. 6). This reflection is mirrored in the poem's structure: after the two Chinese characters for homeland, there is a space, before the implicit lyrical I says that the old Overseas Chinese does no longer exist (l. 6).

There are different ways of interpreting this last line. With this sentence, the lyrical I could want to express that there is no Overseas Chinese anymore, because he has realized that his homeland is indeed Thailand and therefore it is the idea of being an Overseas Chinese that is cremated. On the other hand, it could also mean that the Overseas Chinese has finally returned home, to China, and therefore is no longer an Overseas Chinese, but simply a Chinese again. Both interpretations reflect the wish to return to the roots (*yeluo guigen* 叶落归根) of previous generations. Zeng Xin (2002, 100) also discusses this wish in his metafictional story "Land" (*Tu di* 土地). The protagonist in this is Li Guotu, who has just finished his autobiographical novel and wants to show it to his friend. When his friend arrives at his house, he finds Li Guotu dead at his desk, pen still in hand. Li Guotu, who was born in Fujian (China), lived half his life in Taiwan and the other half in Thailand. He therefore requested that his ashes be divided into three parts: one part buried in each of the three countries. He expresses this wish through his fictional character Li Zhongtu in his novel.

Loyalty to the native land is conveyed in the works of contemporary Sinophone writers in Thailand. Therefore, when they write about China, it is often nostalgia and homesickness that connects the characters in the stories and poems. Zeng Xin shows this by choosing so-called telling names in his story: "Guotu" 国土 meaning "country" and "Zhongtu" 中土 meaning "loyal," both of which express a connection to different "homes." Even though it seems that the protagonist did not spend a significant amount of his life in China, he still feels very connected to the place he was born in: Fujian. The fact that the protagonist also views Thailand as his home illustrates that he has assimilated and adapted to his life there. He does not feel like an immigrant anymore but instead feels a strong bond with the country. The reader does not get any information on his experience as a migrant or his assimilation into Thailand. However, this story presents migration (from China to Taiwan, then to Thailand) in a very positive light by highlighting that Li Guotu wants his ashes to be trisected after his death

⁵ The abbreviation "l." refers to the number of lines in the poem.

so he can be in all three places at the same time, emphasizing the protagonist's floating feeling of belonging.

Yet migration is not always as easy as it is portrayed in this story. On the contrary, migrants not only suffer from their long and hard journeys, but also not everyone makes it to their destination. In Sima Gong's flash fiction story "Afraid of Coming Home Too Late" (*Yikong chichi gui* 意恐迟迟归), the protagonist is a 19-year-old Chinese migrant leaving his home to go to Siam to find work (2012, 18). Since the authorial narrator uses the word "Siam" instead of "Thailand," it is clear the story is set before 1939 when the country was still called Siam. Before the young man boards the boat to Siam, he promises his crying mother that he will write her a letter upon arrival. The narrator explains that it is a long and dangerous journey (lasting several days) on a close-packed boat.⁶ Then the plague breaks out onboard and the protagonist does not survive the journey. The story ends as the sailors throw his body overboard, telling him to "return home." With only a few characters, Sima Gong illustrates the hard and precarious situation for those migrants, who felt that they had no choice but to leave their home for a couple of years to earn a living. This desolate reality is also reflected in Zeng Xin's poem "Red-head Junks" (*Hong tou chuan* 红头船),⁷ in which the migrants' skeletons run ashore on their way south, highlighting that many migrants died attempting to improve their lives.

Sima Gong and Zeng Xin raise the issue that although the journey to Thailand was extremely dangerous, the migrants were so desperate that they nevertheless attempted the journey. They rarely explicitly discuss the reasons for migration, but do not fail to emphasize the consequences. One such example in which Sima Gong (2012, 3) touches upon the topic of reasons for migration is in the flash fiction story "The Bones Near Shangxin River" (*Shangxin hebian gu* 伤心河边骨). This story is explicitly described as being set in the time of King Rama III, who reigned between 1824 and 1851. As mentioned above, a lot of young Chinese immigrants came to Thailand during the 19th century. Many of them helped build Bangkok's infrastructure during that period (Morita 2003, 485). In the first paragraph of the story, the authorial narrator explains that many Chinese left the Chaoshan area because of a severe famine. The five workers mentioned in the story represent thousands of other Chinese immigrants who built channels such as the one for the Shangxin River in Bangkok.⁸ In a dialogue

⁶ Yen Ching-hwang (2013, 81) describes the situation of coolies on boats to the U.S. and South America, which were similar to the conditions on boats to other parts of the world, as follows: "Overcrowding was a major problem on the ship, but other problems were bad ventilation, frustration, tension and sickness. Although most of the coolies came from two southern Chinese provinces, Guangdong and Fujian, they did not speak a common language. Communication problems led to misunderstanding and distrust."

⁷ I only have a personal copy of this poem, which Zeng Xin sent to me in an email. Zeng Xin, Email to author, September 21, 2021.

⁸ It is unclear whether this is a real name for a river in Bangkok since there is no reference to the Thai name of the river.

between the workers, the reader learns that they did not expect to come to Si-am and build channels. They lament their bitter lives, but also say that it is better than dying from hunger at home. They complain about their foreman (Ma Liu), the protagonist of the story, who—in their opinion—withholds their wages and keeps all the money for himself in a little cloth tied to his waist. However, at the end of the story, the reader learns that this cloth holds no money but instead the ashes of other workers, who obviously have not survived the hard labor conditions. Ma Liu, the story's silent hero, probably keeps their ashes to send back home to their families.

The story not only illustrates an atmosphere of mistrust but also that many migrants lost their lives trying to make a living. In particular, Sima Gong, whose ancestors came from Shantou, often refers in his works to the Chaoshan area. The short story "Postman Ma Fu" (*Pigong Ma Fu* 批工马福) focuses on the relatives who stayed behind in Chaoshan when their sons and husbands migrated to Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia (Sima Gong 2008, 175). In the first part of the story, the narrator explains the complex Overseas Chinese postal system of the previous centuries. In the 18th and 19th century, Overseas Chinese who wanted to send a letter or money back home needed to do so through a special "post-office" (*piju* 批局) or "letter-office" (*xinju* 信局),⁹ which was essentially a combination of a post office, a bank and an escort service, as the narrator explains. The main branch was situated in Thailand and in every small village in the Chaoshan region was a smaller sub-branch, from which the letters and money were distributed to the recipients. The protagonist is Ma Fu, a postman (*pigong* 批工) who brings the post to the desperately waiting families in Shanqian Village. Zhang Bingshui, a minor character in the story, is a migrant from this village who left his mother (Li Ma) and new wife (Cui E) in order to earn some money in Thailand. While Ma Fu is explicitly characterized as a young single man who lost both his parents a couple of years before, Li Ma and Cui E are described as sad and alone, two anxiously waiting women. More than six months have already passed since Zhang Bingshui left his family at the beginning of the story, and Ma Fu, who is responsible for bringing the post to many families in villages around Shanqian, has not once brought a letter back to them.

This story is one of the rare examples in which the focus is not on the migrant but on the families who were left behind. It shows that while the migrant's destiny was uncertain, the lives of the families at home depended on them. In an act of selflessness, the postman Ma Fu finally decides to write a letter in the name of Zhang Bingshui and includes his monthly salary. However, at the end Li Ma finds out that Zhang Bingshui died on the journey to Thailand and the letter was sent by Ma Fu. Ma Fu is portrayed as a hero and lifesaver when Li Ma tells him

⁹ The full term for these post offices is "Overseas Chinese post office" (*qiao piju* 侨批局), but they are also called "Overseas Chinese letter office" (*qiao xinju* 侨信局) since in Fujian to-polect they use *pi* (lit. to pass on) for *xin* (letter). See Wang Yanhua and Liu Tingting (2021); Liu (2006, 49).

she is not angry with him at all since they were only able to survive because of the money he gave them. The story's end once again highlights the precarious situation for the Chinese in the Chaoshan area during the 18th and 19th century. As the narrator explains in the first paragraph of the story, "Chaoshan is small but many people live here" (*Chaoshan di shao ren duo* 潮汕地少人多), and many of them were forced to migrate due to extreme poverty and hunger. Ma Fu, although not a migrant himself, takes on the role of Zhang Bingshui, presumably because he thinks Zhang Bingshui did not meet his obligation as the family's breadwinner, and because he feels sorry for Zhang's left-behind family. He invents explanations regarding the letter to the family and although the reader never gets to know what he wrote, the contents of the letter must have been convincing enough for Li Ma and Cui E.¹⁰

Although neither Sima Gong nor Zeng Xin had to experience this kind of migration themselves, by imagining and writing about the conditions of the migrants, they relive it through their characters. They describe details of the migration experience, often focusing on migrants from the Chaoshan area, where the ancestors of many Sinophone writers in Thailand are from. For instance, the poem "Watercloth" (*Shuibu* 水布) by Zeng Xin presents a piece of cotton cloth like those in which many migrants from Chaozhou carried a few things with them (Sun Shuyan and Zhang Fangzhi 2004).

水布	Watercloth
一条旧水布	An old watercloth
湿透老华侨的辛酸	Drenched with the sorrows of the old Overseas Chinese
拧之, 滴滴汗	Wring it out, sweat drips
再拧之, 滴滴血	Wring it again, blood drips
百年拧不尽	Hundred years of wringing will not be enough
千年晒不干	Thousand years of sunshine cannot dry it

In the poem, it is wet from the "old Overseas Chinese" worries, soaked with the migrants' sweat and blood, their suffering from the hard labor they had to do. The fact that the Overseas Chinese gave up everything is also the topic of Zeng Xin's poem "*Rohdea japonica*" (*wannianqing* 万年青, lit. translated as "evergreen").¹¹ The title refers to a plant that is native to China, Japan and Korea, with evergreen leaves. The implicit lyrical I tells the implicit lyrical you to give "it" (l. 6) half a spoon of earth so it can live. Only in the final line does the lyrical I reveal that the alias of this "it" is the Overseas Chinese. This plant was also often used symbolically in connection with Mao Zedong.

¹⁰ We could of course also argue that in their desperate situation Li Ma and Cui E will believe almost anything as long as it is good news on the whereabouts of their beloved son/husband.

¹¹ Zeng Xin, Email to author, September 21, 2021.

万年青	Rohdea japonica
不管红土黑土	No matter how red or black the soil
贫瘠肥沃	Barren or fertile
只给半勺土	Give only have a spoonful of soil
就能活着	And it will live
拌着血汗活着.....	Live through blood and sweat
它的别名叫华侨	It is also called Overseas Chinese

Using the *Rohdea japonica* here as a symbol of the Overseas Chinese not only emphasizes the tenaciousness and stamina of the migrants, but also connects them with the PRC. By using the word combination blood-sweat (l. 5), the implicit lyrical I hints at the rare condition in which a person sweats blood (also hematomatosis) due to extreme emotional or physical stress. The poem hints at the fact that many Overseas Chinese suffered not only from the long and dangerous journey to a foreign land, but they also had to work night and day to make enough money within a couple of years that they could then send home to China.

With just a few characters, Sima Gong and Zeng Xin capture the atmosphere of the migrants' journeys and lives in Thailand and mirror the harsh reality of the past, but they also describe the conditions and historical surroundings in which these waves of migration took place. Zeng Xin (2006, 51), for instance, takes Taksin, who ruled Siam for a short period in the 18th century, as the topic for one of his poems.

郑王	Taksin
收夏	He took over Xia
五十一万平方公里的国土	510,000 square kilometers of land
靠	Relying on
一柄凝集着勇敢与智慧的	A sabre
战刀	Of concentrated bravery and wisdom

In this poem,¹² the implicit lyrical I characterizes him as hero and compares him to a sabre (l. 5) made of bravery (l. 4) and wisdom (l. 4). This illustrates that although he is generally not seen as the most positive figure in the history of Siam, for the Chinese, and especially the Overseas Chinese, he is a hero. Not only did he recapture a sizeable amount of territory from the Burmese, but he also encouraged Chinese from the Chaoshan area to come to Siam.

When Rama I succeeded Taksin and became king in 1782, he transferred the capital from Thonburi across the Chao Phraya River. While Taksin had been a great supporter of immigrants from the Chaoshan region, Rama I was closely associated with the Hokkien community, which were generally seen

¹² The title *Zheng wang* 郑王 refers to his Chinese name, Zheng Xin, also known as King Zheng (*Zheng wang*).

as “more sophisticated” (Van Roy 2017, 171). Therefore, King Rama I kept the Hokkien community close and relocated the Teochew community to an area called Sampheng, southeast of the city center: “The Taechiu [Teochew], as close associates of the ancient régime, were suspect and thus warranted exclusion. [...] they were exiled to the waterlogged precincts of Sampheng, riverside tract several kilometers downstream from the new city center” (Van Roy 2017, 176). There, they soon began building one of today’s largest Chinatowns. Nowadays, the heart of Bangkok’s Chinatown lies in Yaorawat Road, which Zeng Xin describes in the following poem:¹³

唐人街	Chinatown
只有一条街	Only one street
衣食住行	Food, clothing, shelter and transportation
浓缩了龙族的精髓	Concentrating the essence of the dragon
琳琅满目的中国城	Chinatown—a feast for the eyes
世代不失一个密码	Generations, which never lost their code
—汉字	—the Chinese characters

In this poem, Zeng Xin uses two different expressions for “Chinatown”. For the title of the poem, he uses *Tangren jie*, literally “the street of the Tang-people.” In the second stanza, however, he uses *Zhongguo cheng* 中国城 (l. 4), literally “Chinatown.” Endymion Wilkinson (2015, 196) writes that:

Tangren [...] appears to have started as an exonym applied to China and its people by Southeast Asians and Japanese from at least the Song [...] Later it was adopted as an autonym by overseas Chinese (especially Cantonese), who when going overseas in the Ming and Qing, identified themselves to foreigners with the name that foreigners knew, i.e. *Tangren*. The custom has persisted to this day. Overseas Chinese (especially those from Guangdong) call their Chinatowns *Tangrenjie* [...] their (Cantonese) cuisine ‘Tang food,’ their old-style Chinese clothing *Tangzhuang* [...] and China itself *Tangshan* [...]. (emphasis in the original)

“Chinatown” (*Zhongguo cheng*), on the other hand, seems to be a more modern expression that is mainly used by a younger generation of Overseas Chinese. In my opinion, he is using these two different expressions because he wants to emphasize the changes that are taking place, not only regarding the community of Sinophone writers, but also in Chinese immigration to Thailand in general.

By using the two different expressions in his poem, Zeng Xin also draws attention to the Chinese language, the *hanzi* (l. 6) themselves. While *Zhong-*

¹³ Zeng Xin, Email to author, September 21, 2021. In his poetry collection *Liangting* 凉亭 [Pavilion], he also published a poem under the title “Chinatown,” but it is a different one. In that poem, the implicit lyrical I lists a couple of items, such as fruits, which all come from different places in China. (Zeng 2006, 52)

guo cheng is a literal translation of “Chinatown,” which hints at all of China, *Tangren jie* rather points to a specific area within China—Guangdong Province—where Sima Gong and Zeng Xin’s ancestors are from. Sima Gong (2012, 105) even hints at the fact that many Thai politicians are of Chinese descent in his flash fiction story “Return to the Ancestors” (*Gui zong* 归宗). In a kind of summary, the authorial narrator summarizes the 1950s to the 2000s, saying that while in the 1950s many ministers and senior officers in the military police claimed to be 100% Thai, in 2000 many high-level Thais have a Chinese name. Possibly the most prominent examples are Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

The authors’ primary goal is not necessarily to draw attention to the precarious situation of migrants depicted in their stories; instead, they use history to “travel” between their origin and their homeland. They try to retrace the steps their ancestors had to take to facilitate the life the writers are living today, while at the same time they “re-live” their presumed tragedies in order to appreciate the lives they have. However, the focus of attention is not so much the harsh reality of the migration itself, but rather the wandering between the two places. Their intended readership is based in China, therefore the push factors for migration, such as poverty, hunger and droughts, are seldom the center of attention. They rather focus on the lives the migrants lived, often depicting them as hard-working and diligent, promulgating a positive image of the Chinese.

In their poems and stories they do not concentrate so much on creating characters the reader can empathize with, because for them it is not about the migration itself but rather about the wandering between the two places. They rather want to (re-)visit the past, because it is connected to their own identity: The fact that their ancestors migrated from China to Thailand, made them what they are today—Sinophone writers in Thailand; they feel that they are Chinese and Thai at the same time. The authors therefore see as well as use the poems and stories on the one hand as a way to connect to China by “going back,” not just in space but also in time, and on the other hand to emphasize that their lives are indeed not in China but in Thailand. They represent the past migration as something horrible and unbearable (which it was), while at the same time showing the readers and themselves what kind of (positive) ramifications it had, which is Sinophone literature in Thailand.

¹⁴ Thaksin Shinawatra, one of the richest businessmen in Thailand, became prime minister of Thailand in 2001. His great-grandfather, Seng sae Khu (also Khu Chun Seng) was Hakka and emigrated to Thailand in the late 19th century, presumably in the 1860s (Phongpaichit and Baker 2009, 26). His sister was prime minister from 2011 until her deposition in 2014.

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Writing for the wor(l)ds: the reflection on language in Yiyun Li's literary production

Martina Renata Prosperi

Abstract: Yiyun Li, b. 1972, moved from Beijing to the US in 1996, where she soon realized to be a talented writer. Although her early works, including the collections of short stories *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005) and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010), and the novels *The Vagrants* (2009) and *Kinder Than Solitude* (2014), still privileged Chinese settings and characters, after the publication of her memoir *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017) the literary landscape depicted by Li was amplified with autobiographical anecdotes and reflections on literature, human relations and language. Building upon psychoanalytical hints, this article offers a close reading of *Where Reasons End* (2019) and *Must I Go* (2020), reflecting on Li's literature from a global perspective, and arguing that her contribution to world literature lies in her bold dissociation from any conventional, crystallized and thus imprisoning use of language.

Keywords: Yiyun Li, World Literature, Sinophone Studies, Exophony, Jacques Lacan.

“The fact that I
am writing to you
in English
already falsifies what I
wanted to tell you.
My subject:

how to explain to you that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else”
(Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Bilingual Blues*, 1995).

“English is my private language. Every word has to
be pondered before it becomes a word” (Li Yiyun,
“To Speak is to Blunder But I Venture,” 2017).

1. Yiyun Li and the matter of exophony

Considering there are about 50 million Chinese people living abroad, it is not surprising that those whose professions are especially bound to the use of words (teachers, writers, journalists, researchers, etc.) might often—by choice or necessity—write in their adopted language. As a consequence, Chinese-born exophonic writers are not extremely rare. One example of such writers is Lulu Wang (Wang Lulu 王露露, b. 1960), who has lived in the Netherlands since 1986 and

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publishes her work in Dutch. Ying Chen 应晨 (b. 1961), who moved to Canada in 1989, where she began writing in French, is another example. Zhang Lijia 张丽佳 (b. 1964) is another special case, as she writes in English despite living in China. Other famous examples are the younger Annie Wang (Wang Rui 王蕤, b. 1972) and Guo Xiaolu 郭小橧 (b. 1973), both of whom moved to the United States. Wang left China for the University of California in 1993, while Guo obtained a scholarship and moved to London in 2002. Both then became affirmed anglophone writers. As for the male front, it is almost superfluous to mention names such as François Cheng (Cheng Bao 程抱, b. 1929) and Dai Sijie 戴思杰 (b. 1954), both of whom adopted French. Likewise, Qiu Xiaolong 裘小龙 (b. 1953) and Ha Jin 哈金 (b. 1956) left as students for the United States, remained there after the dramatic events of 1989, and began their respective literary careers by writing in English. Several names of lesser-known authors should also be added to this list, as well as students and bloggers who live abroad for long periods of time and sometimes find a private, unconstrained, non-judgemental dimension in their adopted language, which can often be difficult to find in one's native language. A Czech proverb recites, "learn a new language and you will have a new soul." Naturally, this is scientifically questionable, as the speakers' inner change is not elicited by their adoption of a new language, but rather by the context in which this occurs (Grosjean and Li 2013, 41). Nevertheless, language is undeniably an integral and even foundational part of this context. Thus, we can justify the result that an adopted language, initially learned out of necessity, can offer an unexpected tool for personal introspection and analytical thinking over time.

The exophonic writer Yiyun Li (Li Yiyun 李翊雲, b. 1972), with her acute reflections on language, certainly represents a perfect example of this case. Her move to another country and to another language did not make her a political author, but a sharp intellectual inhabiting the convention of language with detachment and awareness. Li admits that, as a migrant writer, she has spent a good part of her life rejecting the scripts that others assigned to her, both in China and America, and she affirms that her strong refusal to be defined by the will of others is her "one and only political statement" (Li 2017, 47). Therefore, Li's contribution to global literature precisely originates from this life-long personal fight against external narratives, and it takes the form of this writer's multifarious boycott of any uncritical, crystallized and imprisoning use of language. This creative boycott is particularly evident in her exploration of silence—both as a topic and as a (paradoxical) means of communication—, in her systematic deconstruction of clichés, as well as in her recovery of dialogue as a narrative tool and as a building site of human relationships.

Building upon a close reading of Yiyun Li's most recent works, *Where Reasons End* (2019) and *Must I Go* (2020), the present chapter offers concrete examples of this threefold critique of language, arguing that said critical approach is valid within any language-culture, and is not, on the contrary, derivative of it. In other words, it is not the English language (or any language of adoption) that frees Li from clichés and constraints of any kind, but rather a profound reflection on

the human condition of existing as linguistic beings. Otherwise said, this article demonstrates how the mobility of Yiyun Li as a migrant exophonic writer, does not consist simply in a departure from the motherland and the mother tongue, but also—and most importantly—in a detachment from language as a pure and blind convention. To any uncritical use of language Li contrasts a vigilant approach, making her literature a free space of encounter and intersection between Chinese and American language-cultures.

2. Yiyun Li's literary production

Born and raised in Beijing with her father, a nuclear physicist, and her mother, a school teacher, Li moved to America at the age of twenty-four. This is following time spent in the military service and a degree in medicine obtained from the Peking University. Still an immunology student, she became passionate about creative writing during an evening course she had originally taken to improve her English skills. Subsequently, she decided to leave scientific studies altogether and enroll in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which she completed in 2005.

Before receiving her MFA (Master of Fine Arts), she was already publishing short stories, mainly on *The New Yorker*, where the short story "Extra" appeared in 2003. She was also published in other magazines such as the *Gettysburg Review*, issuing "What Has That to Do with Me?" (2003). Li's literary career boost, however, was undoubtedly the success of her first story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005), which solidified the recognition and visibility necessary for her to continue her writing career. The book won numerous awards—including the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and the PEN/Hemingway Award—and two of its stories, "The Princess of Nebraska" and "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," were also adapted into films by director Wayne Wang (Wang Ying 王穎).

In 2010, three years after the publication of her first novel, *The Vagrants* (2007), a second collection of short stories, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* were published. *The New Yorker* elected Li as one of the twenty best American writers under forty. Nonetheless, for Li, this was a period of severe personal crisis, to the point that in 2012 she attempted suicide twice. The novel *Kinder Than Solitude* (April 2013) was published just a few months after a suicidal attempt, followed by the long story "A Sheltered Woman" (March 2014) and the autobiographical account "Listening is Believing" (December 2014).

Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life, a collection of memoirs and autobiographical writings concerning the author's relationship with literature and language, was released in 2017. This collection included the essay "To Speak is to Blunder," which had already been published in *The New Yorker* in December 2016. The title of the book quotes a verse by Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923), one that particularly moved Li, as it well represents the period in which, after returning home from the hospital, she lived by taking refuge in the virtual existences of other writers, or spending her days among pages of diaries, correspondences and biographies (Laity 2017). The book, however, was not a

mere commendation of the “private language” and those writers—including Li’s mentor and friend, William Trevor—whom she felt saved her. After all, she explained, English was “as random a choice as any other language” for her (Li 2017, 102). Literature was just one of many things created in and for this world. However, there were moments, she affirmed, in which not even all of the things in the world would be enough “to drown out the voice of this emptiness that says: you are nothing” (Li 2017, 15).

Dear Friend did not describe any cathartic parable of superficial fulfilment of the American dream, or emancipation from the maternal figure, the homeland and Li’s own native language; it did not represent the happy-(American)-ending story that the American reader might expect. On the contrary, the essays hereby collected (but written and revised—by admission of the author herself—in different moments and states of mind), present a continuous but critical—and self-critical—intertwining of memories, anecdotes and personal reflections, which might sometimes contradict each other, suggesting the impossibility of reaching any definitive answer or salvation. The restlessness of *Dear Friend* was almost a premonition. In fact, shortly after its release, when Li was working on a new novel (*Must I Go*), the eldest of her two children, sixteen-year-old Vincent, took his own life. Thus, Li’s work on the new novel was immediately interrupted.

Yet, once again, Li found her a cure through words. She spent her time reading the condolence letters and poems sent by her son’s friends and absent-mindedly knitting a scarf, which—due to her frequent mistakes—she often had to undo and remake, much like restless Penelope. She reported about these reading and knitting activities in an autobiographical novel, published two years later in 2019. The title of this novel was once again a quotation, but this time from a verse by Elizabeth Bishop: *Where Reasons End*.¹ A brilliant essay by Zheng Haijuan points out the strongly metatextual character of this novel, and cleverly suggests that the image of the mother-narrator’s weaving habit is not a mere autobiographical detail, nor a simple homage to her son, who was passionate about this activity. Rather, it is a metaphor for the text itself, or of the literary creation as a fabric of words (Zheng 2019, 44). In short, by making and undoing language, Li, like the legendary Penelope, procrastinates her encounter with reality, and creates an impossible spacetime to converse with her son.

If in Li’s literary production death and language (including thematical declinations such as suicide, orphanage, reticence and silence) have always been recurring topics, *Where Reasons End* represents both the apex and the paradox of their combination. On one hand, the impossible dialogue imagined—thus created—within the text enlivens the impossible spacetime of the book. In other words, it is language that wins over death, as if this is possible for us (linguistic) human beings to defer it forever. On the other hand, however, that very same

¹ The original verse reads “all the way to where my reasons end” and is taken from the poem *Argument* (Elizabeth Bishop, “Argument,” *All Poetry*, <https://allpoetry.com/Argument>, Accessed July 20, 2022).

language is also a sharp and merciless tool of self-reflection and self-awareness, a complex fabric which can both comfort and deceive. It is a tightly-weaved veil that Li renounces to use as a mask, and use instead as a lens:

What I was doing was what I had always been doing: writing stories. In this one the child Nikolai (which was not his real name, but a name he had given himself, among many other names he had used) and his mother dear meet in a world unspecified in time and space. It was not a world of gods or spirits. And it was not a world dreamed up by me; even my dreams were mundane and landlocked in reality. It was a world made up by words, and words only. No images, no sounds (Li 2019, 8).

“No images, no sounds”: in other words, no body. Because no human language can exist without a body; in order to weave this literally ‘off-reason’ conversation, Li violates—consciously and overtly—the very nature of language itself, leaving it naked and defenseless for the reader to ponder.

In contrast, there is the discourse concerning the novel *Must I Go*, the book that Li had started writing before Vincent’s death, which was finally published in July 2020. If Li’s first production had mainly featured Chinese settings and characters—which surely applies to the collections *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, and to novels such as *The Vagrants* and *Kinder Than Solitude – Must I Go*’s protagonist is an American woman, “Lilia Liska from Benicia, California” (Li 2020, 129). The Sinophone world is merely mentioned by chance, from an external point of view, apparently devoid of any emotional connotation. For example, Lilia stumbles upon the names of ‘Shanghai’ and ‘Hong Kong’ as an old woman, while re-reading the diary left by Roland, a man she had fallen in love with during her youth and with whom she had had Lucy, her suicidal daughter. Roland’s diary mentions Hong Kong (and Shanghai, speaking of Hong Kong) as he had been there in 1931 for business reasons:

[Roland’s Diary:] 10 MARCH 1931.

Hong Kong. Arrived yesterday afternoon. Alan Prismall is working at the Maritime Customs Service, and has promised to help secure a position for me, either here or in Shanghai.

Far East. Am I then a member of the ‘Far West’ to the natives here? Far we are from one another, far from being equally human. From the dock to the Peninsula, the man who pulled the pedicab sweated profusely. Had he been a horse I would have halted the carriage and led him to a water trough. But everyone else seems to be at ease. [...] I tried out my minimal Cantonese on the pedicab driver and the bellhop, but both shook their heads disapprovingly and replied in pidgin English.

[Lilia’s comment:] THIS REMINDS ME: I should have a chat with Cecilia. She moved in last month, and she keeps too much to herself to be healthy. She and her husband were from Hong Kong. They immigrated to America after they married, and he had a dental practice in San Francisco (Li 2020, 205–6).

From a sinological viewpoint, Roland’s questions are undoubtedly interesting. Yet, in the economy of this character’s life, his diary and the novel itself,

they are actually isolated, marginal and irrelevant issues. Nonetheless, if Li had initially conquered readers with her unconventional portraits of a late twentieth-century China (e.g. *The Vagrants* and almost all of her early works: “Extra,” “After a Life,” “Immortality,” “Death Is Not a Bad Joke If Told the Right Way” etc.), or with stories of Chinese expats moving back and forth in time and space between China and the US (e.g. “The Princess of Nebraska,” “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” “Sweeping Past,” and *Kinder Than Solitude*), the disappearance of any Chinese background in her later works does not mark a complete break with her previous publications.

Although her more recent stories, such as “A Flawless Silence” (released in 2018 but set in 2016 during the US presidential election), “All Will be Well” (2019), *Where Reasons End* (2019) and *Must I Go* (2020) have an American setting (or do not have any setting at all, as in the case of *Where Reasons End*), their writing style presents many continuities with Li’s previous works. Most importantly, their plots continue to host a parallel, never-ending reflection on language. Therefore, the special and constant element distinguishing Li’s literature and making it a unique contribution within the panorama of international literature is not to be searched in this writer’s exophony, nor in her (Chinese) diasporic perspective, but rather in her delicate and precise linguistic labor. Transcending the Chinese variable, Li’s linguistic exploration often borders on philosophical speculation and sociological reflections, and might be paradoxically defined as poetics of silence, or of measure, reticence and restraint.

These poetics of silence can be seen as Li’s response to the poetics of historical memory. As a matter of fact, the reworking of historical memory constitutes an important theme for contemporary Chinese writers, both living in China and abroad, because it responds to a very current need for a (re)definition of one’s cultural, intellectual, and/or personal identity (Codeluppi 2018, 141). Yiyun Li’s literary practice, however, deviates from this case, both because her latest production shows a complete emancipation from the Chinese theme and because the historical elaborations she proposed in her previous works did not pursue any educational or informative mission, nor did they reflect any identity search. Proof of this statement lies in the fact that her historical narratives were not autobiographical, nor was it possible to identify any potential alter ego or spokesperson of the author among their characters.

The novel *The Vagrants*, for example, is set in a town called Muddy River, where two young women with very different lives and political beliefs are both sentenced to the death penalty and publicly executed within a short period of time. Although their stories are set in 1979, the narrative does not focus on the most iconic events of that year (e.g., the issue of Beijing’s Democracy Wall), but rather on the silent existences of Muddy River’s inhabitants, on their handicaps, desires and emotions. In other words, Li’s historical elaborations do not aim at tracing a clear separation between good and evil, fair and unfair. They do not linger on nostalgia, nor on any harsh critique of the past. Rather, they are simply a stage for well-rounded characters and the extremely realistic complexity of their lives. They are not a place for the author to affirm her own identity and are

not a means to articulate—or even package and sell—her own ‘Chineseness,’ as it evidently is not an object of any doubt or concern for Li and thus does not need to be proven or exhibited.

Indeed, in a passage from her memoir *Dear Friend*, she affirms that she chose to write to reduce herself to a silent void, or to a nonentity, which is the total opposite of writing to affirm one’s own identity: “When I gave up science, I had a blind confidence that in writing I could will myself into a nonentity” (Li 2017, 34). Nonetheless, this is not to be read as a suicidal affirmation. The entity Li intends to fight against does not coincide with her person in itself, but with that narrative of herself to which the conventional languages and external expectations have repeatedly menaced to reduce her. In another part of the memoir, Li returns to this subject, by explaining that she has spent a good part of her life rejecting the scripts that others assigned to her, both in China and America, and that her strong refusal to be defined by the will of others would be her “one and only political statement” (Li 2017, 47).

Li’s contribution to global literature precisely originates from this life-long personal fight against external narratives, and it takes the form of this writer’s multifarious and extremely creative boycott of any conventional, crystallized, imprisoning and uncritical use of language. Li’s literary production not only conveys and proposes a language used with freedom and awareness, but demonstrates how said awareness is valid in any language, and is not, on the contrary, derivative of it. In other words, it is not the English language (or any language of adoption) that frees us from clichés and constraints of any kind, but rather a profound reflection on human language in general. In Li’s literature, this reflection is particularly evident in three recurring themes: silence, the deconstruction of clichés and the revival of the art of dialogue.

3. Silence, clichés and dialogue: Li’s contribution to global literature

As for Li’s early publication, silence is undoubtedly the protagonist of “After a Life.” This story, which is part of the collection titled *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, speaks of a married couple with a spastic daughter whom they hide in their house to prevent the rest of the world from knowing of her. The body of the girl, eventually becoming a woman, confined in a bedroom for twenty-eight years (until her death) is a shapeless and aphasic body: a huge clot of silence, paradoxically eloquent within its impossibility of speaking. Silence as an attempt of hiding the truth metaphorically becomes a bulky, unavoidable presence, cumbering the private life of this couple and the narrow rooms of their apartment.

In the same collection, silence also takes the form of the intergenerational incommunicability permeating the account titled “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.” The story tells of a widowed man, Mr. Shi, who leaves China to visit his daughter Ylan, who long ago moved to a small Midwest town in America. Ylan has recently divorced but Mr. Shi, obtusely anchored to a patriarchal concept of life, cannot understand the reasons for her divorce and insists that Ylan considers the idea of a second marriage before being deemed too old to remar-

ry. Ylan, however, speaks very little and dismisses her father's questions with the same coldness she reserves for the food he prepares for her. Neither the culinary language nor the Chinese language they share are able to scratch the wall of silence separating them, which they are both responsible for creating. Ylan, by keeping silent about the failure of her marriage, has most certainly played a part. Her father has played his part as well by concealing the truth about a scandal that, several years before and due to a misunderstanding, had unjustly cost him his job. Mr. Shi's silence at the time of the scandal was caused by a deep sense of embarrassment, or by fear of losing his face in front of his wife and daughter. However, Ylan's silence at the time of the narration is a reflection of that reticence she had breathed as a child: a fatally learned habit. "I don't talk well in Chinese," she explains to her father, "if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person" (Li 2006, 171). Finally, Mr. Shi has no choice but to go out and converse with Madam, an elderly Iranian lady whom he often meets in the park. As a paradox, the two of them successfully entertain each other with long chats in which each speaks his/her own language, mixed with broken English, without compromising the dialogue.

In addition to silence recurring thematically in short stories, it is also significantly frequent in her novels as well. In *The Vagrants*, a form of silence is that observed by Nini, a crippled and extremely taciturn girl whose deformity makes her invisible to most people, resulting in her ability to eavesdrop on adult conversations and obtain information which would normally be precluded to children. Nini's silence is that of disadvantaged and voiceless people, but is also a receptacle of sounds, noises, news, and emotions. Just as black is a non-color that absorbs all colors in itself, analogously, Nini's silence is a non-sound that absorbs all sounds, or the sounding board of everything said and done within the boundaries of Muddy River.

The restlessness of the elderly Lilia, the protagonist of *Must I Go*, instead revolves around the silence of Lucy, her suicidal daughter. Within the space of the novel, Lucy exists only as a silent name, only mentioned but never truly known. In fact, Lilia herself never managed to get to know the person her daughter really was. Now her unappealable silence, that of someone who is no longer alive, pushes Lilia to chase her daughter's shadow in the diaries of Roland, her natural father. By doing so, Lilia searches for clues that might help her see beyond her own pre-constructed idea of Lucy, or the version of herself that Lucy used to show her mother when she was still alive, in order to see Lucy herself: the true Lucy.

You can live a long life, surrounded by people, but you'll be darn lucky if one or two of them can take you as you are, not as who you are to them.

In our marriage Gilbert and I didn't make that mistake. We were always Gilbert and Lilia, not Gilbert's Lilia or Lilia's Gilbert.

Both Sidelle and Hetty took Roland as he was. What he was to them didn't matter. They saw through him. [...]

I see through him, too, but only now. Before his death and before reading his diaries I didn't take him for who he was, but for who he was to me, and to Lucy. Perhaps I also took Lucy as who she was to me, and to Roland, instead of who she was.

But who was Lucy? (Li 2020, 225).

Lucy's silence is the silence of someone who is no longer there, but it is also the silence of a person who has never existed at all beyond a fictitious form in which the Other's language (in this case Lilia's) had crystallized it.

The silence of Li's own suicidal son, thematized within the novel *Where Reasons End*, is somehow different from Lucy's. This is because Li, unlike Lilia, did see (or tried to see) through Vincent. As a consequence, Nikolai's silence—or Vincent's—does not represent a total absence; it is not an empty silence, but a speaking one. Although the dimension where Li and Nikolai's impossible conversation takes place is one with “no images” and “no sounds,” their dialogue still happens by paradoxically employing a bodiless language and soundless words. In other words, the spacetime Li creates within this novel reverses the causal relationship between subject and language. It is not the subject that causes the language by projecting himself or herself into words, but vice versa, it is the language itself that (re)creates the hologram of the subject. The following passages are examples of this affirmation:

We once gave Nikolai a life of flesh and blood; and I'm doing it over again, this time by words (Li 2019, 47).

[People] don't know what the dead want. And they're afraid of knowing, Nikolai said. They're afraid of not knowing, too, I said.

Are you?

Of knowing or not knowing? I'm not afraid of knowing.

Then you're afraid of not knowing?

Yes, I said. Sometimes. A little.

You can ask me.

That, I thought, was my fear. Whatever questions I asked I had to answer for him.

The world we shared was limited, even if our words were not (Li 2019, 114–15).

The limits the narrator discusses in the last passage derive exactly from this inverted relationship between subject and language. There is (no longer) a subject—Nikolai—who can produce language (for example, to answer questions). However, it is the language itself now—and the only possible one, namely Li's language—that recreates Nikolai's presence as a hologram, or gives him another life, albeit “by words.” It is surely on these pages that Li's research on language achieves one of its most outstanding results by nearly recovering a primordial function of language, one that creates a shape, an order, a cosmos. In the introduction to a collection of studies on Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955), a contemporary artist who is internationally famous for his brave reflections on language, the curators Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger Ames remind the reader of a simple but significant consideration:

Many of the world's cosmologies associate language and cosmic creativity, from "in the beginning was the word" to aboriginal Australians who believe that order is created and sustained through song. A major theme in the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes* 易经), a text that grounds the evolution of Confucian and Daoist cosmology, is the fertile and productive relationship between image, language, and meaning (Tsao and Ames 2011, xv).

As explained within the aforementioned passage, the language of cosmologies reminds us that human life is informed (that is to say, given form, or shaped) by language itself. The silence of death, standing for the opposite perspective, further corroborates the fact that language is constitutive, proper and characteristic only and exclusively of life. Differently said, any attempt to define and temporalize, or to linguistically codify reality, is a relative and illusory effort, which only concerns existence in the here and now, and has no *raison d'être* beyond its boundaries. The circumstance of her son's death-silence precisely reminds Li (and *Where Reasons End's* narrator) of this life-language and of its (almost) ineludible limits, and gently pushes her towards a recovery of the cosmogonic power of words.

An exhaustive list of examples concerning the theme of silence in Yiyun Li's literature could easily cover many pages. The aforementioned cases, however, already allow us to observe how such silence might be interpreted as a denial of expression, but also as a (paradoxical) form of expression.

Another articulation of Li's reflection on language is the deconstruction of clichés, which the author regularly practices in her works. This deconstruction also concerns pre-made metaphors and similes, as well as crystallizations of the language, which, being prefixed, preclude any direct contact with the message to be expressed. In *Dear Friend*, Li asks herself: "What language does one use to feel; or, does one need a language to feel?" (Li 2017, 109). Or—if the other side of the question is implicit—is it rather language that fatally ends up detaching us from feeling tout court with its compulsion to define and frame? Here is a first example of the ways in which Li identifies and deconstructs these clichés.

I was a generic parent grieving a generic child lost to an inexplicable tragedy. Already there were three clichés. I could wage my personal war against each one of them. Grieve: from Latin *gravare*, to burden, and *gravis*, grave, heavy. What kind of mother would consider it a burden to live in the vacancy left behind by a child? Explicate: from Latin *ex* (out) + *plicare* (fold), to unfold. But calling Nikolai's action inexplicable was like calling a migrant bird ending on a new continent lost. Who can say the vagrant doesn't have a reason to change the course of its flight? Nothing inexplicable for me—only I didn't want to explain: A mother's job is to enfold, not to unfold. Tragedy: Now that is an inexplicable word. What was a goat song, after all, which is what tragedy seemed to mean originally? (Li 2019, 7–8)

This passage is taken from *Where Reasons End* and illustrates the case (recurring both in this novel and in *Must I Go*) in which the cliché is deconstructed by questioning words themselves, by investigating their etymology, or by ap-

peeling to a property of and a *presence* within language. Although this is never fully reachable (see the ironic example of the “goat song”), it does still offer a possibility other than the illusoriness of clichés or those premade, impersonal phrases, devoid of any authentic meaning in which, to put it in Lacanian terms, the encounter with the Real is perennially destined to be missed.

Sometimes, however, it is possible to disassemble clichés and transform them into meaningful expressions. In these cases, Li manipulates clichés by introducing an unexpected or estranging element (as Šklovskij would say), which not only prevents the old cliché from going unnoticed, but even places the accent—and thus attracts attention—precisely where the *variatio* has been introduced. An example follows, again from *Where Reasons End*:

I was not an organized person. The other day I realized I couldn't find Nikolai's stocking. Many things slipped away like sand or water, but did it matter?
Sand and water, Nikolai said.

I know, I said. Sometimes you can't avoid thinking in clichés.

They are clichés if you use them to describe time, he said. You're using it to describe a concrete object, which does not move itself (Li 2019, 89).

In *Must I Go*, it is instead the irony, Lilia's irony, that unmasks the clichés of the others' language, especially Roland's. At the time of the narration, Roland has long since passed away and an elderly Lilia is re-reading his personal diaries for the umpteenth time. In the aforementioned excerpt, Lilia narrates herself in the first person by turning to Katherine, Lucy's daughter. At the time of the story, Katherine, who's already a young mother, is the granddaughter with whom Lilia has the most intimate bond because Lilia has taken Lucy's place and raises little Katherine in her home following Lucy's suicide. Katherine is then the imaginary recipient of Lilia's annotations, in which the elderly woman alternates flashbacks of her past, personal considerations and passages from Roland's diaries (Roland being Lucy's natural father and therefore Katherine's grandfather). As for the following excerpt, it is an example of how Lilia's irony, anchoring itself to the words' literal meaning, manages to deconstruct two clichés about pain. Namely, she deconstructs two frequently-used ways of saying “broken heart” and “took something out of me”:

When Lucy died, I used the words that other people used. I said my heart was broken. That her death took something out of me. Can a broken heart have pumped blood steadily for thirty-six years, no, thirty-seven years now? A heart cannot break because none of our hearts is made of glass or porcelain. [...] Sometimes when I hear people use those expressions I want to say: Show me your heart, show me where it's broken; and what has been taken from you, a kidney or a liver or several ribs? Words are like grass. Like weeds. [...] But if I stopped saying things, even the simple words, [the doctors] would think that I'd gone cuckoo. And they'd ask you for more money so they could pack me off to another unit. So you see, words are the most useless things that we cannot afford to lose (Li 2020, 233).

How to resolve the paradox? That is, how to reconcile our life outside the linguistic universe with our language-bound existence? As the philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains, the universe in which we live is necessarily a linguistic one, because words divide the world into classes of nameable objects, raising these objects to the level of the only reality we are able to conceive (Bauman 2000, 207). So much so that, as Lacan already affirmed in his essay “The Instance of the Letter In the Unconscious or Reason since Freud,” words can only perpetually refer to other words, and we would fail from the start if we clung to the illusion that words respond to the function of representing meanings, or “that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever” (Lacan [1957] 2004, 449). This is a temptation of which Li is fully aware, and into which she is particularly careful not to fall, by facing her characters as if they were “hypotheses,” and working the same way with language. She does not seek any unique and unambiguous relationship between signifiers and meanings. Rather, she experiments with possibilities. Scientists, she jokes in an interview while referring to her former scientific formation, do not wait for any inspiration and are certainly not afraid of failure (Friani 2017). Therefore, Li conceives her literature as a laboratory to discover how language works, not so much on a logical or grammatical level but on a psychological one, as a vehicle of emotions and hidden preconceptions.

We have just seen how, in this ideal laboratory, Li investigates the crisis and potentialities of language by exploring the theme of silence and unmasking the noise of clichés. However, observing her production from a macroscopic point of view, it is thus inevitable to observe how Li’s texts are also rich in dialogues, if not built on the skeleton of dialogue. Stories like “Son,” “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” “A Man Like Him,” “Prison,” or even the most recent “All Will Be Well” (to name only a few titles in which the dialogic dimension or the theme of dialogue is particularly relevant), or novels such as *Kinder Than Solitude* and *The Vagrants*, are clear examples of Li’s recovery of dialogue as a narrative device and a symbolic dimension. Beyond this, these stories are constructed through a pressing alternation of dialogued parts and narrated parts (the latter are often flashbacks through which Li gradually unravels the characters’ backstories). The dialogues included in these narratives take on the value of transformative spaces. In other words, Li’s characters do not evolve only through the events they face, but also—and most importantly—through the words they exchange, or by dialoguing with each other.

Within the novels *Where Reasons End* and *Must I Go*, the role of dialogue as a transformative space emerges very clearly. Both of these novels are respectively structured around two impossible conversations: the dialogue between a character-narrator and her suicidal son, and that of the elderly Lilia with the diaries of the now deceased Roland as well as with Katherine, the imaginary recipient of her reflections. These two macro-dialogues constitute the main body of their respective narratives on which flashbacks and other digressions are grafted, but they are not mere structural expedients. Some academic articles and book reviews concerning *Where Reasons End* even argue that the novel ultimately represents a con-

versation of the narrator with herself, or a monologue, where the semblance of the dialogue would solely derive from the fact that the narrator imagines a recipient—Nikolai—for questions she actually asks herself (Zheng 2019; Wang 2019, 4). This lack of attention to the dialogical dimension is also found in several studies concerning “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” (e.g. Lam 2011; Zhai 2013), a story in which the dialogical dimension does indeed play a crucial role. In this short masterpiece of Li’s, the dialogue—a successful one between Mr. Shi and the Iranian woman, but also an unsuccessful one between Mr. Shi and his daughter—clearly represents the place where the characters confess themselves to the other characters, to the reader, and even to themselves. It is far from being a mere narrative artifice and traces that parable of (self-)recognition, necessarily precluding any transformation. Quite a few articles on these stories are instead focused on the forms of linguistic hybridism employed by Li—e.g., translating Chinese proverbs into English—and on language as an obstacle to effective communication between father and daughter, neglecting to note how the crucial nodes of the story emerge and develop precisely through its dialogical parts (Lam 2011; Zhai 2013, 109). In fact, if Li had wanted to write *Where Reasons End* as a monologue, she would have written a monologue. Instead, she chose the form of dialogue, because it is due to the transformative space opened by this two-voice conversation that the narrator can evolve to the point of accepting to separate from Nikolai and returning to her life made of “days,” or to that linguistic universe of the time which—Bauman *docet*—is for us the only livable one. Similarly, it is precisely through her dialogue with Roland’s diaries, and with her niece Katherine to whom she addresses, that Lilia finally comes to “see through” Roland, accept the fact that she has never fully known Lucy, and admit that, despite having survived three husbands, the time will come for her too, sooner or later, to lay down her arms and go.

[From Roland’s diary:] 18 August 1987. [...] Hetty (Roland’s wife) died as she wished. At home, in her own bed, surrounded by no one, with her beloved husband under the same roof but not next to her. [...] Must you go, Hetty? But let me not ask the question that only a fool would ask. Fools we are not. We have done well by each other. Rather, I would say this: Must I go? [...]

[Lilia’s comment:] Roland was right about one thing. When you start writing about yourself, it feels like you can go on living forever. [...] I’ve never asked anyone, not even Lucy: Must you go? And that question Roland lived with every day of his life—I might as well order a gravestone with the question carved on it and have it delivered to his grave. Better late than never, don’t you think?

ROLAND VICTOR SYDNEY BOULEY

19 NOVEMBER 1910–19 JANUARY 1991

MUST I GO?

Yes, Roland, yes. We all must (Li 2020, 363–67).

The extract shown above exactly constitutes the end of the book, as it is interesting to note how this book’s ending, like *Where Reasons End*’s, is not a narrated one, but rather the exhaustion of its main dialogue.

Both Li's alter ego narrator in *Where Reasons End* and Lilia in *Must I Go* choose to escape the monologue of pain and tear open the veil of writing. By escaping the illusion that language can genuinely express their feelings, both narrators deviate from a type of discourse that would be given as absolute (the monologue of Nikolai's mother; Lilia's memoir) and offer the dimension—by its nature plural, and never definitive—of dialogue (respectively, with her son Nikolai, and with Roland's diaries). In short, if language is the trap, Li finds a loophole in the dimension of dialogue. She discovers a space in which language is not monologically given from the self, nor absolutely imposed from the outside, but rather it simply happens by articulating and interweaving itself in the Other's presence. In other words, the language of a dialogue is not made of inert words ("no images, no sounds"), but of exchanges in which the meaning occurs from time to time, manifesting itself by force of interaction. In a dialogue, the choice of a single word does not suffer from having mutilated the concept any more than it rejoices in having created something new and further in its encounter with the Other. Li's deviating from the constraints and illusions of language, then, does not mean moving from one language to another, but rather straining the language—whatever it may be—in constant dialogue with the Other and with herself. In conclusion, dialogue is a dimension of the word which leaves all of its possibilities of meaning in abeyance: dialogue vivifies what language immortalizes.

Finally, it is interesting to observe how, from a psychoanalytical point of view, the two novels *Where Reasons End* and *Must I Go* might represent the continuation of one another. This does not mean, however, that their respective drafts have offered Li a therapeutic path. The connection I intend to suggest simply concerns the two narratives as such, and in particular their respective endings. *Where Reasons End* (2019) closes with a metanarrative dialogue, or with a mutual questioning of mother and child about the nature of questions and answers. Thus, it ends by deferring the encounter with the Real (in its Lacanian sense) of death, the definitive end of any conversation. On the contrary, the ending of *Must I Go* (2020) is a plaque inscribed in capital letters, an unequivocal answer: "MUST I GO? Yes, Roland, yes. We all must." In short, the mother-narrator of *Where Reasons End* allowed her encounter with the Real to remain suspended in a dimension beyond history so that the assertiveness of death remained beyond the sayable, and thus unsaid. On the contrary, the irony, the verve and her advanced age give Lilia the decisive impetus of a fatal answer, the ability to sustain, if not the impossible encounter with the Real, at least the admission of its inevitable existence and magnetic attraction. Therefore, comparing *Where Reasons End's* and *Must I Go's* respective endings, it is possible to detect a psychoanalytical shift from the illusion of an eternal deferral of the encounter with the Real to the admission of its inevitability, or, differently said, from the postponement of death to the encounter with death: a novel-to-novel conversation, which is a narrative—if not even therapeutic—bridge-path.

4. Conclusions

Li's English writing has many points of undoubted resemblance to that of other Chinese exophonic writers. For example, the translation of Chinese sayings and their self-explanatory use within the narrative, or a declared melee with the use of the English pronoun "I," to which Chinese language often prefers the plural *women* 我们, "we," are typical elements of both Li and many other exophonic authors (Guo 2017, 204–6). It should also be said that many of the academic studies currently available on Yiyun Li's literature precisely focus on these linguistic strategies, interpreting them as practices of domestication or estrangement, and thus, relating them to a cultural-identity discourse (Dai 2013; Li Jing 2009; Li Bing 2015; Tang 2018; Lam 2011). These studies put Li's role as a migrant writer ahead of her being a writer tout court, so that the interest of her literature is promptly sought in her relationship with her own Chineseness and in the way in which this element emerges from the texts. However, as Zheng Haijuan explains, "although Li Yiyun can be counted among migrant writers, [in her works] she does not tend to emphasize this belonging, but tries to fit into a much broader [literary] tradition" (Zheng 2019, 40). As this contribution demonstrates, Li's exophony and the strategies through which she hybridizes her English language do not respond to any political agenda or search for identity. On the contrary, I argue that the peculiarity of her works is regardless of the language employed, and precisely lies in their looking through human language: beyond its clichés and its identity labels.

The condition of a migrant writer did not push Li to make her literature a place for nostalgic recovery and (re)construction of identity. On the contrary, in Li's life and literature being a migrant is just one of the many situations and experiences that have influenced her own way of perceiving and thus depicting the world. When she writes, Li is not just a migrant writer, she is a strong woman, a woman who suffered from depression, a daughter, a mother of a living son, a mother of a son who committed suicide, a voracious reader, a fan of Tolstoy and William Trevor, a Chinese woman, an American woman. When she writes, Li is all of this and even more, and her literature, which is not to please any reader, reminds us that no one is reducible to a label, to a name, that language is a convention, and that only as long as something remains unspeakable and unsaid, can we still say we are not prisoners of our own words.

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Transnational urban encounters: existential wanderings in Xue Yiwei's collection *Shenzheners*

Giulia Rampolla

Abstract: The fictional works of the Chinese writer Xue Yiwei, who migrated to Canada in 2002, can be regarded as a byproduct of cross-border mobility and cultural displacement. This paper examines the relationship between the individual and the metropolis in four short stories from the collection *Shenzheners*, focusing on the impact of the writer's transcontinental relocation on his representation of city dwellers and intercultural encounters. This research adopts an interdisciplinary framework, which merges textual analysis with the approaches of Cultural Studies and Literary Urban Studies, and places this theoretical construction within a transnational context. By investigating the multiple narrative forms Xue Yiwei uses to question stereotypical cultural boundaries and to build a bridge between Chinese and global literatures, the connection between his experience of mobility and his hybrid fictional microcosm will be explored.

Keywords: Global Chinese literature, transnational writers, transculturalism in Chinese fiction, Chinese urban literature, Shenzhen fiction.

1. Introduction

The Chinese writer Xue Yiwei 薛忆为 (b. 1964) comes from a complex background of domestic and international migration: born in Hunan province, he lived in several Chinese cities, before expatriating to Canada in 2002.¹ His prolific oeuvre stands out against the broad landscape of contemporary Chinese literature for its textual heterogeneity, for the writer's meticulous investigation into the complexities of language, and because it overflows with literary hybridity and cultural intermingling.² The genesis of this multidimensional fictional uni-

¹ He was born in Chenzhou 郴州 (Hunan), a place "situated within the borders of the ancient kingdom of Chu" (Lin and Nashef 2021, 8), grew up in Changsha and graduated in computer science in Beijing. Subsequently, he turned to literary and linguistics studies and became a professor of literature at Shenzhen University in 1996. Since 2002 he has been living in Montreal. His first novel, *Yiqi 遗弃* (*Abandonment*, 1988), was partially inspired by his own experiences. Over the last decade, his writing activity has intensified with publications in China and abroad.

² The term hybridity, employed in Cultural Studies and other fields to designate an amalgamation of Western and Asian cultures, specifically refers here to the multicultural elements which shape Xue's fiction. The term heterogeneity is used in connection with the multiplicity of textual practices which characterize his works.

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verse is deeply embedded in the writer's personal experience of transcontinental resettlement and in his intimate knowledge of Chinese and Western literature. From this perspective, the works of Xue Yiwei can be regarded as the outcome of transnational mobility and transcultural encounters on multiple levels: they relate the detached gaze of a migrant writer on his homeland; they challenge the common nation-bound literary categories and theoretical discourses; they cross the boundaries between literary genres; they reconceptualize Chinese fictional writing through the intercultural negotiation between Chinese and Western literary modes.

As Hu stated (2021, 35): "Xue engages in a close dialogue with writers from all over the world [...]. He takes as his homeland [...] the whole of world literature." Widely acclaimed in his native country, he prefers to remain on the sidelines of literary circles. However, Xue's literary production is almost unanimously viewed by scholars as a distinctive phenomenon which, as Lin Gang observed while interviewing him, "goes some way to restore the reputation of Chinese contemporary literature" (Lin and Nashef 2021, 5), because it does not succumb to the commercial demands of the publishing industry.³ Since 2016, following the translation of his works into English, Xue Yiwei's fiction has been attracting the attention of an enthusiastic worldwide audience.

The collection *Shenzheners* (2016), the first of his works to be translated into English, includes nine of the twelve stories of the Chinese edition.⁴ The original Chinese title, *Chuzuche siji: Shenzhenren xilie xiaoshuo* 出租车司机: 深圳人系列小说 (*Taxi driver: Fictional series People of Shenzhen*, 2013), was borrowed from the short story "The Taxi Driver" (*Chuzuche siji* 出租车司机, Xue 2016e), which is regarded as Xue's most influential work, and his most well-known inside China (Zhao 2020, 8). Most significantly, the profession of the protagonist, expressed in the title, is based on permanent mobility, which symbolizes the migrant condition of the majority of Shenzhen's population (Wang 2021, 71). In this collection, the writer's acute transnational awareness is articulated through the harmonious interplay between Chinese and non-Chinese visions of the city, with a primary focus on the psychological and existential condition of the individual within the urban environment. The city was a key motif in Western literary modernism (Mullin 2016), an intrinsically transnational movement.⁵ While

³ In the 1990s, following the accelerated pace of the economic reforms, a process of commercialization impacted Chinese culture. Scholars were concerned about a devaluation of literature and intense debates about the loss of its artistic value ensued. Many Chinese writers did long for commercial success, and this certainly influenced their literary output. The marketization of the publishing industry also played a part in the diversification and renaissance of fiction (Wang 2016, 207).

⁴ A translation by S. Nashef of *Nü mishu* 女秘书 (*Secretary Girl*), one of the three stories excluded from *Shenzheners*, was published in *Chinese Literature Today* in 2021. The novel *Celia, Misoka, I* (*Xilali, Mihe, Wo* 希拉里, 密和, 我, 2016) and the collection *Xue Yiwei's war stories* (*Shouzhao Gaojie* 首战告捷, 2016) are examples of recent translations of his works.

⁵ Modernism developed from the 19th to the mid-20th century, spreading across several European countries. It was a heterogeneous movement, characterized by different ap-

carefully examining the impact of globalization on the everyday existence of ordinary people within the particular context of present-day China, Xue exploits the typical approaches of Western modernism to the exploration of the city, as a lens for investigating both the urban transformations and the emotional responses of the individual to them. Beyond modernists, a constellation of other foreign genres, authors and philosophical trends of different epochs can be found in the texts. In this respect, existentialism and absurdism provide this collection with an insightful philosophical background and a paradigm of literary alterity, which allows the writer to interpolate Shenzhen's process of modernization into a broader cross-cultural outline of urban modernity. Linder (2001, 57) calls attention to the concern for the relationship between philosophy and literature which references to Wittgenstein, Hegel and Nietzsche in Xue's works reveal; she maintains that by adopting a style strongly reminiscent of Kafka, Beckett, Camus, Proust, Joyce and Sartre, the writer reflects upon the influence of culture on the individual. Through these cross-cultural allusions, Xue takes world literature as the benchmark against which Chinese literature can be reframed, establishing a relationship of intertextuality with foreign fiction (Lin 2022, 206).

Shenzheners is dedicated to James Joyce (1882-1941), whose masterpiece *Dubliners* ([1914] 2000) was the avowed inspiration for Xue's collection. Several sources (Huang 2022; Ye 2019; Zhang 2018; Jiang 2017) debate the similarities and discrepancies between the two collections and their authors.⁶ It is particularly relevant to the current discussion that both authors were living abroad when they completed these collections, hence casting a deterritorialized gaze respectively on Dublin and Shenzhen. Furthermore, by providing a thumbnail sketch of several urban characters, each the subject of one short story, both works actually scrutinize human fate in the urban context. However, while the city in *Dubliners* is a synecdoche for an economically and culturally paralyzed Irish nation (Hamlin 2016, 129), Xue's Shenzhen is a vibrant place full of opportunities.

The writer's experience as an overseas Chinese was also instrumental in crafting his hybrid writing on Shenzhen (Huang 2022, 15). In fact, he wrote the majority of the stories in the collection while living in Montreal.⁷ Being an expatriate, who actually lived in Shenzhen during the momentous years around 2000,⁸ Xue is able to strike a subtle balance between displacement and belonging when portraying this rapidly modernizing metropolis. Put differently, he reconciles local particularity and global integration in a transnational account of

proaches and themes, whose common feature was the defiance of traditional norms (Williams 1989, 43).

⁶ A broad comparison between the two works is beyond the scope of this research. Insights on the topic are provided throughout the paper when related to the purported arguments.

⁷ "The Taxi Driver" (Xue 2016e) is the only exception: first published in 1997 in the journal *Renmin Wenxue* 人民文学 (People's Literature), he wrote it while living in Shenzhen.

⁸ At the turn of the 21st century, alongside the acceleration of the economic reforms, urbanization and related processes such as inner migration dramatically increased. In 2001 China joined the WTO, thereby consolidating its commitment to globalization.

Shenzhen, which is a hallmark of his cross-cultural identity. While the motifs of alienation, absurdity and social isolation characterize the existence of Shenzhen's inhabitants in this collection, a variety of fictional practices and literary devices are used to address transcultural interactions and pinpoint the virtual crossroad at which the geo-cultural universes forming the writer's creativity converge.

The protean metropolis envisioned in *Shenzheners* can be examined from multiple perspectives. To narrow the scope, this paper brings into focus the impact of Xue's transnational background on his image of Shenzhen, by following two strands of analysis: the representation of the urban subject and the characterization of intercultural encounters, with the implied matters of otherness and displacement. These issues are investigated through the analysis of four short stories, each showcasing a particular facet of the ongoing discussion: "The Taxi Driver" (Xue 2016e) deals with the feeling of alienation of a man who suddenly realizes he is a stranger in the metropolis he has lived in for years. "The Dramatist" (*Juzuoja* 剧作家, Xue 2016c) tells of a man benumbed by the absurdity of his fate. In "The Country Girl" (*Cun gu* 村姑, Xue 2016a) a chance encounter between a Chinese painter and a Canadian translator leaves an indelible mark on both. In "The Peddler" (*Xiaofan* 小贩, Xue 2016b) a rural migrant endures the ostracism of urban dwellers.

In order to foreground the literary practices located at the intersection of national and transnational, which originate from the writer's physical mobility and subsequent cultural hybridity, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the following section will illustrate the theoretical rationale. Next, whilst focusing on the first two short stories, the representation of urban dwellers will be examined in the light of transcultural influences. The final section will deal with the representation of intercultural encounters in the last two short stories.

2. Theoretical framework: Xue Yiwei's Shenzhen between Chineseness and globality

Xue Yiwei's elaborate representation of Shenzhen stems from the conflation of diverse cultural, literary, historical and biographical components, which are entrenched within the dialectical interplay between Chinese identity and worldwide culture. From a socio-historical angle, this literary hybridity is the result of the multiple material and immaterial flows which pervade society in an age of global capitalism. On the other hand, the unique circumstances of the process of modernization in Shenzhen, repeatedly referred to as "China's youngest city" (Xue 2016a, 1, 8, 11, 20; Xue 2016c, 70) in the selected stories,⁹ provide the collection with strong local distinctiveness. Developed into a densely populated megacity in just a few decades, it was a fishing village in 1980 when the first Special Economic Zone was established there.¹⁰ As the emblem of China's

⁹ All the quotes from *Shenzheners* are taken from the English edition.

¹⁰ A megacity is a metropolis with more than ten million inhabitants. SEZ are delimited areas which benefit from more liberal economic rules, encouraging private and foreign invest-

modernization,¹¹ this newly formed conurbation attracts huge inflows of internal migrants and foreign investors. It is now a global manufacturing and technological hub, and the driving force of China's urban development and market economy (UN 2019, 2, 4). This particular urban setting, harbinger of social paradoxes, allows Xue to speculate on human nature in the context of both Chinese economic progress and global modernity.¹²

Indeed, the investigation of the entanglement between individual life, society and history is the epistemic logic undergirding his multifarious narrational stance. In a time of high-speed modernization and planetary socio-spatial interconnectedness, this inevitably implies disclosing human fragility in the face of the incongruity of urban life. In the course of the 20th century, many urban theorists have maintained that the variegated reality of the city influences the perception of the urbanites, with consequences on their psychological condition (GUST 1999, 110). In *Shenzheners*, the focus on the mental state of modern city dwellers is an essential feature, which the writer highlights by avoiding any mention of Shenzhen's landmarks and toponyms (Lu 2020, 129; Huang 2016, 80). Moreover, even though the narration revolves around this metropolis, its name is barely mentioned in the stories. These omissions place Shenzhen in a symbolic realm, making it an icon of generic urban modernity (Lu 2020, 129; Liu H. 2018, 60), thereby setting in motion a process of displacement of the city from the Chinese context to a transnational sphere. Jiang (2017, 99) interprets this technique, which enables the writer to decontextualize the urban experience of the characters from a specific national setting, as a component of Xue's "awareness of the global village" (*diqu cun yishi* 地球村意识).

The underlying complexity of these narratives demands a cross-disciplinary engagement with the fictional representation of the city in order to shed light on the interaction patterns between the writer's textual practices, the identity issues raised by his national and transcontinental mobility, China's recent history, and the multicultural landscape of globalization. On these grounds, this chapter uses Cultural Studies and Literary Urban Studies, transdisciplinary and interrelated fields, as the primary theoretical tools for the investigation of the literary texts. The concepts of transnationalism and transculturalism, widely

ment. After Shenzhen, SEZ were established in Xiamen, Shantou, Zhuhai, Hainan and other territories.

¹¹ With the Reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), launched by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 in 1978, China embarked on a path toward modernization, which involved a gradual assimilation of capitalism. In 1992, during his Southern Tour, Deng advanced the idea of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", which implied the coexistence of socialism with a market economy. The striking growth which followed has led China to become the second largest economy in the world.

¹² Dirlik (2003, 276–77) theorizes global modernity as a reconceptualized modernity which questions the Euro-American cultural hegemony. He contends that in a time of globalization, a single modernity with multiple forms and articulations encompasses the whole world. Other scholars postulate the existence of multiple modernities. For Wang (2009, 116) Chinese modernity is alternative to Western modernity, in dialogue with Chinese and Western tradition.

used in literary studies in relation to works focusing on migration or the hybrid identities of migrant writers, underpin the discussion. However, regardless of whether it is used to describe characters, writers or texts, the term 'transnational' does not jeopardize the idea of nation. On the contrary, it underlines the fact that in a globalized world which is nonetheless divided into countries, people, ideas and capital flow across national boundaries (Wiegandt 2020, 7-8). Therefore, transnationalism calls into question conventional notions of cultural identity.

Cultural Studies are frequently used in literary analysis as a tool to investigate matters of identity, ethnicity and migration, and consider everyday life and popular culture as valid objects of research. In this field, cultural phenomena, including literature, are investigated within their social context. In the selected works, the characters are ordinary people, intent on their daily activities, while major social and economic transformations destabilize their microcosm. The interconnection between city dwellers and urban environment has long been a field of investigation for writers from across the world, especially at times when processes resulting from economic progress bring about dramatic transformations which affect people's lives. At the turn of the 21st century both Literary and Cultural Studies are confronted with the critical interpretation of a reality which is increasingly global and interconnected. Spivak (1991, 66) asserts that cultural research today is "the study of contemporary global capitalism [...], the theory, history and philosophy of the various components of the globe." She raises awareness of the need to consider people outside the Euro-American sphere as agents rather than passive receivers of historical processes. By looking at the short stories under scrutiny through the lens of Cultural Studies, one can detect Xue's desire to direct an unbiased gaze towards the other, be it embodied by the foreign civilization he assimilated or the homeland from which he is voluntarily dislocated. He offers a perspective of Shenzhen as a place embroiled in a consumerist global culture, populated by a multitude of others. This polymorphous approach of the writer to otherness steers a path through the tension between locality and globality, and conveys the heterogeneity of his urban imagination. The characters, migrants in a city where large segments of the population are non-natives, embody cultural alterity; the writer, once a stranger in Shenzhen himself, describes them from the perspective of an external observer, while living in another country. Foreign cultural products, like American movies and European novels, represent cultural otherness for the Chinese characters, while for the only foreign protagonist, the Canadian woman in "The Country Girl" (Xue 2016e), China evokes a pervading sense of exoticism.

The urban sociologist Park (1925, 3) highlighted the importance of fiction for the understanding of urban life in his time. Almost one century later, Xue's urban writing provides readers with a vivid cross-section of Shenzhen's modernity. In this regard, key concepts formulated in the field of literary urban studies offer an insightful rationale for the exegesis of his works. Unlike traditional approaches to the representation of the city, this burgeoning field foregrounds the reality and the contradictions of the urban context (Gurr 2021, 2-3), fulfilling the growing academic need to make the research on the relationship between

the city and the text comparative and global (Finch 2021, 6). Furthermore, literary urban studies are concerned with how literary texts represent urban complexity (Gurr 2021, 19) and look at the city as an open system characterized by social and cultural heterogeneity, “a translocal network of complex relationships, connections and interdependencies subject to rapid change over time” (Gurr, 2021, 14). The blistering pace of social and economic transformation in Shenzhen and its place within the discourse of global modernity make the concept of urban complexity particularly illuminating in literary analyses involving this city.

In the works under scrutiny, hybridity and transculturality, on both a national and international plane, are relevant components of Shenzhen’s inherent complexity. This transcultural dimension is enacted in multiple forms: the displaced perspective of the writer and of the characters; the temporal setting in the multicultural context of globalization; Shenzhen’s appeal as a destination for migrants; narrative strategies which express cultural encounters; inspiration from Western literature and philosophy; intertextuality.¹³ In this respect, Xue’s works not only abound with allusions, individual references and quotations, but also share relevant motifs of foreign masterpieces, borrow structural elements from their plots, or hark back to Western fictional and theatrical genres.

In *Shenzheners*, existentialism and modernism are certainly the main points of reference.¹⁴ In literary existentialism, writing and philosophy are inextricably bound together (Malpas 2012, 104). The same thing occurs in Xue’s works. However, he does not assimilate existentialism passively, but connects it with the reality of present-day China (Hu 2014, 82, 84).

Modernism is particularly noteworthy in relation to Xue’s representation of Shenzhen. In the history of Western literature, modernism and the modern city have always been connected (Lu 2020, 128). The fascination of modernist writers with the city and the psychological state of urbanites lay in the dramatic transformations that the urban environment was undergoing in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. At the time, the extraordinary growth of major cities heralded the emergence of new phenomena including dynamism, mobility and complexity, which strongly impacted upon the cultural sphere (Bădulescu 2015, 67–8). Studies on the urban aspects of literary texts produced in that period unanimously point to the unprecedented scale of transformations in the metropolis as a source of existential bewilderment and social diversity (Finch 2021, 98–9). A striking parallel can be drawn with the situation of Chinese urbanization one century later.¹⁵ Therefore, by utilizing modernist motifs, the writ-

¹³ Another notable example of Xue’s intertextuality is the book *Yu Make Poluo tongxing* 与马克波罗同行 (Traveling with Marco Polo, 2015), in which he engages in a dialogue with Italo Calvino’s masterpiece *Invisible Cities* (1972). See Hu (2021).

¹⁴ The specific literary influences found in each of the four selected short stories will be discussed in the following sections.

¹⁵ In China, large scale urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has increased particularly since the end of the 1990s, closely connected to the advanced stage of the reforms.

er reconceptualizes the modernists' backlash against the disconcerting social transformations of their time in the context of today's Shenzhen. Migration to the metropolis, a new phenomenon brought about by economic development, was also a key element of modernist fiction (Williams 1989, 45), whose relevance in *Shenzheners* has already been mentioned. However, the centrality of the alienated urban subject is undoubtedly the element most reminiscent of modernism in this collection. Random coincidences, epiphanies and chance occurrences are also recurring modernist devices which appear in the selected stories. In urban narratives, these strategies, which revolve around the concept of simultaneity, allow the reader to perceive the overwhelming feeling caused by the synchronous occurrence of thousands of great and small events in the city (Gurr 2021, 36; Finch 2021, 6). This simultaneity is a key component of urban complexity (Gurr 2021, 34).

In recent decades Shenzhen, which is at the forefront of the reforms, has increasingly attracted the interest of Chinese writers, who have looked at the consequences of capitalism, globalization and related processes on individual life, with a focus on subaltern strata.¹⁶ Xue's fascination with Shenzhen recalls some aspects of "Shenzhen fiction" (*Shenzhen xiaoshuo* 深圳小说), a component of the broader landscape of Chinese urban literature.¹⁷ However, while migrants in Shenzhen fiction actively pursue the "Chinese dream" and, in spite of their issues of identity in the city, desperately want to be a part of it (Ye 2019, 61), all the protagonists in *Shenzheners* hope to find an escape from the metropolis. The melancholic mood and detached attitude of the writer and his tone of philosophical speculation clearly distinguish Xue's urban writing from the general features of the trend (Ye 2019, 59–60).

Widely regarded as an independent thinker and a maverick (Huang 2022, 14),¹⁸ Xue is certainly a beacon of our times. Due to his singular literary standards, different from both mainstream Chinese fiction and overseas Chinese literature (Lin 2021, 201), critics usually find his writings difficult to categorize (Wang 2021, 68). Even though he lives in Canada his touchstone is not Canadian culture, but the whole world. Therefore, his works can hardly be defined as Asian Canadian literature.¹⁹

¹⁶ Among the contemporary writers who focus on Shenzhen: Deng Yiguang 邓一光 (b. 1956), Wu Jun 吴君 (b. 1969), Wang Shiyue 王十月 (b. 1972), Fu Guanjun 付关军 (b. 1980), Cao Zhenglu 曹征路 (1949–1921).

¹⁷ After temporarily thriving in the 1930s, urban literature disappeared during the Maoist period. In the 1980s, following the reforms and the gradual resumption of urbanization, the city reappeared as a setting in fiction. In the 1990s, increased urbanization fostered the interest of writers in the consumer culture of the metropolis. Chen (2014, 89) points out that only in the 21st century did this genre flourish and obtain recognition in literary circles.

¹⁸ The Chinese-American writer Ha Jin 哈金 (b. 1956) was the first to define Xue Yiwei a maverick (Lin and Nashef 2021, 5).

¹⁹ Asian Canadian Studies are currently a booming field of study (Beauregard 2008, 11). It is widely agreed that the publication of the anthology *Inalienable Rice* (1979), edited by Christopher Lee, is the starting point of Asian Canadian literature (Liu Z. 2018, 82).

In the 21st century, a new generation of transnational writers has emerged: their writing crosses the borders of their primary cultures, but is significantly different in themes and style from the previous migrant literature (Dagnino 2012, 1–2). The subsequent two sections will define how this new transnationalism is articulated in *Shenzheners*.

3. Explorers of urban absurdity in a global literary space

The urban individual, captured in their subjectivity and trapped in their existential angst within the aloof environment of a rapidly modernizing metropolis which has become inexplicable and devoid of humanity, is the focal point of all the stories included in *Shenzheners*. The characters stumble about in an urban labyrinth (*chengshi migong* 城市迷宫) which they cannot decipher, where they risk getting lost (Chen 2014, 85–6). These nameless protagonists, only identified by their professions, are faced with existential choices and unforeseen kismet within an urban fabric whose impersonal rationality makes them feel profoundly estranged. The writer chronicles their psychological despondency, whilst empathizing with their condition (Jiang 2017, 99). Ye argues that their anonymity, which results in an extensive use of third person pronouns, emphasizes that their identities are paradigmatic of the spiritual background of the time (2019, 61). However, they do not embody the successful businessmen depicted in the media (Liu H. 2018, 59), nor are they enthusiastic advocates of Shenzhen's miracle. These ordinary people, befuddled in the chaos of the metropolis, harbor universal feelings of restlessness and anxiety, through which their experience is transported into a realm of worldwide metropolitan imagination (Chen 2014, 90).²⁰ They constitute an uneasy fringe of the urban population, which destabilizes the glamorous rhetoric of both Chinese modernization and world globalization. As migrants, they do not even represent the official residents of the city, but people who live there in a broad sense (Huang 2022, 16). Moreover, they are absorbed in their everyday reality: “they could be any unknown stranger who walks through the streets of Shenzhen” (Liu H. 2018, 59).²¹

In his ground-breaking essay on the cultural patterns of urbanization, Park claimed that “the city is a state of mind” (1925, 1) and that “the structure of the city has its basis in human nature” (1925, 3). In the works under scrutiny, rather than focusing on the cityscape, Xue constructs the fictional image of the city around the characters' perception of the urban experience. Hence, the urban dimension is conceived as an expression of their frame of mind and manifested through the emotional response of characters to the surrounding conditions. This is particularly evident in “The Taxi Driver” and “The Dramatist” in which,

²⁰ In existentialist thought, angst is aroused by the acknowledgement of the absurdity of life, while a pivotal role is attributed to individual existence: these motifs in the short stories discussed in this section, are a relevant manifestation of intertextuality.

²¹ The quotes from Chinese sources have been translated into English by the author.

as will be discussed in more detail in this section, random snapshots of the physical reality of the city merely express the subjective impressions of characters, while the narration concentrates on their innermost feelings.

The protagonists of these two short stories, a driver who has just suffered a terrible loss and an established artist with a miserable sentimental life, differ in social status and in their personal trauma, whereas they share a strong consciousness of the absurd, a nagging feeling of alienation and utter loneliness. These motifs, which can be traced back to a long tradition of urban denizens in modernist and existentialist fiction,²² are either subverted or reconceptualized, in order to reconcile the local particularity of Shenzhen with the multicultural flows of today's world. Therefore, by tackling these themes, Xue denationalizes the urban experience of the characters, which become archetypes of the metropolitan identity in an increasingly globalized world. These literary contaminations are not restricted to the aforesaid, but span over Western genres and authors of other periods.

In "The Taxi Driver" a third-person narrator recounts the mental agony of a man who, following the tragic death of his wife and daughter who were killed in an accident, meanders through the urban space, which he scans in search of helpful signs to fathom his personal tragedy. He is gripped by a feeling of aloofness and alienation in the metropolis which should be so familiar to him, since "He'd spent the past fifteen years shuttling through those city streets [...] he hadn't left a single trace" (Xue 2016e, 174). This story expresses his thoughts after his last work shift, during which every corner of Shenzhen reminds him of his departed loved ones, while the loneliness and sorrow he detects overhearing the private conversations of his last customers make him regret that he had always taken his family for granted. Hence, he resolves to resign and return to his hometown to take care of his old parents because "he could not go on living in such a foreign city" (Xue 2016a, 174). Mourning triggers a true epiphany in the taxi driver, in a pure Joycean style:²³ the idea of leaving Shenzhen releases him from grief, as if it could disappear together with the city.

The urban spaces are deeply linked to the personal experience of the protagonist: the parking lot, the office, a restaurant where he used to eat with his daughter. Nonetheless, they convey a feeling of emptiness and anonymity. Sporadic references to the roadways offer a glimpse of the bustling metropolis: "The road was so congested it was hard to make any headway at all" (Xue 2016e, 171). And: "It was still rush hour. Many cars had their brights on; an awful glare" (Xue 2016e, 166). Western food and an Italian pizzeria provide an idea of the consumerist culture of Shenzhen in the 1990s. In this respect, drawing attention to

²² Alienated urban subjects appear in novels by Döblin, Joyce, Woolf, Proust and other modernist writers. Concerns about absurdity and alienation are the focus of the existentialist works of Kafka, Kundera, Camus, Sartre.

²³ *Dubliners* abounds with epiphanic realizations, directly and indirectly presented, usually triggered by irrelevant events (Suzuki 2005).

the representation of the impact of globalization on everyday life, Huang (2022, 15) remarks that in this work “the city is no longer a background [...]; an inter-textual symbiotic synchronicity between the city and literature is established.”

Nostalgia for the native village, the identity issues of rural migrants, the rural-urban divide and the marketization and westernization of the urban space are typical themes found in recent Chinese urban literature. In “The Taxi Driver”, the writer transcends their usual representation, making them seem tangential to the subjective experience of the taxi driver. Unlike the other selected stories, this one contains no direct references to foreign writers or foreign novels. However, this emblematic character conjures up a wide array of alienated figures in modernist fiction. In the Western context, literary reflections on the alienated and doubtful Self are closely connected to the representation of the urban subject (Mullin 2016). Writers of previous generations also wrote about the city, but modernists developed a new interest in the psychological impact of urban existence. The taxi driver shares many features of the flâneur, a figure that emerged within the European context of the 19th century, and is today a cultural symbol in discourses about the individual’s relationship with the city.²⁴ Typically a dandy, he is a wanderer in the urban space who idly strolls without purpose and is characterized by acute observation skills. He scours the city looking for signs which could help him understand reality. The taxi driver, unlike the typical flâneur, is not an indolent rambler: he roams as a part of his profession, and is not a member of the wealthy middle class. Contrary to the flâneur, the driver’s absentmindedness is due to his intimate pain. He is not an enthusiastic spectator of the urban jungle, which he only scrutinizes in search of a meaning for his personal tragedy.

There are also various kinds of walking, somehow related to the idea of flânerie, in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, in which the mobility of characters around the city is futile, their journeys are circular (Hamlin 2016, 129-131). This is the same condition of Xue’s taxi driver, who only shuttles customers around, always returning to the same parking lot.

Lu (2020, 131) contends that in *Shenzheners* “there is always a latent antagonism between the individual and the city. The city is an external force which controls people.” Even though they belong to different social categories, the protagonists of the stories discussed in this section succumb to obscure forces which overwhelm their destiny.

Passion, drama, death, coincidences, fatal mistakes, jealousy, anathemas and unexpected twists, weave the fabric of the tragedy-like plot of “The Dramatist”, in which Shakespearean echoes are blended with Beckettian enticements. The protagonist, a solitary playwright, has abandoned a successful career because “he had been exhausted by the drama in his personal life” (Xue 2016c, 54). Ev-

²⁴ The concept of flâneur evolved through the theorizations of several writers and intellectuals, the most relevant of whom are Baudelaire and Benjamin (Coates 2017, 29). The latter fully conceptualized the flâneur and its pivotal role in modernist fiction.

ery morning at 10:20 he mysteriously stands in front of a row of trees wearing a Shakespeare T-shirt. Due to his secluded life “The neighbors called him a weirdo. But I felt that [...] eccentric would be more apt. He didn’t seem to belong to our community, or even to this city” (Xue 2016c, 51). The reasons for the preposterousness haunting his life, manifested in his romantic relations, are only revealed to the internal narrator, one of his neighbors, when the dramatist, after leaving Shenzhen, sends him a tape from a remote village. Years before, on the day of his wedding, an old flame contacted the dramatist, informing him of a parcel she sent from Shakespeare’s hometown, where they had dreamed of spending their honeymoon. Disappointed by the news of his marriage, the woman put a curse on him. Exactly one year after, a violent argument erupts between the playwright and his wife, who evidently knows about the parcel that the man never opened. Convinced that he does not love her, she falls into a severe depression and eventually commits suicide at 10:20 in the morning. He finally finds out that the parcel contained a Shakespeare T-shirt and *The Complete works of William Shakespeare*.²⁵ Therefore, through the performance of his morning ritual at the exact hour of his wife’s demise, wearing the garment received from his ex-girlfriend, he reunites his two doomed love stories in one absurd theatrical act. Shakespeare’s book is the vehicle through which the narrator meets the introverted man. His feelings for the dramatist evolve from initial suspicion to thorough identification in the final: “I felt as though he and I were the same person” (Xue 2016c, 71). A last unexpected twist happens when the narrator, as though in symbiosis with the dramatist, completes his story: the dramatist had left his old flame out of unmotivated jealousy. As in Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, a fatal flaw of the protagonist, jealousy, ignited a chain of inauspicious events.

Camus wrote that in “a universe suddenly divested of illusions [...] man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy [...]. This divorce between man and life [...] is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Camus 1959, 6). This is exactly the condition of the dramatist. He repeatedly mentions absurdity: “What could be more absurd than that? Silence is a revolt against absurdity” (Xue 2016c, 67). And: “I couldn’t write a more absurd play if I tried” (Xue 2016c, 70). When he is asked about his whereabouts he answers: “I am waiting for Godot” (Xue 2016c, 59). However, while Beckett’s characters in *Waiting for Godot* (1952) continue waiting, the dramatist finally leaves Shenzhen.

Liu Hongxia (2018, 60–1) identifies escape as a dominant motif in all the stories included in the collection. Escape is a central topic in existentialist thought, variously connected to issues of freedom and responsibility. The dramatist, as a consequence of his hapless love for two women, is overwhelmed by the absur-

²⁵ The dramatist owns an English version of this book, which he cannot read, while the narrator, who teaches English, can. Two of the protagonist’s plays have been translated into English, Italian and Japanese. Through these details, the topic of translation, further discussed in the next section, also emerges here.

dity of life and wants to leave Shenzhen. The taxi driver abandons his job in an attempt to heal his wounds.

Urban spaces in “The Taxi Driver” and “The Dramatist” allegorically indicate the foremost position attributed to the emotional sphere. While the taxi driver explores public spaces which are actually very familiar to him, the dramatist does not emerge in public, and appears in semi-private urban spaces. His sporadic interactions happen in the limited areas shared with neighbors, mostly anonymous figures: the building where he lives, the garden outside the compound, the stairs. In the collection, the residential building (*juminlou* 居民楼) symbolizes urban life and is a metaphor for the cold human relations in the metropolis, where anonymity and material greed have replaced the warm social interactions of the past (Zhang 2018, 78).

In both these stories, a series of happenstances determine the fate of characters, as they deal with individuals looking for signs or coincidences which can help them to fathom their alienation and perplexity. As previously mentioned, coincidences and chance encounters can be interpreted as metaphors of the simultaneity and contingency which distinguishes urban life. In this case, they are also allusions to typical existentialist motifs. Small serendipities, unexpected hazards, fortuity and random coincidences also appear in the two stories discussed in the next section. While for the taxi driver and the dramatist they emphasize the absurdity of their personal fate, for the protagonists of the other two, they emerge in the exploration of otherness and displacement, in the unpredictability of encounters.

4. Encounters: displacement in the city of otherness

In the 21st century, due to the growing impact of globalization on everyday life and the unparalleled circulation of population on a global scale, the boundaries of nationhood, even at the level of individual identity, are increasingly blurred. Intercultural encounters may entail interactions of different cultural identities not only across national boundaries but also, as in the case of domestic migration, between people from different backgrounds within the same country. As a typical phenomenon of our times, this interrelatedness results in the unfeasibility for displaced subjects to mobilize pre-existing discourses to articulate their uprooted condition. For writers, as in the case of Xue Yiwei, this implies the need to fabricate new patterns of representation.

Matters of alterity, displacement and identity are broached from multiple perspectives in *Shenzheners*. Each character epitomizes a different facet of social and cultural diversity in the context of the metropolis. Furthermore, intercultural encounters of people and ideas, flowing either across or within the national boundaries, make the process of othering integral to the identity construction of the characters. Displacement and otherness are also expressed through conceptual markers of transculturality. A notable example in this regard is translation, metaphorically understood as the emblem of cultural transfers. It appears in the form of quotations of translated editions of famous masterpieces, or it is

the job of one character, or is addressed through reflections about the limits of literary translation.

The singularity of Shenzhen as a city of multiple alterities has been discussed earlier. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that “moving to the city” (*jincheng* 进城) and “going abroad” (*chuguo* 出国) are the most common tropes regarding mobility in contemporary Chinese culture, the first referring to the relocation of rural dwellers in the urban context, the latter hinting at international mobility (Sun 2002, 43). In both cases the migrant is faced with displacement, which stems from the hybrid condition of having departed from the familiar and inhabiting a strange place (Sun 2002, 44). Both these processes are involved in *Shenzheners*.

This section explores issues of displacement and otherness in the context of intercultural urban encounters in “The Country Girl” and “The Peddler”. These stories respectively turn the spotlight on a fleeting yet life-changing intercontinental contact between two persons searching for deeper meaning in life, and on the dire predicaments of a rural migrant. The matter in question is addressed from a dual perspective, encompassing both the condition of the protagonists, strangers to Shenzhen, and the particular standpoint of the author, whose wide-ranging depiction of the city springs from a constant identity negotiation that involves his national origin, his experience of Shenzhen and his relocation abroad.

“The Country Girl” (Xue 2016a), partially set in Canada, significantly is the first story in the English edition.²⁶ It expands the range of action of Shenzhen inhabitants in the direction of the Western world (Jiang 2017, 100). The female protagonist, an English-to-French translator from the Quebec countryside, is introduced to the existence of Shenzhen by a Chinese artist expatriated to Canada, who had previously been a migrant in Shenzhen. Towards the end of the story the woman will move to Shenzhen, metaphorically suggesting the shift of focus of the whole collection, since the other stories are all set in Shenzhen. This work is an allegory of transcultural encounters: the protagonists, owing to a fortuitous encounter on a train bound for Montreal, challenge the common stereotypes about each other’s cultures. The train symbolizes geographical mobility and the insatiable desire to be somewhere else. Their mutual attraction allows them to cross conventional ethnic boundaries by looking at themselves through the eyes of the other. More importantly, the two are attracted to each other because of a book by Paul Auster²⁷ that she is reading in English and he happens to have in Chinese. In fact, linguistic displacement is addressed through scattered references to translation: the woman loves the act of translating, discusses the untranslatability of poetry and in Shenzhen will teach foreign languages; the

²⁶ It is the penultimate in the Chinese edition.

²⁷ The American writer Paul Auster (b. 1947) was born in New Jersey. Among the recurring motifs of his works are coincidences, destiny and the city. *The New York Trilogy* (1987), mentioned in this story, is Auster’s most renowned work.

man repeatedly questions the reliability of translation; and their favorite writer has translated a modern history of China from French to English.

These two people hailing from different continents are fatefully brought together by a series of coincidences that are inextricably related to the cultural hybridity and the increasing international exchanges of contemporaneity. Afterwards, apart from some random contacts, they will never meet again. In fact, the man, who defines himself a failed artist, is a terminally ill cancer patient. The woman only discovers the truth when the Chinese man, just before he dies, sends her a letter with a special gift: a nude painting of her, fruit of his imagination.

She then decides to move to Shenzhen, because “She wanted to know why an original Auster would meet a translated Auster on the train” (Xue 2016a, 20). The transfer of this rural woman to a fast-growing metropolis epitomizes China’s transition from a predominantly agrarian society to an industrial and highly urbanized one. In Shenzhen, she enthusiastically experiences the thousands of options, from entertainment to relationships, that the city offers. However, even though she enjoys the atmosphere, she finally gets homesick and decides to return home.

On the train from Hong Kong to Shenzhen, the Canadian interpreter is faced with feelings of displacement and otherness when she notices that everybody else is Asian. The atmosphere of cultural contact is highlighted by the dialogues between the two characters even before her departure: “What’s it like to feel rootless in your native land? [...] I feel just as rootless here, a stranger in a strange land” (Xue 2016a, 11).

The writer’s detached gaze on Chinese culture is conveyed through seemingly casual allusions to distinctive traits of his native culture, meant to enable foreign readers to capture a glimpse of Chinese reality. Gandara and Sartori (2016, 588) contend that fictional works produced in situations of cultural or language contact manifest patterns of discursive heterogeneity, which convey the tension between different cultural universes. With particular reference to fiction by overseas Chinese writers, they argue that one of the expressions of this heterogeneity is the use of glosses and other kinds of elucidations directed to a hypothetical non-Chinese narratee (Gandara and Sartori 2016, 579). In “The Country Girl”, while talking about his life, the Chinese man provides details of Shenzhen and China’s history that are undoubtedly glaringly obvious to Chinese readers. Furthermore, in an attempt to explain how rural identity is perceived in his homeland, he utters: “In China a country girl is a girl without culture, taste or an urban *hukou*” (Xue 2016a, 10). This is an unnecessary clarification for a Chinese reader which, however, serves as an explanation for those who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture.²⁸

²⁸ This explanatory device also appears in other stories. In “The Dramatist” the narrator gives what would be a superfluous detail for a Chinese reader about the place where the playwright moves to, and this is undoubtedly intended to help foreign readers: “I got a parcel from Xishuangbanna, an ethnic minority area in Southern Yunnan” (Xue 2016c, 62).

The issues under discussion are approached from the perspective of an internal migrant in “The Peddler” (Xue 2016b), whose protagonist belongs to the lowest strata of urban society. The isolation suffered by this street vendor is even more severe compared to the other protagonists, inasmuch as it is exacerbated by his destitution and his low social standing. Persecuted by spoiled children and vexed by security officers, the beleaguered man strenuously resists the abysmal evilness which besieges his existence in the city. In this case it is the schoolboy narrator, detachedly observing the constraints of the wretched man, who becomes aware of the preposterousness of the man’s predicaments. The narrator also feels alienated in the urban environment: he does not like school, does not care about anything and angrily disapproves of the resignation of the peddler to the abuses of urban people. Although the protagonist, as a migrant, endures social bias in the city, he is the only character of the whole collection who does not want to leave. He does not even know where else he could go to obtain that something he is waiting for (Liu H. 2018, 61).

In this respect, this man who sells glutinous rice and popcorn is a typical character of Chinese subaltern fiction.²⁹ Even when the bullies steal the popcorn and physically assault him with a brick, and unidentified people in uniform throw his goods in the garbage and spit on them, he is only interested in getting on with his business, and is not concerned about feelings of displacement and otherness. Through the constraints of this character, who does not even have the means to fulfill basic everyday needs, the writer expresses compassion for disadvantaged urban people (Huang 2016, 80). His experience of rural-to-urban migration is harrowing and challenging and characterized by intense loneliness, as he suffers social ostracism and is excluded from all the advantages of the urban life.

In this case, linguistic otherness is approached through considerations of the narrator about dialects. The narrator, who has a standard Mandarin accent, likes the only girl who cannot speak Cantonese.³⁰ His classmates and teachers, from various parts of China, have different accents, which disturb the narrator. One of the reasons he empathizes with the peddler is the familiarity of his accent, but this is also the reason why he never helps him: “His provincial dialect was very close to the one my mother spoke. I wanted to help him [...]. But I didn’t dare. I was afraid the students [...] would make fun of me” (Xue 2016b).

International culture appears in this story through the enthusiasm of the merciless students for some aspects of Western commercial culture: American movies, the Italian A Series soccer league. Furthermore, during the spring term, while the first-person narrator is “excruciatingly bored” (Xue 2016a, 34), some of his classmates fulfill their dream of moving to England.

²⁹ Subaltern fiction (*diceng xiaoshuo* 底层小说) is a thriving trend in 21st century literature. The characters are migrant workers or other disadvantaged people who live in the metropolis. Shenzhen is one of the cities which most often appears in these works.

³⁰ Shenzhen is situated in Guangdong Province, where the local population mainly speaks Cantonese.

Before concluding, one last facet of the writer's displaced identity is worth mentioning, even though it is not closely related to urban representations. Over the last decade, Xue Yiwei has undertaken an intense activity of rewriting his works published before 2010. As he explains, after his voluntary transfer to Montreal his perception of the Chinese language changed and he felt that something was wrong in the old versions (Lin and Nashef 2021, 11). This rewriting reflects the need to perfect his artistic self-image (Zhao 2020, 11) and demonstrates a feeling of belonging and commitment to his mother language that was aroused in the writer upon migration, since he "firmly believes that his homeland is not defined geographically but linguistically" (Hu 2021, 35). Even though rewriting his works was a response to a feeling of linguistic homesickness, to improve his mother-language he engaged in a systematic reading of foreign masterpieces (Hu 2021, 34) which has most certainly contributed to a continual broadening of his singular fictional universe, built on a constant intercultural dialogue.

5. Conclusion

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the metropolis is the intersection of international networks of ideas and identities and the site where the social and existential repercussions of global modernity emerge most clearly. In light of the foregoing, literary representations of the metropolis often transcend national boundaries, address issues of alterity and cultural diversity and explore the effects of urban transformations on humanity. Of equal importance, fictional representations of the global metropolis may also be grounded in the cultural hybridity of writers with significant transnational backgrounds.

With this in mind, this contribution has endeavored to argue that in *Shenzheners*, Xue Yiwei's portrayal of Shenzhen at the turn of the 21st century is an outcome of his cultural fluidity and geographical mobility. By engaging in two main theoretical strands, which respectively revolve around the delineation of urban characters and the tangible manifestation of discourses of otherness and displacement in situations of intercultural encounters, the transcultural dimension of his urban writing has been examined.

Evidence has been adduced that transculturalism in the selected stories is not only manifested in the form, structure, themes and textual practices, but it also emerges as an intrinsic element of the socio-cultural background. Intercultural encounters in all their forms are, in these narratives, common contingencies of the characters' urban experience. The writer interweaves cross-cultural literary and philosophic references, heterogeneous writing techniques, universal fictional tropes related to the portrayal of the urban individual, and first-hand knowledge of the reality of his homeland, which he looks at with the detached gaze of an expatriate. Through this multisided approach, Xue Yiwei impels readers to rethink their perception of China and of human relations across boundaries, and draws the map of a literary path embedded in a global literary modernity.

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Words and visions around/about Chinese transnational mobilities 流动. This collection gathers the contributions of ten scholars on the topic of transnational, cultural, and physical mobility originating in China. These contributions aim to open conversations among Chinese Studies scholars by applying a Mobility Studies perspective. Exploring diverse narratives and forms of representation from people of Chinese heritage, the book is divided into three parts that each look closely at the relationship between movement and cultural production. The first part is dedicated to four types of mobility of people from China to Italy, namely tourist mobility, labor mobility, student mobility, and mobility of social elites. The second part is dedicated to examples of reverse mobility from Italy to China. The third part focuses on case studies based on mobilities from China to territories other than Italy

Valentina Pedone is an Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Florence. Her research focuses on cultural production by people with Chinese background living in Italy. She is the author of a book on various aspects of Chinese migration to Italy (FUP 2013) and co-editor of a forthcoming book on China-Italy cultural mobility with Gaoheng Zhang (Palgrave 2023).

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