

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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