

Chinese migration(s) to Italy beyond stereotypes and simplistic views: the case of the graphic novels *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*

Andrea Scibetta

Abstract: The current contribution aims at describing some key-aspects of Rocchi and Demonte's graphic novels *Primavera e Autunni* (2015) and *Chinamen* (2017), especially in relation to: 1) the historical reconstruction of Chinese migration to Italy; 2) the challenge of widespread negative stereotypes against Chinese migrants, which still characterize dominant public discourse in the Italian society. The first paragraph will highlight theoretical aspects of both works, in particular relation to the literature on migration and of migration, with Sino-Italian literature, as well as with macro- and micro-aspects of Chinese migration to Italy. After that, some common points of both works will be underlined, including structure and style, semiotic aspects, communicative functions and multimodality. The third paragraph will specifically focus on a series of key-figures described in the graphic novels, which contribute to draw the attention to specific aspects regarding Chinese historical presence in Milan and in Italy.

Keywords: Chinese migration, graphic novel, literature on/of migrations, challenge to stereotypes, multimodality.

摘要: 本文的目标为分析Rocchi和Demonte编写的两本分别在2015年和2017年出版的图像小说*Primavera e Autunni*和*Chinamen*中的一些方面,尤其是:1)两本小说中关于中国人移民意大利的历史事件;2)对意大利社会中还比较普遍的关于中国移民的刻板印象的挑战。本文的第一部分强调两部图像小说的理论基础,尤其是两部作品分别与移民文学、中意文学间的联系。第二部分的主题为两部图像小说的共同点,尤其是关于大概结构、风格、内容的交际功能和多模态化。第三部分对两部作品中一些关键人物进行分析。通过对这些人物的描述,读者们能够更深刻地了解历史上移民意大利(尤其是米兰)的中国人的一些特征。

关键词: 中国移民, 图像小说, 移民文学, 刻板印象的挑战, 多模态化。

1. Introduction. A journey through time, space and society, beyond simplistic reconstructions

A journey through time, space, social changes, a kaleidoscopic view on micro- and macro historical events, a challenge of widespread stereotypes and prejudices related to Chinese people residing in Italy: these can be some of the impressions that a reader of *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* can draw from both graphic novels. These works, in fact, might be understood as narratives, but they also play an important role in terms of accuracy in historical reconstruction as well as in pedagogical terms (Scibetta 2019).

Andrea Scibetta, University of Florence, Italy, andrea.scibetta@unifi.it, 0000-0002-2088-5569

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Andrea Scibetta, *Chinese migration(s) to Italy beyond stereotypes and simplistic views: the case of the graphic novels Primavera e Autunni and Chinamen*, pp. 91-108, © 2020 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-260-7.05, in Diego Cucinelli, Andrea Scibetta (edited by), *Tracing Pathways 雲路. Interdisciplinary Studies on Modern and Contemporary East Asia*, © 2020 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-260-7 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-260-7

The authors are Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte, who are both illustrators and video-makers as well as members of an independent union of movie directors, actors and technicians. Matteo Demonte, in particular, has Chinese ancestors and has studied Chinese language and calligraphy for many years. The first of the two graphic novels analyzed in this contribution is *Primavera e Autunni* and was published in 2015 with the publishing house Becco Giallo. Its title takes its inspiration from the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, traditionally attributed to Confucius. Like this last majestic work, in fact, *Primavera e Autunni* attempts to accurately reconstruct the most relevant historical events in the life of Wu Lishan, Matteo's grandfather, a man who decided to migrate to Europe from the village of Qingtian in the Province of Zhejiang (which has represented an important starting point for thousands of migrants for decades). The graphic novel sums up the personal events of Mr. Wu, from his arrival in Milan in 1931, after having resided in the Netherlands and in France (as many of his compatriots used to do before moving to Italy), until the birth of his grandson Matteo, son of his daughter Luciana (Wu Luqiu) in 1973. A book-trailer, containing animated images reproducing some of the main tables of the work, matched with the voice of an external narrator, was released together with the graphic novel. Besides the Italian edition, a Chinese version of the graphic novel, entitled *Chunqiu* 春秋, was published and commercialized in People's Republic of China in 2018 with the editor Dang Dang. This Chinese version, however, slightly differs from the original one, since it contains some modifications in terms of content and form, and does not include some tables concerning specific historical references.

The second graphic novel, entitled *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 used to be composed exclusively by men (Rocchi 2017: 142). As in the case of 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 within a special exhibition on Chinese migration to Italy at the Museum of Cultures (Museo Delle Culture – MUDEC) in Milan. The exhibition was organized and realized by a team of researchers from the Università dell'Insubria (Varese, Lombardy), under the scientific supervision of sinologist Daniele Brigadoi Cologna. The main goal at the basis of the exhibition was to draw the attention to the century-old history of Chinese presence in Milan through the display of various kinds of historical finds (pictures, documents, and objects) belonging to Chinese migrants. Moreover, a relevant number of those historical finds contributed to the iconographic documentation characterizing the tables and the animations by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte (Brigadoi Cologna 2017: 158). As for the other graphic novel, a new

version in Chinese has recently been published with the editor Dang Dang in the People's Republic of China.

Unlike *Primavera e Autunno*, which contains the main events of Wu Lishan's personal history on its foreground, in *Chinamen* the authors try to put together multiple histories of different Chinese migrants in Italy, focusing on their personal and familiar events, and, in most cases, also on their social and professional affirmation within the Italian context (Scibetta 2019). On the background of both novels there are continuous references to the history of Milan, to Italian history, to the history of the Republic of China and of the People's Republic of China, as well as on international relations between Italy and China.

1.1 An in-between space where literature of migration and literature on migration are blended

As mentioned above, a narrative dimension and a historical one are blended in both works: this balance between narration of personal and familiar events of single migrants and historical reconstruction of a broader, century-long process contributes to the construction of an in-between space in which «literature on migration» and «literature of migration» are strictly intertwined (Scibetta 2019: 107).

On the one hand, in fact, both works show an accurate tendency to give back to the collectivity aspects of history previously repressed by mainstream discourse; on the other hand, narrations appear to be emotionally participated, especially by Matteo Demonte because of his familial links with some of the characters. Such an in-between space can be read through the lens of *postmemory*, as argued by Giuliani (2019a: 39). Taking into account Hirsch's understanding of this concept, in fact,

postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation (Hirsch 2011: 22; also in Giuliani 2019a: 40).

Hence, in light of Matteo Demonte's emotional involvement in the construction of both works due to his intergenerational relationship with his ancestors, and considering that the authors collected a relevant amount information and proofs directly from Matteo's relatives, postmemory might be one of the most appropriate labels in order to approach the two graphic novels¹.

¹ In this perspective, it might be interesting to notice that at the beginning of *Chinamen*, while describing the arrival of the salesman Wu Qiankui at the International Exposition held in Milan in 1906, since the authors did not have any photographic evidence of the physical aspect of this character, it was decided to portray his face using the features of Matteo Demonte's face, with a Manchu cue and Manchu garments.

In addition, reflecting on the «boundaries» of the definition of «Sinoitalian literature» (Pedone 2014), we might ask ourselves whether these two works can be included within this domain, or whether they can be conceived in proximity with it (Scibetta 2019). We can certainly notice some links which create a common ground with this literary trend: among all, there are discourses of/ on migration, in particular on identity construction and social affirmation, the issue of cultural belonging and hybridity explained by different characters, the authors' will to deconstruct and fight against some widespread negative stereotypes related to Chinese migrants (Rocchi and Demonte 2015: 6). However, we shall also identify some gaps with Sinoitalian literature and Sinoitalian writers in general. Some of the main questions stressing on such possible gaps might be: to what extent can Matteo Demonte be defined a Sinoitalian writer? Should it be right to label him as such? Is it possible to talk about third-generation Sinoitalians? Would such a definition be too ambiguous or too contradictory in these cases? It might therefore be interesting to ask whether we should reflect on new possible labels to better describe cultural productions like *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*. We shall argue that also in this case the works can be situated in an in-between space.

The genre is not new in this domain at an international level. Art Spiegelmann's *Maus* can be certainly conceived in the field of postmemory, even if it deals with different topics (the familiar traumas of the Holocaust) (Art 1980). Shaun Tan's *The arrival* (2006) is closer to *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* in terms of contents, whereas in its layout it resembles a silent book rather than a graphic novel. Within the frame of «Sino-American literature» (Yin 2000), instead, it is worth mentioning Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American-born Chinese* (2006), both for the contiguity of some of its main contents with those of Rocchi and Demonte's works, and for the implications related to the deconstruction of negative stereotypes which can be drawn from its reading. As regards the Italian context, however, the reconstruction of relevant aspects of the history of Chinese migration to Italy (and, probably, of migration to Italy in general) through graphic novels appears to be an innovation in cultural production.

1.2 Unveiling one century of history of Chinese migration to Italy: beyond simplistic reconstructions and stereotypes

The *topos* of the deconstruction of widespread negative stereotypes and prejudices against Chinese migrants characterizes the production of several Sinoitalian writers and artists (Pedone 2016). Among all, some examples can be represented by Hu Lanbo, who often provides a 'domesticated' image of China, diametrically opposed to the stereotypical one conveyed by mass media and public discourses (Pedone 2016: 109); Shi Yang Shi, writer and actor who often provocatively jokes with the main characteristics of Chinese migrants' varieties of Italian with Chinese accent by performing translinguistic practices; Marco Wong who, in his book *Nettare rosso* (*Red Nectar*, 2010), challenges the stereotypical image of docile and introverted Chinese women.

In contrast with what mentioned above, mainstream Italian literature and cultural production too often tend to emphasize prejudices and distorted images of Chinese migrants, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes rather consciously. Chu (2001, 2014, 2019) and Giuliani (2019b) in particular, have repeatedly underlined that such representations involve a relevant variety of cultural products, from movies and TV series to books belonging to different genres, and contemplate a wide range of images of China and Chinese people, from China as the new imperialist power to common stereotypes projected on single Chinese persons. In Chu's (2019: 384) opinion, the pervasiveness and the recurrence of such multiple distorted representations produce the effect of reiterating and strengthening unreal narrations:

Such representations, which include crime fiction for adults and adolescents, sci-fi, dystopian 'climate fiction', and film comedy and drama, contribute to the popular imaginary of China and, in some cases, while textual and paratextual evidence suggests the author's intention to critique that imaginary, the potency of the ideological framework within which they are inscribed produces results which, in effect, ultimately reiterate and reinforce certain narrative tropes.

In addition, several works by Zhang Gaoheng (2017, 2019 *inter alia*) focus on the construction and the strengthening of negative stereotypical views on Chinese residents in Italy in mainstream cinema and media. As regards the role played by media in particular, Zhang (2017: 386) highlights the fact that it is often possible to assist to one-way debates on Chinese people, where only a distorted point of view of the society is reported, and no Chinese interlocutors are present:

Is the ethnic business model based on self-employment adopted by most Chinese migrant workers and entrepreneurs in Italy damaging or contributing to the local economy? Are Italy's Chinese helping trade between Italy and China to the benefit of the former or the latter? Can Chinese be integrated into the local social fabrics? Can Chinese be assimilated into Italian culture? Are such integration and assimilation desirable? In the public arena, these ongoing debates are mediated, at times molded, by journalism, television, literature, cinema and other media forms. Surveying the conveyance of these issues in the media, we notice that fear and paternalism, and condemnation and admiration, coexist in Italian attitudes toward Chinese migrants.

One of the merits of *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* is that they both primarily aim at fighting against widespread prejudices and negative representations of Chinese people, trying to reconstruct a new image of the history of Chinese migration to Italy. It is not a case that the last utterance of the narrator in the booktrailer of the first graphic novel is «per scoprire che al di là degli stereotipi, all'origine della comunità cinese di Milano c'è una storia di integrazione»² (cfr.

² En: «To discover that, beyond stereotypes, at the basis of the Chinese community in Milan there is a story of integration».

also Giuliani 2019a: 38). What Demonte and Rocchi often do in both works, in fact, is not just to deconstruct negative stereotypes, but it is also to go beyond them, thus restoring a polycentric image of Chinese people in Italy (Scibetta 2019) rather than simply representing a ‘community’ (an *umbrella-term* often used by media and public discourse in order to justify hyper-simplifications of more complex processes and phenomena, cf. Faso 2008).

Hence, what can be implied by both graphic novels is, on the one hand, the importance to give back to common knowledge a precise and accurate historical reconstruction of Chinese migration to Italy. On the other, the reader is 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. As the authors underline in *Primavera e Autunni* (p. 133) and as suggested by Peterle (2018) and Giuliani (2019a), «collective biographies» might be the right term to describe such a process, a key to deconstruct and to go beyond too simplistic representations of Chinese communities in Italy. The dimension of «collective biographies», in fact, traces a *fil rouge* between the events of single and familiar lives, with their specificities, and communities as polycentric conglomerates with an internal complexity (Adami 2017).

Finally, both graphic novels help us understand Chinese migration to Italy not as the result of two distinct and separate phases (a preliminary one, represented by a restricted number of people, and a more recent one, which started in the eighties); it is rather a unique big process, which originates from the personal histories of those men, like Wu Lishan, who arrived in Italy in the twenties and in the thirties, and which is still taking place today.

2. Intertwining key-points of both graphic novels

In this paragraph, some of the main common key-points characterizing both *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* will be analyzed. The first section will highlight similarities concerning the general structure and the graphic style adopted by the author, whereas the second section will take into consideration semiotic aspects and different communicative functions expressed by both works, especially in relation to the concept of multimodality.

2.1 Structure and style

The main structure of *Primavera e Autunni* is composed of five main sections, each one corresponding to a decade from the thirties to the seventies. Every single decade is characterized by the main personal and familiar experiences by Wu Lishan (Matteo Demonte’s grandfather), with some of the most important historical events taking place in Italy (particularly in Milan), in the Republic of China, and, since 1949, in the People’s Republic of China on the background. After the conclusion of the graphic novel there is a brief afterword by Ciaj Rocchi, in which the author expresses the main motivations lying at the basis of her work, as well as its main characteristics. Moreover, she underlines the accuracy

in the methodologies adopted for data collection, which have been fundamental both for the historical and for the visual reconstruction of the narrated events. After that, there is a short personal contribution signed by Angelo Ou, second son of the main characters of the novel (and also Matteo's uncle), accompanied by a historical article written by sinologist Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, focusing on life conditions of Chinese people in Italy during the fascist dictatorship, which is one of the multiple aspects neglected and repressed by Italian historiography and public discourse.

Similarly, the main structure of *Chinamen* appears to be very close to that of *Primavera e Autunno*. Also this novel is divided into five main sections which together cover a time span of more than sixty years, starting from 1906. The work begins with the arrival in Milan of the salesman Wu Qjankui in 1906 as one of the organizers of the Chinese pavilion within the International Exposition held at Parco Sempione. The last event narrated in the graphic novel relates to the history of professional affirmation of entrepreneur Mario Tschang, which culminated with the foundation of the worldwide famous stationery brand Osama in 1967. However, from a chronological point of view, further events are mentioned which took place after this last date: it is the case, for instance, of the funeral ceremony in honor of the famous entrepreneur Hu Zhongshan (called «Junsà») in 1977. A final section of the graphic novel is specifically dedicated to Chen Yuhua (also known as Anna Chen), who is considered to be the first Chinese woman ever emigrated independently to Italy (in 1960, and successively joined by her husband and her children in 1963). Besides that, Chen Yuhua's story is also a story of personal and social affirmation as an entrepreneur and as the owner of one of the first and most famous Chinese restaurants in Milan. As in *Primavera e Autunno*, also in *Chinamen* there is an afterword by Cij Rocchi, in which the author sums up some considerations on the main steps from the planning to the realization of the graphic novel, together with some remarks about specific characters. Finally, also in this case there is a historical article written by Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, focusing on some crucial events characterizing Chinese migration to Europe, and to Italy in particular, from the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of the Second World War.

As concerns the graphic style adopted in both novels, it is possible to detect almost the same visual-iconic patterns. As Cij Rocchi explains in her afterword to *Primavera e Autunno*, in fact, «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» (Rocchi 2015: 136)³. The main impression a reader can have while consulting the tables of both graphic novels is therefore to be looking at video sequences.

³ En.: «We kept distance from comics as we usually understand them, in order to switch to a hybrid type which uses the graphic sign, but in most cases framing it within a video format. Wide. Horizontal».



Fig. 1 – Table portraying the salesman Wu Qiankui and describing his relationship with the Milanese businessman Cesare Curiel (*Chinamen*).

Tables frequently cover even an entire page, unlike comics in general. In addition, the reader can often see detailed narrations and descriptions, which usually go beyond the short interchanges usually characterizing common comics (cfr. Fig. 1, taken from *Chinamen*, representing the salesman Wu Qiankui and describing his relationship with the Milanese businessman Cesare Curiel).

From a strictly visual point of view, the chromatic variety used is not wide and often includes a very restricted range of colors, with a predominance of tables in sepia black and white, or scales of grey (cfr. Fig. 2, taken from *Primavera e Autunni*, portraying the arrival of Wu Lishan in Milan, asking for information about how to reach Via Canonica, the address where he would find some compatriots).

interactions occurring between the Chinese characters and local people actually did not take place in standard Italian (a number of them perhaps even could not speak Italian), but they took place in local dialect. As regards the use of Chinese, it must also be taken into account that conversations among compatriots probably occurred in some geo-dialectal varieties of the places where they came from (most of all the County of Qingtian in the Province of Zhejiang). In any case, it would have been difficult to reproduce interchanges in different and heterogeneous diatopic and diachronic varieties in the novels⁴.

This constant attention paid by the authors to the multilingual dimension characterizing interactional attitudes of the characters can be well represented by Fig. 3 taken from *Primavera e Autunno*, where all the languages included in the novel appear together in the same table.



Fig. 3 – Table representing multilingual communicative interchanges (*Primavera e Autunno*).

It shall be argued that such a table perfectly reproduces the ‘normal’ and ordinary interactional patterns characterizing Chinese migrants like Wu Lishan, who alternately used Milanese dialect and Chinese varieties. In other words, this dimension of linguistic complexity contributes to reproduce what Quassoli

⁴ As regards the Chinese contents, and, in particular, some of the most recurring characters, as well as the references to Chinese mainstream culture, readable also through a pedagogical lens, it might be interesting to consult Scibetta 2019: 112-115.

(2006) defines «local production of sense», going beyond simplistic representations also from a situational point of view.

Another common feature of both works is represented by the multimodal dimension characterizing a relevant number of tables. Multimodality is defined by Kress (2010: 1) as «the normal state of human communication»: such a concept was coined by a group of scholars in New London (New Hampshire) at the end of the 20th century in order to contribute to deepen the understanding on the complexity of human interaction. Since the very beginning, the major studies on multimodality have primarily involved an educational and pedagogical dimension. In 1996, in fact, the above-mentioned group of scholars published a manifesto entitled *A pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*, in which they emphasized the crucial importance of legitimizing the use of multiple semiotic resources in educational domains, in order to better meet the requirements of ordinary social communication, which is implicitly 'multimodal'. The main focus of multimodality is therefore to encourage the use of multiple modalities (including dimensions related to reading and writing, as well as visual-iconic, audio-musical, and further non-verbal resources) in educational domains, with the purpose of supporting multiple intelligences and letting learners familiarize with the complexity of communication.

Primavere e Autunni and *Chinamen* shall be understood as multimodal products par excellence. The authors are able to activate meaning-making processes through writing (narrations, descriptions, multilingual dialogues), as well as through visual-iconic resources. The latter dimension includes illustrations related to relevant national, transnational and international historical events, as well as representations of scenes of local personal and familiar life of the characters: besides that, from a semiotic point of view, cartography is also worthy of mention. As argued by Giuliani (2019a: 40-41) and by Rossetto and Peterle (2016: 173), cartographic resources can work as informative, cognitive, symbolic and aesthetic signs simultaneously. In the case of these two graphic novels, in particular, cartographies contribute to localizing and mapping (not only from a physical point of view, but also from an emotional one) the places involved in Chinese migration in Milan and in Italy since the Thirties, attributing them a new value which has too often been neglected by historiography. In this perspective, multimodality can serve as a means to shed light on the dynamics of local production of sense.

3. Key-figures in both graphic novels

The current paragraph aims at introducing three key-characters of *Primavere e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, by providing implications related to their presence in the graphic novels and their role in the macro-processes of migration and affirmation of Chinese people in Italy.

It is quite difficult to choose which figures to focus on, since there is a wide range of characters who should deserve particular attention, because they represent various aspects and specificities within the reconstruction of historical events related with Chinese presence in Italy. To exclude one figure might im-

ply to exclude or to underestimate a particular perspective from which this kaleidoscopic and heterogeneous process can be observed.

Many different characters might be understood as single bricks building up specific micro-historical and social processes, and thus contributing to better unveil a macroscopic dimension (Chinese migration to Italy) which has been partly repressed by collective memory so far (Scibetta 2019). One of them is surely Wu Lishan, Matteo Demonte's grandfather and protagonist of *Primavera e Autunno*. Mr. Wu arrived in Milan and settled in Via Canonica, a place that would have become one of the main reference points of Chinese people in Italy. Wu Lishan, like a relevant number of other Chinese migrants, was born in and emigrated from the town of Qingtian in the Province of Zhejiang; like many other Chinese migrants in those years, he moved to Italy from France in order to sell fake pearls, various kinds of trinkets and ties. The story of Wu Lishan, who, after the period of fascist dictatorship and Second World War, gradually became a successful entrepreneur, might be understood as a model representing the stories of other compatriots who were able to affirm themselves from a symbolic and from a social point of view.

A similar image is represented by Anna Chen (Chen Yuhua), to whom Demonte and Rocchi decided to dedicate the closing section of the graphic novel *Chinamen* (therefore called «Chinawoman»). As mentioned above, Anna Chen was the first Chinese woman migrated independently to Italy (in 1960), successively calling her husband and children for family reunification. Known as the owner of the famous restaurant “La Muraglia”, opened in 1974 (it was not the first, but it was surely one of the best known and appreciated in Milan), Chen Yuhua can be understood as a pioneer among women entrepreneurs in the history of Chinese migration to Italy.

In addition, it might be interesting also to focus the attention to non-Chinese characters who played a crucial role in the most important events related to Chinese presence. One of these is Giulia Bazzini, Matteo Demonte's grandmother, who was also a ‘migrant’, even if just from the countryside near Cremona to the urban context of Milan. Giulia got married with Wu Lishan in 1938, gave birth to Wu Jianguo (Luigi Wu) in 1941, Wu Xinghua (Angelo Wu) in 1947 and Wu Luqiu (Luciana Wu, Matteo's mother) in 1949. She has been an integral part and played a pivotal role in Wu Lishan's entrepreneurial success and, for this reason, she is also represented as a crucial character in all the sections of *Primavera e Autunno*.

Taking into account the theoretical considerations explained in the previous paragraphs, I decided to analyze other key-figures characterizing the graphic novels. Specifically, I will introduce Hu Zhongshan (Junsà) in relation to the deconstruction of widespread stereotypes towards Chinese people in Italy, Mario Tschang as an example of transnational entrepreneurial success, and Wu Lishan and Giulia Bazzini's three children from a perspective of hybridity in cultural belonging.

3.1 Deconstructing stereotypes: the history of Hu Zhongshan (Junsà)

Hu Zhongshan is one of the main characters of the graphic novel *Chinamen*. Like Wu Lishan, he migrated to Italy in the thirties and his story is one of gradual social affirmation and entrepreneurial success. Unlike Mr. Wu, he moved from

China directly to Italy, facing a long trip in 1936, when he was only 16 years old. He was a well-educated student and, as he settled in Italy, he was fascinated by local traditions and mainstream culture. He soon converted to Christianity, and, after facing times of great hardship due to the Second World War, in 1947 he got married with an Italian woman whose name was Attilia. In the following years, Attilia gave birth to four children. His career as an entrepreneur began very soon during the period of economic growth in Italy. In the early fifties, in fact, he was able to open his own shop that was specialized in the production of leather goods. The name of the shop, *Nanchino* (Nanjing), made him so famous among compatriots and in his neighborhood that soon his nickname became the same as the name of his shop. His personal history of social and entrepreneurial success culminated with the opening of the first Chinese restaurant in Milan, named *La Pagoda*, in 1962. Although the restaurant was the result of a strict cooperation between local Chinese investors, Hu Zhongshan played a central role in its opening, both in monetary terms and in terms of establishing contacts and conducting bureaucratic procedures. Junsà died unexpectedly in 1977: he was so well-known in his neighborhood that hundreds of Chinese and Italian people took part in his funeral to greet him for the last time. Although the whole life of this character might be understood in terms of challenge to common negative stereotypes towards Chinese migrants (like the one according to which Chinese people 'steal' job places to local people, or the one according to which the Chinese are innately shy and they do not want to communicate with Italian people, cfr. Oriani and Staglianò 2008), I shall argue that the event of his funeral can be seen as the deconstruction par excellence of these kinds of distorted representations. In contrast with the image of Chinese migrants who are invisible, mysterious, until the point that someone even argued irrationally that «the Chinese never die», the table describing the funeral of Junsà represents a proof of the fact that already more than 40 years ago Chinese residents were rather visible and well-known by the members of the hosting society. As Demonte and Rocchi write:

Purtroppo Junsà morì improvvisamente nel 1977 [...]. Al suo funerale un fiume di persone attraversò il quartiere dalla sua abitazione fino alla chiesa della Santissima Trinità. C'era talmente tanta gente che la testa del corteo ne toccava la coda, saturando quel quadrilatero di strade e dimostrando il forte legame tra i membri della comunità cinese e i moltissimi milanesi affezionati. Padre di quattro figli, era stato un indiscusso protagonista di tutta l'epopea dei cinesi a Milano, partecipando con entusiasmo alla crescita economica della comunità: dai piccoli laboratori di pelletteria ai grandi negozi su strada, fino a diventare un pioniere della ristorazione. Junsà, Hu Bung Ko [...] era conosciuto con molti nomi, ma tutti lo chiamavano semplicemente Nanchino, come il suo negozio⁵.

⁵ En.: «Unfortunately, Junsà suddenly died in 1977 [...]. At his funeral, a river of people crossed the neighborhood from his house to the church of Santissima Trinità. There were so many people that the head of the funeral procession touched the final part, saturating that quadrilateral of streets and showing the strong relationship between the members of the Chinese community



Fig. 4 – Table representing the funeral of Hu Zhongshan (Junsà) in 1977 (taken from *Chinamen*).

3.2 Mario Tschang and his story of transnational entrepreneurial success

Mario Tschang was born in Milan in 1933 from a Chinese father and an Italian mother: as the authors underline in *Chinamen*, he was a special child, since he was the first Italian-Chinese child ever born in Italy. His birth was celebrated for four days in Via Canonica and in the neighborhood where Chinese people used to reside at that time. Since when he was young, Mario had proved to

and lots of attached Milanese. Father of four children, he had been an undisputed protagonist of the whole epic of Chinese in Milan, participating enthusiastically in the economic growth of the community: from the small leather laboratories to the shops on the street, until becoming a pioneer of the food services. Junsà, Hu Bung Ko [...] he was known through various names, but all simply called him Nanchino, like his shop».

possess a strong entrepreneurial spirit, starting from being a peddler and then contributing to the economic growth of an artisan who produced frames.

The turning point of his life was in 1963, when he decided to invest all his savings in a business trip to Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. With his trip, he aimed at searching for innovative products that would have contributed to his economic success in Italy. Starting from Japan, he immediately became fascinated by the stationery products of the famous brand Mitsubishi. At the beginning, Japanese partners did not show to be interested to making business with European enterprises. However, thanks to the intercession of the Taipei branch, during his short stay in Taiwan, Mario managed to establish a strict relationship with the Japanese brand, and thus to import in Italy marker-pens, ballpoint pens and pencils with innovative designs. His economic activity was so successful that after four years he was able to found one of the most distinguished enterprises producing stationery in Italy (still today), i.e. the brand Osama.

The story of Mario Tschang's transnational entrepreneurial success is perfectly summarized by Demonte and Rocchi in the two final tables regarding his personal history in *Chinamen*, as follows:

Con questo viaggio, Mario era riuscito a realizzare il suo sogno di portare in Italia oggetti mai visti prima. Ma in realtà aveva portato a casa anche un altro grandissimo risultato. Aveva aperto una strada commerciale tra l'Italia e l'Oriente, in particolare modo con Cina e Giappone, che negli anni a venire, gli consentì di ascendere all'Olimpo degli imprenditori.

Aveva iniziato come ambulante vendendo pentole ai mercati. Era poi diventato rappresentante di un piccolo artigiano del quartiere che faceva cornici, obbligandolo ad ingrandire il laboratorio e ad assumere personale per la crescita esponenziale della domanda. Poi aveva rappresentato i grandi marchi di casalinghi, facendo carriera un passo alla volta e cambiando le modalità di vendita di alcuni prodotti per la casa. Nel 1967, fondando l'Osama, rivoluzionò per sempre il nostro modo di scrivere⁶.

I argue that it is important to focus on Mario Tschang's life, because his figure represents a model of entrepreneurial success that is not just limited to his place of residence, or to Italian borders: his is a remarkable story of transnational success, which contributed to establish contacts between Italy and the East, strengthening the internationalization of Italian economy. Such an attitude towards transnational businesses and trade has been shown by a number of Chi-

⁶ En.: «With this trip, Mario managed to make his dream come true: bringing in Italy objects that were never seen before. Actually, he brought home also another great result. He opened a commercial route between Italy and the East, particularly with China and Japan, which in the following years gave him the opportunity to ascend the Olympus of entrepreneurs. He had started as a peddler selling pots in the markets. Afterwards, he became a representative of an artisan of the neighborhood, who produced frames, letting him increase the laboratory and hire workers for an exponential growth of the request. After that, he represented big brands of household products, enriching his career step by step and changing the modalities for selling some products for the house. In 1967, as he founded the brand Osama, he revolutionized forever our way of writing».

nese migrants and Chinese-Italian entrepreneurs over the last thirty years: Mario Tschang might therefore be understood as a pioneer in this sense.

3.3 Growing up across two cultural models: Luigi, Angelo and Luciana Wu

In the narration of the personal and familiar events of Wu Lishan in *Primavere e Autunni*, particular attention is paid to the birth of Giulia Bazzini's and his children, Luigi Wu, Angelo Wu and Luciana Wu.

It is interesting to notice that each birth is represented in contiguity with or at the beginning of specific macro- and micro-historical events, as well as in relation to crucial changes in family life. Luigi Wu, the first son, was born in 1941, during the Second World War: his parents decided to move to the countryside near Cremona (Giulia Bazzini's place of birth), in order to find a safe refuge and escape from fascist violence. It was a time of hardship that would have been overcome only after the end of the war. The birth of the second son, Angelo Wu in 1947, in fact, coincided with the re-birth of a peaceful familiar life after the bad times experienced during the previous years: the new life was one of gradual social and economic affirmation, which would have lasted for many years.

As Rocchi and Demonte write in a table in *Primavere e Autunni*:

Il piccolo Angelo Wu portò nuova linfa nella vita dei suoi genitori. Era il figlio del cambiamento e della ricostruzione, il simbolo della rinascita e della ritrovata felicità.⁷

Lastly, the birth of Luciana Wu in 1949 confirmed this new condition of happiness and represented a further impulse towards familiar prosperity and social and economic affirmation. Hence, these three births might be imagined along a time-span characterized by relevant changes, both in Italian society and in the life of Wu Lishan's and Giulia Bazzini's family: a figurative pathway which can be associated with a macro-pathway from the hardships experienced during the Second World War and during the fascist dictatorship to the optimism constituting the re-birth of Italian democracy and economy.

Moreover, these three Italian-Chinese children can be understood in a «third space» (Kramsch and Uryu 2012) where Italian and Chinese cultural aspects are blended, and where personal identities are shaped according to this blending. Cultural hybridity is what characterizes the lives of these children, who in the authors' view represented a «new generation of Italians with oriental traits which perfectly integrated within the local context» (Rocchi and Demonte 2015). As argued by Rocchi and Demonte, these children's cultural belonging, despite being across two cultural models, ended up being unbalanced in favor of the local context. Various factors occurred in order to strengthen the dominance of belonging to local and Italian cultural belonging: from the multiple Italian acquaintances and friends, to the fact that children used to speak mostly Italian inside and outside their home.

⁷ En.: «Little Angelo Wu gave new nourishment to his parents' life. He was the son of the change and of the reconstruction, the symbol of re-birth and of a recovered happiness».

4. Final considerations

This contribution aimed at describing some key-aspects of Rocchi and Demonte's graphic novels *Primavera e Autunni* (2015) and *Chinamen* (2017), in light of two main aspects: first, the accurate historical reconstruction of Chinese migration to Italy represented by both works; secondly, the challenge and the deconstruction of widespread prejudices and negative stereotypes against Chinese migrants in Italian public (and political) discourse.

As regards the former aspect, it shall be argued that the reconstruction provided by the authors is mainly diachronical, but, at the same time, it involves multiple perspectives: macro- and micro- historical perspectives perfectly blend together in the novels, raising also key-issues like Chinese - Italian belonging, local and global dimensions, and polycentric representations.

As concerns the challenge to and the deconstruction of negative stereotypes, it shall be argued that *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* are primarily understood as cultural products dealing with the issue of the visibility of Chinese communities in Italy. Such an aspect, in fact, has been too often removed or neglected by Italian media and public opinion, usually focusing on irrational narrations or negative myths on Chinese presence in Italy. This important social and, in some sense, political aspect becomes necessary in order to give voice to Sino-Italian cultural products, as well as to cultural products related to Chinese presence in Italy, especially in this specific period of the Covid-19 sanitary emergency (Pedone 2020), when irrational views on Chinese people in general and on Chinese migrants in particular are becoming more and more widespread.

References

- Adami Elisabetta 2017, *Multimodality and superdiversity: evidence for a research agenda*, «Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies» 177: 1-28.
- Art Spiegelman 1980, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- Brigadoi Cologna Daniele 2017, *Un secolo di cinesi a Milano*, in *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano*, edited by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte, Cierre Grafica per Becco Giallo, Sommacampagna: 157-182.
- Chu Mark 2001, *Giallo sarai tu! Hegemonic Representations and Limits of Heteroglossia in Carlo Lucarelli*, «Spunti e Ricerche 'Il Giallo'» 16: 45-58.
- Chu Mark 2014, *Non voglio morire cinese: crisi e conflitto in La seconda mezzanotte di Antonio Scurati*. «Narrativa nuova serie» 35/36: 129-141.
- Chu Mark 2019, *Industry and gender in recent representations of Sino-Italian relations*, «Modern Italy» 24 (4): 383-399.
- Faso Giuseppe 2008, *Lessico del razzismo democratico. Le parole che escludono*, Derive Approdi, Roma.
- Giuliani Chiara 2019a, *Chinamen d'Italia. La nascita della comunità italo-cinese in due graphic novel*, in *Viaggi minimi in luoghi qualsiasi. In cammino tra cinema, letteratura e arti visive nell'Italia contemporanea*, edited by Monica Jansen et al., Franco Cesati Editore, Firenze: 37-46.
- Giuliani Chiara 2019b, *Italiani Made in China: Defining Italianness in Second-generation Chinese-Italians*, «Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies» 7 (1): 75-92.

- Hirsch Marianne 2011, *The Generation of Postmemory*, «Poetics Today» 39 (1): 103-128.
- Kramersch Claire and Uryu Michico 2012, *Intercultural contact, hybridity, and third space*, in *Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, edited by Jane Jackson, Routledge, London: 211-225.
- Kress Gunther 2010, *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, Routledge, London.
- Oriani Raffaele and Staglianò Riccardo 2008, *I cinesi non muoiono mai. Lavorano, guadagnano, cambiano l'Italia e per questo ci fanno paura*, Chiarelettere, Milano.
- Pedone Valentina 2014, *La nascita della letteratura sinoitaliana: osservazioni preliminari*, in *Atti del XIII Convegno dell'Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi. Milano, 22-24 settembre 2011*, edited by Clara Bulfoni and Silvia Pozzi, Franco Angeli, Milano: 310-321.
- Pedone Valentina 2016, *Nuove declinazioni identitarie: quattro narratori dell'esperienza sinoitaliana*, in *Lingue, letterature e culture migranti*, edited by Ayse Saraçgil and Letizia Vezzosi, Firenze University Press, Firenze: 101-120.
- Pedone Valentina 2020, *(Non) Fai rumore. Il silenzio intorno all'espressione culturale sinoitaliana durante la stagione Covid-19*, «Sinofere – Sinografie (Virus)»: 85-99, <<http://sinofere.com/2020/07/30/valentina-pedone-non-fai-rumore-il-silenzio-intorno-alle-spressioni-culturali-sinoitaliana-durante-la-stagione-covid-19/>> (01/21).
- Peterle Giada 2018, *Orientarsi tra le nuvole: cartografie, atlanti e pratiche mappanti nel racconto a fumetti*, «Between» 8 (15): 1-31.
- Quassoli Fabio 2006, *Riconoscersi: differenze culturali e pratiche comunicative*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.
- Rocchi Ciaj 2015, *Kung fu Panda insegna: "Chi crede nel caso non conosce le leggi dell'universo"*, in *Primavera e Autunni*, edited by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte, Cierre Grafica per Becco Giallo, Sommacampagna: 135-145.
- Rocchi Ciaj 2017, *They were funky Chinamen, from funky Chinatown...*, in *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano*, edited by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte, Cierre Grafica per Becco Giallo, Sommacampagna: 141-147.
- Rocchi Ciaj and Demonte Matteo 2015, *Primavera e autunni*, Cierre Grafica per Becco Giallo, Sommacampagna.
- Rocchi Ciaj and Demonte Matteo 2017, *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano*, Cierre Grafica per Becco Giallo, Sommacampagna.
- Rossetto Tania and Peterle Giada 2016, *Refiguring Italian Cultural Quarters: Il Ghetto di Venezia. 500 anni di vita (Film by Emanuela Giordano, 2015) and Primavera e Autunni (Graphic Novel by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte, 2015)*, «Semestrale di Studi e Ricerche di Geografia» 2: 167-177.
- Scibetta Andrea 2019, *Graphic novel, storia e storie di migrazione cinese in Italia. L'esempio di Primavera e Autunni e Chinamen*, «LEA» 8: 105-122.
- Shaun Tan 2006, *The Arrival*, Hodder & Stoughton, London.
- Yang Gene Yuen 2006, *American Born Chinese*, First Second Books, New York.
- Yin Xiaohuang 2000, *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana.
- Zhang Gaoheng 2017, *The Chinaman and the cinesina: Gendering Chinese migrants in Italian novels*, «Journal of Romance Studies» 19 (1): 69-97.
- Zhang Gaoheng 2019, *Chinese migrants, morality and film ethics in Italian cinema*, «Journal of Modern Italian Studies» 22 (3): 385-405.