

***Rereading Travellers to the East: Shaping Identities and Building  
the Nation in Post-unification Italy***

Beatrice Falucci, Emanuele Giusti, and Davide Trentacoste, eds.

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This volume edited by Beatrice Falucci, Emanuele Giusti, and Davide Trentacoste aims to offer a new historical perspective on post-unification Italy by following three research guidelines, namely: travel writing; the search for ‘Italianness’ and the construction of a national identity in post-unification Italy, and the history of Oriental studies and Orientalism in Italy. These three research guidelines intertwine with one another in the various contributions of the volume, forming a complex web of individual and collective stories that provide the readers with a new and more complete knowledge of the instrumental use of some famous ‘Italian’ travellers carried out in the past both at an academic and a popular level. The result of a process that had already begun in the past centuries, the exaltation of the Italian genius and the birth of the ‘myth of travellers’ to the East (13) reached its height in post-unification Italy, particularly, during the years of the Fascist regime. The original perspective and added value of this volume are encompassed in the ‘rereading’ of the title. The essays of the volume in fact share the same methodological approach in that the authors’ analysis does not so much concentrate on travellers’ enterprises and/or travel narratives, rather, they aim to disclose the ‘rereading’ processes of these travellers’ enterprises and narratives in order to identify and analyse methods and objectives of rereaders in post-unification Italy. The book contains eight essays (plus an afterword) which provide a vivid and interdisciplinary fresco of the rereading processes of some of the most important travellers of the Italian peninsula: from Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci of pre-unification Italy to the travellers of the ‘new’ unified Italy such as Pellegrino Matteucci or Giuseppe Tucci. At the time, these rereadings and reinterpretations were carried out both at the institutional level (first of all through the studies carried out by the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente or IsMEO) and by individual scholars. Through the essays of the contributors and their rereading of these historical processes, it is thus possible to attain a wider panorama of the history of Oriental studies and Orientalism in Italy.

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In the Introduction, the editors keenly highlight the pitfalls one could fall into when researching a topic founded on terms such as ‘Italian’ and ‘Oriente’ (the East), i.e. ‘lands that early modern Europe called the Orient, the Indies or the Levant’ (10). These concepts have of course changed over time, and these changes need to be taken into account to contextualise both the Italian travellers analysed and their successive reinterpretations and iterations. Furthermore, the editors’ choice to focus on travellers and travel writing is dictated by the very nature of this genre which, more than others, is characterised by an ‘openness’ and intersectionality allowing ‘for virtually endless interpretative possibilities’ (14).

The volume opens with an accurate historical reconstruction by Beatrice Falcucci of the rereadings and studies related to Italian travellers of the past. The scholar thus points out how the recovery of pre-unification travellers is part of a process of nation-building and national identity that finds its climax during the Fascist regime and the foundation of the IsMEO and that contributed to making the East more ‘familiar and close’ to the Italian audience. Fabrizio De Donno’s essay focuses on Africa by presenting two different time frames corresponding to two different narratives and visions of Italian travellers in Africa (colonial and post-colonial): from the Fascist reinterpretation of Pellegrino Matteucci’s travels by Cesare Cesari—which made him a ‘heroic precursor of the Fascist colonialism’ (68)—to the contemporary rereading of Emanuelli and Montanelli by Del Boca and Scego respectively, rereadings aimed at bridging the sense of shame and the Italians’ ‘amnesia’ of Italy’s colonial past. Alessandro Tripepi focuses on the two Japanese embassies in Italy that took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in order to highlight how these embassies were reread in later periods and in particular in post-unification Italy, when they were instrumentally reread to build an alleged history of contacts between the two countries and justify the Italian support for Japan. Aglaia de Angeli’s essay concentrates on Ludovico Nocentini’s rereading of the life of Matteo Ricci. Nocentini was the first to focus on Ricci’s cultural contributions, rather than on his religious objectives and outcomes. Ricci is not only one in the long genealogy of Italian travellers to the East—which, unlike other European powers, are represented as more interested in cultural exchanges than in conquer—but he is also consecrated by Nocentini as the founding father of European Sinology, thus establishing another Italian primacy. Luca Orlandi traces the history of Italian expansionism in the Dodecanese, placing emphasis on Italian contributions in the field of art, architecture, and archaeology especially through the works of Hermes Balducci. The latter, in line with Fascist propaganda, sought historical traces of *Romanità* and *Italianità* on the islands to legitimate Italian power. Through the rereading of the historiography on Fakhr al-Dīn II, Davide Trentacoste draws a fascinating parallelism between the expansionist policies of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Fascist regime. Central to the author’s analysis is the biography of the Druze emir written by Paolo Carali in 1935 and aimed at reconstructing a presumed historical continuity in the contacts between Italy and Lebanon. Laura De Giorgi’s interesting essay is dedicated to the rereadings of Marco Polo’s *The Travels*. Her study provides an overview of the European and Italian rereading and appropriation of the

Venetian traveller over the centuries and also has the merit of underlining that the ‘iconic significance’ attributed to Polo (in Italy and Europe) has actually had limited reception in China. Taking Iran as a reference, Emanuele Giusti traces the history and birth of Iranian studies in Italy, in particular those on Italian travellers to Iran, which complied with ‘the idea of the continuous cultural and “civilizational” exchange between Italy and Iran’ (183). This idea was particularly carried forward by scholars who revolved around the IsMEO, so Giusti’s essay symbolically closes the volume and returns to the starting point. In the Afterword, Giovanni Tarantino breaks away from travellers and travel writing to address examples of rereading in the field of cinema and theatre. The author focuses in particular on three different works: the documentary *Chung Kuo/China* by Antonioni (1972), the French film *Les Chinois à Paris* (1974) by Jean Yanne, and the rereading of a libretto from 1739 (*Ballet des Porcelaines*) in the recent reinterpretation and re-creation by Meredith Martin and Phil Chan. As pointed out by Tarantino, this rereading, which reverses the roles by replacing the Chinese antagonist with a European, differs from other rereadings because it is not aimed at ‘assimilation and domination’ but is ‘a story of restitution, reparation and beauty’ (219).

The mosaic that emerges from the essays in this volume is that of a post-unification Italy and a Fascist regime in which the search for an Italian identity (expressed here through the appropriation, rereading and re-creation of the myth of ‘Italian’ travellers to the East) sometimes assumes the disturbing contours of the Italian (Fascist) obsession for ‘Italian primacy’ in order to justify the colonial aims of the regime but also to fill the sense of frustration arising from the lack of recognition of Italian ‘greatness’ abroad.

As underlined in the Introduction, women are notably absent from this story of traveling and travel writing which suggests, as the editors acknowledge, that studies in this area are still far behind. All the authors have succeeded in providing an overview of the rereading of Italian travellers to the East in their specific field of study, even if some essays give too much space to theory on the rereading or to the historical background than to the rereading itself. Nevertheless, all the essays are accompanied by a rich, useful, and up-to-date bibliography and use accessible language, making for a pleasant and very readable book, which could even appeal to a non-specialist audience. To conclude, the work of Falcucci, Giusti, and Trentacoste has great value and manages to offer readers new perspectives and new views on the recent past of Italy.