

The ‘Ferrante phenomenon’ in China

Circulation and reception of the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend”

Natalia Riva

From the perspective of comparative and world literature, the global curiosity for Italian author Elena Ferrante’s “Neapolitan Novels” tetralogy has been described based on a four-element framework: Naples; a new female identity; the long narrative; and the memoir-style extended autobiography. This paper measures the applicability of the first two elements to the circulation and reception of Ferrante’s four-book series and the tetralogy-inspired TV series “My Brilliant Friend” (Seasons 1 and 2) in the People’s Republic of China. Firstly, considering Italian and Chinese cultural policies, the study describes the main factors participating in their distribution in the Chinese context. Secondly, it draws a connection between circulation and reception by examining the audiences’ and critics’ discourses generated therein around the editorial and audiovisual products. Specifically, the qualitative mixed method design integrates corpus analysis tools into the exploration of content analysis data to examine posts drawn from a select sample of social networks and newspaper and magazine articles. The findings confirm the validity of Naples and a new female identity as elements playing a considerable role in the success obtained by the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” in China but add to the framework the emphasis on the cross-media and transnational nature of the products, the contribution of their international fame, and the mystery built globally around Elena Ferrante.

Keywords: Elena Ferrante, circulation, reception, China, “Neapolitan Novels,” “My Brilliant Friend,” critics’ discourse; online audiences’ discourse.

1. Introduction: the significance of studying the circulation of Italian cultural media products in China

According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, in 2021, China’s foreign cultural trade saw a growth of 38.7%, reaching USD 200 billion, the import and export volume of cultural products hit USD 155.8 billion, with an increase of 43.4% on the previous year, and cultural services increased by 24.3% to USD 44.22 billion (Zhang 2022). Cultural products and services enjoying this positive trend appear to include movies, TV plays, online literature, online audiovisual content, and creative products (CIFTIS 2022). To continue on this path, in July 2022, the aforementioned ministry coordinated with twenty-six

government bodies to issue a plan to boost China’s cultural sector by 2025 and promote national cultural soft power and the influence of Chinese culture abroad (Shangwubu *et al.* 2022). As reported, the guidelines target cultural trade and promise actions to support exports of high-quality cultural products and services in a variety of areas to improve China’s cultural competitiveness, while at the same time increasing imports to respond to the people’s cultural needs (Shangwubu *et al.* 2022). Notwithstanding the political rhetoric behind these goals set by the State—which one can argue are typical of the Chinese official top-down vision of cultural soft power (Voci and Luo 2018)—and the tight regulations that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) enacts on the cultural industry—one of “the most restricted and censored in China” (Wang 2022), this scenario could open up space for foreign countries, including Italy, to engage with the Chinese market and develop potentially fruitful collaborations in the cultural and media sector. Provided that both Italian and Chinese soft power flow across national barriers, Italian cultural exports could find a fertile terrain in China and generate both cultural impact and economic returns. In the publishing and audiovisual fields, this requires identifying captivating themes, contents, characters, and formats that can become successful exportable products. However, Italian cultural and creative industries are still struggling to find the right formula to fully exploit the soft power of Italian culture.

Chinese institutions take the politics of soft power into serious consideration. Their Italian counterparts also show interest in the aforementioned issues. In 2014, for instance, the Italy-China Cultural Forum was established as proof to the commitment of the two countries to jointly promoting their respective cultural heritages. In particular, the Statute of the Forum signed in Beijing in 2016 by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and of Tourism and the PRC Minister of Culture states that the Forum is conceived as a platform for permanent dialogue between the sectors of culture, art, and creative industries of the two countries specifically in regard to conservation and protection of cultural heritage, theater and live entertainment, visual arts and design, cinema and music, and tourism (MIBAC 2016).

Another significant accomplishment is the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between RAI—Radiotelevisione italiana S.p.a. and China Media Group, that is one of the nineteen institutional agreements signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Italy on March 22, 2019. According to the then President of Rai Marcello Foa, the agreement entrusted RAI with the country’s “biggest cultural mission” (cited in Rai 2019).

In the audiovisual sector, Italy has had successful experiences in the PRC. One of the most watched Italian films in China is Paolo Genovese’s *Perfetti sconosciuti*, which has also been followed by a Chinese remake, “Kill Mobile.” It is indeed thanks to the success of the theatrical release of *Perfetti sconosciuti*

that Italy jumped to third place in the Chinese box office ranking of foreign films distributed in theaters in 2018, grossing USD 1 million on the first day of release alone and reaching USD 7 million in the following weeks (Ruperto 2020: 18).

Moreover, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation offers subsidies for the translation or dubbing/subtitling of Italian publications, short and feature films, and TV series with the aim to promote the dissemination abroad of Italian language and culture (Newitalianbooks 2022). Within this framework, in 2019, the novels *Lacci* and *Scherzetto* by Domenico Starnone and *La Frantumaglia* by Elena Ferrante (all translated in Chinese by Chen Ying 陈英) obtained a contribution for the publication of their Chinese translation through the Shanghai Italian Cultural Institute (IIC) (IIC Shanghai n.d.).

Based on these examples, it is clear that the circulation and reception of Italian cultural media products in the world needs to include a more extensive analysis of the Chinese market.¹

2. The project's design

This paper presents part of the results of the research project “Analysis of the impacts of Italian media products on the contemporary Chinese market” carried out in the framework of PRIN 2017 “Italian Na(rra)tives: the international circulation of the brand-Italy in the media.” The project stemmed from the desire to contribute to studies on the globalization of Italian media products and their cultural impact abroad by extending the observation to China. The research conducted by the unit of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (coordinated by Prof. Matteo Tarantino) focused on the reception of Italian media products—editorial and audiovisual—distributed or circulating on the Chinese market. Focusing on the decade 2010-20, the selected objects of analysis were: Elena Ferrante’s “Neapolitan Novels” four-book series and the tetralogy-inspired TV series “My Brilliant Friend;” the TV series “Medici;” and the TV series “The Young Pope” and “The New Pope” by Paolo Sorrentino, not officially distributed in China but available online. The main questions that the research intended to answer concerned the definition of factors shaping the circulation and reception of an Italian cultural media product in China and the identification of the characteristics of the discourses that were generated around the specific object. For each product, the research considered four levels of analysis: quantitative circulation data;

¹ Italian academics engaged in Chinese studies have produced important works which analyze the presence of Italian literary and audiovisual products in China focusing on their cultural, historical, and linguistic value, among which: Brezzi (2008), Bona (2016), Varriano (2019) and Zuccheri (2019).

discourse of the elites around the product; bottom-up discourse generated online around the product; and institutional discourse within the framework of the cultural policies in which the product is inserted. The aim was to measure the product’s impact, namely the ability to generate value in cultural and discursive terms, and its role in promoting images and models of Italy in China.

The research combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. To investigate the factors shaping the products’ circulation in the PRC, it relied on the observation of the distribution and promotion processes and their traces in the media (e.g., websites of Italian institutions in China, social media of the publishing house, distributors’ platforms, etc.) and on the information collected through interviews with cultural operators. For the analysis of top-down and bottom-up discourses, it relied on two sets of data: one constituted by a corpus of Chinese newspaper and magazine articles and functional to the qualitative analysis of the critics’ discourse; and one constituted by a corpus of posts drawn from a select sample of Chinese social networks, sites, and platforms, and functional to the qualitative analysis of the audiences’ discourse.

3. The case study: Elena Ferrante in the PRC

Within the framework discussed so far, this paper focuses on Elena Ferrante’s “Neapolitan Novels” and Saverio Costanzo’s TV series “My Brilliant Friend” (Seasons 1 and 2). The “Ferrante Fever” (Durzi 2017) phenomenon in Europe and the United States has been extensively analyzed but limited space has been dedicated to contexts characterized by a lesser cultural proximity to Italy (e.g., Maranhão 2020). As will be demonstrated, Ferrante’s works, particularly the recently introduced “Neapolitan Novels” tetralogy, have gained a vast readership in China. As well, the first two seasons of “My Brilliant Friend,” available in the Chinese market when the study was conducted, are greatly appreciated. A clear sign of the success of these Italian cultural products in China is that, at the time of writing, the news of a Mandarin-language adaptation of the TV series being in the making was spreading online triggering a heated discussion among “My Brilliant Friend”’s Chinese followers (Qian 2022).

So far, the reception of the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” in the PRC has been discussed by Chen Ying (2019), Ferrante’s Chinese translator, and Tiziana de Rogatis (2018). The latter describes the global curiosity for Ferrante based on a four-element framework: Naples; a new female identity; the long narrative; and the memoir-style extended autobiography (de Rogatis 2016). This paper draws on this structure but moves the focus onto the Chinese context. In particular, it analyses the applicability of the framework’s first two elements to the circulation and reception of both the tetralogy and the TV series in the Chinese context. Firstly, considering Italian and Chinese cultural policies, it describes the main factors participating in their distribution in the PRC. Secondly, to draw

a connection between circulation and reception, it examines the discourses generated in China around the products.

The findings confirm the validity of Naples and a new female identity as elements playing a considerable role in the success obtained by the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” in China but also highlight how the two frames are closely connected in the discourses analyzed. Moreover, it will be shown how the products’ Chinese success has benefited from the emphasis on their cross-media and transnational nature, the contribution of the international fame they had already achieved before entering the Chinese market, and the ‘human factor,’ that is the mystery and sensationalism built globally around Elena Ferrante.

3.1. Circulation

3.1.1. Overview of the products’ presence in the PRC

2017 and 2018 are crucial years for the case study as the global success of Elena Ferrante’s tetralogy reached China. The first volume, *L’amica geniale*, translated into Chinese as *Wo de tiancai nüyou* 我的天才女友, was published in January 2017 by the People’s Literature Publishing House (*Renmin wenxue chubanshe* 人民文学出版社) for its brand Shanghai 99 Readers (99 *Dushuren* 99 读书人). The following volumes, *Storia del nuovo cognome* (*Xin mingzi de gushi* 新名字的故事), *Storia di chi fugge e chi resta* (*Likai de, liuxia de* 离开的, 留下的), and *Storia della bambina perduta* (*Shizong de haizi* 失踪的孩子) were published, respectively, in April 2017, October 2017, and June 2018. The four books were collected by the publishing house under the label *Nabulesi si bu qu* 那不勒斯四部曲 (literally, “Naples tetralogy”), mimicking the name with which the tetralogy was published in the United States (“Neapolitan Novels”). Elena Ferrante’s works obtained considerable success in the PRC, receiving an excellent response from the public in a very short time: in just over two years, the tetralogy is said to have sold 1.3 million copies (Xu 2019). This success was further confirmed by the release on online platforms of the TV series inspired by the “Neapolitan Novels” and created through the cooperation between Rai, TIM Vision, and HBO. Season 1 aired in Italy on Rai 1 in autumn 2018 and subtitled versions were also broadcasted abroad—in over fifty countries—by global producer and distributor Fremantle. The episodes were released in China—with Chinese subtitles—thanks to the agreement signed between Fremantle and the Chinese streaming platform iQiyi (*Aiqiyi* 爱奇艺), which was the first buyer to show interest in the series after the distributor proposed it in 2018. According to Hariaty Rahman (SVP Distribution Asia, International), who oversaw the sale of the TV series to China, after the negotiation

of the agreement between distributor and buyer, the latter submitted all episodes to the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA, *Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju* 国家广播电视总局)—the department directly under the State Council of the PRC in charge of supervising, managing, and censoring the content and quality of radio, television, and online audiovisual programmes—and the series’ first season then landed on the platform in March 2019 (Rahman 2020). Season 2 followed a similar path but marked a record for non-English language European drama as it was bought simultaneously by the three main Chinese streaming platforms—iQiyi, Tencent (*Tengxun* 腾讯), and Youku 优酷—with a potential of 250 million viewers (Frematle 2020). Moreover, a sale to China Central Television (CCTV) was underway at the time of the interview conducted by the present author with Hariaty Rahman (Rahman 2020), resulting in “My Brilliant Friend” being broadcast on CCTV *Fengyun juchang* 风云剧场 during Spring Festival in 2021.

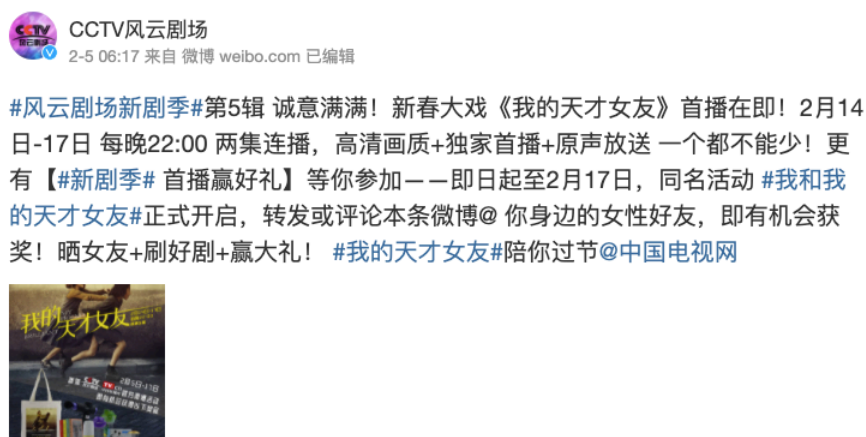


Figure 1. CCTV *Fengyun juchang*'s post on Weibo 微博 announcing the broadcast of “My Brilliant Friend.”

3.1.2 Main factors participating in the products’ placement in the PRC

This section provides some examples of the four main factors which have been identified as conveyors of the “Ferrante phenomenon” (*Feilante xianxiang* 费兰特现象) (Sun 2021) to the Chinese audience: institutional promotion; marketing by the publishing house and online platforms; the role of the books’ translator as Ferrante’s voice in China; and Douban 豆瓣 ratings.

With the release of the tetralogy’s second volume, the Chinese publishing house, in collaboration with the Italian Embassy and the IIC offices in Shanghai and Beijing, organized seminars aimed at presenting the “Neapolitan Novels.” The conferences were hosted by the Fudan University of Shanghai, the University of Nanjing, the Sinan Readers’ Club (*Sinan dushu hui* 思南读书会) in Shanghai, and the

Graduate School of the Chinese Association of Social Sciences in Beijing and saw the participation of the books' translator Chen Ying as well as Italian scholars (e.g., Tiziana de Rogatis). As for the TV series, it is worth mentioning that between October 2021 and June 2022 the Shanghai IIC supported the exhibition "My Brilliant Friend. When Literature Appears on Screen" organized by the Mu Xin Art Museum (Wuzhen, Northern Zhejiang Province) and containing the stage photos of the show's first and second seasons (IIC Shanghai 2021). According to the museum's director Chen Danqing 陈丹青 (2021), the exhibition, shaped by three different media (e.i., best-selling novels, hit TV series, and stage photos), "bears witness to the lasting charm of the Italian neorealist aesthetic."

In regard to Chen Ying, she holds the position of coordinator of the Italian Department of the Sichuan International Studies University (SISU) in Chongqing. Because of her prolific work as an Italian-Chinese translator, it can be argued that she is not only Elena Ferrante's spokesperson in China but also the ambassador of contemporary Italian literature as a whole in the Chinese context. As such, she was awarded the title of "Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Stella d'Italia" for the role played in promoting cultural relations between Italy and China (SISU 2021).

Turning to the publishing house's promotional activity, according to Huang Yuhai 黄育海, the head of Shanghai 99 Readers, as the only Chinese copyright owner of the "Neapolitan Novels," the company established a Weibo account (@nabulesisibuqu @那不勒斯四部曲) for the tetralogy in November 2016, publishing information related to the books and their writer and promoting the concept behind the tetralogy in the form of notebooks, posters, etc. (Shi 2019a). After the publication of the second volume, Shanghai 99 Readers produced a brochure (Figure 2) promoting the "Neapolitan Novels," in which the author is presented in the section "Who is Elena Ferrante" (*Ailaina-Feilante shi shei? 埃莱娜·费兰特是谁?*) as follows: "The Italian writer currently most appreciated and mysterious. Elena Ferrante is a pseudonym; her identity is still unknown." The leaflet focuses on the enigma surrounding the author's identity and answers the question "Why maintaining anonymity?" (*Weishenme baochi niming? 为什么保持匿名?*) by means of a praise for the centrality of a literary work's autonomy expressed by Ferrante in a letter to editor Sandra Ossola. Keeping a low profile is a distinctive trait of the author, one which arouses curiosity in the public around the world (e.g., Ferrara 2019; Albano 2022) and in China as well.

The brochure exploits this and two other factors for the local publicity of the tetralogy: the reviews published by international newspapers and the data regarding the number of copies sold all over the world. In particular, comments from "The New York Times" and "The Atlantic" are reported in the section "Why reading Ferrante?" (*Weihe yao yuedu Feilante? 为何要阅读费兰特?*). The section

“What are the ‘Neapolitan Novels?’” (Nabulesi sibuqu shi shenme? 那不勒斯四部曲是什么?) contains the tetralogy’s synopsis, while the numbers of copies sold in countries around the world in the first ten months of 2016 are listed under the label #Ferrante Fever. The absence of Italy among the countries listed (i.e., United States, England, Australia and New Zealand, Iceland, Germany, France, Norway, and Sweden) shows the weight of the international side of Ferrante’s success as a factor supporting the tetralogy’s promotion in the Chinese market.

埃莱娜·费兰特是谁?

目前意大利最受欢迎的、也最神秘的作家，埃莱娜·费兰特匿名，其真实身份至今未揭晓。
 埃莱娜·费兰特1962年发表第一部长篇小说《内陆》，很快声名远播。1996年她发表另一部长篇小说《那不勒斯》系列小说的序言。此后她陆续出版小说《暗处的女儿》《爱别人的爱》和散文、评论《那不勒斯事件》。
 2011年至2014年，埃莱娜·费兰特以笔名“埃莱娜·费兰特”出版了四部小说《那不勒斯四部曲》（《我的天才女友》《新名字的故事》《离开的孩子》和《失踪的孩子》，这四部小说与埃莱娜·费兰特的“那不勒斯四部曲”系列小说同属一个系列，描绘了那不勒斯两个不同阶层出生的女性（埃莱娜和莉拉）跨越两个世纪的朋友、姐妹对女性发展的不同选择和命运的探索，让她们走向世界而闻名。她被称为“那不勒斯四部曲”的“女神”。

匿名作者从未公开其性别，但媒体和评论家从其“自传”色彩强烈的写作中判断其为女性。2015年，埃莱娜·费兰特在《金融时报》开办了“匿名女作家”。

2016年，《时代》周刊将埃莱娜·费兰特列入“最具影响力的100位艺术家”。

那不勒斯四部曲是什么?

一段关于友谊、爱、嫉妒、暴力、命运的史诗，所有的人都无法逃脱过去。

1. 《我的天才女友》
 已故成名女作家埃莱娜·费兰特的四部小说系列中第一部，描绘了那不勒斯两个不同阶层出生的女性（埃莱娜和莉拉）跨越两个世纪的朋友、姐妹对女性发展的不同选择和命运的探索，让她们走向世界而闻名。她被称为“那不勒斯四部曲”的“女神”。

2. 《新名字的故事》
 1996年，莉拉结婚之前，将自己写作的埃莱娜·费兰特的第一部长篇小说《内陆》献给她的朋友。莉拉对这部小说感到震惊。她开始写自己的自传体小说。于是决定与下她的一生一起生活。

3. 《离开的孩子》
 莉拉和埃莱娜的友谊在莉拉离开那不勒斯之后继续发展。莉拉在丈夫的陪伴下开始重新学习，她一直深知自己利用的学习天赋和惊人的决心。莉拉在16岁的时候决定重新开始学习，但在这之前，她发现了丈夫的背叛。莉拉一直热爱自己的丈夫，她从未停止过思考。莉拉一直热爱自己的丈夫，她从未停止过思考。

4. 《失踪的孩子》
 莉拉在经历了艰苦、回到了那不勒斯，因为她相信自己必须返回那不勒斯才能写作。莉拉在那不勒斯的生活，她成功拥有了自己的人生。莉拉在那不勒斯的生活，她成功拥有了自己的人生。

为什么保持匿名?

你知道，要保持匿名（保持匿名）这个决定很难。我只是想写，这对我来说是一种解脱。保持匿名，它是一种自我保护的方式，也是一种自我保护的方式。保持匿名，它是一种自我保护的方式，也是一种自我保护的方式。

1991年，露西娅·费兰特（Lucia Ferrante）和埃莱娜·费兰特的关系。
 1991年，露西娅·费兰特（Lucia Ferrante）和埃莱娜·费兰特的关系。
 2015年8月，露西娅·费兰特的去世。

1992	L'amore ostinato	英文译名: Troubling Love, 2006
2002	I giorni dell'abbandono	英文译名: The Days of Abandonment, 2005
2003	La frantumaglia	英文译名: Fragments, 2016
2006	La figlia oscura	英文译名: The Lost Daughter, 2006
2007	La casa di rasoio	英文译名: The Beach at Night, 2012
2011	L'amica geniale	中文译名: 《我的天才女友》2016.12
2012	Storia del fuoco copione	中文译名: 《新名字的故事》2017.4
2013	Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta	中文译名: 《离开的孩子》2017.5
2014	Storia della bambina perduta	中文译名: 《失踪的孩子》2018

#Ferrante Fever!

过去五年，几乎所有的欧美读者都在谈论她!

2016年10月10个那不勒斯四部曲销量——	《我的天才女友》——
美国 2,400,000 册	法文版 300,000 册
英国 660,000 册	法文版 500,000 册
意大利和欧洲其他地区 465,000 册	德文版 500,000 册
全球销量达 5,000,000 册	瑞典销量 100,000 册——
每 10 个成年人有 7 个谈论过她	

Figure 2. A page from Shanghai 99 Readers’ “Neapolitan Novels” brochure (as reported in Shi 2019a).

For quite some time, the banner of the Shanghai 99 Readers Weibo page was the cover of *La frantumaglia* and over time the publishing house has offered no shortage of posts advertising reprints of the “Neapolitan Novels” or promoting marketing events. For instance, a seminar which took place on March 7th, 2021—uncoincidentally the day before Women’s Day—in a bookshop in Chongqing, with the participation of the translator as the invited guest, was streamed on the social network. As well, according to Haryaty Rahman (2020), iQiyi did “a great job” promoting the series, collaborating with a local publisher to reprint a special version of “My Brilliant Friend” and give the book away to viewers when the show premiered on the platform.

In line with the publishing house, Amazon.cn (n. d.) exploits Ferrante’s international success to market the “Neapolitan Novels” and couples it with the books’ cross-media nature, referring specifically to HBO’s tetralogy-inspired TV show: “Global best-seller with almost 10 million copies sold,

HBO's acclaimed real-life drama, fifty years of friendship and conflict between two women." Once again, there is no mention of Italy as one of the producers of the TV series, through its cooperation with US giant HBO, but the description of the tetralogy presents it as a best-seller by Italy's most mysterious writer translated in over forty languages (Amazon.cn n.d.).

Finally, it is indicative that on Douban—the main Chinese online platform for the rating of books and movies—the four volumes belonging to the tetralogy rank among the Top 250 books, occupying n. 141, n. 22, n. 96, and n. 21 respectively (as of September 2022).² As well, the first two seasons of the TV series were voted by 170,433 and 110,424 netizens and obtained a score of 9.3 and 9.5 respectively.³

3.2. Reception

3.2.1. Data and methods

The data for the analysis of the top-down discourse were collected through a search in the “newspapers” (*baozhi* 报纸) and “magazines” (*tese qikan* 特色期刊) sections of the China Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. The search produced nineteen newspaper articles and twenty-six journal articles collected between October and December 2020. Given their limited amount, the articles were analyzed qualitatively. As for the audiences' discourse, members of the research unit at Università Cattolica carried out automatic harvesting on Amazon.cn, Dangdang 当当, Douban, Jianshu 简书, WeChat (*Weixin* 微信), Weibo, Tieba 贴吧, iQiyi, Tencent, Youku, and MTime, collecting a corpus larger than 3 million tokens (Table 1). The corpus was divided into three sub-corpora (corresponding to the books and Seasons 1 and 2 of the TV series). The issue of choosing the most suitable methods to qualitatively examine such a large number of reviews and posts was addressed by dividing the analysis into two phases: qualitative coding of a sub-sample and text analysis conducted using corpus analysis tools by means of the Sketch Engine software (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014). The analysis of the audiences' discourse was thus carried out with a qualitative mixed method which combined corpus analysis with content analysis (e.g., Kutter and Kantner 2012; Rubtcova *et al.* 2015; Kantner and Overbeck 2020; Franceschi 2021; Tarat, Siritaratn and Jaroongkhongdach 2021) for the exploration of data in relation to specific research questions. In particular, the “concordance” tool in Sketch Engine allowed for the identification of examples of use in context of a series of words considered relevant based on the initial

² <https://book.douban.com/subject/26878124/>; <https://book.douban.com/subject/26986954/>; <https://book.douban.com/subject/27104959/>; <https://book.douban.com/subject/30172069/>.

³ <https://movie.douban.com/subject/28427782/>; <https://movie.douban.com/subject/30395843/>.

manual coding and the frequency wordlist. The integration of corpus analysis and content analysis facilitated the identification and examination of recurring themes in the corpora.

	Books	Season 1	Season 2
Tokens	794,931	921,615	1,560,008

Table 1. Distribution of tokens in the three sub-corpora.

3.2.2. Discourses

3.2.2.1. Naples and a new female identity

“Elena Ferrante’s ‘My Brilliant Friend’ Is Like a Trip to Naples. Only Better” states the title of a “Wall Street Journal” article (Cheng 2020). As a matter of fact, set largely in and around Naples, the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” have stimulated tourists’ interest in the city and the Campania region (e.g., Bell 2020; Leotta 2020; Avalle 2021). In a newspaper article for the *Wenhui bao* 文汇报, Xu Chang (2018) highlights a connection between the global spread of the Ferrante Fever (*Feilante re* 费兰特热) and the increase in tourism in Naples and, quite curiously, even reports the introduction of “pizza Ferrante” in the menus of some local pizzerias.

Nevertheless, Elena Ferrante does not depict post-WWII Naples as an exotic or escapist destination but rather as a place of social struggle, poverty, and violence. As stated by de Rogatis (2018: 290), the city, appearing both archaic and modern, becomes a symbolic world in which the peripheries tend to subvert their traditional subordination and replace the old centers. In such a space, an inversion of hierarchies between center and periphery is possible and it is precisely this ability to short-circuit the archaic and modern eras that makes Naples the exemplary image of a city in the age of globalization (Turchetta 2020: 19-24). The Chinese audiences appreciate this sense of change and feel affinity for the “plebs” (*shumin* 庶民) of Naples and its working-class Rione Luzzatti in relation, for instance, to shared issues concerning education, material and cultural poverty, class difference, violence, domination of male power, etc. Indeed, “My Brilliant Friend”’s passage describing the plebs is one of the most cited in the reviews and comments analyzed. Moreover, Naples is often perceived as “poor” (*pingqiong* 贫穷) and “in decline” (*pobai* 破败) and reminds many Chinese readers and viewers of their childhood in Chinese towns when the Reform and Opening-Up policy was launched at the beginning of the 1980s:

The social problems of the slums in southern Italy in the 1950s and 1960s were similar to those of the slums in China in the 1970s and 1980s. The flaws of those old countries were similar [to ours], but they were addressed earlier there, and therefore they are [considered] developed countries (post from Douban 2018).

Thus, for Ferrante's audiences, Naples becomes a symbol of many other evolving places in the world, including China, where many cities have undergone profound socio-economic transformations in the course of recent history.

Naples's changing society appears to be the only possible background for the unfolding of Ferrante's story of female empowerment—an extremely delicate and vivid description of women's friendship, psychology, and emotions (Chen 2020: 47). The Chinese critics' discourse, in line with that of other countries, defines the tetralogy as an “epic of female growth” (*nüxing chengzhang de shishi 女性成长的史诗*) in which “love and hate intertwine, dependency and rupture intertwine. It is delicate female psychology and female friendship that only women can keenly observe” (Pan and Shi 2020: 92). With female identity (*nüxing shenfen rentong 女性身份认同*), growth (*nüxing chengzhang 女性成长*), and friendship (*nüxing youyi 女性友谊*) being the main topics discussed as crucial themes, the “Neapolitan Novels” are rightfully inserted into the world panorama of feminist literature (*nüxingzhuyi wenxue 女性主义文学*) (Wang 2020). The long-lasting friendship between the protagonists Raffaella Cerullo (Lila) and Elena Greco (Lenù) is the center of Ferrante's extended narrative and can be read as the story of identity development of two female friends, a process made more difficult by their families and the patriarchal and violent environment in which they mature:

The “Neapolitan Novels” are based on the friendship between two sisters with different surnames [*yixing jiemei 异姓姐妹*] and describe the relationship between the two women living in the city of Naples, as well as their different lives. At the same time, it also uses this story to show social changes in Naples, from various bad social habits and malpractices to the disasters brought on by the war, and the journey of survival of the characters in their specific historical and geographical environment [...] (Wei 2019).

The two female protagonists are the characters the Chinese audiences discuss the most. They are often compared to one another and generally appreciated for their friendship, which is seen as a mix of affection and jealousy. It is precisely this complexity that attracts the audiences: “The female friendship in this show is real, friendship among women is like this. It is a mix of feelings of envy and competition; as my bestie I want you to be excellent but not more than me” (post from Douban 2020). The analysis of the online discourse around Lila and Lenù shows similarities with the critics' discourse

but also highlights multiple readings and interpretations which primarily function on the level of identification. Online, Lila and Lenù are given Chinese nicknames with the use of appellations expressing affection—*xiaohei* 小黑 and *xiaobai* 小白. Readers and viewers recognize their own difficulties in the problems experienced by the two friends:

Elena [Ferrante] unadornedly depicts the growth of two women, Lenù and Lila, and does not shy away from showing the difficulties they face, which are the difficulties that every woman faces: injustice, difficulties to receive an education, menstruation, marriage, love, pregnancy and childbirth, responsibility for children... The work was thus praised as “a truly feminist novel” (post from WeChat 2020).

As well, comments on the importance of education in a woman’s life abound, for instance:

Seeing Lila and Elena [Lenù] when they were young, I unconsciously remembered my own experience. I also desperately wanted to go to school, but because of financial reasons my parents didn’t let me (post from iQiyi 2020).

For the Chinese public, Lila and Lenù are bearers of a global feminist message: “It [the story] is not limited to petty love and trivial friendship. It is more like a feminist guide to ‘the awakening of women’s consciousness, courage, [spirit of] class fight’” (post from WeChat 2019). It is a powerful call which unites all women around the world: “It’s interesting how this story would be the same if it was set in China at any time; it can elicit empathy among women around the world” (post from Douban 2020).

3.2.2.2. The cross-media and transnational nature of “Neapolitan Novels”/“My Brilliant Friend”

Interestingly, the analysis of the audiences’ discourse highlights a lack of differentiation between the tetralogy and TV series. This is due to the fact that many of Ferrante’s readers are also viewers of the show, and vice versa. Although referring to different media experiences, they tend to talk about the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” as one single product. Nevertheless, depending on how the product is consumed, there emerge different perceptions. In relation to the product’s origins, for instance, Elena Ferrante is unquestionably recognized as an Italian writer, but the TV show is identified as an American series produced by HBO in Italian: “As an American drama based on a series of books by an Italian female author, it has set many historical records, including being the first American drama in HBO history to entirely use Italian dialogue” (post from WeChat). In addition to the books’ author, the setting, the language, the actors, and the director are also recognized as Italian.

As far as language is concerned, a necessary differentiation must be made between the editorial and the television product. The use of the Neapolitan dialect is functional to the depiction of characters but is lost with the subtitling in Chinese or English, while it remains valid in the translation of the books into Chinese, even though there is no use of dialectal forms but rather the explicit indication that the speaker in a dialogue is using dialect. This aspect is discussed in some of the comments online, which at times highlight the viewers' disorientation in understanding whether the dialogues are in Italian or another language, in particular in the reception of Season 1 of the TV series. It can be argued that this lack of clarity is also due to the audiences' expectations, with some believing it is an American show: "Who knew it wasn't an American drama, but an Italian drama!!!" (post from Douban 2020).

These expectations are at times reinforced by the critics' discourse. When the TV show is discussed, it is often defined as an American TV series (*Meiju* 美剧) (e.g., Zhang 2019) or a TV series launched by the American TV network (*Meiguo dianshiwang* 美国电视网) or streaming platform (*liu meiti pingtai* 流媒体平台) HBO (e.g., Zhen 2018; zmiao 2020). One newspaper article, for instance, lists "My Brilliant Friend" together with other American TV series which are said to have recently set a milestone for female drama:

Check out these recent US TV shows: "My Brilliant Friend," "The Amazing Mrs. Maisel," "The Good Wife" and "Homeland." Without exception they all have female leads and female themes. This revelation, perhaps not coincidentally, gives credit to those who have called 2018 a leap forward for women's rights (Zhang 2019).

As previously highlighted, Ferrante's story of female empowerment stimulates empathy in the Chinese audience triggering a phenomenon of identification based on the emotional involvement felt towards the topics at the center of the tetralogy. An element of particular interest in this regard is that Chinese or foreign stories, in the form of books, TV series or films, portraying female friendship and sharing some characteristics with the "Neapolitan Novels" and "My Brilliant Friend" act as triggers of this emotive response, frequently becoming terms of comparison or "bridges" between foreign and local cultural productions. In the critics' discourse, the complex friendship between Lila and Lenù is compared to the relationship between Lin Qiyue 林七月 and Li Ansheng 李安生 in the movie "Soulmate" (*Qiyue yu Ansheng* 七月与安生), "who have different personalities and love and hurt each other deeply" (Yan 2019). Other pairs cited are Nana and Nainai in *Nana*, Momoko Ryugasaki and Ichigo "Ichiko" Shirayuri in "Kamikatzé Girls," the two female protagonists in "Hana and Alice," and even Baochai 宝钗 and Daiyu 黛玉 in the "Dream of the Red Chamber" (*Hong lou meng* 红楼梦):

Readers of the “Dream of the Red Chamber” like to divide Baochai and Daiyu into two factions. But in reality, the two girls, who are both talented and beautiful, complement each other’s personalities. When they open their hearts, they can appreciate each other’s merits and become intimate friends (Yan 2019).

Thus, despite being born and raised in Italy and in another era, Lila and Lenù are familiar characters to the Chinese public who read the “Neapolitan Novels” or watch “My Brilliant Friend” as a sort of Italian (or American) version of works which they feel close. The most referenced work in the audiences’ comments is indeed the 2016 movie “Soulmate,” which is an adaptation of the 2000 novel by Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝, and the 2019 teen drama it inspired:

“My Brilliant Friend” is also known as the upgraded Italian version of “Soulmate.” The implicit message of this evaluation is actually that: even though this is a work with a very strong Italian flavor, it successfully describes the universal predicament of mankind through a regional story. Good art can cross cultural barriers and touch people’s hearts (post from Weixin 2018).

It must be clarified that in the case of “My Brilliant Friend,” this parallelism is emphasized by the marketing and curation strategies employed by the distributing platforms, which in their libraries do not systematically classify the TV show as Italian, presenting it instead as the American version of “Soulmate” (Figures 3, 4). This phenomenon is described by Gilardi *et al.* (2018: 221-222) as “localisation,” that is a common practice used by Chinese platforms to market international TV series and engage local audiences by means of cultural analogies or proxies. Bridging differences goes hand in hand with other features Chinese streaming services have at their disposal to promote content: audience feedback such as likes and dislikes, number of views, audience rating of the series and/or episodes, audience comments, and the integration of user-generated content (Gilardi *et al.* 2018: 219). This “engagement-based” strategy also includes the “bullet screen” (*danmu* 弹幕) function, that is a unique interacting activity allowing viewers to communicate by leaving comments that then flow on the screen as in a social platform (Zhang 2019: 235). Thus, it can be argued that the way in which “My Brilliant Friend” is promoted and viewed on Chinese streaming platforms clearly shows the level of manipulation the product undergoes through local distribution and consumption (Figure 5).

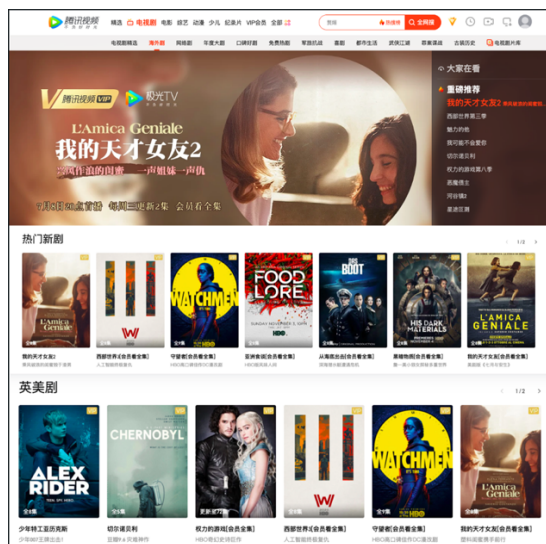


Figure 3. Screenshot of the Tencent library.



我的天才女友[会员看全集]
美剧版《七月与安生》

Figure 4. Cover of “My Brilliant Friend” in the Tencent library.



Figure 5. Screenshot of a user-generated video with “bullet screen” comments.

3.2.2.3. Ferrante’s international success and the mystery built around the writer

In the Chinese critics’ discourse there is no lack of reference to Ferrante’s international success in terms of global sales and the story becoming the plot for a TV series produced by American giant HBO. The same can be said for the audiences’ discourse, where readers and viewers report parts of articles or interviews praising the “Neapolitan Novels” or “My Brilliant Friend” as world-acclaimed products, refer to the awards and prizes they received, and mention the TV series world premiere at the 75th Venice International Film Festival. As a matter of fact, in the Chinese market a foreign product’s participation in national or international festivals is a sign of prestige which facilitates its local distribution and circulation.⁴

As well, the mystery around the author, which has generated hype globally, is confirmed as an attractive characteristic, with many magazine and newspaper articles discussing Ferrante’s concealed identity (*yishen* 隐身) (e.g., Kang 2019, 2020; 2miao 2020). One newspaper goes as far as specifying that,

⁴ In regard to the film industry, according to Niola (2021), the global circulation of Italian movies can be classified in five typologies: para-television films or TV films; high-grossing films in Italy that have a market only in countries adjacent to Italian culture; festival hits; productions or co-productions with a strong international vocation; and the films for which the remake rights are sold. In this scenario, festival hits enjoy a potential worldwide distribution which confirms the ability to create an “economy of prestige” of national and international high-caliber industry events (Scaglioni 2020: 19). Film festivals are fundamental platforms for the promotion and circulation of audiovisual products between Italy and China too. For instance, in June-July 2018, the Venice Biennale and ANICA (Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche Audiovisive Digitali) opened the first edition of the “From Venice to China—Following the Silk Road” film exhibition, an initiative dedicated to the presentation of a selection of Italian films from the Venice International Film Festival to the Chinese public (Ruperto 2020: 18; IIC Pechino n.d.).

although it is very plausible that Elena Ferrante is a “she” (ta 她), the author could also be a “he” (ta 他; Kang 2019). This is reflected in the audiences’ discourse, where Elena Ferrante is often described as “the most famous anonymous writer’ in contemporary Italy” (post from Weixin 2019).

Besides eliciting curiosity, in the Chinese context the absence of an empirical author poses a challenge to authorship and authenticity in relation to marketing strategies. In this regard, a number of articles published in the *Wenhui bao*, *Jiefang ribao* 解放日报, and *Zhongguo xinwen chubian guangdian bao* 中国新闻出版广电报 discuss the publication in 2019 of Italian writer Massimiliano Virgilio’s novels *Più male che altro* (2008), *Arredo casa e poi m’impicco* (2014), and *L’americano* (2017). The publishing house—Baihuazhou Literary and Art Press—opted for the Chinese titles *Nabulesi de yinghuo* 那不勒斯的萤火 (literally, “The Firefly of Naples”), *Nabulesi de tiankong* 那不勒斯的天空 (literally, “The Sky of Naples”), and *Nabulesi de liming* 那不勒斯的黎明 (literally, “The Dawn of Naples”), which uniformly contain the toponym *Nabulesi* 那不勒斯 (Naples), and uncoincidentally distributed the three books under the label *Nabulesi san bu qu* 那不勒斯三部曲 (“Neapolitan Trilogy;” Zhou 2019; Shi 2019a, 2019b; Xu 2019). Attempting to produce an “exact copy” (*zhuanglian* 撞脸) of the “Neapolitan Novels,” this marketing strategy appears to leverage the winning formula “Neapolitan series” (*Nabulesi xilie* 那不勒斯系列) to exploit the advantages derived from the online “popular search query” (*resou* 热搜) (Xu 2019).

4. Concluding remarks

Attempting to contribute to studies on the globalization of Italian media products and their cultural impact abroad, the present paper has focused on the analysis of the circulation and reception of the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” in the PRC. The choice of this case study stems from the great success achieved by these products globally and in China, where Elena Ferrante has developed a cult following. By looking at the products’ “life cycle” in the Chinese market and the related discourses generated therein, the analysis has highlighted how this success is supported by elements which in some respects follow the global trend but also show specific characteristics. De Rogatis (2018) presented four frames contributing to Ferrante’s international success among which the present study has considered the first two—Naples and a new female identity. The identification of four main factors conveying the “Ferrante phenomenon” to the Chinese audience and the analysis of the Chinese critics’ and the audiences’ discourses confirm the validity of these two frames additionally showing how the

portray of a city in evolution and the feminine subjectivity which develops therein are perceived as being strongly intertwined—a combination that particularly stands out as a main contributor to the positive reception of Ferrante among the Chinese public.

Focusing on the discourses analyzed, generally speaking, the critics’ discourse explores the “Ferrante phenomenon,” the literary qualities of the “Neapolitan Novels,” the editorial and media operations aimed at launching the books and TV show, and the major themes surrounding the story (e.g., female writing, feminism, emancipation). The audiences’ discourse, on the other hand, is multifaceted and not clearly differentiated in relation to the tetralogy and TV series as many readers are viewers, and vice versa. Thus, the distinction between the editorial and the audiovisual product seems blurred, highlighting how their cross-media nature is a key factor contributing to their positive reception in the PRC. As well, because Naples becomes a symbolic archaic and modern reality, distances are shortened between the regional capital of Campania and other cities in the world or China which in recent times have undergone considerable changes, making the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” products capable of crossing borders and to which many people can relate. This confirms the definition of Elena Ferrante’s books and Saverio Costanzo’s series as successful transnational works of art. Thus, it is not surprising that, should the news of a Chinese-language remake of “My Brilliant Friend” be confirmed, the story will probably be restaged in 1930s Shanghai (Qian 2022).

By highlighting the identity of the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend” as both Italian cultural products and translational products, the promotional and marketing operations and the critics’ and the audiences’ discourses can be positioned in between a local and a global logic. On the one hand, the Italian cultural specificity is recognized, in particular for the books; on the other, the TV series is appreciated also because it involves HBO. Overall, the products are presented as targeting a supranational community and as such the public experience them as conveyors of shared emotions and values. Additionally, the findings confirm that in the Chinese context, Ferrante’s international fame is portrayed and perceived as a guarantee of quality, a factor which—together with the author’s mysterious profile—stimulates interest and plays a relevant role in the Chinese success of the tetralogy and TV series.

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Natalia Francesca Riva is a fixed-term researcher and assistant professor of Chinese language and culture at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Brescia. She holds a PhD in History, Institutions, and International Relations of Modern and Contemporary Asia and Africa obtained from the University of Cagliari (Italy). She has lectured in Chinese language and culture as well as history of contemporary China at several Italian universities. From 2020 to 2022, she participated in the PRIN 2017 “Italian Na(rra)tives: the international circulation of the brand-Italy in the media” as a postdoc researcher. Her studies focus on the analysis of China’s cultural strategies, soft power and discursive strategies, and political and media discourses. She also engages in Chinese-Italian fiction and non-fiction translation.

Natalia can be contacted at: nataliafrancesca.riva@unicatt.it