

Mobility and identity in Chinese Italian writings

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The goal of this essay is to create an analytical framework for Sino-Italian literary production that accounts for the diverse patterns of mobility from China to Italy. To achieve this, I integrate theories from mobility studies (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007) and Sinophone studies (Shih 2007, 2010, 2011). Cresswell (2006) defines "mobility" as the combined effect of movement, meaning, and power. Adopting this perspective encourages us to account for the diversity within mobilities from China to Italy. This approach broadens the focus on Chinese Italian writings, which are not exclusively produced by people drawn by low-skilled labor opportunities—a group that has been the primary focus of academic attention so far. Conversely, Sinophone studies, as developed by Shih Shu-Mei, encourage interpreting cultural texts by people of Chinese origin permanently residing in Italy as place-based articulations, regardless of the languages used. In the essay, I analyze three Italy-based Sinophone authors: Deng Yuehua, an immigrant worker writer; Gao Liang, a diasporic writer associated with a cosmopolitan elite; and Heng Zhi, a liuxuesheng poet. These three case studies represent different ways of living across the People's Republic of China and Italy. By examining their works, the paper highlights the impact of their specific conditions of mobility (both physical and symbolic) on them and, consequently, on their writings.

Keywords: Mobility studies, Sinophone studies, Sino-Italian literature, China-Italy cultural contact, Chinese Italian cultural production.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I combine mobility studies theory (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007) and Sinophone studies theory (Shih 2007; 2010; 2011) to create a general frame of interpretation for Sino-Italian cultural production. New mobility studies define movement as constitutive of economic, social and political relations. Bearing this perspective in mind allows us to foreground the impact of movements of people from China to Italy in all their manifestations, thus

refocusing the attention on a more articulated group than solely those who were attracted to Italy by the availability of low-skilled labour, which so far has been the only flow that elicited extensive attention from academia. On the other hand, Sinophone studies, intended in the perspective developed by Shih Shu-Mei, encourage us to interpret cultural texts by people of Chinese origin permanently living in Italy as place-based articulations, regardless of the languages in which they are expressed, thus rejecting the diaspora model that conceives this production exclusively in relation to a global overseas Sinosphere centered in continental China (Bernards 2016). Combining the two perspectives helps us create new and fruitful frameworks for the analysis of the cultural production by people with Chinese cultural backgrounds based in Italy.

The work of Tim Cresswell (2006; 2010) enriches the new mobility studies debate by focusing on representations. Cresswell foregrounds the role of representations in the research on mobility to explore the transdisciplinary potential of the new mobility studies paradigm by drawing on theories from the social sciences as well as from geography, cultural and philosophical studies. For this research, he relies on empirical methodologies and on cultural and representational sources. Merriman and Pearce take Cresswell's suggestions further and inaugurate a sub-current within mobility studies that pays particular attention to the contribution that the humanities can bring into play. In their influential article "Mobility and the Humanities" (Merriman and Pearce 2017), the two scholars assert the importance of the role of the arts and the humanities in investigating mobilities. They maintain that the analysis of textual representations can fill in significant gaps left by methodologies more typical of the social sciences. In the most general terms, what characterizes the mobility study turn is "prioritising the specificities of mobility itself, and mark a contrast with studies in which mobility is treated as an incidental part of a wider phenomenon" (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016: 4). Inspired by this innovative way to look at migration flows and cultural production, in the next pages I present different kinds of people's mobility from China to Italy and show how their intersection forms constellations of mobility and opens contact zones where the inspiration for cultural production originates. Then I focus on the cultural production that emerges from these phenomena. By selecting literary texts as the basis of my analysis, I move on to provide a general introduction to Sino-Italian writings and then I outline different texts produced by people of Chinese origin that reached Italy through distinct, yet consistent, patterns of mobility. In highlighting different textual typologies, I demonstrate how the mobility lens can foreground aspects of this production that would be otherwise overlooked if more conventional frames of analysis are used.

2. What types of mobility from China affect Italy?

According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, Chinese citizens who live legally in Italy on a permanent basis are slightly more than 300,000¹. The largest proportion of such population, estimated at around 70-80%, is constituted by adults who came to Italy from specific areas of Southeast Zhejiang, especially from Wenzhou city and its surroundings. This specific mobility has rather homogenous traits that determine how the Chinese population in Italy is perceived by the rest of the society. The migration flow from southern Zhejiang to Europe started at the beginning of the XX century (Benton 2011) and is considered to have formed the first numerically significant Chinese communities around the continent. Even though some movement from Zhejiang to Italy was recorded in the first half of the XX century (Cologna 2020), it is from the 1980s that an uninterrupted and growing stream of people connected this area to Italy. The reasons for this migration were mostly related to the desire to achieve a better economic status, sometimes to emerge from conditions of poverty, and at other times as a form of investment. This search to better one's luck is more viable to people who have a relative in Italy since they can legally be reunited with them. As this population grew in number it became evident that, compared to other migrated groups, Chinese in Italy tended to set up independent businesses and to hire other Chinese nationals by inviting them from China, although illegal immigration was also a reality, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Overall, these specificities shaped the Chinese presence in Italy as a group with a very distinctive entrepreneurial agenda, that could accommodate a virtually infinite number of new immigrants who would not need to know the host language to work. While these conditions allowed a specific group of immigrants to play a certain role within the Italian entrepreneurial landscape, they also created the conditions for social and cultural marginalization of these new immigrants, who had little to no contact with society outside their workplace (Pedone 2013). Most people of Chinese origin who choose to become Italian citizens participate in similar patterns of mobility. People born or schooled on Italian territory must reach the age of 18 years old before they can apply for citizenship. Since PRC does not recognize dual citizenship, many would rather keep their Chinese citizenship despite having spent most of their life in Italy. As a result, it is not easy to define the socio-cultural specificities of those who choose Italian citizenship, but they should total around 15,000 units (Istat) and most of them probably belong to Zhejiangese families who followed the migration path just presented. Elaborating on this premise, and considering that the described migratory project rests heavily on the collaboration of all members of the migrated family, we can see

¹ An exact population of 307.038 as at of 1st January 1, 2023, according to Istat (Italian National Institute of Statistics <http://dati.istat.it/>).

how children of these immigrants still share with their parents the overall experience of mobility in its social and cultural implications without necessarily having experienced the physical migration themselves. Besides those families who arrived in Italy to work in specific Chinese-run businesses, there is also a modest group of Chinese professionals, intellectuals, and people who work in social mediation, the media, education, and in Chinese and Italian Institutions. They usually have an overall better command of Italian because they are more motivated to learn the language in order to work with Italians and often because of their involvement within projects in the local society and culture. They come as single individuals and head from different parts of China. They also tend to be less mobile compared to the Zhejiangese entrepreneurs and workers.

While usually official data only accounts for families permanently residing in Italy, there are also other important flows of people from China to Italy. Following a mobility studies angle, I intend to include these flows here and frame Chinese-Italian mobility on a new scale by also including temporary visitors who nonetheless leave signs in the cultural landscape. The other two meaningful mobilities of people from China that concern Italy are the mobility of Chinese college students and that of Chinese tourists. According to Unitalia, in 2018/19 there were 15,000 Chinese students in Italian universities, making it by far the most represented non-European nationality. Suffice it to say that the second nationality, Iranian, was represented by “just” around 4000 units. As indicated by the two specific institutional programs, Marco Polo Programme and Turandot Programme, the Italian government is actively facilitating the access of Chinese students to Italian academies, especially in the field of the arts and music (the Turandot project is specifically designed for these areas). On the other hand, while some Chinese students are genuinely attracted to Italy’s excellence in some specific fields, such as fashion design, music and art, there are also many Chinese families who choose foreign education as an investment in their children who are perceived as not capable of building a good academic career in their homeland. Since studying abroad is quite an expensive enterprise, the average socio-economical background of Chinese students in Italy is usually middle to high class. Generally speaking, these students share an urban social extraction and come from different parts of China and thus do not have specific immigrant communities of reference in Italy. In a way, they are farther from entrepreneur/worker migrants from Zhejiang and closer to the other smaller percentage of Chinese individual professionals, since they both do not belong to specific local cultures that are well represented on the Italian territory. Their socio-cultural and economical background is higher than the average Chinese migrant to Italy and a relevant percentage of these students stay in Italy for up to several years or even decide to overstay their degree and work in Italy after graduation. This dynamic group is also active on a cultural level. The last representative typology of mobility from China to Italy

that I include in this excursus is that of tourists. In 2019, before the emergence of Covid-19, Italy had reached three million annual visits by Chinese tourists.² Being motivated by leisure, their experience of mobility is different and is framed as a very short and superficial contact with the Italian society and culture, accessible only to selected people who have the economic (but also cultural) means to invest in such experience. With their numbers, however, these are people who have an impact on the Italian country on many levels; they bring wealth and interact with the society, but they also produce cultural expressions, such as travel literature, blogs, vlogs, memoirs, reports, and other documents around their mobility experiences.

Some of these mobilities intersect and sometimes overlap; for example, at times the students become tourists themselves or choose to live permanently in Italy and work for Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs or their descendants. This network of paths and trajectories, in all its complexity, is well anchored to specific historical, social, political, and cultural conditions concerning China and Italy at this specific moment in time. This set of mobility, or constellation of mobilities as Cresswell calls them (Cresswell 2010), thus, constitutes an object of study firmly located within a well-defined network of power relations. The cultural production that comes from the people involved in these mobilities is highly influenced by their empirical experience of mobility and by the representations connected to them. In the next section, I offer a closer look at this cultural production and I propose examples of how mobility studies can contribute to textual analysis.

3. Different mobilities, different writings

The most active Chinese population in Italy in terms of creativity is likely that of students. In fact, this group not only has a socio-cultural background that allows for a more evident involvement in the consumption and production of cultural items, but it also often chooses Italy specifically to study art and music. Their participation in the Italian cultural landscape becomes more tangible in the fields of visual art, through the opening of specialized exhibitions, for example, and the performing arts, especially through the engagement with Italian conservatories and music academies. In this respect, the Turandot program, which welcomes Chinese students who want to study the arts in Italy, plays an important role. As for literary texts, travel writings by Chinese tourists in Italy require a separate analysis due to the specificities of this mobility, which is characterized, among other things, by a short

² According to Enit (*Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo*), in 2019 about 3 million Chinese citizens have slept at least one night in an Italian touristic facility <https://www.enit.it/it/il-ritorno-dei-turisti-cinesi-in-italia>.

period of permanence in the visited country. I will concentrate instead only on people of Chinese origin who stay in Italy for longer periods, highlighting on one side how their production is rooted in the Italian contexts, and, on the other, how it shows different features according to the different paths of mobility or immobility experienced by the authors.

I defined Sino-Italian literature as the repertoire of creative writings by people of Chinese cultural background who live in Italy long-term³, that is, those who participate consistently in Italian society (Pedone 2013). While it does not represent the entire literary production that spurs from mobility between China and Italy, since it excludes travel writings, it is a very important part of it. I focus on these writings as I am interested in how different cultural systems interact in them. In fact, I assume that, being created under specific conditions of mobility (or post-mobility in the case of children of Chinese migrants), this literature is always influenced by contact and interaction among different systems of values and cultural traditions, regardless of its language or the readership it addresses. Even accounts by Chinese authors who live permanently in Italy that are written in Chinese and published in the PRC for a Chinese readership, for instance, are shaped by the life experience of having lived outside China and inside Italian society. By embracing the concept of Sinophone developed by Shih Shu-Mei (Shih 2011), I do not consider this literary production as some form of Chinese literature, neither do I accept for it a simplistic definition such as that of diaspora literature, which homogenizes diverse local productions and stresses solely their connection to the Chinese central tradition. On the other hand, the reason why I include writings expressed in Italian, both by native speakers and by non-native speakers, does not stem from the assumption that ethnicity is in any way informing their content as the concept of *huaren wenxue* (literature of ethnic Chinese) seems to imply⁴. In fact, the main reason why I find it useful to include writings by people of Chinese cultural background born or raised in Italy within the repertoire of Sino-Italian literature is that, at present, this production is very much influenced by the tangible circumstances around the pathways of mobility from China to Italy of the families of its authors. Moreover, since in Italian public discourse the Chinese minority is depicted as homogeneously carrying specific qualities (Zhang 2019), regardless of the different histories of incorporation into Italian society, people of Chinese cultural background in Italy are exposed to a

³ According to the European Council, long-term residents are those who live permanently in the country for at least 5 years <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/>.

⁴ The term *huaren* is usually translated as ethnic Chinese, meaning people of Chinese heritage who live outside China, regardless of their nationality. The term has been often criticized. For a discussion on what the term includes and what leaves out see Shih 2010. For a broader discussion about Chinese identity overseas and literary production see, among many others, Bernards 2016.

similar strong culturalist attitude in all of the main social domains. Consequently, the written production of this specific sub-group of people centers around issues of identity construction that are useful to analyze in continuity with similar issues raised by other groups of Sino-Italian authors.

4. Sino-Italian writings and labour migration

The first evidence that emerges when we take into consideration the repertoire of Sino-Italian writings is the fact that the texts by those who arrived in Italy through privileged patterns of mobility greatly outnumber those made by the group of low-skilled labourers. This shows that even if many people of Chinese origin living today in Italy arrived from Southern Zhejiang to be employed in enterprises run by Chinese managers, this group is almost not represented among Sino-Italian writers. The reason for this absence is understandable if a few important factors that characterize Chinese labour migration to Italy are taken into consideration. One important factor can be linguistic. In fact, the Chinese migrated group is, in comparison with the other largest nationalities in Italy, among the least competent in Italian. This is due to the fact that the newcomers are immediately employed within businesses where Chinese is the only language in use. Moreover, while other groups of migrants in many cases have a certain competence in a European/colonial language, for Chinese there is no such linguistic foundation. Nonetheless, this group is not very productive in Chinese either. It can then be assumed that the working hours do not leave time or energy to dedicate to writing, and that the motivation for migration is an important influence on how these individuals choose to be more or less literary creative. While cultural mobility, like that of students, implies creativity to some extent, labour mobility is mainly meant to better one's economic status and it is in that direction that most of the individual's efforts will be devoted. Lastly, the lower socio-cultural extraction of labour migrants probably plays a role in the perception of themselves as potential published writers.

In Italy, Deng Yuehua 邓跃华 is probably the most prolific writer who arrived searching for low-skilled labour. He exclusively published online and/or in Sinophone Italian press. He wrote several novels which were published in instalments, short stories, essays, and poems. All his production revolves around the life of Chinese migrants in Italy and Europe and some of it is autobiographical or inspired by real-life events. While these texts could be framed as minority literature, by writing in Chinese and addressing primarily a Chinese readership, he practically erases the vertical power imbalance implicit in the minority-majority relation. The result is a literature that is strongly nostalgic and mostly centered on China. Nonetheless, its most significant value is given by the fact that it explores the life circumstances of this very representative part of Chinese mobility to Italy. The

following is a poem by Deng Yuehua translated into Italian and published in the bilingual Chinese/Italian magazine *Cina in Italia*, in 2010:

Those who come back home
See the red lanterns hanging from the windows.
They sing together, one after the other, the songs of their hometown.
Be blessed, my beloved.
As deep as the scars of their wandering are,
Those who come back home
Always have a warm heart.
Those who go back home
Reunite in their homes and fill glasses with good wine.
Let's have a toast, my beloved.
As cold as the world of the perennial drifting is,
Those who go back home,
Always have a warm heart (Deng 2010: 41).

A similarly nostalgic and melancholic tone is used by another worker, Jin Zicai 金子才, who also used to publish his work in local Chinese language press in Italy and won a writing contest in 2016 with the short lyrical prose *Voglio tornare a casa* (I want to go home). The following is a short excerpt from that text:

I want to go home. These are the first words I uttered eight years ago, when I had just arrived in Italy. When I realized that this place was a thousand miles far away from the paradise I had imagined: luxurious buildings, gold and marvels, I wanted to go home. [...] Wastepaper (residence permit), oh wastepaper (money), the 21st century belongs to China, the blood spilling from the native soil must flow back to the native land to stop its madly boiling. Because that is the place where I was born and raised, like a fish in the water (Jin 2006: 19).

Besides these quite sporadic cases of writings by lower-class workers, their children's textual production, which is mostly expressed in Italian, can also be representative of this kind of mobility. Even though the life experiences of the so-called second generations differ from that of their parents, these writers are very well aware of the circumstances of Chinese migration of lower-class individuals, the hardship and the racism they faced and their pattern of economical emancipation experienced in Italy. Their writings show awareness of the unfair treatment that low-income migrants often receive in Italian society and blame the same society that they feel part of. The following is a passage from *Cuore di seta* (Heart of Silk), the autobiography of actor and writer Shi Yang Shi 石阳. Here the author

recalls one of his first summers in Italy, when, still a child, he worked as a dishwasher in a tourist hotel on a Southern Italian beach:

The owner of the hotel was a short dark man, always wearing sunglasses, with an attitude resembling that of a mafia boss. And maybe he was one. [...] His wife was a bit taller than him, bleached blond hair, she wore high heels but had masculine manners. Their children – two boys and a girl, the elder – felt in charge, at least as much as their parents.

As soon as my mother and I arrived, we were asked to hand in our passports.

“I’m gonna keep these” said the man rudely, while grabbing the documents. “I will give them back to you when the season is over” added. And that was the end of it, even though I had not even finished translating to my mother.

Right, at the end of the season...only then we realized that we had been taken hostage.

In that moment my mother only said: “Yes”, also because she knew her child was 12 years old and according to Italian laws he was obviously not allowed to work.

I, on the other hand, was told to pretend that I was 16.

Here we go again, I thought, pretending once again to be something I am not” (Shi 2017: 82).

5. Sino-Italian writings and privileged migration

As anticipated, it is mostly participants in privileged patterns of mobility from China to Italy who publish their creative writings. Their point of view is not representative of the majority of Chinese living in Italy. In fact, this literary production is often aimed at counterbalancing the allegedly poor image of lower-class Chinese workers in the eyes of Italians, which is why it gives importance to Chinese high culture in its content. The particular status of the majority of Chinese published writers in Italy makes their work hardly comparable to what is usually referred to as post-colonial literature, or even minority or migrant literature. While certain texts from historically marginalized literatures—such as post-colonial and diasporic narratives—have been increasingly absorbed into the mainstream, it remains the case that Chinese authors in Italy are still published by marginal, independent publishing houses that specialize in immigrant writers. The irony is that these same authors do not write from the perspective of typical immigrants; this group is composed of people who did not migrate by taking advantage of family reunions or work visas, but because of a variety of personal reasons. Very often they are people who work in education or in the media. Similarly to what we have seen for lower-class writers and their children, autobiography and autobiographical references are also favoured by these writers.

Another typology of text that is very common among these writers is that of the cultural essay, something that could be close to the idea of Chinese *sui bi*: jottings on various aspects of life. Very often, these authors write short memories or reflections on specific cultural aspects of China or Italy,

including some details from their own life. The tone can be didactic, as if the goal was to inform the reader about unknown facts of which the author has a particularly deep knowledge. This kind of writing is sometimes included in wider works, such as memoirs or reports. One of the more influential among this typology of authors is Hu Lanbo 胡兰波. She moved to France in the 1980s to study in Paris and later fell in love with an Italian man and moved to Rome, where she has been living since the early 1990s. She has rewritten and published her autobiography four times, two in China and two in Italy (Hu 1993; 2009; 2012; 2015). An intellectual, writer and journalist, Hu Lanbo runs the bilingual magazine *Cina in Italia* and a publishing house with the same name. In her works, the aforementioned recurring autobiographical elements intertwine with cultural explanations, folk references and so on.

April 5th for Chinese is the day of the dead, also known as Qingming, and our heart goes back to hug the loved ones who are not here anymore. The spring breeze that caresses our skin brings a bit of warmth also in our hearts.

The memory of those who left us is affectionately preserved within us and when we think about them we are saddened that the human being is not immortal, I do not know if heaven exists, nor I have an idea if hell does. But is it really that important? Good people will always be with us and will deserve our respect forever; as for the evil ones, we do not care if they went to hell or not, they are dead and they cannot hurt anybody anymore. In the day of the dead, we can bring some flowers on the tombstone of those who still live in our hearts, or we can open our heart as a blooming flower and get closer to them in our thoughts: they will feel it for sure. After all, this is the beauty of holidays and of the day of the dead in particular. In the west, the day for remembering the dead is November the second... Personally, I think the Chinese choice is better, as they celebrate this festival in the spring when flowers bloom and the weather is milder: in this period even cemeteries are less sad and desolate (Hu 2019: 140).

The author assumes a position that is equal to that of the Italian reader and does not appear subaltern in any way. On the contrary, the author often adopts a teaching tone, which can be conveyed through the reference to the authority of Chinese cultural tradition. By calling out the status of Chinese cultural superiority, these authors claim their role as spokespeople for China more than that of representative of the Chinese Italian population. Other examples of this kind of writing are the books by Zhang Changxiao 张长晓, a Chinese music agent who moved to Italy and whose business consists in the promotion of Italian music to China. He published a book titled *La costellazione del dragone* (“The constellation of the dragon;” Zhang 2020), in which he claims to reveal the secrets of Italian Chinatowns to Italian readers. He also published a book in China, titled *Gaogui de xuezi* 高贵的靴子 (“The precious boot;” Zhang 2018), which, conversely, explains Italian habits and customs to Chinese readers. When the writings are addressed to readers in China, they sometimes adopt a style that borders with that of tourist guides, where the majority of the space is dedicated to descriptions of Italian cultural heritage,

local naturalistic landscapes and references to Italian history. These cultural insights are then accompanied by personal comments or more references to society and contemporary events. While this kind of writing can be found in many books by the aforementioned “privileged” authors of Chinese descent in Italy, they are especially common among people who work in media, such as Wan Zimei 万子美, who wrote *Yidali, Yidali* 意大利, 意大利 (“Italy, Italy;” Wan 2012), and Li Shuman 李叔蔓, a Chinese journalist who published a report of her life in Rome, *Binfen Luoma* 缤纷罗马 (“Colorful Rome;” Li 2002), which is rich with these descriptions. Overall, it is a style that is often used by authors of Chinese origin who make references to Chinese or European high culture to frame their mobility within a culturalist perspective while avoiding references to power unbalances between Chinese and Italians in Italy. A sort of counterpart to these tourist accounts can be traced in the many works that focus on Chinese traditional folk culture, often expressed through the retelling of old Chinese myths and legends. While in both cases the role played by publishing houses in preferring this kind of content can play a strong role in encouraging authors to choose these styles and contents, the same dynamic observed for touristic tales described above applies to these sometimes hyper-exoticized folk tales. In fact, in these works authority is granted to the authors on account of their ethnic background, just as it is given to them in the tourist descriptions on account of their living in Italy. However, these writings do not touch on any real social aspect implied in the mobility from China to Italy and seem to be a safe and socially accepted (or at least granted) way to take the word in the Italian editorial establishment. Some of the works by Mao Wen 毛文 (Mao 1992; 2001) and Yang Xiaping 杨夏萍 (Yang 2003; 2008) are in this vein.

In the written repertoire of this group of people, there are also a few non-autobiographical novels. A theme that is frequently encountered in these purely fictional novels is that of the so-called intercultural romantic relations, most of the time between a Chinese woman and an Italian man. While in the case of literary representations of such relationships in autobiographies like those of Hu Lanbo (2012), Shi Yang Shi (2017), and Long Santiao 龙三条 (2010), a former student presented further down, the cultural difference appears to be more of an asset than a problem, fictional characters seem to struggle with and sometimes succumb to intercultural romantic relations. Among the most significant examples of this type of stories is *Yuan jia Ouzhou* 远嫁欧洲 (“European marriage”) by Zhai Ran 翟然 (Zhai 2000), which tells the story of a Chinese woman who gets married to an Italian man and who ends up being a succubus of his mother since he is the typical cliché of the Italian mama’s boy. Another example could be that of *Qing chen* 轻尘 (“Light dust”) by Gao Liang 高粱 (2014), where an Italian married man is unfaithful and plays with the emotions of the Chinese protagonist. Another difficult relationship is the one created by Yang Xiaping in *Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia* (“As two

butterflies flying on the Great Wall;” Yang 2011), in which the relationship between a girl of Chinese origin born and raised in Italy and a Chinese boy who arrived in Italy from China later in life is represented as very difficult. The most famous Sino-Italian author, Bamboo Hirst, describes the love between her Chinese mother and her Italian father as problematic in her novel “Blue China” (Hirst 2005). Although each work differs in many respects, they often indulge in cultural stereotypes and simplifications. To have an idea of how these encounters are presented, in the following excerpt from *Qing chen*, Gianni, an Italian married man, takes advantage of a casual meeting with Xiao Yu, the protagonist he already had an affair with, to feel her up:

Until one evening, outside the Wangxiang Tower gate, Gianni tried to wrap his arms around Xiao Yu’s thin waist. Not only did she not dodge, but she leaned lightly against his body, turning her face flushed so as not to meet his gaze. Gianni was gaining ground, his fingers widened, starting to gently caress her waist. The ring that he never took off began to press on her body. Only then, Xiao Yu turned away, freeing herself from his grip.

“Ah, I’m so sorry, forgive my recklessness.” He smiled, but he was not embarrassed.

“You always have a sweet mouth, as if it were covered with honey” Xiao Yu said softly with a slightly spiteful look.

“Everyone likes to hear nice things, especially women, are you an exception?”

“You apologize all the time, but are you always so nice to everyone?”

Xiao Yu glanced towards the brightly lit room, but fortunately there was no one around.

“If you allow me, or force me, I’ll stop being so polite.” Gianni held her close.

“We are old friends now, it would be really strange to continue with the pleasantries”

“Old friends? Is that all? I really hoped that ...” (Gao 2014: 95-96).

6. Sino-Italian writings and student migration

Students and particularly former students are the other group who produces literature. Since that of students is also privileged mobility, it is not surprising that it shows an inclination towards creative expression, despite being often a transitory presence and a recent one compared to that of lower-class workers. The works of former students are influenced by their cosmopolitanism and present traits of transculturalism. In general terms, they treat cultural confrontation by creating a synthesis rather than implying a distance or a necessary conflict. As an example of this production, we can refer to Heng Zhi 衡之, an ex-student of economics at the University of Florence, who after his degree moved permanently to Italy and published a book of poems in Taiwan titled *Feichang mie* 非常灭 (“Eternal cessation;” Heng 2018). In his poems, he mixes elements of Chinese and European classical traditions, creating verses that are inspired by both cultural canons, like the following poem, which contains references to Christianity and to Taoism:

Under the tainted glass

Noble primitiveness

Pours out from the blood on the breast of Christ.

Red blooded wine

Reverberates the tinkling of the translucent cup.

Through the cracks in the ash-gray sky

The wind gusts, and dives violently

Into the void of the soul.

The primitive nobleness, however, lightly

Smiles

And thinks: the soul can be yours, but the wine is mine (Heng 2018: 11).

Similarly, the illustrated short stories published in the UK by Chen Xi 陈曦 (2015), previously mentioned with her alias Long Santiao, unfold in similar transcultural landscapes. Chen Xi was an ex-student in the UK when she moved to Italy to marry an Italian. Another interesting case is that of Yang Yi (2021; 2022), also a former student, who published two graphic novels in Italy that, although taking place in China, seem to belong to a global comic production on the hardships of teenage and school life. Her work is more influenced by classic Japanese manga than Chinese or Italian traditional cultures and speaks to readers of any ethnic background. In conclusion, the literary production of ex-students seems less focused on cultural contrast and more transcultural, and it appeals to a readership that is determined more by age and socio-cultural status than by specific cultural backgrounds.

7. Conclusions

With around 300,000 legal long-term residents, Italy's population of Chinese citizens is the largest in Europe, followed by that of Spain and Germany⁵ (Italian Ministry of Labour). If we also consider shorter-term residents and visitors from China, such as international college students and tourists, along with individuals born to Chinese parents who later obtained Italian citizenship, the number grows significantly and allows us to seriously take into consideration the impact of the mobility from China to Italy, not only on the social and economic dimension but also on the cultural sphere.

⁵ Source: Italian Ministry of Labour. Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, Comunità cinese in Italia: Rapporto annuale sulla presenza dei migranti 2021, www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it.

The majority of Chinese nationals in Italy arrive from Southeast Zhejiang and are attracted to Italy by the availability of low-skilled labour in small enterprises run by other Zhejiangese entrepreneurs. While this group occupies the great majority (well over 80% of the total) of Chinese citizens in Italy, it is not very productive in terms of literary creation. On the other hand, a numerically marginal élite of Chinese migrants who arrive in Italy from other parts of China and with the most various motivations regularly publish their writings, both in China and in Italy. Former students who remained in Italy after attending university are also relatively productive, even though they represent a more contemporary mobility compared to the previous generation in the 1990s that arrived mostly as a wave of migrant workers. As a result, the repertoire of Sino-Italian writings today is not representative of what the majority of Chinese in Italy feel. On the contrary, it seems to react to what the majority of Chinese in Italy came to represent in Chinese and Italian public discourse, by proposing lengthy descriptions of Chinese and Italian high culture, by producing anthropological reports on the different societies or by imagining cultural conflicts within the private sphere.

An analysis of the works produced by Chinese in Italy must take into account the specific dynamics of their mobility and the power dynamics involved in their speaking. In fact, only by considering the specificities of their mobility path, such as their motivation to reach Italy, their access to the editorial establishment in China and Italy, the cultural and political discourses around them in the two countries and many others, can the analysis of their cultural production be informed enough so as to foreground aspects that can further enrich our understanding of the several kinds of the contribution of minorities to contemporary Italian culture and society.

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