

## The state of the art of Chinese studies in a slice of the “All-under-Heaven” world

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This miscellaneous volume offers a general overview of the state of the art of Chinese Studies in Italy. It cannot but be a partial image. Nevertheless, it accounts for an extensive range of topics in which Italian scholars—mainly young scholars—are involved. This is a signal of great vitality, but it also brings to the forefront some critical issues that may negatively affect the development of research in Chinese studies in our country. The criteria to evaluate the scientific production of young scholars to co-opt them into the academic career are not flexible enough: they do not promote an interdisciplinary approach and are not fully adapted to new research interests or research needs emerging in an increasingly complex world. It is evident that research cannot and should not simply follow the trends dictated by the urgency of the times, but at the same time, it cannot be deaf to such needs.

Chinese Studies in Italy are certainly mature enough to engage with other disciplines and research fields without any feelings of inferiority, paving the way for future research paths that can benefit from diverse disciplinary expertise and foster new approaches and perspectives. However, we cannot fail to consider that this new approach must also be adopted when evaluating scholarly works during the selection processes to enrol new scholars. It should be possible to assess the scientific output of researchers—particularly young scholars—in a consistent manner beyond disciplinary boundaries. Unfortunately, this is not very easy today, and it does not appear easy to achieve even considering some possible changes that might be introduced in the future. How far considering interdisciplinarity as a positive element is often left to the sensitivity and discretion of individual scholar-evaluators in the absence of clearly defined criteria. Publishing a work of good scientific value in a prestigious academic journal that is (apparently) outside the field of Chinese Studies can be disadvantageous when submitting one's work for evaluation by commissioners in a selection process, and it should not be the case. On the one hand, this can disadvantage young researchers who are more open to an interdisciplinary approach; on the other hand, it can make it difficult for universities to select profiles that adequately meet their teaching and scientific needs.

The studies in this volume undoubtedly demonstrate the breadth of research interests within the field of Chinese Studies in Italy, together with a certain courage among younger researchers to navigate without being overly intimidated by the formal barriers that hinder interdisciplinarity. We must all be

aware that interdisciplinarity brings with it the risk of a too-comprehensive horizontal approach that may compromise sufficient vertical depth in analysis. At the same time, however, the complexity of reality shows us that, in the realm of research, the path of interdisciplinarity must be pursued with increasing determination.

If such proof were still needed, this volume could demonstrate the disappearance of the ‘old-fashioned sinologist,’ from whom, at least by society (though less so by the academic world), a 360-degree understanding of China was once expected. This is undoubtedly a sign of the field's maturity and a evidence of the significant progress made in recent decades.

However, a new risk looms in the background: China is now a critical player on the international stage. Its importance continually prompts us to engage in new reflections on issues we are not always accustomed to addressing, but face almost daily due to the country's growing importance, undeniable dynamism, and the increasingly inevitable and intricate intertwining of its destiny with our own.

All this is stimulating and can even be intellectually exciting. Still, it risks creating a new type of scholar who, once again, becomes a ‘jack of all trades’—not in terms of his/her knowledge about China, but rather because he/she venture too boldly into fields of study he/she does not master; such an approach leads inevitably and dangerously to superficiality and imprecision.

We can and must prevent this from happening.

This is not an easy task. As we have emphasised in the past, the study of the Chinese world and the Chinese language belonged to a nebulous realm of Oriental Studies, frequented by a group of odd, happy few. Today, these are no longer niche disciplines, as demonstrated by the inclusion of Chinese in the official curriculum of many high schools. This shift objectively pulls us, as scholars who deal with Chinese Studies, out of a comfort zone populated only by books and study materials and throws them into the midst of contemporary realities, as society often looks to them for answers. Now more than ever, this is one of the responsibilities of the modern scholar, who must always maintain the rigour expected from a scientific approach.

With increasing assertiveness, China seeks to position itself as a global actor offering its values that it deems ‘universally shareable.’ Among the main tasks of a scholar is undoubtedly to understand and explain these values, without this taking on the features of a defense or antagonistic struggle. There are several issues that Chinese and Western scholars disagree on, mainly when dealing with ‘sensitive matters.’ Chinese scholars have been conducting serious reflection on many of them: they all are crucial to the existence of humanity as a whole, from human rights to governance mechanisms that run an increasingly globalised but also increasingly conflict-ridden and unequal world; Chinese and Western scholars’ research and study can lead to different conclusions but also have a lot of starting

points in common. We must undoubtedly begin with what unites us to better understand what divides us and equip ourselves with the scholarly tools necessary to craft new syntheses.

Although in Italy we are perhaps not yet sufficiently attuned to the contributions Chinese scholars are making in this area of scholarship, ‘something is stirring under Heaven,’ as evidenced by the recent Italian translation (2024) of Zhao Tingyang’s thought-provoking work *Tianxiade dangdaixin -Shijiede zhixude shijian yu xiangxiang* 天下的当代性- 世界秩序的实践与想象 (Zhao Tingyang 2016), already translated into English in 2021 as *The Contemporary Relevance of All-under-Heaven: The Practice and Imagination of World Order*, (2016). This book has garnered significant attention from American scholars. Some foundational concepts from which the book develops its theories are shared by many, as it happens, for instance, with its reflections on the notion of ‘world history.’

World history is a dubious concept, for humanity has yet to accomplish ‘taking the world as a world’ (an allusion to Guanzi’s ‘taking tianxia as tianxia’). Therefore ‘the world qua (political) world’ has yet to exist. Under these conditions the idea of world history is nothing more than a kind of misleading fiction. The ‘world’ in which we are living is still only a world in a physical sense, that is as the planet Earth. But we have yet to imagine a world defined by world interests and a world to be shared by all. For this reason the world we are living in, apart from its material substance, has no political identity or political order of being. So until now, when we say ‘world’ it actually only refers to a ‘nonworld.’ In this ‘nonworld’ world that we inhabit, there has hitherto been no universal, shared history. Prior to the modern era, each region had its own version of history (Zhao Tingyang 2021: 183).

However, a deeper mutual understanding is essential, and we can now leverage advanced tools such as AI to bridge linguistic barriers. These powerful resources enable experts in Chinese Studies, as well as scholars across historical, philosophical, social, anthropological, linguistic, and literary disciplines—and even those in the ‘hard sciences’ within the ‘Western world’—to engage in close collaboration, all while incorporating and critically reflecting on the contributions of their Chinese counterparts.

Many of the young scholars contributing to this volume have gained substantial experience through extended periods of study and research in China. This invaluable ‘exposure’ to diverse worlds and worldviews often manifests in the overall balance in which they approach their work and the broader perspective that characterises their methodology.

The volume is organised into seven different sections in an effort to connect texts that are sometimes significantly diverse to a unifying thread. The first one is devoted to various kinds of ‘learners,’ that is, people who have decided to undergo a learning process, both Chinese and Western. The theme of learning is explored through various perspectives: Miriam Castorina presents two Chinese figures who sought inspiration in the West and travelled to Italy in the 1930s, each motivated

by distinct reasons—personal and political for the general Cai Tingkai, and specifically cultural and artistic for the painter Huang Juesi. Both, however, were driven by an interest in the different ethical or aesthetic values offered by societies far removed from their own Chinese context. Alessandro Leopardi brings back to our attention Amedeo Cracco's *Grammatica Italiana*, which, in his opinion, “rapidly fallen into oblivion due to the general hostility of Italian sinologists to its ‘unorthodox’ approach to many problems of Chinese linguistics,” while Arianna Magnani focuses on children's daily education in 17<sup>th</sup> century China as it dealt with in Ming dynasty ‘books of daily use’ (*rigong leishu*, 日供类书).

The section dedicated to contemporary literatures ‘in and out of China’ highlights the challenge of defining which literary works can today be encompassed within the overly narrow framework of ‘Chinese literature.’ The studies by Lavinia Benedetti and Eugenia Tizzano, focusing respectively on Feng Tang and Mo Yan, may be united by a shared reflection on the characteristics of human nature and the inherent drive to transcend its limitations. Both contributions centre on two pivotal authors within the literary landscape of mainland China. Silvia Schiavi and Ludovica Ottaviano focus on a different body of literature written in Chinese but emerging from a cultural context profoundly distinct from mainland China—a contest whose deeply branched cultural roots extend beyond the traditions and heritage of the *dalù*. Taiwan authors draw from diverse experiences, as is well exemplified by the life story of Zhang Dachun within the *juancun* 眷村 (‘soldiers’ villages’) communities of Taiwan during the 1980s. Ji Xian's poetic works analysed by Schiavi also revolve around the theme of the representation and symbolism of *huaixiang* (‘homesickness’), which is profoundly unique to Taiwanese culture and literature. Valentina Pedone examines a body of literature that is, in some sense, also Chinese, as it profoundly reflects the ‘Chineseness’ of its creators, while at the same time extending beyond it. Focusing on Chinese immigrants in Italy who have resided in the country for relatively long periods, Pedone's essay examines a body of literary production that “is rooted in the Italian contexts,” but, at the same time shows different features according to the different paths of mobility or immobility experienced by the authors.

The analytical approach taken by Massimiliano Canale and Alessandro Tosco in their respective essays, hosted in the section of the volume dedicated to ‘Literature in Imperial China,’ benefits in both cases from a perspective that departs from those typically employed in the study of so-called ‘classical Chinese literature.’ Canale, in examining the *ci* poems of Ouyang Xiu and the tension arising from the oscillation of these texts between lofty themes and almost trivial ones, offers a reading that does not ‘separate the wheat from the chaff,’ as is commonly done in Chinese literary criticism. Instead,

adopting a less moralistic stance, he considers the entirety of the great Song intellectual's body of work as the whole and ultimately harmonious expression of a complex personality.

In analysing the works of Xu Wei, a prominent playwright of the Ming dynasty, Tosco focuses mainly on the 'fluctuating identity' of the heroines, primarily expressed through a common device: the concealment of identity achieved by adopting attire suited to the purpose. This type of plot engages with the question of the physical and non-physical traits that are typically expected to define gender and the moral qualities that such traits are presumed to signify—qualities often testified by distinctive physical 'markers.' These narratives also embody the tension between being and appearing. By applying this interpretive lens to 16th-century texts, the analysis highlights the striking modernity of many themes addressed by 'classical' literature, which is sometimes capable of offering insights or interpretative keys to the mystery of human existence—a mystery to which, even today, humanity often seems ill-equipped to respond.

The section dedicated to 'Thought and Religion' brings together the essays of Raissa De Gruttola, Chiara Pette, and Gabriele Tola, which, despite their differences, are unified by the common theme of the 'reception of a text.' This issue encompasses multiple dimensions, some of which are explored in this section. De Gruttola analyses Simone Weil's attempt at 'cultural domestication' in her 'Notebooks' (*Cahiers*), where she draws parallels between concepts from Chinese thought and Christian philosophy. Lexicographical and terminological issues are deeply intertwined with the question of text reception, and these aspects are the focus of Pette's article, which examines translations from Sanskrit to Chinese within the context of Buddhist literature. Although Tola's work does not primarily focus on themes related to the reception of texts, as it provides an analysis of the secondary literature on Xu Guangqi's *Pishishi zhuwang* (關釋氏諸妄 'Confutation of all the absurdities of the Buddha'), it nonetheless opens up intriguing perspectives on the cultural interactions that took place between Chinese converts such as Xu and Western missionaries. These interactions point toward exploring the impact of an author's exposure to cultural and literary traditions—here employing the term 'literary' in its broadest sense—distinct from their own.

For reasons perhaps entirely coincidental, only a few scholars responded to the call for this volume by submitting research in history. We hope that the limited scope of this section is merely due to contingent factors, as a deeper understanding of historical and contemporary China is undoubtedly grounded in a solid foundation of historical research. Federica Cicci addresses a topic that intermingles historical issues with gender analysis, presenting a study focused on women's role within the Chinese Red Cross in humanitarian work, from the War of Resistance against Japan to the Second World War. Tonio Savina focuses on a distinctive aspect of the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) and China's recent history, examining the strategies employed to reconcile the establishment's need to foster national pride by glorifying the launch of the first domestically-produced satellite (1970) with the embarrassment stemming from the fact that this achievement occurred during the Cultural Revolution—a period of recent history that China has yet to confront seriously.

The section titled 'Chinese media facing Chinese and world culture' brings together various contributions that, in different ways, share a focus on media and their presence in modern life, both in China and beyond. Martina Caschera's essay is dedicated to the collaboration between the United States and China in animated film production. Through the analysis of two CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) co-productions, the author argues that "the Sino-American co-production that is US-led (*OtM*) follows Hollywood traditions and established co-production trajectories, while the PRC-led one (*WS*) tends to align more closely with the national official discourse on *guochan* 国产 ('national cultural production'). As is well known, advertising is an integral part of the media and communication landscape, playing a role in shaping and narrating the image of a nation. Building on this premise, Giovanna Puppini's essay on the revival of the iconic White Rabbit candy brand, which dates back to the early decades of the twentieth century, illustrates how the path toward a 'reinvention of tradition,' decisively pursued in Xi Jinping's China, also harnesses the pervasive power of advertising. The television series 'Neapolitan Novels' and 'My Brilliant Friend,' based on Elena Ferrante's novels, and their extraordinary success in China are analyzed in Natalia Riva's essay. Her analysis of 'Neapolitan identity' and an 'epic of female growth' reveals points of convergence in the reception of the series in China and other parts of the world. This study will undoubtedly provide a valuable foundation for further research, such as exploring the influence of certain stereotypes leveraged both in the literary text and the television adaptations.

The study of contemporary Chinese art remains a Cinderella within the field of Chinese studies in Italy, yet it is represented in this volume with two essays. Marta Bisceglia and Martina Merenda's work provides an overview of the most prominent graffiti crews in Shanghai and Chengdu, highlighting the collaboration between Chinese and foreign artists and the interplay between the Western graffiti art movement and Chinese artistic and cultural traditions. The interplay and connections between characters, calligraphy, and the desemantization of individual graphemes toward a universe of multifunctional symbols opens up new perspectives and leads to unexpected outcomes, as seen in the works of artists like Fan Sacks, who ultimately arrives at figurative painting inspired by Buddhist themes. What unites all these artists is a strong desire to explore new paths and to express themselves freely. This pursuit is not always easy for graffiti artists in China, even though, as Kade Maijala states,

China has a long cultural tie to graffiti. The art form took its initial shape in China as the ‘Red Letter Era.’ As described by Crayon, the director of the documentary *Spray Paint Beijing*, .... the 1920s, red lettering would be displayed across neighbourhood walls to broadcast communist ideals. This use of paint on walls to spread information and cultural ideas set its roots early on and still survives today (Kade Maijala, 2022, *The graffiti in China*, <https://kademaijala.medium.com/the-graffiti-of-china-8ca1fe8ffdf2>).

Adriana Iezzi and Marco Meccarelli’s article also considers graffiti production while proposing a new taxonomy of contemporary calligraphy. What emerges in both studies is the central role still occupied by calligraphy in the Chinese artistic world, as well as in the aesthetic and emotional sphere of the Chinese people as a whole. Its power as a profound marker of identity has withstood all the upheavals and revolutions that have shaped the country’s recent history.

Before leaving you to the reading of this volume, we feel it is both a privilege and a duty to express our deepest gratitude to our colleague Mauro Tosco, whose essential contribution made this work possible. His meticulous attention to detail in the editorial and editing process, his graciousness, and his unwavering commitment to supporting all the authors who contributed to this collection have been fundamental. He exemplifies a luminous standard of dedication and scholarly rigour, all the more remarkable considering that he devotes his research not to the Sinic world but to Africa. To him, the Editorial Committee presents its most heartfelt thanks.

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