



# Kerwan

International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies

***China, Chinese people and sinology:  
An overview of the state of the art***

edited by  
Monica De Togni, Barbara Leonesi,  
Stefania Stafutti and Tanina Zappone

28

2024

*KERVAN - International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies*

KERVAN is an international and multidisciplinary discussion platform, dealing with the history, politics, economics, sociology, geography, visual culture, languages and literatures of Asian and African countries. KERVAN publishes theoretical studies, reviews and surveys, as well as detailed empirical studies, critical editions of texts and translations, by both young researchers and established scholars.

KERVAN is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

All **submissions** to KERVAN undergo double blind peer-review.

KERVAN's Policies and Code of Ethics are available [here](#).

KERVAN is listed in [ERIH PLUS](#) and indexed in [SCOPUS](#).

Since 2016 KERVAN is rated **Class A** journal for the Italian National Scientific Qualification (ASN, disciplines 10/N1 and 10/N3).

Scientific Director:

Mauro Tosco

Steering Committee:

Esterino Adami · Pinuccia Caracchi · Alessandra Consolaro · Veronica Ghirardi · Francesco Grande  
· Daniela Moro · Stefania Stafutti

Scientific Board:

Graziella Acquaviva · Esterino Adami · Nadia Anghelescu · Lucia Avallone · Maurizio Bagatin  
· Francesco E. Barbieri · Francesca Bellino · Tommaso Bobbio · Marco Boella · Matteo Cestari  
· Emanuele Ciccarella · Gianluca Coci · Pierluigi Cuzzolin · Monica De Togni · Andrea Drocco  
· Veronica Ghirardi · Barbara Leonesi · David Neal Lorenzen Sbrega · Matthew Morgenstern · Marco  
Moriggi · Cristina Nicolini · Kristofa Zulu Nyoni · Lia Ogno · Ongaye Oda Orkaydo · Paola Orsatti  
· Luca A. Patrizi · Alberto Pelissero · Gianni Pellegrini · Stefano Piano · Valentina Sagaria Rossi  
· Nikolay Samoylov · Maurizio Scarpari

Contact:

mauro.tosco@unito.it

ISSN:

1825-263X

Cover by Marta Tosco

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

28/Special Issue

(2024)



## Table of contents

### China, Chinese people and sinology: An overview of the state of the art

*edited by*

*Monica De Togni, Barbara Leonesi, Stefania Stafutti and Tanina Zappone*

The state of the art of Chinese studies in a slice of the “All-under-Heaven” world	3
<i>Stefania Stafutti, Monica De Togni, Barbara Leonesi and Tanina Zappone</i>	

### Learning Chinese and Chinese learners

The general and the artist:	11
Travel narratives in 1930s’ Italy by Cai Tingkai and Huang Juesi	
<i>Miriam Castorina</i>	
A forgotten piece of Italian sinology:	29
Amedeo Cracco’s <i>Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna</i> (1951)	
<i>Alessandro Leopardi</i>	

A synthesis of educational chanted rules: 45

The chapter *Xuntong men* 訓童門 in *riyong leishu* 日用類書

*Arianna Magnani*

## Chinese contemporary literatures in and out of China

“I am not writing about sex but of human nature:” 69

Pornography, sex and human nature in Feng Tang’s “Unspeakable Trilogy”

*Lavinia Benedetti*

Sex and irony in Zhang Dachun’s *Bildungsroman Wo Meimei* 91

*Ludovica Ottaviano*

Mobility and identity in Chinese Italian writings 105

*Valentina Pedone*

Representation and symbolism of *Huaixiang* in Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry 121

*Silvia Schiavi*

The fantastic dimension in Mo Yan: A new way of narrating the supernatural encounter? 137

*Eugenia Tizzano*

## Literature in Imperial China

Between refinement and vulgarity:	161
Apparent contradictions in Ouyang Xiu’s song lyrics	
<i>Massimiliano Canale</i>	
Body, cross-dressing, identity: Mulan “in his Shoes” in Xu Wei’s play	179
<i>Alessandro Tosco</i>	

## Thought and religion

Chinese thought in the writings of Simone Weil: Encounter and translation	201
<i>Raissa De Gruttola</i>	
Chinese descriptions of Sanskrit: The concept of ‘root’ and <i>puruṣa</i> nominal declension	217
<i>Chiara Pette</i>	
Lexicographical questions and revealing quotations: New clues on <i>Pi shishi zhuwang</i>	233
<i>Gabriele Tola</i>	

## Modern and contemporary history

- In the name of the Red Cross Society of China: 253  
Women’s activism and humanitarian aid during the war (1937-1945)

*Federica Cicci*

- Commemorating the PRC’s first artificial satellite: 273  
The contested legacy of “The East is Red-1” in today’s China

*Tonio Savina*

## Chinese media facing Chinese and world culture

- The new era of Sino-American coproduction: 299  
“Chinese national culture” in “White Snake” (2019) and “Over the Moon” (2020)

*Martina Caschera*

- The revival of China time-honoured brands: 325  
Following the paw prints of the “White Rabbit” (*Dabaitu* 大白兔)

*Giovanna Puppini*

- The ‘Ferrante phenomenon’ in China: 351  
Circulation and reception of the “Neapolitan Novels” and “My Brilliant Friend”

*Natalia Francesca Riva*



## Chinese contemporary art

Graffiti in Shanghai and Chengdu: Looking for Chinese writing, symbols and calligraphy along the streets <i>Marta R. Bisceglia and Martina Merenda</i>	377
New forms of calligraphy in contemporary China <i>Adriana Iezzi and Marco Meccarelli</i>	399



China, Chinese people and sinology:  
An overview of the state of the art

*edited by*

*Monica De Togni*

*Barbara Leonesi*

*Stefania Stafutti*

*Tanina Zappone*



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

*Stefania Stafutti, Monica De Togni, Barbara Leonesi and Tanina Zappone*

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 *dalu*. 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.

## References

- Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳. 2016. *天下的当代性- 世界秩序的实践与想象* [Tianxiade dangdaixin -Shijiede zhixude shijian yu xiangxiang]. Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe.
- Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳. 2021. *The Contemporary Relevance of All-under-Heaven: The Practice and Imagination of World Order*. English translation of Zhao Tingyang 2016 by Joseph E. Harroff. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳. 2024. *Sotto il cielo. Tianxia. Un antico sistema per un mondo futuro*. Italian translation of Zhao Tingyang 2016 by Alessandra C. Lavagnino. Roma: Ubaldini.

Stefania Stafutti

University of Turin

[stefania.stafutti@unito.it](mailto:stefania.stafutti@unito.it)

*Monica De Togni*

University of Turin

[monica.detogni@unito.it](mailto:monica.detogni@unito.it)

*Barbara Leonesi*

University of Turin

[barbara.leonesi@unito.it](mailto:barbara.leonesi@unito.it)

*Tanina Zappone*

University of Turin

[tanina.zappone@unito.it](mailto:tanina.zappone@unito.it)

# Learning Chinese and Chinese learners



## The general and the artist

Travel narratives in 1930s' Italy by Cai Tingkai and Huang Juesi

Miriam Castorina

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented mobility from China to Europe. Many Chinese travelers came to Europe to travel or study and, once home, contributed in various ways to the construction of the newly born Chinese republic. During their journeys, many of them visited Italy for practical reasons—being the place to leave the continent via sea—or often under the influence of the education received in other European countries such as France, Belgium, Germany, and the UK, where the memory of the Grand Tour was still alive. The paper illustrates a research project on Italian cultural itineraries whose main purpose is to identify types of travelers and travel modes, and map cultural itineraries covered by Chinese people in Italy mainly through the analysis of Chinese travel literature written in the first half of the twentieth century. Particular attention is paid to the close relationship between literature and movement from a Mobility Studies perspective (Merriman & Pearce 2017), and to the variety of accounts dealing with Italy, its culture and society as perceived and narrated by this generation of Chinese travelers. The possibilities of quantitative and qualitative analysis of such a research project are then illustrated through two case studies: the accounts of the coeval journeys to Italy by the former general Cai Tingkai 蔡廷楷 (1892-1968) and by the artist Huang Juesi 黄觉寺 (1901-1988) which respectively led to the publication of the *Haiwai yinxiang ji* 海外印象记 (Impressions from abroad, 1935) and *Ouyou zhi shi* 欧游之什 (European writings, 1944).

**Keywords:** Chinese travel literature; Republican China; Italy and China; mobility studies.

### 1. Preliminary remarks<sup>1</sup>

The reconstruction of travel narratives can be very useful to understand past and present mobilities and interconnections, leading to an enriched global perspective on history. This is particularly true for cultural movements and transmissions which, in some cases, cannot be fully perceived if not

---

<sup>1</sup> This short essay is part of the research activities conducted within the SILC (SinoItalian Links and Crossroads <<https://www.forlilpsi.unifi.it/p535.html>>) coordinated by Valentina Pedone. I would like to thank Arendt Speser for providing me with valuable suggestions.

represented by individual actions. This article is part of an ongoing research project that aims to map the cultural itineraries of Chinese people in twentieth-century Italy through written memory in the form of travel literature.<sup>2</sup>

The emergent tradition of Chinese mobility in the last century can be explored from different perspectives, and the great variety of visions of Italy—written, read, and later disseminated in China—is still not well known. This variety will be illustrated through two case studies: the accounts of the coeval journeys to Italy by the general Cai Tingkai 蔡廷楷 (1892-1968) and by the artist Huang Juesi 黄觉寺 (1901-1988), which respectively led to the publication of *Haiwai yinxiang ji* 海外印象记 (“Impressions from abroad,” 1935) and *Ouyou zhi shi* 欧游之什 (“Writings on my European travels,” 1944).

In the last years, immobility imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of our lives and thinking, leading me to reconsider the relationship between body, movement, and mind. Lack of movement impacts not only the body but also thought processes and the ability to create and imagine new spaces, understood in the broadest sense. Michael Mewshaw (2005) has underlined how immobility immediately recalls the ultimate act of life—i.e., death—so that the freedom to move, which makes us feel alive, also provides us with the opportunity not only to assert our identities but to think, to imagine outside of the box, to be creative. Furthermore, as Mewshaw points out, to travel is a “crucial act” in literary terms (2005: 2). “Writers,” states Mewshaw, “need travel, its freedom, its stimulation, and exposure to new and innovative points of view in the same way they need air, editors, and a reading audience” (2005: 3).

Given these premises, the present essay aims to explore Chinese travel literature on Italy, mapping and highlighting the cultural itineraries traveled by Chinese during the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> and thereby shedding new light on the grey areas of cultural contacts between Italy and China. In addition, the ongoing research aims to look at the phenomenon of Chinese travel literature within two theoretical frameworks: Literary Studies (Chinese travel literature about Italy), and Mobility Studies (cultural mobility).

Travel has always had a fundamental influence on cultural construction and transmission. In his famous volume *Routes* (1997), James Clifford emphasizes how culture has more to do with “routes” than with “roots.” Clifford highlights the close relationship between movement and literature and points

---

<sup>2</sup> The research project is fully illustrated in Castorina (2023).

<sup>3</sup> For this article, only the first half of the century has been considered.



out that a ‘journey’ could be used as a new lens through which to look at literary phenomena (Clifford 1997). These reflections found a further formulation in recent years with the “new mobilities paradigm” theorized by Sheller and Urry (2006). This critical practice is characterized by strong interdisciplinarity that looks at many phenomena by placing the emphasis on movement itself rather than on its possible purposes or destinations, shaking off many implications linked to the concept of movement, especially when it involves people. Mobility as a new critical perspective not only concerns the social sciences but has also begun to be applied within the humanities (Merriman and Pearce 2017; Greenblatt 2010). In addition, the recording/memory of a journey, often reconstructed *a posteriori*, acts as a glue between the individual and the individuals who in the past have traveled the same roads, and helps to fix on paper the “mobility of travel” by transforming natural space into artificial (i.e., cultural) space.

## 2. Chinese travel literature on Italy

Italy’s Renaissance and Risorgimento have been at the center of the Chinese modern political and intellectual discourse since the end of the nineteenth century, as the work of Kyle D. Anderson underlines (2010). Their protagonists—Dante, Boccaccio, Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Cavour—were employed as models by modern Chinese intellectuals. Apart from Chinese intellectuals’ vision of Italy, what image of Italy has been projected in China by those who saw the country in person? What itineraries did they follow and why? What influences, if any, did these images and visions have on modern China? How were these first-hand experiences disseminated in China? These are some of the questions addressed in this paper, even though much more research on the subject must be done to organize the multifaceted and heterogeneous travel literature on Italy written by Chinese people in the last century.

The first comprehensive study on the subject is that by Chen Shiru (2007), which deals with the period between 1840-1945. Another research has been conducted by An Ran (2018), who concentrates on Chinese travels in Europe in the first part of the last century. Strictly speaking of works dedicated to twentieth century Chinese travel literature in Italy, several scholars have translated and analyzed part of this literature.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> There is not a systematic work on the subject but since the 2000s, some scholars had begun to publish articles and essays on twentieth century Chinese travel accounts about Italy, see for example: Abbiati (2007), Brezzi (2012 and 2014), Castorina and Pedone (2022); Findeisen (2000); and Jin (2015).

The great revolutions that hit Chinese literature at the beginning of the twentieth century also impacted the genre of travel notes or *youji* 游记. Writing about travel no longer belonged exclusively to the class of *literati* but opened to other types of writers; for example, students and journalists abroad at the turn of the last century gave birth to modern tourist narratives. To give an idea of this massive expansion of mobility, Marius Jansen writes: “The Chinese student movement to Japan in the first decade of the twentieth century was probably the largest mass movement of students overseas in world history up to that point” (Jansen 1980: 348). The movement of students towards Europe was also very large, fueled by Chinese political organizations in Europe and programs such as the Work-Study Program (*qingong jianxue* 勤工俭学).<sup>5</sup> This mobility originated a production in Chinese travel writings without precedent (Mei 2010), reaching its peak between the 1920s-1930s and World War II (An 2018: 3).

Overseas travel notes were very popular during the Republican period and circulated among the public by means of new media such as newspapers and magazines. Together with translations of Western literature, new media enriched “common Chinese people’s cognition of the world’s geographic space” and provided fresh “impressions and images of Europe and ‘modernity’” (An 2018: 5). These accounts not only had an enormous influence among the intellectuals and the general public for more than a century, but also—taking Europe as a mirror—allowed many travelers to re-examine the past, narrate the present, and imagine the future of China (An 2018: v). Italy, at the same time, “was first represented as a re-emerging country which flourished in politics, economy, military, and then treated as the cradle of European civilization” (Jin 2015: 125).

During the 1920s and 1930s, people from all walks of life—students, politicians, entrepreneurs, soldiers, and journalists—went to Europe for study or tourism. Many also visited the Italian peninsula taking notes of what they saw. This is the case with the travels of Cai Tingkai and Huang Juesi, which offer rich insight into the forms of mobility and narrative aspirations made possible by modern travel conditions.

### 3. The general: Cai Tingkai and his *Impressions from abroad*

Born in Luoding (Guandong province) to a peasant family, Cai Tingkai chose a career in the army along with many of his fellow countrymen. In 1904, at the age of 12, he was forced to abandon his first schooling in the local village, due to his family economic restrictions. He then began to work as a tailor

---

<sup>5</sup> On the origin and development of the program see, among others, Bailey (1988).

and expressed the desire to join the army. His family strongly opposed this aspiration and instead found him a wife, Peng Huifang 彭惠芳. In 1909, he secretly enrolled for the first time during the visit of the Qing New Army in Luoding. After the fall of the empire, Cai joined the army again as a private soldier and his military career gradually took off. The army gave him access to a wider knowledge; he began to read newspapers under encouragement from his supervisor (Luo 2005: 15) and later entered the military academy in Canton where he graduated in September 1921.

Within the Guomindang (GMD) Army, Cai participated in many battles and took part in the Northern Expedition (1926-28) amongst the divisions and splits that characterize the military forces in those years. The growing conflicts between the Nationalist and Communist military caused him to almost be killed by the Communists in June 1931 (Luo 2005: 17). In the same period, Japan was marching against China; the Nanjing government was bankrupt and had no money to pay its soldiers; Cai, therefore, planned to form a voluntary army (Luo 2005: 17). One of Cai's major challenges was to lead the China 19<sup>th</sup> Route Army in January 1932 to resist the Japanese attack in Shanghai, which lasted for 33 days, known as the January 28 Incident.<sup>6</sup> As the Nanjing government was losing support, Cai was sent to Fujian as Peace Restoration Officer and Commander-in-Chief of the 19<sup>th</sup> Route Army. Together with Jiang Guangnai 蒋光鼐 (1888-1967) and others, they gave birth to a people's republican government in Fujian in November 1933, standing openly against the GMD government that sent an expedition against them in January 1934. Cai retreated, and part of his army was incorporated by the Nationalist government.

Without a post in the army, the general decided to leave the country. After a few months in Hong Kong, he left for his travel around the world, which lasted from April 12, 1934, to April 19, 1935. Once back in China, Cai occupied many political positions and collaborated with the newborn People's Republic of China. He was a founding member of the GMD's Democratic Promotion Party (DPP, *Minzhu cujin dang* 民主促进党) in March 1946 (Lau 2005: 21), and then, from June 1949, served as a member of the Central People's Government Committee under the guidance of the Communist Party. He was targeted by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, like many former GMD leaders, and died in Beijing in April 1968.

---

<sup>6</sup> On this episode see Jordan (2001).

### 3.1 The travel and text of Cai Tingkai

As aforementioned, Cai Tingkai's travel abroad was motivated by political reasons. Having lost his job after the experiment of a democratic government and in open opposition to Nanjing governance, Cai's travel is more a flight disguised as an "observation trip," motivated to gain international support from foreign countries and from Overseas Chinese, to whom the book is dedicated. In the first page, Cai explains the reasons behind his leaving:

I, Tingkai, anxious to save my country, was outraged at the Nanjing government which has humiliated China and had no alternative but to organize a revolution in Fujian Province in November 1933, hoping to complete my aspirations nurtured in the battle of Shanghai. Later, because of the [political] atmosphere, I voluntarily quit. [...] After arriving in Hong Kong, I often thought that all of us are responsible for the rise and fall of the country: today our country is in crisis and needs to be saved urgently; the international situation is unstable, and it would be pressing in the days to come. Therefore, I asked Mr. Tan Qixiu and Mr. Qiu Zhaochen to join me, and hired Mr. Mai Ying as secretary and English [interpreter], preparing to go abroad together to change my personal situation, observe the international trend, and thank overseas Chinese for their generous support during the anti-Japanese war in Shanghai (Cai 1935: 1).

His trip was not directed to one specific place but was an around the world tour. Cai left China on the Italian *Conte Rosso*, a liner launched in 1922 that from 1932 connected Trieste to Shanghai (Eliseo and Miller 2004: 42-43). After a few pages dedicated to the countries visited during the journey across the sea (Malaysia, Ceylon, Bombay, and Egypt's pyramids), the liner arrived in Italy on May 3, 1934, where the (now ex-) general stayed until May 27th. Following his sojourn in Italy, he visited many European countries such as Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Germany, and France; he then left for New York from London in late August. Cai remained in North America for six months and visited many cities before leaving in February 1935, this time to visit Honolulu, Oakland, Sydney, and the Philippines. He returned to Hong Kong on April 19th, after most of a year roaming around the world. His account, *Haiwai yinxiang ji*, consists of 87 chapters plus three final chapters in six parts, titled *Huigu* 回顾 ("A retrospective view"), where he summarizes his ideas and impressions on the political, economic, and military issues afflicting China.

Even if Cai Tingkai remained in Italy for less than a month, it is worth noting that the country occupies a large space in the travel account (11 pages), especially compared to other European countries with one or two pages of description, at most. In addition, the Italian tour of the ex-general is a 'Fascist military tour' of sorts, as can be seen from the following table, which lists the places he visited in 1934:

Date	Place or occasion
May 4	Venice
May 7	Rome
May 8	Meeting with the Chinese Ambassador Liu Wendao 刘文岛 (1893-1967)
May 9-14	Rome
May 15	Meeting with Benito Mussolini
May 16	Visit to the third division of the Italian Army and Caserma Mussolini in Rome with Gen. Enzo Emilio Galbiati (1897-1982)
May 17	Naples (Baia). Visit to the torpedo factory with Conte Valte[l]lina <sup>7</sup>
May 18	Short visit to Pompei and visit to the Aeronautical Academy in Naples
May 19	Rome (Ostia). The new residential quarter of Mussolini (Borghetto dei Pescatori)
May 20	Rome (Ciampino). The airport with Col. Raffaele Senzadenari (1890-?) and Col. Umberto Grani (1897-1944), and again in Ostia
May 21	Cesano (Rome). Infantry school with Conte Valtellina
May 22	Milan
May 23	Visit to an Artillery school with Gen. Galbiati on the Apennine Mountains
May 24	Visit to a military camp on the Apennines
May 25-26	Visit to a motorcycle factory, aircraft factory, and firearms factory
May 27	Lake Como

Table 1. Cai Tingkai's itinerary in Italy

From the very first pages, Cai's interest in Italy is focused on its government and soaked in professional bias; his account—far from describing scenic or cultural spots—details Italy's political and military aspects. In the Italian diary, the author provides information on the organization, structure, numbers, and success of the Italian army in a way that is not very attractive for a liberal reader but gives a precise and unilateral view on the country.

In Venice, for example, he dedicates just a few words to the charm and history of the city, while the weaponry displayed in a museum attracts all his attention, one item in particular:

---

<sup>7</sup> The name appears transliterated in this way in the text together with the Chinese name “Major Hua Duo'er” 華多爾華多爾少校. I have not been able to identify him yet. This could be Alessandro Voltolini di Valtellina but further research is needed.

[...] The most peculiar thing is that when ancient officers and soldiers set out on expeditions, they prevented their wives from committing adultery. The museum also displays the sealing instrument used on women's lower bodies. It is made of iron and is similar in shape to mousetraps found in our country's villages. If it is locked, there is no way to open it unless you destroy it completely or have the original key. Upon leaving, the soldiers locked the instrument and once back, they inspected it to make sure it was intact to determine whether their wives abided by the ethical rules for women (Cai 1935: 6).

The museum displays many items, but Cai's interest in chastity belts is indicative. Despite not expressing any particular judgment, Cai seems to appreciate, or at least comprehend, the 'value' of such a peculiar item, perhaps comparing it with his country's traditional ethics.

Similarly distasteful to most modern readers, one of the most thrilling moments for the general is his meeting with Mussolini. It took place on May 15, 1934, thanks to the mediation of Galeazzo Ciano,<sup>8</sup> who he met in China during the famous battle of Shanghai.

On the afternoon of [May] 15, I went to visit the Italian Prime Minister Mussolini at his office with Secretary Mai in accordance with previous agreements. As I arrived, Mussolini extended his warmest welcome to me, shaking my hand for a few minutes. Turning to Secretary Mai, he declared: "I speak Italian, French, English and German. What do you prefer?" Mr. Mai replied that he preferred to speak English. Following a pleasant exchange of greetings, Mussolini asked: "Why do I want to welcome you? Because I have never met any Chinese who dared to fight against Japan except for the one and only General Cai. Your heroism must be admired not only by Chinese but also by foreigners. Regardless of the Chinese government's attitude towards you, today I would like to extend a warm welcome." He went on: "For this reason, I am going to give you a picture of me so that you will remember me. General, after returning to China, do your best to save [your country]." He then took a picture from a cabinet, signed it personally, and gave it to me (Cai 1935: 8).

The original autographed picture is attached to the account. However, apart from that, I found no written evidence so far of this meeting (or of Cai's passage in Italy) in the Central State Archive of Rome or other historical sources,<sup>9</sup> and further research is still needed. The scene has a comical twist; consider the pompous and rhetorical dialogue aimed at exalting Cai's heroism, despite the latter's relationship with the Nanjing government, along with Mussolini playing the diva and giving the general an autographed photo in total accordance with the historical figure.

As a soldier, Cai's primary interests were in military and political reasoning. On May 22, he asked his escort, Mr. Valtellina, how he would explain fascism's success. Valtellina's response gave him an

---

<sup>8</sup> Apparently, as Cai writes, they already met twice on the battlefields (Cai 1935: 7).

<sup>9</sup> For example, I have searched one of the most popular newspapers of the time, *Popolo d'Italia*, without finding any news about the general's visit.

opportunity to express his thoughts about the sad situation of his country and increased Cai's admiration for the fascist regime, which seemed to provide a solution to the difficulties facing China. According to Cai Tingkai, the key to success is to stand with the people and cooperate with them to ensure a better future for China, as the Fascist Party had done in Italy. At the end of the Italian tour, the author summarizes his experiences giving some conclusive considerations, not sparing rhetorical propaganda enveloped in a very questionable predictive sense:

During World War I, Italy collapsed, regardless of the politics of the time. After Mussolini's dictatorship, considerable progress was made in organizing the budget, improving the monetary system, reducing rail costs, and developing hydroelectricity. What people call dictatorship maybe is the premise to enrich the country and benefit the people. After Mussolini jumped onto the Italian political stage, the national government became increasingly strong and one of the five great powers. The diplomatic relations with our country are also extremely close. Once I asked an Italian child, "Do you love Chinese people?" He replied, "I love Chinese people the most." I asked again, "Why do you support Mussolini?" The answer was: "Mussolini is for the country and the people, so we support him." Mussolini's public loyalty to the country won the people's faith. How could a dictatorship like this be of any harm? (Cai 1935: 17).

Cai's vision is clearly influenced by what have been called the "golden years" in the history of relations between Italy and China (Samarani and De Giorgi 2011) and by the emergence of what became known as 'Chinese Fascism.' If and how this trip to Italy modified his political vision, however, is not yet clear from current research. What is certain is that from 1937 onwards, bilateral relations between the two countries gradually worsened and Cai ended up serving the People's Republic of China after 1949.

#### 4. The artist: Huang Juesi

Unlike Cai Tingkai, much less is known about Huang Juesi. Nevertheless, he is one of the most important Chinese names related to the introduction of Western painting techniques and esthetics in his country, and one of the most important art educators of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Despite his influence and role in spreading artistic education in China, Huang has found little space in academic research apart from the work of Zhang Xuefei (2016), and almost no space in scholarship outside China.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> The biographical information on Huang Juesi is taken from Zhang X. (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Julia Andrews (1994), for example, does not even mention his name.

Huang Juesi was born in the district of Wujiang in Jiangsu province.<sup>12</sup> He was interested in writing and painting since childhood; in 1922, he followed one of the teachers of the local school, the famous painter and art educator Yan Wenliang 颜文樑 (1893-1988), to Suzhou.<sup>13</sup> Together with other artists of the time, they founded the Suzhou Summer Art School (*Suzhou xiaqi tuhua ban* 苏州暑期图画班), predecessor to the Suzhou Academy of Fine Arts (*Suzhou Meizhuan* 苏州美专). Huang was one of the first 13 students to graduate (Zhang X. 2016: 10). After graduation, he was asked to remain at the alma mater. He devoted himself to teaching drawing and researching art history, while continuing to paint and show his works in several exhibitions in Suzhou and other cities. When the Suzhou Art Museum was founded in 1927, Huang was chosen to direct the construction work. In 1929, he invited Xu Beihong to teach at the Suzhou Academy of Fine Arts, thus initiating their friendship.

After studying in France between 1929 and 1931, Yan Wenliang chose Huang Juesi and Zhang Ziyu 张紫屿 (1902-1984) to go at the l'Ecole des beaux-arts de Paris, probably with a scholarship program from the province (Cinquini 2017: I, 389). Between 1935 and 1936, Huang studied with the famous painter André Devambez (1867-1944) but had to return to China due to his father's death (Zhang X. 2016: 32). While in France, he wrote an important volume entitled *Sumiao hua shuyao* 素描画述要 (“On Drawing and Painting”), which was later used as a textbook in schools and attracted the attention of the public in China, republished several times through the years (Zhang X. 2016: 25-29). Another book by Huang with an enormous impact, *Ouzhou minghua caifanglu* 欧洲名画采访录 (“Collection of European Famous Paintings,” published in 1939), introduced Western museology in China (Zhang X. 2016: 32-35). In 1944, Huang published his travel memories in the volume *Ouyou zhi shi* 欧游之什.

Huang Juesi was involved in art magazines in China. He was, for example, editor-in-chief of *Yilang* 艺浪 (“Art Waves”)<sup>14</sup> since its foundation in 1928, and chief editor of *Yishu* 艺术 (“Art”). After the foundation of the PRC and until the 1960s, Huang served as a professor at Suzhou College, a

---

<sup>12</sup> In French sources, his name is Romanized in Wong Kio Szu. See Cinquini (2017: II, 12).

<sup>13</sup> Yan Wenliang is considered one of the greatest artists and educators of the period. Yan spent three years in Paris studying painting at l'Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts between 1929 and 1931 and was significantly influenced by the Impressionists. Together with other young artists of the time, like Liu Haisu 刘海粟 (1896-1994), Huang Juesi, and the famous Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 (1895-1953), he was one of the first Chinese to go abroad to study art. See Andrew (1994) and Cinquini (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Originated with the title *Canlang mei* 沧浪美, Huang was appointed editor-in-chief from the beginning, while the magazine changed its name in March 1930. For the magazine's origin, development, and importance, see Zhang J. (2018: 58-62). On the role of Huang in the magazine, see Zhang X. (2016: 38-40).



committee member of the Cultural Relics Association (*Wenwu xiehui* 文物协会), director of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (*Zhongguo Wenxue Yishujie Lianhehui* 中国文学艺术界联合会), and director of China Artists Association (*Zhongguo meishujia xiehui* 中国美术家协会). During the Cultural Revolution, he was persecuted and imprisoned in a cowshed (*niupeng* 牛棚).<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, many of his written works, such as the “Animal Anatomy for Artists” (*Yiyong dongwu jiepouxue* 艺用动物解剖学)—along with photos, albums, and manuscripts—were confiscated and irreparably lost, together with a complete set of *Art Waves*. Huang retired in 1978 and spent the rest of his life writing articles and essays on Chinese paintings until his death in 1988.

#### 4.1 The travel and text of Huang Juesi

As for his travels abroad, we do not know much about Huang’s European sojourn. In his account, he does not provide any precise data to help us understand the span of time of his travels or the itinerary he followed. The text, in fact, is not in the form of a diary but of a recollection of memories. Likely, more information about his tour had already been given in the magazine *Yilang* since the author seems to address a readership already familiar with his overseas adventures.

It is also possible that Huang made several trips, as the last chapter suggests. Here we find the only annotation of a date (January 26, 1936) written on the occasion of a trip to London organized by the Chinese Art Association in France (Huang 1944: 69). Interestingly, the *Preface* by Xu Zhongnian 徐仲年 is dated April 16, 1937. This is important information from which it can be inferred that Huang had completed the book that year but had to wait until 1944 to publish it. This delayed publishing was likely caused by the turmoil and destruction of the civil war. Another element, however, seems to contradict the thesis that Huang finished the book in 1937. In the travel account, Huang lamented the fact that in a previous book he did not give enough space to Italian artists and works of art (Huang 1944: 64). He is clearly referring to his *Collection of European Famous Paintings*, published in 1939. It is, therefore, possible that the account was compiled in several stages. Despite the lack of specific dates, Huang's Italian travel or travels certainly occurred during his sojourn in France. It is however currently impossible to establish if the year was 1935 or 1936, and to calculate how long each trip (if several)

---

<sup>15</sup> As Li writes (1995: 292-293): “It did not have to be a genuine cowshed; it could be a classroom, storehouse, dark room, temple, or stable. Because the people who were kept there were given the degraded title, ‘cow monsters and snake demons [*niugui-sheshen* 牛鬼蛇神],’ the place where they were imprisoned became a ‘cowshed.’”

lasted. In addition, from a few passages in the text and a picture taken in Piazza della Signoria (Florence) inserted in the first pages of the book, we apprehend that Huang was with two friends, Mr. Zhang (Zhang jun 张君) and Mr. Ye (Ye jun 叶君).<sup>16</sup>

The book is in 15 chapters, with an Introduction written by Xu Zhongni and a Postscript by the author himself, for a total of 80 pages. Published almost eight years after his sojourn in Europe, the account does not follow a chronological order or a linear itinerary, as evidenced by the contents:

Preface by Xu Zhongnian

1. Missing Rome
2. A Venetian night
3. Paris in my eyes
4. In Milan
5. A Chinese art exhibition in London
6. The Vatican frescoes
7. Archaeological visit to Pompeii
8. Impressions of Geneva
9. The girl outside the Uffizi Gallery
10. The theatres of Paris
11. [Paris] literary cafés
12. Night in a Dutch hotel
13. An introduction to “Italian famous paintings”
14. Florence, the flower capital of Europe
15. Trip to London

Postscript

The author probably organized the contents following his own memories. However, it is immediately evident that, despite the title, 8 out of 15 chapters are dedicated to Italy. Italy is, quite textually, at the

---

<sup>16</sup> Most likely, the first one is his old friend, the painter Zhang Ziyu mentioned above; the latter is also indicated as Monsieur An Ye (*moxi An Ye* 墨歇安叶) in the book, which I have not been able to identify. As mentioned later in the account, he studied—probably architecture—in London (Huang 1944: 17). The term ‘Monsieur’ could perhaps have been used as a joke. There is also a possibility that this third traveler is of a different nationality, and An Ye or Anye should be interpreted as transcriptions. Unfortunately, the quality of the picture attached in the book does not allow us to clearly visualize the facial features of this little companionship.

center of Huang's narration. Without going into details, although a close reading would prove very interesting, it is worth noting the deep passion the artist developed for Italian art. In Rome, the travel group visited many places like the Colosseum, the Pantheon, Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica, and others. Recollecting the memory of the city, Huang compares Rome to Beiping (Beijing) as they both are very ancient, with the difference that Rome preserved all its antiques while Beiping did not:

What Rome possesses is primitive, grand, magnificent, and splendid; all this can also be found in every corner of Beiping. However, what Beiping shows us has already been modified and cannot fully preserve the traces of "ancient." In Rome, on the contrary, not only did all the monuments fully preserve their original state but [the Romans] also avoided putting them together with modern buildings. Therefore, in Rome, you can see a civilization of three thousand years ago, while in Beiping, even the Old Summer Palace refuses to preserve its remnants [...] (Huang 1944: 1).

This positive evaluation of Rome falls within a common practice which characterizes travel literature. As Pageaux notes, travel is not only a 'translation of a space' but also a form of autobiography (2010 [2008]: 60). Huang is struck by the stark contrast between the capital cities of two countries: Rome, with its grandeur, and Beiping, with its incapacity for preserving the past. To Huang, the difference between the two cities is emblematic of the vast disparity between their respective nations. Rome, with its opulence and sophistication, is a testament to the progress and development of its country, while Beiping, unmindful of its past, represents the decline of all China. Huang states: "Rome is not just a city; it is a symbol of everything. Those who have been to Rome will no longer appreciate modern beauty. The anachronism of Rome is its greatness" (Huang 1944: 3). In Rome, the author admires the splendor of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's work, and Rafael's mastery.

Italian painting is so important to him that he devotes Chapter 13 to illustrating its history, starting with Guido da Siena and Duccio da Buoninsegna up to the Italian Renaissance masters. Venice, as if in an impressionist painting, is depicted amongst colors and lights:

As if drowsy eyes filled with a thousand feelings, thousands of lights emitted a mystical light amid the blue waves of the water city. The bright moon, hanging on the treetops amid smoke and clouds, closely chased us; countless smiling stars shimmered at each other in a twinkling light...What a view! (Huang 1944: 7).

Huang also visited Milan, where he appreciated da Vinci's "The Last Supper" the most. He traveled to Naples and Pompeii, which again aroused his admiration. "The great Italian art—he writes—is a source of human culture that will remain unchanged forever!" (Huang 1944: 64).

Among all the European cities he visited and described, however, Florence is the one he "loves the most:"

In Florence, I not only loved its art, its “beauty,” I also discovered “love;” I found the true meaning of “love.” And that is why I felt more satisfied by “beauty” and perceived more the greatness of art. Walking along the ancient streets of Florence, I met Dante and Beatrice on the bridge he fell in love with her at first sight. I then realized there was a word for “love” in life. The meeting between Beatrice and Dante took place only that one time, yet that one only time was so ordinary. Nevertheless, Dante’s yearning became deeper and, from that one encounter, lasted for all of his life. He was upside down for this lover, he was crazy for her, and even later, he did not find another lover to love so wholeheartedly. Beatrice married another man; Beatrice died, and yet Dante continued to love her. What did Dante love? What did he gain in love? I do not know. Only after reading Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and *Divine Comedy* did I understand love’s greatness; only after traveling through this city steeped in perfumes, the city of flowers, permeated with love and art—Florence!—I grasped the true meaning of “love”. [...] I dived myself into this ancient city, unwilling to leave in front of the art of such great artists: Dante revealed to me the [meaning] of “love”; Raphael gave me the comfort of “beauty”; Michelangelo strengthened my courage to behave like a man and to move forward with courage on the path of life. As for da Vinci’s works, they are so powerful, so rich and vital, so praised that it seemed like I had already peeped at the entire world and dominated my entire soul. [...] I have traveled to Florence...Dante revealed to me “love”; Raphael gave me the comfort of “beauty”... (Huang 1944: 68).

Among all the excerpts illustrating Italian art history in Huang’s account, this description reveals the individual and artistic sensitivity of the author. It goes beyond simple observation and perception—telling instead of an internal reaction, an epiphany, a transformation. His encounter with the Italian genius on the Ponte Vecchio allowed Huang Juesi to fully realize what is beyond art—the secret sense of life that human beings are always searching for: beauty and love.

## 5. Conclusions

Due to limited space, it is not possible here to go into detail about each narrative. These two accounts have only one thing in common: the time period of their travel. They have been juxtaposed here as examples of the variety of Chinese authors who put Italy at the core of their travel experiences. As can be seen from the short excerpts of the two travel accounts and their itineraries, the narratives of Cai Tingkai and Huang Juesi differ very much in style and content. The general chooses rigid prose, full of erudite and classical expressions; the artist follows his imagination in vivid and vernacular language. Following the definitions by An Ran (2018), Cai Tingkai’s travel account can be classified as an “investigation travel account” (*kaocha youji* 考察游记). The book by Huang can be considered, both an “investigation travel” and a “humanistic account” (*renwen youji* 人文游记), since the travel seems to be a trip to investigate and study, motivated by a ‘humanistic’ approach. The interests of the authors are at opposite poles and show the readers (and the scholars) something new about China-Italy

mobilities, but also how these different accounts enact “mobility through processes of production and interpretation” (Merriman and Pearce 2017: 500).

While it is unclear what kind of diffusion Cai’s work had in China, Huang’s work likely had a circulation afterward, thanks to his editorial work and his profession as a teacher of art. It was likely Huang who introduced in China one of the first scientific and exhaustive overview of Italy’s history of art. Both of their narratives are important not only for the images and ideas they offer about Italian society; they are also valuable as means of cultural production, revealing diverse and divergent routes that expose the desires and ambitions of the traveler. No better contrast can be offered than Huang’s revelations of love through Dante and Beatrice in Firenze, while Cai delights in Mussolini’s fascist populism. Reflected back to the Chinese audience through narrative mediation, their accounts are equally accurate and flawed at the same time. Even though it is still difficult to measure how these narratives affected Chinese society, I believe the two examples presented here shed new light on a rich panorama of twentieth-century Chinese travel notes about Italy that is still in need of further investigation.

## References

“Cai Tingkai 蔡廷楷.” In: *Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica*.

<https://mhdb.mh.sinica.edu.tw/mhpeople/result.php?peopleName=%E8%94%A1%E5%BB%B7%E6%A5%B7&searchType=1#8> (Accessed 4 Sept. 2022).

Abbiati, Magda. 2007. “Il riflesso del leone nell'occhio del drago.” *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 46/ 2: 13–26.

An, Ran 安然. 2018. *1912-1949 nian Zhongguo lü Ou youji zhong de Ouzhou xingxiang* 1912-1949 年中国旅欧游记中的欧洲形象. PhD. Diss., Shanghai: Shanghai University.

Anderson, Kyle D. 2010. *Promises of Modern Renaissance. Italian Presences in Chinese Modernity*. PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University. Available online:

[https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final\\_submissions/3356](https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/3356) (Accessed 9 Oct. 2022.)

Andrews, Julia F. 1994. *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*. Berkley and Los Angeles, CA – London: University of California Press.

Bailey, Paul. 1988. “The Chinese Work-Study Movement in France.” *The China Quarterly* 115: 441-461

Brezzi, Alessandra. 2012. *Note per un dono segreto. Il viaggio in Italia di Shan Shili*. Roma: Editrice Orientalia.

Brezzi, Alessandra. 2014. “L’immagine dell’Italia nei resoconti di viaggio cinesi all’inizio del XX secolo.” In: *Atti del XIII Convegno dell'Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi*, edited by Clara Bulfoni and Silvia Pozzi, 87–97. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Cai, Tingkai 蔡廷楷. 1935. *Haiwai yinxiang ji* 海外印象記. Hong Kong: Dongya yinwu youxian gongsi.

- Castorina, Miriam. 2023. "The Journey and the Memory: Mapping mobilities through Twentieth-Century Chinese Travel Notes on Italy". In: *Cultural Mobilities and Interactions Between Modern China and Italy*, edited by Valentina Pedone and Gaoheng Zhang, 61-87. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Castorina, Miriam and Valentina Pedone. 2022. "Early twentieth-century Chinese travellers in Florence." *Studies in Travel writing* 25/4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645145.2022.2128438>
- Cinquini, Philippe. 2017. *Les artistes chinois en France et l'Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris à l'époque de la Première République de Chine (1911-1949): pratiques et enjeux de la formation artistique académique*. PhD. Thesis. Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille III, 2 vols.
- Chen, Shiru 陈室如. 2007. *Jindai yuwai youji yanjiu (1840-1945) 近代域外遊記研究 (1840-1945)*. Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press.
- Eliseo, Maurizio and William H. Miller. 2004. *Transatlantici tra le due guerre: l'epoca d'oro delle navi di linea*. Milano: Hoepli.
- Findeisen, Raoul David. 2000. "In the hutong of Naples from Chinese travelogues of the Republican Era." *Cina* 28: 89-106.
- Greenblatt, Stephen (ed.). 2010. *Cultural Mobility. A Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hargett, James M. 2016. "Chinese Travel Writing." In: *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, edited by Carl Thompson, 112-124. London: Routledge.
- Huang, Juesi 黄觉寺. 1944. *Ouyou zhi shi 歐游之什*. Shanghai: Wuzhou shu-bao she.
- Jansen, Marius. 1980. "Japan and the Chinese revolution of 1911." In: *The Cambridge History of China*, edited by J. Fairbank & K. Liu, 339-374. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521220293.007
- Jin, Zehuan 金泽环. 2015. "Yidali xingxiang de bianqian yanjiu 意大利形象的变迁研究." *The World Literary Criticism 世界文学评论* 5: 125-129.
- Jordan, Donald A. 2001. *China's Trial by Fire: The Shanghai War of 1932*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lau, Wing-hong. 2005. *Cai Tingkai—The National hero from Lingnan*. M.A. Thesis. Vancouver: The University of British Columbia.
- Li, Gucheng 李谷城. 1995. *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Mei, Qibo 梅启波. 2010. "Ershi shiji sanshi niandai Zhongguo youji wenxue zhong de Ouzhou xingxiang 20 世纪 30 年代中国游记文学中的欧洲形象." *Journal Of Zhengzhou University 郑州大学学报* 43/3: 118-121.
- Merriman, Peter, and Lynne Pearce. 2017. "Mobility and the humanities." *Mobilities* 12 (4): 493-508.
- Mewshaw, Michael. 2005. "Travel, Travel Writing, and the Literature of Travel." *South Central Review* 22/2: 2-10

- Pageaux, Daniel-Henri. 2010 [2008]. *Le scritte di Hermes, introduzione alla letteratura comparata*, edited by Paolo Proietti, it. trans. by Anna Bissanti. Palermo: Sellerio Editore [orig.: 2008. *Le séminaire de'Ain Chams. Une introduction à la littérature générale et comparée*. Paris: L'Harmattan].
- Qiao, Chunlei 乔春雷. 2006. “20 shiji 80 niandai yuwai youji zhong de Xifang xingxiang 20 世纪 80 年代域外游记中的西方形象.” *Journal of Tianzhong* 21/6: 82–84.
- Samarani, Guido and Laura De Giorgi. 2011. *Lontane, vicine. Le relazioni fra Cina e Italia nel Novecento*. Roma: Carocci.
- Sheller, Mimi and John Urry. 2006. “The new mobilities paradigm.” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38/2: 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- Zhang, Xuefei 张雪霏. 2016. *Huang Juesi yanjiu 黄觉寺研究*. PhD Thesis. Kunming: Yunnan University.
- Zhang, Jianlin 张健林. 2018. *Suzhou Meizhuan yanjiu (1922-1952) 苏州美专研究 (1922-1952)*. M.A. Thesis. Suzhou: Suzhou University of science and technology.

---

Miriam Castorina is Associate professor at the University of Florence. She is the author of *Le donne occidentali nei diari dei viaggiatori cinesi dell'Ottocento* [Western women in Chinese travelogues of the 19th century] (Nuove Edizioni Romane 2008) and *In the garden of the world. Italy for a young Chinese traveller in the 19th century* (FUP 2020). She is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Sulla via del Catai*. Miriam is interested in Chinese travel literature, cultural contacts and mobilities between China and Italy, and the history of Chinese language education in Italy. Her current research focuses on travel narratives from China to Italy, especially in the 20th century.

Miriam can be contacted at: [miriam.castorina@unifi.it](mailto:miriam.castorina@unifi.it)





## A forgotten piece of Italian sinology

Amedeo Cracco's *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (1951)

Alessandro Leopardi

This article deals with *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (1951) by Amedeo Cracco O.F.M., one of the earliest comprehensive grammars of Chinese published in Italian. Rapidly fallen into oblivion due to the general hostility of Italian sinologists towards its “unorthodox” approach to many problems of Chinese linguistics, Cracco’s grammar is nonetheless worthy of recognition for its original mix of archaisms and innovations. While Cracco’s commitment to a five-tone variety of Mandarin and the Latin grammatical framework can be mentioned for the former, his emphasis on the polysyllabism of Modern Chinese and new categories borrowed from the latest generation of Chinese grammarians make good examples of the latter. Presenting *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* in its historical and epistemological background, the article aims at retrieving the memory of a forgotten piece of Italian sinology.

**Keywords:** Chinese grammar; Italian sinology; missionary linguistics; history of linguistics.

### 1. Introduction

Composed in Rome for Edizioni dell’Ateneo, *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (1951) by Amedeo Cracco O.F.M. (1903-1970) is the first proper reference grammar of Chinese published in Italy.<sup>1</sup> Less than three hundred pages of typewritten text interrupted by hand-drawn Chinese characters, in which the author, Italy’s last missionary linguist, set out to methodically expose the Chinese language “for Italians, especially for missionaries... who are satisfied with the knowledge they gain from the purely mnemonic study of words, phrases and expressions” (Cracco 1951: 5-6). Without departing from the traditional (Latin) grammatical categories, Cracco tried to introduce the Italian public to a series of topics that were being debated in China at that time: such as the distinction between “words” and

---

<sup>1</sup> By “reference grammar,” I refer to a prose-like description of the major grammatical structures in a language, designed as a reference tool for finding specific details of the language. A reference grammar is distinct from a “pedagogical grammar” designed for teaching language usage through exercises. Before Cracco, other Italian authors had written about Chinese grammar, but their works were primarily pedagogical grammars, such as those from Naples’ Collegio dei Cinesi described in Castorina (2014), or were only partially published, such as Severini’s draft described in Paternicò (2019).

“characters,” the definition of the parts of speech, and—rigorously detached from its political implications—the question of “national pronunciation.”

Despite being the most comprehensive work of its genre published in Italy up to that time, Cracco’s grammar was destined for a rapid descent into oblivion. Neither the book nor its author is indeed mentioned in most research on the history of Chinese language studies in Italy, especially Antonucci and Zuccheri (2010), nor in historical overviews of Italian sinology in general, such as Bertuccioli (1995) and Lanciotti (1995). Preventing Cracco from entering the history of Italian sinology was likely a feud with F. Pasquale D’Elia (1890-1963), who at the end of World War II was the only active professor of Chinese in Italy (Antonucci and Zuccheri 2010: 32). In a harsh exchange of views on the Chinese language during 1956-1957, D’Elia attacked Cracco’s deviation from the traditional pedagogical model of Italian sinology, based on memorising characters and phrases, and labelled his Chinese grammar “a contrived and artificial superstructure [that is] but a house of cards” (D’Elia 1956: 529), therefore barring it from playing any role in fostering the new generation of Italian sinologists.<sup>2</sup> Relying on archival and bibliographic sources,<sup>3</sup> the present paper is dedicated to restoring the memory of a forgotten piece of Italian sinology, with its curious mix of novel and obsolescent features, and the scholarly debate it aroused, which witnesses to classical prejudices about the Chinese language surviving in Italy well into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## 2. In the wake of tradition

Cracco remains to date a relatively obscure figure in the history of Italian sinology. Native of Vicenza, in Veneto, he entered the Franciscan order in 1926 and was ordained priest in 1927; in the 1930-40s he served as a missionary in China, most notably in the post of superior regular for the Diocese of Sanyuan 三原 and warden of the Tungyüenfang (Tongyuanfang) 通遠坊 minor seminary in Gaoling 高陵, a suburb of Xi’an 西安, until the newly established communist government expelled him after 19 years

---

<sup>2</sup> Federico Masini has recently retrieved the records of Vacca and D’Elia’s Chinese language classes at Sapienza University of Rome for an article on Giuliano Bertuccioli’s training as a sinologist. These records indicate that during the 1940s, the traditional method was still being practised, with the primary textbook being Zottoli’s five-volume *Cursus Litteraturae Sinicae* (Shanghai: 1879-1882). The classes focused on analysing and translating excerpts from classical literature, with the teacher providing usage notes for important grammatical structures and cultural and historical concepts.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to my friends and colleagues, Emanuele Raini (University of Naples “L’Orientale”) and Timon Gatta (“Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore,” Milan), for their invaluable assistance in obtaining materials necessary for this paper.

of missionary activity.<sup>4</sup> During his stay in China, Cracco was an attentive witness to the significant changes that the Chinese language was undergoing since the end of the Empire and the decline of traditional Chinese culture, as well as to the political vicissitudes which accompanied such transformation. Besides learning Chinese for his pastoral duties, he also did scholarly research into the history and current events of the Catholic Church in China, as reflected in his earliest publications. Despite being a marginal presence in the history of Italian sinology, Cracco is therefore fully qualified as a sinologist due to his first-hand knowledge of China and his competence in the Chinese language (Bertuccioli 1995: 72).

A prolific writer, Cracco published a series of books in Latin and Italian on geography, missiology, apologetics, and hagiography. His bibliography counts about a dozen works published between 1933 and 1964, of which seven dedicated to China and the Catholic Church in China are listed in D’Arelli (2007: 203, 299).<sup>5</sup> *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna*, Cracco’s only major work in linguistics, was purportedly compiled in Rome during the year 1949 (D’Elia 1956: 530), as further indicated by the—highly symbolic—date of 25 September 1949 for the author’s foreword (Cracco 1951: 10). The book was also printed in Rome, in July 1951, by Edizioni dell’Ateneo, a local publishing house linked to Sapienza University of Rome.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1950s, Cracco had admittedly prepared a second edition, which was never published (Cracco 1957: 109). Come to light among the hardships of Italy’s post-war period, this only edition of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* looks more like a hastily-made piece of handicraft than a full-fledged academic publication due to its typewritten Italian text dotted with quivering Chinese characters penned by the author himself—who had not been able to find a Chinese to do the task (D’Elia 1956, 530). Unlike contemporary works labelled as “grammars,” most distinctly Gonzalez-Alvarez A. (1928), Cracco’s *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* is a proper reference grammar and not an annotated anthology of Chinese language texts:

---

<sup>4</sup> Biographical information on F. Amedeo Cracco is scarce in scholarly literature. Despite his prolonged missionary activity, he does not yet have an entry in the monumental *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*. The information given here is sourced from Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (2023). See also the biographical note in *De seminariorum sinensium institutione* (s.n. 1949, 651).

<sup>5</sup> Listed in D’Arelli (2007, 203, 299) are: *La prefettura apostolica di Sanyüan, China, Shensi* (Tsinanfu: 1933); *Missionarium Shensinensium lapideae inscriptiones* (T’ai-yuen-fu: 1940); *De seminariorum sinensium institutione* (Shanghai: 1946); *I missionari della Cina nella statistica* (Shanghai: s.d. [1935]); *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (Roma: 1952 [1951]), *Testimoni di Cristo nella Cina d’oggi* (Padova: 1956); “La lingua cinese moderna è monosillabica o polisillabica?” (1957).

<sup>6</sup> Although the involvement of Edizioni dell’Ateneo in publishing Cracco’s grammar would suggest a link with Sapienza University of Rome, a query for “Cracco, Amedeo” submitted by me to the central archives of Sapienza University of Rome in Autumn 2021 gave no results. However, since Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) donated Cracco’s books to Rome’s Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, it is likely that he was the one who introduced Cracco to the publishing house.

Over the last decades, Chinese sinologists (*sic*) have begun to study the logical form of their language [...]. It seemed helpful to me [...] to methodically expose the most important of these results; convinced that the study of the language, conducted only with the methods in use, does not provide that mastery of Chinese that is constructive; that is to say, such as to detach oneself from the forms learnt by heart [...] However, most people do not feel, at least up to the present, the need to know the grammatical and logical structure of the Chinese language, satisfied with the knowledge they draw from the study [...] of sentences and expressions (Cracco 1951: 5-6)

Cracco's grammar strictly adheres to the conventional structure and categories of Latin grammar that were widely known to educated Italians of his time, especially those who had attended grammar schools (*licei*) or minor seminaries.<sup>7</sup> Preceded by a short introduction (Cracco 1951: 5-8), the grammar is divided into three parts: "The Word" (*La Parola*), where, after a few preliminary remarks, the nine parts of speech are introduced with a particular focus on their composition (*ibid.*, 11-135); "The Clause" (*La Proposizione*), dedicated to the structure of simple clauses (Cracco 1951: 137-204); "The Sentence" (*il Periodo*), covering the syntax of (complex) sentences and logical analysis as treated by the Chinese grammarians (Cracco 1951: 205-249). These three chapters end with a few reading, translation, and composition exercises. Closing the work is a list of Chinese grammatical terms translated into Italian (Cracco 1951: 250-256) and an index to commonly used characters found in the Grammar (Cracco 1951: 257-266).

The nine parts of speech named in the Grammar, in Italian and Chinese, are: noun (*nome, mingci* 名詞); adjective (*aggettivo, xingrongci* 形容詞); pronoun (*pronome, daimingci* 代名詞); verb (*verbo, dongci* 動詞); adverb (*avverbio, fuci* 副詞); preposition (*proposizione, jieci* 介詞); conjunction (*congiunzione, lianci* 連詞); pleonasm (*pleonasma, zhuci* 助詞); interjection (*interiezione, tanci* 歎詞). No theoretical definition is ever given, and the parts of speech are intended contrastively with Italian—e.g., resultative verbs used as degree and result complements are called "adverbs" despite their explicit verbal nature because they translate into Italian adverbs (Cracco 1951: 100-103)—or Latin—e.g., "classifiers" or "measure words" (*classifiche, liangci* 量詞) are treated as adjectives along with the numerals (Cracco 1951: 57-61). Throughout the history of missionary linguistics, there have been many examples of forcing exotic elements into European grammatical categories; the continuation of this practice by Italy's sinological community until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century indicates their conservative posture.

---

<sup>7</sup> A fair impression of this system can be obtained from Rocci's *Grammatica greca* (Roma 1908), which many Italian students have learned Greek grammar in *liceo classico* ("grammar school").

From this point of view, the Chinese noun is said to possess the two categories of gender—only relevant when the noun “designates living beings: people, animals, plants,” where, as in Italian, “two genders can be distinguished: male [*yanglei*] 陽類 and female [*yinlei*] 陰類” (Cracco 1951: 39)— and number—for “a noun can be singular or plural depending on the context, or whether it is specified by specific determinatives (*determinative*), that may be: adjectives [...], numerals [...], pronouns [...]” (Cracco 1951: 41), or by placing the “unaccented” suffix *men* 們 after a noun, or by reduplicating it, in which case the totality of a species must be understood (Cracco 1951: 42).

As for adjective morphology, much attention is paid to the rules regulating the use of the adjective “desinence or suffix” (*desinenza o suffisso*) *de* 的 (Cracco 1951: 53-55). The convention adopted looks quite effective in its simplicity: Monosyllabic adjectives “if accompanied by their noun, always repel the suffix [*de*] 的;” Polysyllabic adjectives “can all receive the suffix, which in the clause is often understood” [i.e., omitted]; while reduplicated monosyllabic adjectives are always marked with *de* 的. Consistently with the classical grammatical framework, much more attention is dedicated to comparison, i.e. to the “grades of the adjective” (*gradi dell’aggettivo, biji xingrongci* 比級形容詞, which are those found in Latin or Italian: the “positive” (*grado positivo, ping biji* 平比級), the “comparative” (*grado comparativo, cha biji* 差比級), and the “superlative grade” (*ji biji* 極比級), all but the former expressed by certain particles juxtaposed to the adjective (Cracco 1951: 55-57).

The verb, on the other hand, is said to possess a full conjugation by mood, tense, and person, “if by conjugation we mean the various modifications of an action in the way it is performed, in tense, number and person” (Cracco 1951: 89), which can be deduced from accompanying words. Thus, Chinese has three tenses: “present” (*presente, xianzai shi* 過去時), “perfect” (*perfetto, guoqu shi* 過去時) and “future” (*futuro, weilai shi* 未來時), plus the others also found in Italian—“present perfect” (*passato prossimo*), “imperfect” (*imperfetto*), “past perfect” (*piuccheperfetto*). There are the same six moods as in Latin: “indicative” (*indicativo*); “subjunctive” (*congiuntivo*); “imperative” (*imperativo*); “infinitive” (*infinito*); “present participle” (*participio presente*); “past participle” (*participio passato*) (Cracco 1951: 90-94).

Finally, syntax is analysed according to the specific categories of Latin grammar, starting from clause components (subject, predicate, attribute, and complements) (Cracco 1951: 142-192), passing on to clause types (Cracco 1951: 193-199), and logical analysis (*analisi logica, tujiefu* 圖解法 “explanation through pictures;” Cracco 1951: 201-204), and concluding with the syntax of complex sentences (Cracco 1951: 205-245). The most notable feature of this section, so clad in the spirit and practical terminology of classical language pedagogy, is the “diagrams of logical analysis” twice included (Cracco 1951: 202-204; 243-245) to show “the method of Chinese grammarians” (Cracco 1951: 243). A little part of this 272-

page book, the diagrams are substantial evidence that Cracco was at least familiar with Li Jinxi (1924), who introduced the concept of logical analysis in the Chinese grammatical tradition. Li Jinxi presents this “explanation through pictures” (*tujiefa* 圖解法), i.e. logical analysis, at the beginning of his work, and resorts to it diffusely. A more attentive look at the work also reveals that a substantial part of the Chinese grammatical terminology sparsely employed by Cracco is borrowed from Li Jinxi.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Witness to a changing language

The language described in *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* is a form of vernacular Chinese (*Baihua* 白話) characterised by most of the grammatical and lexical features of Mandarin Chinese also included in the contemporary National Language (*Guoyu* 國語 “National Language”) and the standard adopted by the People’s Republic of China after just a few years (*Putonghua* 普通話 “Common Language”).<sup>9</sup> This language is contrasted both to the “great variety” of spoken forms (*passim*) and to the literary language (*Wenyan* 文言)—“the privilege of a few,” which until recently “had a culture and development that made it inaccessible to most people” (Cracco 1951: 27). Elements of the latter are, in effect, limited to flavoured words and expressions also employed in the cultured spoken language of the time—e.g., the particles *zhi* 之, *ye* 也, *xu* 許, labelled *pleonasm* “pleonasms” in Italian (Cracco 1951: 194).

Compared to contemporary *Guoyu* 國語, however, Cracco’s Chinese is notable for a series of archaisms, especially in its phonology. At a time when the long-running debate on standard pronunciation had been resolved *de jure* in favour of the four-tone system of northern Mandarin,<sup>10</sup> Cracco does manifestly stick to the “mandarinal pronunciation” (*pronuncia mandarinale*) of old—that is, the *Guanhua* 官話 of the late Empire—with its five-tone system. From among Cracco’s sources, a five-tone system is most notably used by Valle in both his coursebook (Valle 1949: 24-26) and dictionary (Valle 1948: iii); notice that the latter remained the only one available to the Italian public until the early 2000s (Lanciotti 1995: 81). However, it must be said that the phonology and internal structure of

---

<sup>8</sup> Most notably, the category of “attribute” (*fujiaoyu* 附加語), although its use in Cracco (1951) is restricted to nouns used as modifiers of other nouns.

<sup>9</sup> That is Modern Standard Mandarin, defined in 1956 as “the standard form of Modern Chinese with the Beijing phonological system as its norm of pronunciation, Northern dialects as its base dialect, and looking to exemplary modern works in *Baihua* ‘vernacular literary language’ for its grammatical norms.”

<sup>10</sup> For an historical synthesis of the standardisation of modern Chinese on a northern dialectal base between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Van Ness Simmons (2020) and Söderblom Saarela (2020).

the Chinese syllable are not dealt with in detail; after a few remarks on “the pronunciation of Chinese characters” (Cracco 1951: 16-18), “the tones” (Cracco 1951: 18-22) and “the method of transcription” (Cracco 1951: 22-25), the author deals immediately with the word as the basic unit of the language. The reason could be that the author lacked a theoretical understanding of the problem or that the classical European grammatical model he conforms to does not leave much space for phonology. In any case, Cracco’s stated reason to go against the tide would have seemed, in hindsight, somewhat naïve:

Although Beijing pronunciation is now prescriptive, we also deem it more useful and convenient to learn the mandarinal pronunciation (*pronuncia mandarinale*), whose monosyllabic sounds are more than twice as many as that: this property is fundamental and decisive for the future of the language (Cracco 1951: 18).

In practice, tones are no obstacle: Cracco limits himself to reporting that “most people admit five of them [...]. The first and fifth tones often cannot be distinguished, which explains the present tendency to admit only four tones, as are found in the speech of Beijing;” in any case, they “cannot be learned but from the live voice of the teacher” (Cracco 1951: 20-21). Pronunciation is also seldom indicated in the examples, except *passim* throughout the first chapter (Cracco 1951: 16-25), despite the fair amount of attention paid to native systems of phonetic notation.<sup>11</sup> After all, articulating the tone clearly

is necessary when pronouncing a character [...] in isolation; it is generally necessary for sentences [made up] of characters that in themselves are also words [...], but it is generally not necessary in words composed of several syllables and [longer] clauses, only in the most important word (Cracco 1951: 21-22).

Cracco’s implicit overlook of contemporary normative *Guoyu* 國語 also shows from the brief mention of *Guoyin Zimu* 國音字母 as an alphabet based on pure Beijing pronunciation adopted “with the not too distant aim of replacing the characters” (Cracco 1951: 22). The system shown in the following tables, along with equivalences to *Gwoyue Romatzyh* 國語羅馬字 is, however, an earlier form of it, including initials *ng* 兀, *gn* 广, and *v* 万—remnants of the Old National Pronunciation (*Lao Guoyin* 老國音), based on a synthesis of northern and southern Mandarin. Rather than *Gwoyue Romatzyh*, Cracco makes use of a peculiar Italian Romanisation of Chinese, which looks like an adaptation of the French EFEO system

---

<sup>11</sup> Cracco admittedly planned to add a complete transcription to the second edition of his grammar he had prepared by the late 1950s, although it could not be published (Cracco 1957: 109).

(e.g., It. *tciong* vs EFEO *tchong* for *zhong* 重) or Wade-Giles (e.g., It. *cheng* vs WG *keng* for *geng* 更): a similar if not the same Romanisation is also used by Valle.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, many innovative elements in *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* testify to the author's knowledge of the latest advancements in grammatical studies in China. For example, Cracco shows to have developed, along with his Chinese contemporaries, a sense of the distinction to be made between characters (*carattere; zi* 字) and words (*parola; ci* 詞), basing his morphology on the assumption that polysyllabism is a distinctive feature of the modern language (*Guoyu* 國語) as opposed to the old literary medium (*Wenyan* 文言):

The word is the character, or union of several characters, expressing an idea. In words, one does not look at the character or its monosyllabic nature, but at the meaning, which responds to a logical unity. Consequently, an idea can be expressed with a single character or with the logical union of several characters. In this case, the pronunciation is also one, forming a phonetic unit and, therefore, a grammatical unit. (Cracco 1951: 25)

Here is an apparent reference to Li Jinxi (1924), which reads

A character is one of the “characters” [taken] individually. A word is one of the “words” which, in speech, express one object of thought. Sometimes a character is a word [...]. Sometimes two or more characters are needed to combine to make a word. In grammar, the word serves as the basic unit to distinguish among parts of speech. No matter whether they are [made of] one or a few characters, as long as they express a single concept, they can be called a word<sup>13</sup> (Li Jinxi 1924: 2-3).

The reason why Chinese has long been thought to be a monosyllabic language, Cracco suggests, is that in writing, every character looks like a unit in itself, whereas the reader must rely on his instinct to combine them into spoken words; nonetheless

writing cannot be the fundamental reason that distinguishes languages into monosyllabic and polysyllabic, but their phonetic expression. The Chinese language, in its current phase, is a polysyllabic language (Cracco 1951: 26).

---

<sup>12</sup> Valle himself explains in the introduction to his dictionary that his Romanisation is a version of the EFEO system adjusted to Italian orthography: “The pronunciation used in this dictionary [...] is that of Debesse [used, e.g., in Debesse 1901], redressed in an Italian form [...]. Thus, K is replaced by C and CH; J, TC, TS are maintained; and SH is employed when, in front of the vowels A, O, [and] U, one must pronounce an Italian SC with the same value that it has before the vowels E, I” (Valle 1948: iii).

<sup>13</sup> 字就是一個一個的“單詞”。詞就是說話的時候表示一個觀念的“詞語”[...]。有時要兩個字以上組合起來才成功一個詞[...]。文法中分別此類，是把詞作單位；不問他是一個字或是幾個字，只要是表示一個觀念的，便叫作詞。



According to Cracco, polysyllabism in modern Chinese is the result of different characters, either “specifying” (*specificativi*) or “synonymous” (*sinonimi*), being combined as prefixes (*citou* 詞頭) or suffixes (*ciwei* 詞尾) with a base word or character to expand or restrict its meaning (Cracco 1951: 28). In Cracco’s opinion, Chinese even has a complete set of derivational inflections closely resembling those found in Italian, as the existence of a distinct nominal morphology in any language is “a requirement of thought, which needs, in order to perfect itself, signs or syllables that manifest the different variations of one concept” (Cracco 1951: 29).<sup>14</sup> Cracco’s insistence on this point, which would eventually trigger the quarrel with D’Elia, must be understood against the backdrop of Italy’s intellectual culture of the 1930-40s. The idea that Chinese is a monosyllabic and purely isolating language, inherited by 19<sup>th</sup>-century linguistics, was still commonly held at that time, as is shown by the many mentions of it in De Filippi *et al.* (1931: 303-306), that is the section on the Chinese language under the entry “Cina” in the authoritative *Enciclopedia italiana*, edited by Giovanni Vacca (1872-1953), complete with a basic bibliography.<sup>15</sup> In any case, Cracco’s distinction between “specifying” or “synonymous” and “base” characters is notably similar and almost contemporary with the distinction of “free” and “bound words” found in Chao (1947: 33-34).

Cracco’s reference list is essential for understanding where this significant innovation comes from. His sources include a series of Chinese grammars published between 1921 and 1947, the most recent of which are Li Jinxi (1947) and Wang Li (1947). It is to these two, and especially the latter, that Cracco probably owes the distinction in concept between characters and words. Note also that *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* bears in its title an implicit reference to Wang Li (1947), whose Chinese title *Zhongguo xiandai yufa* 中國現代語法 is printed on its cover. None of the Western-language manuals and anthologies included in Cracco’s bibliography delves to the same extent into the distinction between character and word. From among the Italian-language bibliography, Valle (1949:

---

<sup>14</sup> In the history of Italian sinology, a similar concept had already been expressed by Antelmo Severini (1828-1909) in a draft book named *Elementi di grammatica cinese* (“Elements of Chinese grammar”), of which only the first 21 pages were published in 1865. Although Severini also suggests that “in every language, but mostly in Chinese, the words change quality and nature, or better to say, switch from one grammatical category into another, according to the different use that they have in the clause” (quoted in Paternicò 2019: 129), it is unlikely that Cracco was influenced by Severini’s work, as it was not available until long after 1949.

<sup>15</sup> Besides Wiegner’s *Chinois écrit* (Sienhsien [Xianxian]: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1922), the three grammars included in the bibliography are Prémare’s *Notitia linguae sinicae* (Malacca: Academia Anglo-Sinensis, 1730), Abel-Rémusat’s *Grammaire chinoise* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1822), and Julien’s *Syntaxe nouvelle de la langue chinoise* (Parigi: Librairie de Maisonneuve, 1869-1870).

11-44) and Gonzalez-Alvarez (1928) are the most likely sources of the notions of Chinese grammar,<sup>16</sup> while Bortone (1935) can only be the source of a few notions on the “national transcription” (*trascrizione nazionale*, i.e., *Zhuyin zimu* 注音字母) (Cracco 1951: 22-24). Other works in Western languages in Cracco’s bibliography, most notably Gasperment (1925), are also mostly concerned with the old *Guanhua* 官話 and can be held accountable for the phonological archaisms of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna*. However, these archaisms, which would become more and more accentuated into the 1950s as language standardisation went on, seem to have attracted little or no attention. Ironically, it is that innovative discourse on polysyllabism that would become the object of heated debates soon after that.

#### 4. “A cluster of stones does not make a house”

The doyen of Italy’s sinologists, Pasquale D’Elia, was soon to stumble upon Cracco’s insistence on considering Chinese a polysyllabic language. Italy’s first comprehensive grammar of Chinese could not contradict at its essence what most Italian sinologists had up to then held to be true, which was to compromise its potential as a teaching instrument. Chinese language teaching was at that time still heavily dependent on a character-based approach dating back to early Jesuit linguistics. Foreign languages had to be taught according to the classical pedagogical model, which postulated learning vocabulary and grammar through translation exercises and mnemonics. Only exceptions to rules were thought to need a proper grammatical explanation. Defending the traditional method required demolishing Cracco’s proposition from its foundations, and D’Elia tempestively set himself to work on this task. His response, prepared soon after the publication of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* (Cracco 1957: 102), was published on *Monumenta Serica* in 1956 in the format of a book review (D’Elia 1956). D’Elia claimed that Cracco’s fundamental mistake had been presuming that the Chinese language has a grammar at all:

Until a few years ago, it was common to say that there is no Chinese grammar. Indeed, since it is a monosyllabic language, with no possible inflection, hence no possibility of declensions or conjugations, it is hard to see what exactly this grammar could consist of, at least for the morphological part. Adding a prefix or suffix to a syllable is already leaving aside the

---

<sup>16</sup> Valle (1949) and Gonzalez-Alvarez (1928) are not comprehensive grammars but anthologies of Chinese texts and sayings with a grammatical commentary. The language described in both works is a variety of Southern Mandarin with five tones. Notice that Gonzalez-Alvarez (1928) is of little help if phonology is concerned; moreover, this book is a translation from Spanish into Italian made by F. Cosma Sartori (1890-1957) as a source of samples of Chinese rhetoric. See Casalin (2013).

monosyllabism (*monosillabicità*) of the language. Who modifies a syllable, furthermore, changes it into another one that is no longer the former (D’Elia 1956: 528).

Clad in a mix of compliments and cutting remarks, this was a severe attack on Cracco’s pretence to write a grammar of Chinese. D’Elia blames such a posture on the desire of certain Chinese intellectuals to emulate the great powers, leading them to imitate their social, political, economic, and cultural institutions. Attempts since 1917 to substitute the “spoken language, almost current” [*baihua* 白話] for the classical language, holds D’Elia, are the product of this drive to emulate the linguistic institutions of the Western powers, which also implied adopting the Latin alphabet. Despite Cracco’s claims, however, time is yet to show whether such attempts at “Europeanising” the grammar of Chinese will turn out to be fruitful or whether “this whole artificial and contrived superstructure is nothing but a house of cards” (D’Elia 1956: 529).

To disprove Cracco’s claims that this form of the Chinese language is polysyllabic, D’Elia moves to analyse the expression *Tianzhujiao shi zhigong de* 天主教是至公的 “Christianism [i.e. ‘Catholicism’] is the most universal” (*La religione cristiana è universalissima*), given by Cracco (1951: 26) to illustrate his thesis. Analysing the phrase as containing three words, Cracco is said to have fallen into an error that led him straight to considering Chinese “a language close to Latin or Anglo-Saxon languages” (Cracco 1951: 26), “[an] agglutinating language” (Cracco 1951: 29), where even “noun gender and number, verb conjugation, subordinate clauses, logical and grammatical analysis, and many other fine things found in Western grammars” can also be found (D’Elia 1956: 529). In fact, continues D’Elia, the exact phrase can be translated into Latin “literally and *ad verbum*” as *Coeli Domini religio est valde communis* (“The Lord of Heaven’s religion is very common”)—thus, with a 1:1 character per word ratio, “to the exception of the last character, which indicates that what comes before is an adjective” (*sic*; Cracco 1951: 529). D’Elia, while challenging Cracco to compile a grammar of the classical language as well, concludes that

while remaining monosyllabic, [modern Chinese] makes use of synonyms, antonyms, and specifiers, words that dilute the meaning of the monosyllables and that, while retaining their meaning, can be translated into Western languages with a shorter number of words. This agglomeration of monosyllables, which can correspond to a single Western word, is called “word” [yu] 語 by modern Chinese grammarians as opposed to “character” [zi] 字, which is still a monosyllable, and which until yesterday was synonymous with “word”—each character being a word, for it has a meaning of its own. [...] *So far so good!*<sup>17</sup> But let us not forget that even today, the Chinese language remains what it is and that just as a cluster of stones does not make a house,

---

<sup>17</sup> In English in the original.

neither does an agglomeration of monosyllables make a language polysyllabic (D'Elia 1956: 528-529).

“A cluster of stones does not make a house.” Punched by this line, the following year, Cracco replied to D'Elia from the pages of the Franciscan periodical *Le Venezie francescane*—interestingly, not a journal of sinology. In the article, Cracco affirms that D'Elia is not the only sinologist who does erroneously believe that modern Chinese, often thought to be the same as the classical language, is still a monosyllabic language: Valle (1949), Bortone (1935), Gasperment (1925) and most foreign missionaries in China, as well as the *Enciclopedia italiana* (De Filippi *et al.* 1931: 303-306), all stick to this opinion regardless of the steady change towards a polysyllabic language that Chinese had ostensibly undertaken since 1917 (Cracco 1957: 103). Such misunderstanding arises because the character continues to be the basic graphic unit (*unità fondamentale della grafia*) of modern Chinese:

Modern sinologists, like all foreign missionaries, have stuck to the unity of the ideographic character, maintaining the historical conviction of the monosyllabism of the language, even of the modern one. Here, in short, has occurred the fact, far from rare, that we also note in opinions of other kinds: *the persistence of appearances keeps alive a convention that has been superseded in substance, which may have changed or has been deepened by new studies: the Sun, for... many people, still revolves around the Earth* (Cracco 1957: 103; my italics).

For Cracco, all languages have gone through three phases during their evolution, that is:

1. The “ideological phase” (*fase ideologica*), when “unitary” words are coined for simple ideas conceived by the mind;
2. The “vocal phase” (*fase vocale*), when the different sounds in the language are consciously and orderly organised to bear specific semantic content, by which grammatical inflection emerges;
3. The “written phase” (*fase della scrittura*), when written signs are invented to ease the exchange of ideas and concepts. Now, since it is not but arbitrarily bound to the semantic or phonetic features of a particular language, a writing system cannot offer substantial evidence on whether a language is monosyllabic or polysyllabic—apart from languages written with a phonetic script, where, due to the strict relation between sound and writing, the phonetic structure shows through the written superstructure (Cracco 1957: 103-105).

Cracco openly rejects the idea that the Chinese language is a cluster of stones, used by D'Elia to discredit his sketch of Chinese grammar by trying to translate “literally and *ad verbum*” the phrase *Tianzhujiao shi zhigong de* 天主教是至公的 “Catholicism is very common:”

Do you not feel, Father, the *in-re* contradiction of these two terms? In Chinese, we only have characters, not letters or terms (*ad verbum*), elements that are exclusive to speaking and not to the ideographic script—[D’Elia] makes an effort to translate character by character, in which we sense the method used in elementary lectures of the language, where didactics demands this procedure (Cracco 1957: 106).

#### 4. Conclusions

If we were to assess the impact of Cracco’s grammar on the development of Chinese linguistics in Italy from its diffusion, our judgement would not be a positive one. *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* had relatively little circulation and seemed destined for rapid obsolescence. Not only due to the open hostility of D’Elia, then Italy’s only professor of Chinese, but also because Cracco missed his predictions on how Chinese would have further developed: a failure already visible only a few years after its publication. At the same time as D’Elia and Cracco eagerly exchanged their views in 1956-57, the last major reform of Written Chinese was being enacted in the People’s Republic of China. Beijing pronunciation was established by law as the basis of China’s Common Language (*Putonghua* 普通話), the promulgation of *Hanyu pinyin fang’an* (1956) put an end to the debate on Romanisation, and the first character simplification dissipated hopes that the Chinese language reform would end up in a full alphabetisation.

Despite some naivety that could have been filed off with experience, Cracco’s work could have played some role in the rebirth of Italian sinology after its post-war depression, but the story went differently. Cracco never published the second edition of his grammar, which he had admittedly prepared in 1957. He also did not take on the challenge from D’Elia to compile the grammar of the classical language. At that time, Italian sinology was at its lowest and still too much attached to the traditional philological approach to Chinese language teaching to feel any urge to deal with the “chemistry of the language.”<sup>18</sup> After all, Grammar, as any other literary genre, cannot ignore its duty: to please the taste of the public whom it targets. As Cracco shifted his focus to missiology and hagiography, the extant copies of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna* ended up catching dust on the bookshelves of Chinese language schools or being sold at second-hand book stands. The first comprehensive grammar of Chinese published in Italy and the fierce debate aroused by its publication have thus faded into obscurity.

---

<sup>18</sup> Federico Masini once told me that Giuliano Bertuccioli has used this phrase to label the object of his studies in Chinese linguistics.

## References

- Antonucci, Davor and Serena Zuccheri. 2010. *L'insegnamento del cinese in Italia tra passato e presente*. Roma: La Sapienza Orientale.
- Bertuccioli, Giuliano. 1995. "Sinology in Italy 1600-1950." In: *Europe Studies China: Papers from an International Conference on the History of European Sinology*, edited by John Cayley and Ming Wilson, 67-78. London: Han-Shan Tang Books.
- Bortone, Fernando. 1935. *Sillabario cinese, o Metodo teoretico-pratico per apprendere la pronunzia nazionale della lingua cinese*, 2 voll. Shanghai: Zi-Ka-Wei.
- Casalin, Federica. 2013. "Guanhua zhaiyao": 20 shiji zaoqi Hankou chuban de Yidaliyu ban Hanyu yufa shu" 《官话摘要》—20 世纪早期汉口出版的意大利语版汉语语法书 [Grammatica cinese ad uso degli italiani: A Chinese Grammar in Italian published in Hankou at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century]. In: *Guoji Hanyu jiaoyu shi yanjiu* 国际汉语教育史研究 [Studies on International Sinology], edited by Zhang Xiping 张西平, 172-183. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Castorina, Miriam. 2014. "I materiali didattici del Collegio dei Cinesi di Napoli: una ricerca preliminare." In: *Atti del XIII Convegno A.I.S.C., Milano 22-23 settembre 2011*, edited by Clara Bulfoni and Silvia Pozzi, 145-55. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Chao, Yuen Ren. 1948. *Mandarin Primer: An Intensive Course in Spoken Chinese*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Conferenza Episcopale Italiana. 2023. "Amedeo Cracco." BeWeB. Last updated April 6, 2023. <https://www.beweb.chiesacattolica.it/persona/persona/14099/Cracco%2C+Amedeo>.
- Cracco, Amedeo. 1951. *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna*. Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo.
- Cracco, Amedeo. 1957. "La lingua cinese moderna è monosillabica o polisillabica?" *Le Venezie francescane* 24/2-3: 102-110.
- D'Arelli, Francesco. 2007. *La Cina in Italia: Una bibliografia dal 1899 al 1999*. Roma: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.
- D'Elia, Pasquale. 1956. "Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna." Review of *Grammatica della lingua cinese moderna*, by Amedeo Cracco. *Monumenta Serica* 15/2: 528-31.
- Debesse, Auguste. 1901. *Petit dictionnaire chinois-français*. Chang-Hai [Shanghai]: Imprimerie de la mission catholique à l'Orphelinat de T'ou-Sè-Wè.
- De Filippi, Filippo et al. 1931. *Enciclopedia italiana*, vol. IX (Care-Chia), 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (1931), s.v. "Cina."
- Gasperment, Alphonse. 1925. *Etudes de chinois. I, grammaire : langue mandarine*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Sienhsien: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique.
- Gonzalez-Alvarez, Agostino. 1928. *Grammatica cinese ad uso degli italiani*, 2 voll, translated by Cosma Sartori. Hankow: Central China Post.
- Lanciotti, Lionello. 1995. "Italian Sinology from 1945 to the Present." In: *Europe Studies China: Papers from an International Conference on the History of European Sinology*, edited by John Cayley and Ming Wilson, 79-87. London: Han-Shan Tang Books.

- Li, Jinxi 黎錦熙. 1924. *Xinzhu Guoyu wenfa* 新著國語文法 [“New Mandarin Grammar”]. Shanghai: The Commercial Press.
- Paternicò, Luisa. 2019. “Le riflessioni linguistiche di Antelmo Severini in scritti editi e inediti.” In: *Atti del XVI convegno AISC 2017*, edited by Elisa Giunipero and Chiara Piccinini, 125-132. Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2019.
- Rocci, Lorenzo. 1908. *Grammatica greca: Morfologia, sintassi, dialetti*. Milano – Roma – Napoli: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri.
- Söderblom Saarela, Mårten. 2020. “Manchu, Mandarin and the Politicization of Spoken Language in Qing China.” In: *Language Diversity in the Sinophone World*, edited by Henning Klöter and Mårten Söderblom Saarela, 39-60. London – New York, NY: Routledge.
- s.n. 1949. “De seminariorum sinensium institutione.” Review of *De seminariorum sinensium institutione* by Amedeo Cracco. *La Civiltà Cattolica* 100/2/2371: 651-652.
- Valle, Benedetto. 1948. *Dizionario cinese-italiano*. Hong Kong: Catholic Truth Society.
- Valle, Benedetto. 1949. *I primi passi nello studio della lingua popolare cinese parlata e scritta*. Changsha: Catholic Truth Society.
- VanNess Simmons, Richard. 2020. “What Was Standard Chinese in the Nineteenth Century?: Different Views in the Times of Transition.” In: *Language Diversity in the Sinophone World*, edited by Henning Klöter and Mårten Söderblom Saarela, 13-38. London – New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wang, Li 王力. 1947. *Zhongguo xiandai yufa* 中國現代語法 [Modern Chinese Grammar], 2 voll. Beijing: The Commercial Press.

---

Alessandro Leopardi, PhD (2020), is a Chinese Language and Literature researcher at University of Rome “La Sapienza.” He mainly deals with the history of Chinese linguistics, Italian sinology, and historical and cultural relations between China, Russia, and Eastern Europe. Among his works, “Latinxua Sin Wenz between Russia and China” (*Rso* XCIV, 1-2, 2021), and “Cyrillic and Chinese” (In *Ricerche del dottorato in Civiltà dell’Asia e dell’Africa I*, edited by F. Casalin and M. Miranda. Rome: SUE, 2022).

Alessandro can be contacted at: [a.leopardi@uniroma1.it](mailto:a.leopardi@uniroma1.it)





## A synthesis of educational chanted rules

The chapter *Xuntong men* 訓童門 in *riyong leishu* 日用類書

Arianna Magnani

Among the many chapters on all human knowledge provided by the 1612 encyclopedia entitled *Xin ban zengbu tianxia bian yong wenlin miao jin wanbao quanshu* 新板增補天下便用文林妙錦萬寶全書 (The marvelous, precious, newly edited and supplemented “Complete Book of Myriad Treasures” of literati for the convenient use of all), there is also one on infant education. In the introduction of the chapter, the author stresses the importance of education, and how it can transform a person’s life. Therefore, what were the recommended teaching strategies for raising virtuous children? What was the common etiquette for a child to follow in seventeenth-century China? What analogy or difference does it have in comparison to previous pedagogical literature?

This paper, by means of the partial English translation of the encyclopedic chapter *Xuntong men* 訓童門 (section for educating children), tries to answer these questions by analyzing the educational precepts, their roots anchored in the Chinese pedagogical literature and the use of rhymes such as *erge* 兒歌, *geyao* 歌謠, as an effective teaching strategy to make the precepts simpler and catchy.

The selected case study represents a model example of printed text which belongs to the genre *riyong leishu* 日用類書 (a collection of texts for daily-use), encyclopedias that circulated widely in late Ming and early Qing China, and reflects what was then the most widespread and common knowledge in the pedagogical field recommended for self-study. The chapter which is focused on teaching children also represents the fusion of Confucian educational concepts and the practical nature characteristic of daily-use encyclopedias.

**Key words:** Ming literature; *riyong leishu*; children education; Chinese encyclopedia.

### 1. An overview of the education system between the Late Ming and Early Qing dynasties (15th and 18th centuries)

In premodern China, childhood was semantically often associated with the concept of *Meng* 蒙, meaning ‘ignorance’, as seen in the terms such as *tongmeng* 童蒙, child ignorance, or *mengxue* 蒙學, elementary learning. *Meng* 蒙, which appears as the fourth hexagram in the text *Yijing* 易經 (see Zhu

2016) “the Scripture of Change,” consists of the trigram *gen* 艮 (mountain) above *kan* 坎 (water). This configuration, as explained in the text, suggests:

Below the mountain lies danger, a place of dimness. Inner danger and outer stability are concepts associated with being “dim, ignorant” (...) Below the mountain emerges a spring: Dim. The superior person nurtures his virtue by improving his behavior (Zhu Xi 2019: 80).

Interpreted in relation to children, *Meng* indicates the enormous potential of this blank canvas stage (*Meng heng* 蒙亨 “*Meng*, there will be progress and success”), but also its dimness and potential for harm if not properly guided. Youth is portrayed as a fertile phase in which talents can be cultivated, shaping the *meng*, this state of knowing nothing, through *jiaoyu* 教育, education.

During the Ming dynasty, various types of *tongmeng jiaocai* 童蒙教材 (didactic materials for children) were produced, drawing inspiration from the rich tradition of pedagogical studies of previous eras, particularly during the Song dynasty (960–1279). This period saw a significant production of works aimed at selecting the primary requirements in children’s education, such as the text *Tongmeng xuzhi* 童蒙須知 (What Every Child Should Know) written by Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) (Falato 2020: 23-45). The importance of education as a tool for personal development was often stressed not only by Confucian tradition but also by Taoist and Buddhist circles (Lee 2000:4).

The decision made by the founding Emperor Hongwu (洪武, 1328–1398) to initiate a process of reculturalization, *jiaohua* 教化 (Schneewind 2006:2), or indoctrination of the masses through education marked the beginning of the Ming dynasty. This led to the widespread establishment of schools at all levels. In premodern China, the state led primary education by establishing dynastic schools (*guanxue* 官學) aimed at imperial clan descendants, with a curriculum focused on preparing for imperial examinations. The Confucian elite, defined by kinship relations, could attend clan or family schools (*jiashu* 家塾), while wealthy families preferred to hire private tutors for their children’s education (private teaching, *sixue* 私學).

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, rural indoctrination was greatly promoted, expanding elementary education in rural communities with the primary aim of disseminating basic moral and social educational content, as not all students would proceed to further their studies and access the imperial examinations (Leung 1994). Education reached a broader and more diverse student population through private academies (*shuyuan* 書院), community schools (*shexue* 社學, also *shuxue* 塾學, *xiangxue* 鄉學), and charitable schools (*yixue* 義學 or *yishu* 義塾).

Private academies primarily depended on renowned scholars and their teaching methods (Cong 2011: 20), with support from the rulers contingent upon whether the teacher supported the rulers' policies. Community schools, also known as village schools, were established throughout every prefecture, township, and county with the founding of the Ming dynasty. However, these schools lacked a fixed format and did not receive consistent state support. Although some community schools served as preparatory institutions for the imperial examinations, their main purpose was to teach basic Confucian orthodoxy, making them the most common type of primary education (Lidén 2022).

Charitable schools were institutions supported not by public funds but by private donations from the local gentry. These schools were intended for poor families who lacked the financial resources to educate their children or for children belonging to clans. Charitable schools primarily focused on teaching basic literacy, although in some cases, they also offered advanced studies.

Education was directly proportional to the Ming dynasty's economic and cultural development. The commercial boom generated by the growth of agricultural development and commercial infrastructure, which began during the Song and Yuan (1271–1368) eras, led to the formation of large metropolises in the Lower Yangzi 扬子江 area. This, in turn, fostered the emergence of a powerful bureaucratic-mercantile elite. Consequently, the regions of Jiangsu 江苏, Zhejiang 浙江, Jiangnan 江南, and Jiangxi 江西 were particularly well-served by schools.

## 2. Primers for children and *riyong leishu*

During the Ming dynasty, child education primarily focused on a set of basic primers, typically the *Sanzi Jing* (三字經, Three-Character Classic), *Baijia Xing* (百家姓, Myriad Family Names), and *Qianzi Wen* (千字文, Thousand-Character Essay). These three books, often summarized as *San/Bai/Qian*, were studied during the initial years of schooling and served as preparation for reading the core texts of Confucian thought, the *Sishu Wujing* (四書五經, Four Books and Five Classics).

With the restoration of the imperial examination system and the widespread dissemination of Neo-Confucianism in civil society, Confucian texts, along with their commentaries, became integral to children's education (Brokaw 2007: 322). Among these commentaries, those produced by the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi's<sup>1</sup> school of thought (the Cheng-Zhu tradition) gained popularity from the 14th

---

<sup>1</sup> The thinkers Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and his older brother Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) together with Zhu Xi were among the main philosophers behind the Neo Confucianism interpretations. For further information on the spread of Neo Confucianism and the connection with Buddhism, see Makeham (2018).

century onwards. By the early 15th century, these commentaries formed the foundation of comprehensive manuals (*da quan* 大全), such as the *Wujing Sishu Daquan* 五經四書大全 (great collection of the Five Classics and the Four Books), which were essential for preparing for the imperial examination program (Lippiello 2009).

However, due to the rise in interest in education and the increased accessibility to learning facilitated by the proliferation of schools (Yue 2013: 292-293), written knowledge began to spread creating a new increased group of “literate commoners” —“common people with reading ability lower than the elite” (Wang 2021: 595), which includes people who had the opportunity to receive an elementary education in private and institutional schools but did not continue with further education curriculum. Consequently, traditional educational materials evolved to meet the needs of these new “literate commoners,” necessitating comprehensive manuals that were simpler, more concise, and more economical (Brokaw 2007: 323).

By the mid-sixteenth century, as extensively analyzed by Elman and Brokaw’s studies, woodblock printing reached its zenith, which allowed for a response to the burgeoning demand for educational texts. Particularly in the southern coastal region of the Yangzi Delta, a significant increase in publishers and bookstores established this area as the epicenter of commercial publishing (Elman and Chao-Hui 2017: 138; Elman 2016: 16-18). In addition to the traditional “private” production of texts for government offices, religious organizations, and technical books for official examinations, there emerged a flourishing commercial production aimed at the new literate gentry. This led to the widespread distribution of so-called daily-use encyclopedias, or *riyong leishu* (日用類書),<sup>2</sup> a genre of texts that originated in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) and thrived during the middle and late Ming Dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

As *leishu* (collections of writings organized by categories),<sup>4</sup> these books were designed to compile and systematize previously established texts. The addition of the *riyong* (daily-use) aspect involved updating these texts to reflect the evolving social environment. Consequently, *riyong leishu* provided

---

<sup>2</sup> The term *riyong leishu* was first introduced in the 1950s by Japanese scholar Sakai Tadao (Sakai 1958), gaining acceptance among scholars and still widely used today, translated into English as ‘daily use encyclopedia’ or ‘household encyclopedia’. For more on this topic, see Elman (2020), Brokaw (2007, 2017), and Rusk (2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Leishu* were already increasingly attentive to the everyday world in the Song era; for example, the encyclopedic work *Shilin Guangji* 事林廣記 compiled by the Southern Song Confucian Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚 (12th-13th century) in the early Yuan Dynasty demonstrates a shift in the production of the *leishu* genre: the encyclopedia was not commissioned by the imperial court and included illustrations within the text.

<sup>4</sup> For general information on the genre of *leishu*, see Wilkinson (2000: 600-610).

summaries of practical knowledge required for daily life, including topics such as medicine, geography, calligraphy, and social customs. These comprehensive manuals aimed to equip readers with general skills across various fields, as highlighted in their appealing titles designed to attract customers. They were intended for a broad audience, including *tianxia zhiren* (天下之人, all the people under heaven), *simin* (四民, the four social classes: *shi* 士 scholars, *nong* 農 peasants, *gong* 工 artisans, *shang* 商 merchants), and, more broadly, *yufu yufu* (愚夫愚婦, ignorant men and women) (Brokaw 2007a: 269). Additionally, *riyong leishu* often included a chapter titled *Xuntong Men* (訓童門), dedicated to the education of children.



Fig. 1 *Xuntong Men* (訓童門), Section Dedicated to Teaching Children: Chapter Opening Illustration.

From *Xin ban zengbu tianxia bian yong wenlin miaojin wanbao quanshu* 新板增補天下便用文林妙錦萬寶全書. Harvard-Yenching Library Rare Book T 9299 7224. Public domain, from the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University. Available at <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:2093485>.

*Xuntong Men* draws inspiration from “Enlightenment books” (*mengshu* 蒙書) to educate children, incorporating pedagogical sources from the Song Dynasty such as Zhu Xi’s *Tongmeng Xuzhi* with new methods for presenting Confucian ethical precepts to align with contemporary societal needs. The chapter under analysis features what the text itself refers to as *kouhao ge* (口號歌). These are rhyming texts, “songs” without musical accompaniment, that aid memory, making the content more digestible and accessible to a broader audience, including young readers.

Zhao Jingshen’s studies highlight the ancient tradition of using rhymes in children’s education,<sup>5</sup> exemplified by nursery rhymes known as *tongyao* (童謠). However, this literature for children did not receive significant attention until the 20th century (Pellatt 2015). Pellatt’s review of studies on children’s rhymes indicates that Lin Wuhui views *tongyao* and children’s songs (*erge* 兒歌) as different terms for indicating the same type of rhythmic composition for children, though this view is not universally accepted (Pellatt 2015). There is some overlap among *tongyao*, *erge*, and children’s poetry (*tongshi* 童詩). He Sanben prefers to use the term *geyao* (歌謠), a term found in the *Huainanzi*, to encompass all three subgenres and emphasize their ancient origins (He 2003). According to Gao Guofan, the roots of *tongyao* lie in the folk songs (*gudai minge* 古代民歌) that originated among ordinary people and can be traced back to *The Book of Changes* (*Zhou Yi* 周易) (Gao 1995: 197). During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, poetry was a common feature in vernacular books, often supplementing the text with part in lyrics for clarity and occasionally combined with illustrations and prose for educational purposes (Liu 2007).

The following chapter of this paper provides the English translation of the section *Xuntong men* from the 1612 daily-use encyclopaedia *Xin ban zengbu tianxia bian yong wenlin miao jin Wanbao quanshu* 新板增補天下便用文林妙錦萬寶全書 (“The Marvelous, Precious, Newly Edited and Supplemented *Wanbao Quanshu*: Complete Book of Myriad Treasures of Literati for the Convenient Use of All”), which is housed in the Harvard-Yenching Library.<sup>6</sup>

As indicated in the title, this book is a reissue of the *Wanbao Quanshu*, a well-known encyclopaedia for everyday use published during the Ming era, with several reprints and editions in circulation. The

---

<sup>5</sup> The study of rhyming compositions was also part of childhood education. Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, poetry primers on *yundui* 韻對 (rhyme and paired phrasing) used to teach the composition of lyrical couplets were frequently employed (Zhang and Chen 2014: 186).

<sup>6</sup> T9299/7224, repository Harvard College Library, Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University. The encyclopaedia is composed of 38 juan in total. The text is available at the link: <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:2093485>.

title's description as “marvelous, precious, newly edited and supplemented” reflects the typical advertising strategies employed by Ming publishers to persuade readers to purchase their edition over others available on the market.<sup>7</sup> In the specific section analysed here, the supplement added in this book includes the use of songs in verses that accompany common educational notions for children.

The translated chapter begins with an introduction that lacks rhyme and a fixed sentence structure. This is followed by eight educational teachings (*Xun meng ba gui* 訓蒙八規), each introduced by a prose explanation (partly sourced from earlier texts) and followed by songs *ge* (歌). The structure of the twelve songs is consistent, with almost all comprising eight lines of seven characters each (*qizi gejue* 七字歌訣). The metrical pattern typically excludes end sounds in the third and sixth lines, although this is not always adhered to.<sup>8</sup> The overall result of this chapter, which alternates parts in prose with more elaborated sections in rhyme, is a very simple, catchy, and easy-to-memorise text that could impart effectively basic education to children.<sup>9</sup> The translation here proposed, however, focuses on conveying the meaning of the text rather than preserving the original rhyme and rhythm. In the following transliteration of the text, punctuation has been added, which is absent in the original, for a smoother reading experience and to indicate the interpretation made of the content. Where simplified characters appear in the document, it is because they are written in the original source and thus are faithfully reproduced. Some characters appear to be incorrect or are variants of more common forms, so a possible interpretation is provided in parentheses. Citations from other works, or phrases that appear similarly in other sources, are indicated in notes.

---

<sup>7</sup> For other techniques used by daily-use encyclopaedias to encourage the purchase of reprints by emphasising the uniqueness of a particular edition, see Rusk 2021: 287-289.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in the first song, “Song of Serving Parents” (事親歌), the end rhymes are as follows: line 1 *tiān* 天, line 2 *quán* 全, line 3 *fǒu* 否, line 4 *mián* 眠, line 5 *juàn* 眷, line 6 *biān* 邊, line 7 *nù* 怒, line 8 *yán* 言. Lines 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8 end with the sound *-an*. In contrast, the final song “Song of Instructions on Walking” (訓行歌) deviates from this pattern. Here, the end rhymes are as follows: line 1 匆 *cōng*, line 2 同 *tóng*, line 3 重 *zhòng*, line 4 容 *róng*, line 5 揖 *yī*, line 6 從 *cóng*, line 7 舜 *shùn*, line 8 中 *zhōng*. Lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 end with the sound *-ong*.

<sup>9</sup> The text also employs quotations familiar to the reader and uses forms of parallelism that aid memorization. These aspects, along with a more detailed metric analysis, will not be addressed in this paper but will be covered in future work with a more in-depth analysis.

### 3. An example of Ming daily-use encyclopedic guide to child education

#### 訓童門：教子指南

古者生男，俟其稍有知識則教之以恭敬、尊長，禁其頑暴。六七歲時始習書寫，夙興夜寐<sup>10</sup>，毋容其惰怠，衣服量其寒暖，<sup>11</sup>勿使其失時，飲食必須樽節，毋使其過度。<sup>12</sup>八歲始令入小學，教之以灑掃應對之節，令讀《孝經》、《四書》，始為講解，使知禮義。收其放心、養其正性。十歲出就外傳，居宿于外。乃讀經傳諸史，使知善惡之所由來、是非之別、利害之端。博視群書，當知古今行事以崇。學業日積月深，自然成就。故孔子曰：“少成若天性，習慣如自然”。<sup>13</sup>此乃聖人之遺訓，教人之法也。今人少諳此理，習於常情。

始有其子，頗有聰明之資，便謂其必自能，遂荒其業。亦有見其子之資質魯鈍，謂其終不能成，遂廢其學。或者恃其富貴，倚其世祿，乃驕其子孫，以致墮(墮)遊失業，習於下流。於此之類，是不愛其子，忝辱祖宗。<sup>14</sup>是故養子不可以不學，而教之不可以不嚴也。學之篤，教之嚴，未有不成就者也。先儒有言，“學，則庶人之子為公卿。不學，則公卿之子為庶人”。<sup>15</sup>可不慎哉？故區不揣淺鄙之言為陋，特於此訓童之門，知務君子，當鑒而行之是幸。

#### Section dedicated to teaching children: Guide to child education

In the past, male offspring, as soon as they were old enough to understand things, were taught to be respectful of superiors and elders, as well as to suppress stubborn and violent behavior. At the age of six or seven, they were taught to write, to be hardworking, and to avoid laziness. They were taught to dress appropriately according to the season and to eat without wasting food or overeating. At the age

---

<sup>10</sup> “夙興夜寐” this expression comes from the *Book of Poetry (Shijing, 詩經)*, Book of Poetry, Odes of Wei, Mang.5.1.

<sup>11</sup> A similar sentence can be found in *Zunsheng Bajian 遵生八箋 (Eight Discourses on Respecting Life)*, written by Gao Lian 高濂 (ca. 1527–1603) and published in 1591. The text obtained wide circulation. See the part *Gaozi yiyang licheng 高子怡養立成*, eight *juan*: 高子曰...時自酌量身服，寒暖即為加減，毋得忍寒不就增服” (Gao Lian 1988: 216-17). Manuals on self-cultivation to obtain health preservation were common in the Ming dynasty, see Chen 2008.

<sup>12</sup> These sentences, which are the same in *Zunsheng Bajian*, are also collected in the 18th century encyclopedia *Siku Quanshu 欽定四庫全書*. “時 / 不時” can also be related to the Confucian concept of timely/untimely, suitable or unsuitable.

<sup>13</sup> “少成若天性，習慣如自然” from *Han shu*, (ch. 48 *Jia Yi zhuan 賈誼傳*). In Chinese Text Project, ed. Donald Sturgeon. <https://ctext.org/han-shu/jia-yi-zhuan>.

<sup>14</sup> This introductory passage on the different educational steps according to age and the different types of educational errors is also present in the encyclopedic work *Shilin Guangji 事林廣記*, in the beginning of the section *You xue xuzhi 幼學須知* (Instructions on children education).

<sup>15</sup> From *Quanxue wen 勸學文 (To Encourage Studying)* written by the Song writer Liu Yong 柳永.



of eight, children were introduced to elementary education, where they were taught how to clean the house, interact with guests appropriately, and instructed to read the *Xiaojing* (孝經 The Classic of Filial Piety) and the *Sishu* (四書 Four Books). These books were explained to them, and through them, children learned the rites and courtesies, to restrain their wandering minds, and to cultivate their proper nature. At the age of ten, they were sent to boarding schools where they would reside. Here, they learned to read the classics and historical records to understand the reasons behind good and evil, the difference between right and wrong, and the principles of benefit and harm. Reading various books leads to an understanding of the course of events in the past and present, thereby increasing their knowledge over time and achieving success naturally. As Confucius said, “What one learns in childhood is like one’s inborn temperament; the habits one forms become second nature.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, these are the wise men’s teachings and the methods of educating people. Few people today are fully acquainted with these principles, and they follow common practices instead. Some parents, having a particularly brilliant child, assume the child will succeed on his own and thus neglect his education. Conversely, those who have a child that is not very intelligent believe he will never achieve anything and thus abandon his education.

Some families who rely on their wealth or inherited titles spoil their offspring by allowing them to loiter, causing them to lose their achievements and become accustomed to a lower lifestyle. Such practices are not loving toward their children and bring disgrace to their ancestors. Therefore, raising children without education is not acceptable, and teaching them cannot be lax. Diligent studying and strict teaching, in fact, lead everyone to success. Ancient scholars said: “With education, the children of commoners can become noblemen; without education, the children of nobility can become commoners.” How can we not be cautious about this? Regardless of my shallow and humble words, I have made this guide for teaching children. Wise gentlemen, if you take my words as a reference and put them into practice, it would be fortunate.

---

<sup>16</sup> The English translation of the sentence is sourced from Tian and Kroll (2021: II.3). Some ideas on education refer to *Yan shi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 (Family Instructions for the Yan Clan), particularly in the section II “Educating Children;” see Tian and Kroll (2021).

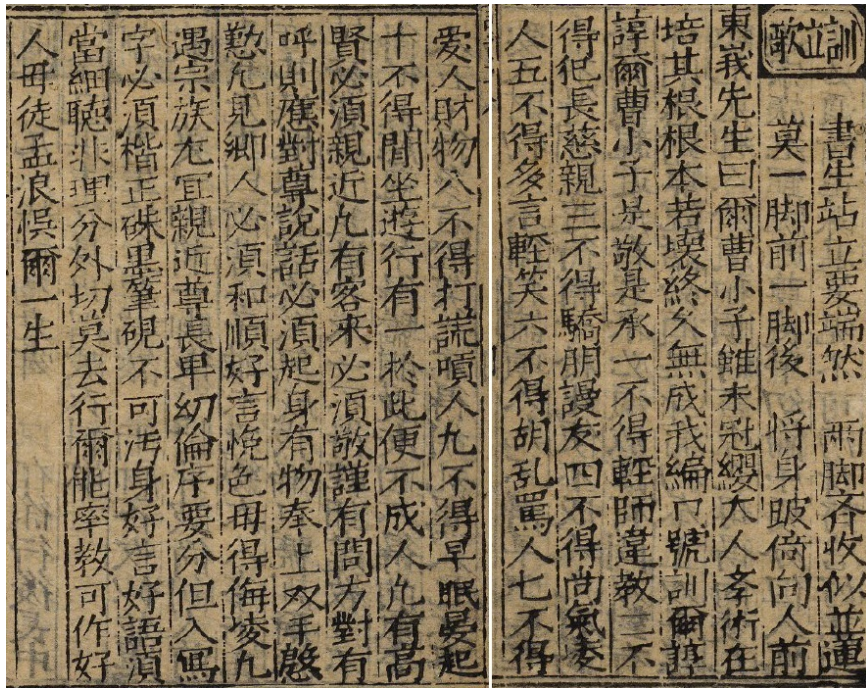


Fig. 2. Detail from the Text. From *Xin ban zengbu tianxia bian yong wenlin miao jin wanbao quanshu* 新板增補天下使用文林妙錦萬寶全書. Harvard-Yenching Library Rare Book T 9299 7224. Public domain, from the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University. Available at <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:2093485>.

《訓蒙八規》附彭東峨先生口號歌一十三章<sup>17</sup>

一 孝禮：凡為人要識道理，識禮數。在家庭，事父母。入書院，事先生，並要恭敬順從，遵依教誨。與之言則應，教之事則行。敬兄長，處朋友，毋得怠慢，自任己意。<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In other sources that reference to Mr. Peng Dong'e instructions to children, this text is cited as 彭東峨訓十章 (Peng Dong'e's Ten Instructions) or 彭东峨的《训蒙八规》 (Peng Dong'e's "Eight Rules for Educating the Young"). For example, see *Fan jia ji lue* (範家集略) compiled by Qin Fang 秦坊, volume 6, published by Muxi Xuan in 1871.

<sup>18</sup> These eight regulations are similar—if not completely identical—to the eight rules of Zhen Dexiu (真德秀; 1178–1235) in "Jiaozhi zhagui" (教子齋規 Rules for Educating Children). However, in the Southern Song text, there is no chanted part, and the order of the rules differs. References to the text and the positioning of the rules will be given according to Zhen Dexiu's version in the following notes. In this case, the text is the same except for a minor variation at the end: "一曰學禮。凡為人要識道理，識禮數。在家庭事父母，入書院事先生。並要恭敬順從，遵依教導。與之言則應，教之事而行，毋得怠慢，自任己意。" (Lou Hansong, 2017, vol. 2, p. 881). The same text is also found in *Shilin Guangji* (事林廣記), Later Collection (後集), Volume 9.

The “Eight Regulations for Educating Children” with Mr. Peng Dong’s Thirteen chanted Verses Attached.

First, studying etiquette. To be well-behaved, you must understand the correct principles and the proper etiquette. At home, attend upon your father and mother; at school, you must serve the teachers, be respectful and compliant, and follow their instructions diligently. When they speak to you, respond; when they instruct you to do something, do as you are told. Respect the older peers and get along with friends, without negligence, or acting according to your own whims.

事親歌：父母深恩等昊天，兒當孝順報生全。早晨先起問安否，晚夕還來看坐眠。懷果<sup>19</sup>便知思顧養，望雲心每<sup>20</sup>在親邊。有時打罵并嗔怒，只是和顏與笑言。<sup>21</sup>

- “Song of Serving Parents:” Parents’ deep grace is immense as the sky, and children must express filial piety for their whole lives. Once awake, you must first pay your greetings to your parents giving your regards to them, and in the evening, return to check on their rest. Every time your belly is full, you must think about it is thanks to your parents’ care; every time you see the clouds, you will miss your parents, like your heart is near them. Even when they scold or are angry, respond with a gentle demeanor and smile.

事師歌：師教深恩並父母，尊師重道始能成。百工技藝猶知本，莫作忘恩負義人。

- “Song of Serving Teachers:” The teacher’s deep grace is like that of parents; only by respecting teachers and valuing their teachings can one achieve success. Even artisans and craftsmen recognize that their technique and skills are rooted in their masters. Therefore, do not be ungrateful or forget your obligations.

<sup>19</sup> Here, 果 is interpreted as 果腹 (from *Zhuangzi* 庄子, *Xiaoyao You* 逍遙游), meaning “to have eaten one’s fill”.

<sup>20</sup> “望雲思親” is an allusion to filial piety derived from the story of Di Renjie (狄仁傑), one of the Twenty-four Filial Exemplars (二十四孝).

<sup>21</sup> The songs associated in Ming dynasty with the eight educational rules enjoyed widespread diffusion. An example of this is found in the later Qing book “*Mengyang shi jiao*” (蒙養詩教, The Teaching Poems of Primary Education), compiled by Hu Yuan (胡淵). The passage reads: 父母恩深等昊天，孩童孝順報難全。早晨先起問安否，晚夕還來看坐眠。吃果使思懷顧養，出門須想望雲邊。有時打罵母嗔怒，更要和顏近膝前。(The deep kindness of parents is as vast as the sky; children find it difficult to fully repay their filial piety. In the morning, rise early to greet them and ask how they are; in the evening, return to check on their rest. Eating should remind you of their care and nourishment. When leaving home, remember to think of them as you look towards the clouds. When they sometimes scold and get angry, be even more gentle and stay close by their side).

事兄歌：兄友弟兮<sup>22</sup>弟敬兄，天然倫序自分明。席間務讓兄居左，路上應該弟後行。酒食先須供長者，貨財切勿起爭心。諄諄誨汝無他意，原是同胞共乳人。

- “Song of Serving the Older Brother:” The older brother has affection for the younger one, and the younger one respects the older one. This natural order is clear and distinct. At meals, let your elder brother sit on the left; when walking, the younger brother should walk behind. Offer food and drinks first to the elders and do not covet others’ possessions. This sincere teaching is simply a reminder that you both were born of the same parents and nurtured by the same person.

處友歌：朋友之交道若何？少年為弟長為(歌\* sic 哥)。同行共席須謙讓，立志存心<sup>23</sup>互切摩。終日群居談道義，青春可惜莫蹉跎。休論富貴與貧賤，同氣相求<sup>24</sup>所益多。

- “Song of Getting Along with Friends:” How should one interact with friends? If you are younger, behave like a younger brother; if older, be as an elder brother. When walking or dining together, always be modest and considerate. Set your mind and keep the purity of your heart, and through the exchange of opinions, both of you will benefit. Spend the day in groups discussing principles and righteousness. Cherish your youth and do not waste time. Do not judge friends based on wealth or social status; friends with shared interests and morality will be more beneficial to each other.

二季誦：專心看字，斷句慢讀，須要字字分明，毋得目視東西，手執他物。<sup>25</sup>

Second, studying reading aloud. Focus on reading words carefully. Read slowly and with proper pauses, and ensure each word is distinct. Do not let your eyes wander or fiddle with other things.

訓讀歌：讀書端的要專心，義禮求明辨字音，諷誦務宜多遍數，晨昏須自細推尋，聖經賢傳同天地，善訓嘉言無古今，誠向此中求受用，一生勝積萬贏金。

- “Song of Instructions on Reading:” When reading, it is crucial to concentrate. Strive to understand the meanings and distinguish the sounds of the characters. It is important to recite them plenty of times, to meditate and reflect on the texts with care from morning till evening. The classics compiled by sages and the works explained by wise men are as vast as heaven and earth, good instructions and fine words are timeless. Sincerely seeking to gain usefulness from them is more valuable than accumulating ten thousand pieces of gold in a lifetime.

---

<sup>22</sup> Reminds “兄友弟恭” (the older brother take care of the younger brother, and the younger brother respect the older brother) in *Shiji*, “History of the Five Early Emperors” by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (史記·五帝本紀 *Shiji, Wudi benji, juan 1*).

<sup>23</sup> From Mengzi 孟子: “存心養性” (preserve his heart and nourish his nature); Mengzi (Mencius), *Jinxin Part I*, (盡心上).

<sup>24</sup> Concept from the *Yijing* 易經: “同聲相應，同氣相求。” (Notes of the same key respond to one another; creatures of the same nature seek one another). See *Zhouyi zhengyi* “Qian” 乾, “Wenyan” 文言, 20; Legge, *I Ching*, 411.

<sup>25</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s seventh teaching, same verse.

三季坐：定坐端身，齊腳斂手，毋得偃仰傾側。<sup>26</sup>

Third, studying how to sit. Sit upright and still, with your feet aligned and your hands gathered, without slouching or leaning.

訓坐歌：坐時義（又）手肅容儀，端拱安然似塑泥。莫把一身偏左右，謾將兩手弄東西<sup>27</sup>。與人並坐休橫股，獨坐之時亦整衣。記得古人言一句，坐如尸也是吾師。<sup>28</sup>

- “Song of instructions on sitting:” When sitting, keep your hands crossed and maintain a respectful demeanor. Sit upright and calm, like a statue molded from clay. Do not let your body lean left or right, and avoid fidgeting with anything. When sitting beside others, do not stretch your legs laterally towards them; when sitting alone, neaten your clothing. Remember what the ancients said: “Sitting still and motionless (like a corpse) is how you must learn to be”.

四季言：朴實語事，勿得妄誕，朗然出聲，毋得低喚。

Fourth, Studying to Speak. When speaking, one must sincerely tell the truth, avoid falsehood and exaggeration, and speak loudly and clearly; do not speak too softly or mumble.<sup>29</sup>

訓言歌：說話從今切勿輕，輕言動輒取人嗔。尊長問時從實對，友朋相處露情真。打謊哄噴人輕薄子，至誠應物聖賢人。平無妄語溫公者，分付兒曹要景行。

- “Song of Instructions on Speaking:” Be careful from now on not to speak carelessly; reckless words always provoke others’ anger. Answer elders truthfully and interact genuinely with friends. Liars and deceitful people are frivolous, while those who respond to things with utmost sincerity are sages and virtuous men. Never telling lies in daily life is what the Duke of Wen<sup>30</sup> did, and I ask you children to follow his example and practice.

<sup>26</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s second teaching, slightly different verse: 定身端坐，齊腳斂雙手。毋得伏槩靠背，偃仰傾側。

<sup>27</sup> The same song of Dong Peng’e, classified as a Ming text, is quoted in Qin Fang 秦坊, *Fan jia ji lue* 範家集略, 6 卷, 1871, but the last sentences changed slightly. The text is available at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044068324912>

<sup>28</sup> This sentence comes from *Liji* 禮記: “若夫，坐如屍” (*Liji, Qu Li* 曲禮 I, 4).

<sup>29</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s fifth teaching, slightly different verse: 五曰學言。樸實語事，毋得妄誕。低細出聲，毋得叫喚。

<sup>30</sup> Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), whose honorific posthumous title was Sima Wen Gong 司馬溫公, or Sima, Duke of Wen, is referred to here in connection with his well-known biography and integrity. The association between Sima Guang and the concept of 不妄語 (not speaking deceitfully) can already be seen in the text *Zhuxi yu lei da quan* (朱子語類大全, also known as *朱子語類 Zhuxi yulei*), see Zhu Xi 1998, p. 693. During the Ming dynasty, for example in the *Shengxun yan* 聖訓演, it is clearly illustrated how, according to Sima Guang, a person must be honest and always strive not to tell lies: “溫公曰: 「其誠乎。吾平生力行之，未嘗須臾離也。故立朝行己，俯仰無愧爾。」公問: 「行之何先?」溫公曰: 「自不妄語始，自是拳拳弗失，終身行之。」” see Lin Jinwei 2023, p. 202.

訓食歌：飲食隨時飽便休，不宜揀擇與貪求。若同尊席毋先宰，便是同行務遜酌。魚肉喫殘須勿反，飯湯流啜甚堪羞。遺羨讓果垂青史<sup>31</sup>，妬食之人乃下流。

- “Song of Instructions on Eating:” You must eat and drink at the right time but also know when to stop if you are full. It’s not good to be picky and gluttonous. If you are at a meal with elders and superiors, do not start eating first; even with people at your level, you must be modest and courteous when you toast. When eating fish, do not turn it over to the other side, and it is shameful to let juice fall from your mouth when you drink the soup. Those who share food generously with others will have a good reputation in history, whereas those who are greedy with food will be despised.

五孝書：臻志把筆，並(probably carved wrongly for 字 or missing 字) 要齊整圓淨，毋得胡塗。<sup>32</sup>

Fifth, studying writing. Concentrate your mind when holding the pen; the characters must be written neatly and orderly. Do not scribble or smudge.

訓字歌：童蒙習字用心勤，書畫端楷却為真。手中把筆宜正直，紙上揮毫要分明。莫道登場重文士，須知臨池敬書人<sup>33</sup>，若有糊塗幼不改，老來體法寫無成。

- “Song of Instructions on Characters:” Young learners should diligently practice writing with care. In writing and calligraphy, the regular style is the best. Hold the brush upright in your hand, and ensure that each brushstroke is clear and distinct on the paper. No wonder that those who can pass the exams are all good calligraphers; you kids must dedicate yourself to practicing handwriting, following the example of Zhang Zhi. If, in your young age, you always write sloppily and do not correct it, you will fail to write properly in old age.

六孝揖：低頭屈腰，出聲收手，毋得輕率慢易。<sup>34</sup>

Sixth, studying greetings. Bow with your head lowered and your torso bent forward. After saying your greeting, retract your hands. Do not act hastily or carelessly.

訓揖歌：逢人作揖請昇東，腳要並齊腰要躬，低頭落手頻過膝，平身收手漫按胸，若遇尊者須敬上，下拜不必論西東，謾道尊人施禮淺，少年勿與老年同。

---

<sup>31</sup> 穎考叔，孔融讓果 quotation from two stories connected to filial piety.

<sup>32</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s eight teaching, written quite similarly: 臻 (聚也) 志把筆，字要齊整圓淨。毋得輕易糊塗。 For the interpretation of the first part of the encyclopedic text, the text of Zhen Dexiu was referenced.

<sup>33</sup> Reference to Zhang Zhi 張芝’s story, renowned for his dedication to calligraphy, famously known for practicing his writing skills until the pond turned black with ink. This story illustrates his extreme commitment and diligence in perfecting his craft.

<sup>34</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s sixth teaching, same verse.

- “Song of Instructions on Greetings:” When you meet someone, bow with your hands folded in front and let them stand on the east side. Your feet should be parallel, and your torso should be bent. Lower your head and let your hands fall past your knees. Stand up straight, bring your hands back, and gently place them on your chest. When you encounter an elder or superior, you must show respect by performing the kowtow. When bowing on your knees, it is not necessary to choose a specific orientation. Do not criticize the greetings of superior people as being insufficient, as young people and elderly people are not in the same position.

七孝行: 籠袖隨行, 毋得掉臂跳足。<sup>35</sup>

Seventh, studying walking. When you walk, fold your arms and tuck them into the opposite sleeves. Do not swing your arms or jump.

訓行歌: 行時無事莫匆匆, 休與顛狂一樣同, 怕有崎嶇須隱(穩)重, 恐遭傾跌(跌)失儀容, 但遇親鄰深作揖, 若逢尊長後相從, 凡人皆可為堯舜<sup>36</sup>, 只在徐行後長中。

- “Song of Instructions on Walking:” When walking, do not rush if there is nothing urgent. Do not behave like a madman. Be cautious of uneven paths and walk steadily, to prevent falling and losing your composure. When meeting relatives or neighbors, bow deeply with your hands folded in front. If you encounter superior or elders, follow them: everyone can become as virtuous as Yao or Shun by walking slowly behind the elderly.<sup>37</sup>

八孝立: 拱手立身, 毋得跛衣(sic\*倚)斜欹。<sup>38</sup>

Eighth, studying standing. Stand with hands clasped, maintaining a straight posture without limping, leaning, or standing at an angle.

訓立歌: 書生站立要端然, 兩腳齊收似並蓮。莫一腳前一腳後, 將身跛倚向人前。

- “Song of Instructions on Standing:” Students must stand upright, with both feet together and parallel, like twin lotuses. Do not place one foot in front of the other or limp forward.

東峨先生曰: 爾曹小子, 雖未冠纓, 大人孝術, 在培其根, 根本若壞, 終久無成。我編口號, 訓爾諄諄。爾曹小子, 是敬是承。

<sup>35</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s third teaching, same verse.

<sup>36</sup>The Emperors Yao and Shun are often cited as the highest standards of humanity. This reference aligns with the dialogue in Mencius, Gaozi Part II: 曹交問曰: “人皆可以為堯舜, 有諸?” 孟子曰: “然。” (“Jiao of Cao asked Mencius, ‘Is it true that ‘All men may be Yaos and Shuns?’” Mencius replied, ‘Yes, it is.’”). (Mengzi 4.2.32)

<sup>37</sup> This concept is derived from Mengzi, Gaozi Part II, where it is said: “徐行后長者謂之弟, 疾行先長者謂之不弟。”

<sup>38</sup> Zhen Dexiu’s fourth teaching, same verse: 拱手立身, 毋得跛倚欹斜.

一不得輕師違教，二不得犯長慈親，三不得驕朋謾友，四不得尚氣凌人，五不得多言輕笑，六不得胡亂罵人，七不得愛人財物，八不得打謊噴人，九不得早眠晏起，十不得閒坐遊行。

有一於此，便不成人。凡有高賢，必須親近。

凡有客來，必須敬謹。有問方對，有呼則應對尊說話，必須起身。有物奉上，双手殷勤。

凡見鄉人，必須和順。好言悅色，毋得侮凌。

凡遇宗族，尤宜親近，尊長卑幼，倫序要分。

但入寫字，必須楷正。硃墨筆硯，不可污身。

好言好語，須當細聽，非理分外，切莫去行。

爾能率教，可作好人，毋徒孟浪，悞爾一生。

Mister Dong'e said:

“You, little children, even though you have not yet grown up, the foundation of adult learning lies in cultivating the root. If your roots are rotten, you will not achieve success. I have compiled these verses to provide you with sincere teachings. Children, respect and practice them:

1. Do not offend teachers or disobey their instructions.
2. Do not offend elders or parents.
3. Do not be arrogant with friends or mock them.
4. Do not act aggressively or oppress others.
5. Do not talk too much or laugh frivolously.
6. Do not curse or scold people carelessly.
7. Do not covet others' possessions.
8. Do not lie or deceive others.
9. Do not sleep too early or get up too late.
10. Do not sit idly or wander aimlessly.

If you commit even one of these faults, you will not become a mature person (成人).

Always approach virtuous and wise people and learn from them. When guests arrive, always be respectful and cautious. Answer questions directly when asked and respond promptly when called. When speaking to elders and superiors, stand up and offer items with both hands sincerely. Always be gentle and respectful to fellow villagers. Speak kindly, with a friendly expression, and do not insult or bully others.



Whenever you encounter your clan, be close to your clan members, and remember to respect the hierarchy and age differences: those who are superior and older, versus those who are inferior and younger.

Characters must be written correctly and in the proper style. When using brushes, do not make red or black ink stains on yourself.

Listen carefully to good words and advice. Avoid unreasonable actions.

If you follow these teachings, you will become a good person. Do not be reckless, and do not ruin your life.”

#### 4. Innovations made in tradition

The chosen case study exemplifies a printed text from the genre *riyong leishu*, reflecting the prevalent pedagogical knowledge during the Ming and Early Qing periods. The chapter *Xuntong men* is constructed by integrating various sources, as noted in the annotations. This compilation reveals the enduring influence of Southern Song pedagogical production, which continued to be a primary reference for child education in the Ming era. Neo-Confucianism, particularly Zhu Xi’s teachings, along with quotations from classical texts like the *Mengzi* and the *Liji*, are evident in the chapter. However, there are also notable innovations.

The chapter incorporates the *Xunmen ba gui* (Eight Rules for Teaching Children), originally listed by Zhen Dexiu and subsequently included in the *Shilin guangji* with a different arrangement. The changes made in this chapter during the Ming Dynasty, with the addition of Peng Dong’e’s songs, adapted Confucian ethical norms to the practical lives of readers. The texts referenced underwent significant reduction and simplification: for example, the sections on rituals related to clothing and utensils, which were prohibitively expensive for ordinary individuals, were omitted to bridge the gap between affluent and humble readers (Wei 2015: 184). The text caters to a pragmatic audience, particularly traders, by emphasizing a reward-centered mindset: adhering to specific behaviors grants one a rightful role in society. Additionally, elements of self-cultivation for health preservation (*yangsheng*) are mentioned, reflecting interests from Daoist manuals and medical anthologies frequently cited in Ming-era everyday encyclopedias.

The text alternates between prose and seven-character poetry, concluding with a mix of seven- and four-character lines. This rhythmic and accessible format facilitates memorization and oral transmission, even among the illiterate, thereby promoting the dissemination of Confucian ethics to the broader population. Simplifying and summarizing traditional concepts into catchy poetry enhances the common person’s perceptual understanding.

The author addresses readers in the first person, adding an element of interaction that captures attention and strengthens engagement. However, the focus of these teachings is not on the needs of infants but on how to quickly transition them into their adult social roles.

## 5. Conclusion

*Riyong leishu* texts provide a reflection of Ming-era society. The chapter on childhood education analyzed here offers insight into the sources and techniques used to educate children in the 17th century, particularly the methods employed to facilitate memorization of rules necessary for becoming adults (*chengren*). Musicality as a mnemonic device was highly valued in China, evident in the use of three, four, five, or seven-character sentences in primers, along with rhymes and parallel couplets, such as the quadrisyllabic structure used in the *Qianzi Wen* (Lee 2000: 467). These educational texts, as well as daily-use encyclopedias with simpler language and songs, benefitted from the development of print production, leading to widespread diffusion both within China and beyond its borders (Brokaw 2005, 2007, 2020).

During the 17th century, many encyclopedic texts reached Japan, where they were studied and used as models for later Japanese editions.<sup>39</sup> Texts such as *Mingxin baojian* 明心宝鉴 (Precious Mirror for Illuminating the Heart), a collection of moral aphorisms for children's education compiled in the 14th century by Fan Liben 范立本, also gained popularity in Korea (Clart 2018). These texts circulated alongside other Chinese primers for children, such as *Qianzi Wen*, *Tongmeng xianxi* 童蒙先習 (Children's First Learning), and Zhu Xi's *Xiao xue* 小學<sup>40</sup> (Elementary Learning).

It is noteworthy how these texts, focused on children's education, extended beyond the Chinese cultural sphere and attracted the attention of European missionaries in China. These missionaries brought the books back to Europe or in some cases undertook their translation. Several editions of popular everyday encyclopedias, primarily derived from the *Wanbao quanshu* text, circulated in Europe, as evidenced by collections of Chinese books originating from Jesuit contacts starting in the 17th century (Magnani 2020).

---

<sup>39</sup> Regarding the transmission of encyclopedic texts in East Asia, see “The Transmission of *Wanbao quanshu* to Japan in the Early Edo Period: Their Role in the Compilation of Educational Texts” by Lin Kuei-ju, and “The Transmission and Translation of the *Wanbao quanshu* in Chosŏn Korea” by Ch'oe Yongch'ŏl 崔溶澈 in Brokaw (2020).

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Kang (2006: 208).

Western missionaries were particularly drawn to Chinese educational materials as a means to understand the roots of Chinese culture and society. The *Mingxin baojian*, for instance, was among the first Chinese books translated into a European language. The Dominican missionary Juan Cobo (1546/47–1592) translated it into Spanish at the end of the 16th century, and recent research suggests Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) had earlier translated it into Latin (Hu & Zhang, 2022).<sup>41</sup> Missionaries recognized the importance of structuring texts in simple sentences with a consistent number of characters, giving the text a rhythmic quality for easier comprehension. For instance, Giulio Aleni (1582–1649), while living in Fujian, created the *Four Character Classic* (*Sizijingwen* 四字經文) by emulating the children’s primer *Sanzijing*, structuring the text in four-character sentences (Clark 2021).

However, missionaries did not always successfully capture the rhythm or technical refinements such as parallelism or tone patterns (平仄, *pingze*) typical of Chinese classical poetry<sup>42</sup>. Nonetheless, they fully adopted the idea that rhythmic structures and songs could indeed aid in teaching children and preaching the mass.

## References

- Brokaw, Cynthia J. 2007a. “Book History in Premodern China: The State of the Discipline I”. *Book History* 10: 253-290.
- Brokaw, Cynthia J. 2007b. *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brokaw, Cynthia J. 2017. “Publishing and Popular Literature in Imperial China.” Oxford: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History, Oxford University Press.
- Brokaw, Cynthia J. and Kai-wing Chow. 2005. *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: CA: University of California Press.
- Brokaw, Cynthia J. and Joan Judge (eds.). 2020. “Publishing for Daily Life in Early Modern East Asia.” *Lingua franca*, Issue 6.
- Chen, Hsiu-fen (陳秀芬). 2008. “Nourishing Life, Cultivation and Material Culture in the Late Ming: Some Thoughts on *Zunsheng bajian* 遵生八牋 [Eight Discourses on Respecting Life, 1591]”. *Asian Medicine* 4: 29-45.
- Clark, Anthony. A. 2021. *Chinese Jesuit Catechism: Giulio Aleni’s Four Character Classic* 四字經文. Singapore: Springer Nature.

---

<sup>41</sup> These translations did not disseminate widely in Europe until 1676, when the translation by the Dominican friar Domingo Fernández de Navarrete (1618–1686) was published.

<sup>42</sup> In this regard, see the analysis of Michele Ruggieri’s Chinese poems by Zhang Xiping (2024).

- Clart, Philip. 2018. “The Mingxin Baojian 明心寶鑑 (Precious Mirror for Enlightening The Mind) And Its Transmission In The West”. *Ming-Qing yilai shanshu congbian (chuj)* (明清以來善書叢編: 初輯) 1: 13-29.
- Cong, Xiaoping. 2011. *Teachers’ Schools and the Making of the Modern Chinese Nation-State, 1897-1937*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Elman, Benjamin A. 2005. *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550-1900*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Elman, Benjamin A. 2007. “Collecting and Classifying: Ming Dynasty Compendia and Encyclopedias (Leishu).” *Extrême orient Extrême occident, hors série*: 131-157.
- Elman, Benjamin A. 2020. “Chinese Encyclopedism and the Power of Knowledge, 1451 to 1770.” In: *Encyclopedism: A Companion to World Literature* (December), edited by Ken Seigneurie, 1-13. Online edition. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0295>
- Elman, Benjamin A. and Chao-Hui Jenny Liu. 2017. *The ‘Global’ and the ‘Local’ in Early Modern and Modern East Asia*. Leiden: Brill.
- Falato, Giulia. 2020. *Alfonso Vagnone’s Tongyou Jiaoyu (On the Education of Children, C. 1632): The Earliest Encounter Between Chinese and European Pedagogy*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gao, Guofan 高國藩. 1995. *Zhongguo minjian wenxue* [中國民間文學 Chinese Folk Literature]. Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju.
- Gao, Lian (高濂). 1988 [1591]. *Yashang zhai zunsheng bajian* [雅尚齋遵生八牋, Eight Discourses on Respecting Life from the Studio Where Elegance is Valued], modern reprint. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe.
- He, Sanben 何三本. 2003. *You’er wenxue* [幼兒文學, Children’s Literature]. Taizhong: Wunan Library Publishers.
- Hu Wenting (胡文婷), Zhang Xiping (張西平). 2022. “Mengxue jingdian “Mingxin baojian” de Ladingyu yiben chutan” [蒙學經典《明心寶鑑》的拉丁語譯本初探, A Preliminary Study on the Latin Translation of the Mongolian School Classic “Ming Xin Bao Jian”]. *Zhongguo fanyi* (中國翻譯, Chinese Translators Journal) 4: 38-44.
- Kang, Jae-eun. 2006. *The Land of Scholars: Two Thousand Years of Korean Confucianism*. Trans. Suzanne Lee. Paramus: Homa & Sekey Books.
- Lee, Thomas H.C. 2000. *Education in Traditional China: A History*. Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill.
- Leung, Angela Ki Che. 1994. “11. Elementary Education in the Lower Yangtze Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”. *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900*, edited by Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside, 381-416. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lidén, Johanna. 2022. “Charitable Schools as a Social Welfare Project in the Ming Dynasty”. *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 26/1: 1-29.

- Lin, Jinwei 林晉葳. 2023. *Sheng yu yu jiaohua: Mingdai liu yu xuanjiang wenben "Sheng xun yan" tanxi* [聖諭與教化：明代六諭宣講文本《聖訓演》探析 Edicts and Enlightenment: An analysis of the "Sheng xun yan" in Ming Dynasty]. Taipei: Xiuwei zixun.
- Lippiello, Tiziana. 2009. *Il Confucianesimo*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Liu, Tianzhen (刘天振). 2007. "Shi lun mingdai minjian leishu Zhong ge jue de bianji gongneng: yi Mingkan riyong leishu wei kaocha zhongxin [试论明代民间类书中歌诀的编辑功能——以明刊日用类书与通俗故事类书为考察中心 On the function of rhythmic formulas in compiling popular *leishu* during Ming dynasty: using the *riyong leishu* and popular story books as the focus of research]". *Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua* 中国典籍与文化 3: 89-94.
- Lou, Hansong (楼含松) (ed). 2017. *Zhongguo lidai jia xun jicheng*, 2 [中国历代家训集成, 2 Collection of Chinese Family Instructions, vol. 2]. Zhejiang: Zhejiang gujing chubanshe.
- Magnani, Arianna. 2020. *Enciclopedia cinese in Europa: percorsi transculturali del sapere tra Seicento e Settecento*. Genova: De Ferrari.
- Makeham, John (ed.). 2018. *The Buddhist Roots of Zhu Xi's Philosophical Thought*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Pellatt, Valerie. 2015. Chapt.1. "Nursery rhymes, children's rhymes and children's poems as a Chinese literary genre." In: *Sunflowers and Stars. The Ideological Role of Chinese Children's Rhymes and Poems in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Valerie Pellatt, 17-33. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Qin, Fang 秦坊. 1871. *Fan jia ji lue* 範家集略. N. p.: Muxi xuan.
- Rusk, Bruce. 2021. "Chapter 9. Writer's Block or Printer's Block: The Book and Its Openings in Early Modern China." *Impagination – Layout and Materiality of Writing and Publication: Interdisciplinary Approaches from East and West*, edited by Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang, Anthony Grafton and Glenn Warren Most. 273-300. Berlin – Boston, MA: De Gruyter.
- Sakai, Tadao (酒井忠夫). 1958. "Mindai no nichiyō ruisho to shomin kyōiku" (明代の日用類書と庶民教 [Daily-use Encyclopedias of the Ming Dynasty and Popular Education]). *Kinsei Chūgoku kyōikushi kenkyū* 近世中国教育史研究, edited by Hayashi Tomoharu, 62-74. Tokyo: Kokudoshia.
- Schneewind, Sarah. 2006. *Community Schools and the State in Ming China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Tian, Xiaofei and Kroll, Paul W. 2021. *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan and Other Works by Yan Zhitui (531-590s)*, Berlin – Boston, MA: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Wang, Richard G. 2021. "Taoist Writings Packaged in Ming Popular Encyclopedias and Their Editing Strategies." In: *Religion and Chinese Society Vol. 2: Taoism and Local Religion in Modern China*, edited by John Lagerwey, 591-621. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Wei, Zhiyuan (魏志远). 2015. "Mingdai riyong leishu yu Rujia tongmeng jiaoyu [明代日用类书与儒家童蒙教育 Confucian Children's Enlightenment Education in Encyclopedias for Daily Use in Ming Dynasty]." *Anhui shifan daxue Xuebao (Renwen shehui kexue ban)* 安徽师范大学学报(人文社会科学版) 43/2:178-184.

- Wilkinson, Endymion. 2000. *Chinese History. A manual (Revised and enlarged)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Yue, Fang (岳芳). 2013. “Mingdai de sishu yu shushi [明代的私塾与塾师, Private Schools and their teachers in Ming Dynasty]”. *Jinri Zhongguo luntan 今日中国论坛* 15: 292-293.
- Zhang, Xiping. 2024. “Primo incontro tra le culture cinese e occidentale: uno studio sulle poesie cinesi di Michele Ruggieri di Zhang Xiping”. *Intorcettiana* 6/11: 66-79.
- Zhang, Jian and Dandan Chen. 2014. “Primers and Poetry in Ancient China: Shenglü Fameng and Beyond”. *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 1/1-2: 186-215.
- Zhu Xi (朱熹). 1998. *Zhu zi yu lei xuan zhu. 朱子语类选注*. 2 vol. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe.
- Zhu Xi, Transl. and ed. by Joseph Alan Adler. 2019. *The Original Meaning of the Yijing: Commentary on The Scripture Of Change*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Zhu, Zihui. 2016. “The Primer Tradition and Reflections on Chinese Education over the Past 100 Years.” *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 36/6: 148-155.

---

Arianna Magnani is a researcher in Chinese Language and Literatures at the University of Enna “Kore,” where she teaches courses in Chinese Language and History of Asia. She currently coordinates as Principal Investigator the 2022 PRIN Project titled “M.A.R.E.: Manuscripts and books from Asia Reaching Europe. A semantically enhanced digital library mapping Asian books circulation along the Silk Maritime Routes,” in collaboration with the Universities of Pisa and Salerno. She obtained her Ph.D. degree in Asian and African Studies, at Ca’Foscari University of Venice. Her research mainly focuses on Chinese *riyong leishu* encyclopedias published during the Ming and early Qing era, as well as the investigation of early documents and collections of Chinese books still preserved in European libraries. She is also interested in the role of early modern Christian missionaries in the intercultural mediation between East and West.

Arianna can be reached at: [arianna.magnani@unikore.it](mailto:arianna.magnani@unikore.it)

# Chinese contemporary literatures in and out of China





## “I am not writing about sex, but about human nature”

### Body, sex and pornography in Feng Tang’s “Unspeakable Trilogy”

Lavinia Benedetti

Since the early 1990s, sexuality has emerged as an increasingly significant theme in Chinese literature and popular culture. In contrast to earlier works that suppressed sexuality in favor of political fervor, authors like Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997) introduced a completely fresh perspective on sexuality, emphasizing its individual significance (Larson 2003). Two decades after the release of Wang Xiaobo’s renowned novel “The Golden Years” (1991), Feng Tang (1971) astonishes Chinese readers with his unconventional treatment of sex in his novel *Bu’er*, the first of the so-called “Unspeakable Trilogy” (in the text referred to as the “Trilogy”). Beyond the controversies often surrounding Feng Tang for his unreserved approach to discussing sexuality, particularly male sexuality, this article aims to provide reflection on his poetics of sex, which often appear to aim for higher, sometimes philosophical, ends rather than merely seeking to shock or disturb the reader.

**Keywords:** Feng Tang; “Unspeakable Trilogy;” sexuality; body; human nature.

It can be said that Feng Tang demystified the concept of sex, presenting it as something as ordinary as drinking tea, eating, playing the piano, or reading—an integral part of human life. (Zhou Xuehua 2008: 68)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

This article focuses on three narrative works of the Beijing writer Feng Tang 冯唐 (pseudonym of Zhang Haipeng 张海鹏): *Bu’er* 不二 (lit. “Not-Two,” 2011), *Tianxia luan* 天下卵 (“Of All The Balls,” 2012) and *Anyang* 安阳 (2012).

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Chinese to English in this article are my own responsibility.

These three writings are defined by the author as the "Unspeakable Trilogy" (*Zi bu yu san bu qu* 子不语三部曲), though only *Bu'er* 不二 was published separately as a novel, while *Tianxia luan* 天下卵 and *Anyang* 安阳, being shorter, were included in a collection titled *Tianxia luan* (2012).<sup>2</sup> The name of the "Trilogy" *Zi bu yu* ("What the master would not discuss") refers to the title of a famous collection of supernatural stories compiled by Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) scholar Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797), which in turn referred to a passage of the "Analects of Confucius" (*Lunyu* 论语) that states, "The Master never discussed strange phenomena, power exploits, disorder or supernatural/saints stories" (*Lunyu* 7: 21). It seems that the Master Confucius 孔子 (c. 551-c. 479 BCE), the father of Chinese thought, had talked about everything in front of his students (who would then have compiled the "Analects"), but he avoided talking about certain topics because he considered them unworthy, or perhaps only because there was nothing to discuss.

Feng Tang, therefore, like a modern Yuan Mei (who was criticized as a heretic), dedicates his "Trilogy" to themes that have been neglected by Confucian orthodoxy: *Bu'er* is set in the Tang dynasty (618-907) tells the story of Buddhist monks and nuns who achieve enlightenment through unusual means (disorder and saints), *Tianxia luan* is set in the court of a likely Liao dynasty (907-1125), follows the story of a eunuch who plots a conspiracy against the emperor (power), and finally *Anyang* which is set in the Shang dynasty (1600 BCE – 1050 BCE), tells the story of a fortune teller who loses his ability to predict the future (strange). In all three works, the exploration of the body and sexuality becomes a means of social assertion for the protagonists, whose portrayals are clearly inspired by recognizable historical figures. In some cases, these figures are entirely out of context, such as the eunuch Liu Jin 刘瑾 (1451-1510) in *Tianxia luan*, while in other cases, the characters are richly detailed, with insights and descriptions that are intertwined with documented sources and historical events, such as the patriarchs of Chan Buddhism and the poetess Yu Xuanji 鱼玄机 (c. 840-c. 868) in *Bu'er*. However, it is almost impossible to summarize the plots of Feng's novels, just as the critic Li Jingze 李敬泽 (1964) once said:

There's no story or characters in Feng Tang's world. Nobody would picture himself as someone in Feng Tang's novels, and even if somebody wants to enter Feng Tang's world, he cannot find the entrance. His novels can never be adapted into any TV series or movie, because his world has no

---

<sup>2</sup> In 2020, I translated into Italian the two stories *Tianxia luan* and *Anyang*, respectively titled "Palle imperiali" and "Anyang" (Feng Tang 2020).

power or willingness, not even lust. No one can tell which school he belongs to, and not any critic is willing to offend him---I do not remember any well-known critic who attempted to comment on him, and I do not want to get into the trouble either (*Qianyan* in Feng 2012b).<sup>3</sup>

Feng Tang has been called “Best Non-Professional Writer” (*Wentan wai gaoshou* 文坛外高手) because he made his debut in the literary world in 2001, after earning a PhD in gynaecology in Beijing, a degree in business in the US, and a carrier as consultant for McKinsey & Co. After that he published numerous novels, collections of essays, short stories, poems, translations, screenplays and journal articles, he has a blog<sup>4</sup> and podcasts<sup>5</sup> on *Weibo* (the biggest social media platforms in China) with thousands of followers.

In the literary panorama the first to notice him is perhaps Li Jingze, who in 2004 after reading a draft of “Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen” (十八岁给我一个姑娘), called him the “best writer of the post-70 generation” (70后作家第一人), attracting the attention of other very influential critics and writers such as Bai Hua 白桦 (1952), He Shaojun 贺绍俊 (1951), Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 (1962) and Huang Jiwei 黄集伟 (1958). Just a short time later, in fact, fame arrived. In 2007, his first three novels known as the “Beijing Trilogy” (*Beijing san bu qu* 北京三部曲)—“Everything Grows” (万物生长, 2001), “Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen” (2005) and “Beijing Beijing” (北京北京, 2007)—are selling out in bookstores in Beijing and Taiwan (Wang Duo 2007: 81).

However, his most sensational success is certainly *Bu'er*, a historical novel which departed abruptly from his earlier semi-autobiographic themes. After being rejected by as many as twenty-two publishing houses in China (too much sexual content) and Taiwan (speaks of Buddhism in a somewhat critical manner), in 2011 *Bu'er* was finally published in Hong Kong, and in just two months it became the best-selling Chinese-language novel in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, thanks to his writings and income from his managerial work, Feng entered the list of the wealthiest Chinese writers (Wang Duo 2007: 80).

---

<sup>3</sup> The English translation is provided by Zhang Mingjia (2016: 6). Please refer to the preface (*qianyan* 前言) authored by Li Jingze for the novel *Shiba sui gei wo yi ge guniang* (Feng Tang 2012b).

<sup>4</sup> Feng’s blog is titled *Yong wenzi dabai shijian* 用文字打败时间 (Beat time with literature). Feng Tang uses this expression with two meanings: it suggests that a successful literary work makes its author immortal, and that literature helps overcome boredom.

<sup>5</sup> Some examples are *Chengshi xinfa* 成事心法 (“Psychological methods to achieve one’s goals”), and *Feng Tang jiangshu* 冯唐讲书 (“Reviews by Feng Tang”).

<sup>6</sup> *Bu'er* is still not published in mainland China, however, albeit with some censored words, it is easily found on Chinese websites.

Feng is loved/criticized for involving sexuality in almost all of his writings, including poems and essays. His vivid depiction of actual or simulated sex always arouse animated controversy. In an interview on the journal *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报 September 8, 2015, Feng justifies himself by saying, "Just as some people use psychological issues, and others use chicken soup, I prefer to use human sexuality as an entry point to explore human nature" (*Nanfang dushi bao* 2015)<sup>7</sup>.

For his emphasis on sexuality and irreverent style, he has often been compared to two other popular Pekingese writers, Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997) and Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958; Wu Congju 2009). Yet, Feng Tang does not like to be associated with other writers, not even with the "Two Wangs" whom he recognizes as "literary heroes" (*wenxue yingxiong* 文学英雄) but who spares no criticism: "Xiaobo's appearance is a miracle; he can be considered a leading figure in literary history, but he cannot yet be considered great" (Feng Tang 2017: 49).<sup>8</sup> However, among those who define Feng Tang as "the Twenty-First Century Wang Xiaobo" (*21 shiji Wang Xiaobo* 21 世纪王小波), and "Wang Shuo's Successor" (*Wang Shuo chuanren* 王朔传人), there is also Xiaobo's widow Li Yinhe 李银河 (1952), who is not only one of Feng's biggest fans, but also a world-renowned sexologist. In 2009, she wrote in her blog "Feng's judgment of Xiaobo is a bit harsh," but "his books are too beautiful," and later she comes to say: "Among contemporary writers, Wang Xiaobo ranks first, followed by Feng Tang in second place" (Li Yinhe 2012).<sup>9</sup>

Even if Feng's openness toward sexuality has something similar with Wang Xiaobo, we have to assume that by 2011 the cultural, social and political environment had changed a great deal since the release of "The Golden Years" (*Huangjin shidai* 黄金时代, 1991). When this novel appeared in the literary world, China was experiencing enormous social, political, and economic change. The Maoist

---

<sup>7</sup> See Feng Tang *tan wenxue chuanguo: Qingse shi ge rukou yao gei ni kan linghun* 冯唐谈文学创作：情色是个入口 要给你看灵魂 ("Feng Tang talks about literary creation: Erotica is an entrance to show you the soul"). *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报, September 8, 2015: <https://news.sina.cn/sh/2015-09-08/detail-ifxhqhuf8216901.d.html?vt=1> (2022-11-11).

<sup>8</sup> See the full chapter *Wang Xiaobo daodi you duome weida* 王小波到底有多么伟大 ("How great is Wang Xiaobo after all?"), in Feng Tang (2017: 44-49).

<sup>9</sup> See Li Yinhe, *Dangdai xiezuozhe zhong Wang Xiaobo di yi, Feng Tang di er* 当代写作者中王小波第一, 冯唐第二. December 4, 2012: <https://weibo.com/liyinhe> (2022-11-11). Li has been one of the most active promoters of Feng's work, and it is not surprising that she took his defence also in the bitter controversy that involved Feng Tang in 2015 following his translation of the Nobel laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore's poetry "Stray Birds." To Feng's opponents who believed that his translation had put too much emphasis on sexuality to the point of misrepresenting the original text, Li responds "Feng Tang's translation is the best Chinese translation of 'Stray Birds' so far." See Li Yinhe, 冯唐的译本是《飞鸟集》迄今为止最好的中文译本 (Feng Tang's translation is the best Chinese translation of "Flying Birds" so far). December 27, 2015: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_473d53360102wa86.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_473d53360102wa86.html)

era was over and individual needs no longer have to be totally devoted to the collective and nationalist cause, we were now in the era of reform and open-door policy. In this transitional and transforming period, sexuality has been a crucial factor for the constitution of modernity and for the re-appropriation of spaces of both power and resistance. On the one hand, the authors who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution (ca. 1966-1976) and write during the 1990s, such as Wang Xiaobo, but also Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (1952)—just to name the most representative—show greater straightforwardness and tolerance regarding sex love concepts as a strategy to react to the previous repressive political climate and reaffirm individualism (Larson 1999: 423). As Larson has observed, *The Golden Years* depicts “an aesthetic modernity that for intellectuals is a pleasing and comforting alternative to the stressful, politicized Maoist years” (Larson 2003: 37).

On the other hand, the social demand for a more open sex policy of those years<sup>10</sup> gave impetus to a new way of conceiving sexual activity and human desires also within academic circles, which felt the need to establish a new approach to sexology.<sup>11</sup> Chinese cultural and literary studies, for the past thirty years, have been profoundly involved in debates surrounding the body and sexuality. These matters are echoed not only in an abundance of broadly theoretical publications, but also in more specific studies focusing on individual works and authors.

Nowadays neither the global landscape nor the very idea of sex are the same as they were in the 1990s. Although in the past thirty years the state has formalized regulatory bodies and periodically launches initiatives to inhibit the circulation of any kind of videos, images, literature, and audio that feature sexual content—not to mention pornography that is strictly prohibited<sup>12</sup>—these efforts to purge “social evils” have been often ineffective or even hypocritical, especially in urban areas where the sex and pornography market is flourishing.

When Feng Tang published *Bu'er*, discussing sex wasn't as unusual and startling as it was when Wang Xiaobo published his book. Discussions about sexual desire and orgasm, even female orgasm, were topics that could be found in a blog, a work of art, or a novel. Just think of the case of Muzi Mei 木

---

<sup>10</sup> In the winter of 1986-1987, many nationwide demonstrations by university students asked for a more open sex policy which were considered crucial to the modernization of the country. See Fang Furuan (1991: 9).

<sup>11</sup> An example is the pioneer study of Fang Furuan (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Since 1997, a series of laws and campaigns targeting pornography have been implemented. The penalties for such offenses vary depending on the severity and scope of the crime, and can range from monetary fines to multiple years of imprisonment. See Sixhtone 2016 (2020-12-01).

子美 (1978), who already in 2004 put a highly explicit log of her very active sex life online.<sup>13</sup> So ubiquitous in the Internet age, art and literature once rejected as pornography have become a lively, inventive art form, widely consumed, openly debated and seriously reviewed.

So, in contemporary Chinese hyper-consumer society, where beyond the restrictions of the government, the connection between sex, individuality and media is quite evident, what more can Feng Tang's sexual representations tell to the Chinese readers?

Starting from some famous statements of the writer, this article will try to discuss the contribution that Feng Tang's "Unspeakable Trilogy" has made to the Chinese literature and specifically to the erotic literature. We will delve into how Feng strategically employs explicit sexual and pornographic depictions, often linked with "lowbrow" literature, to assert his presence within a wider philosophical debate on the essence of human nature.

## 2. "Why do I write pornographic books?"

On November 23, 2005, with a post on his blog entitled "My forbidden reading on winter nights" (*Xueye zhen bian du jinshu* 雪夜枕边读禁书), Feng Tang announces to his readers his intention to write a pornographic book. Six years later, in the summer, Feng finally realizes his dream with the release of *Bu'er* in Hong Kong bookstores.

It was not the first time that Feng included sexuality in his works; indeed, there is no doubt that he owes part of his success to his controversial use of erotic descriptions. So, what distinguishes *Bu'er* from his previous literary works? To answer this question, we must necessarily start from what I consider the manifesto of pornographic literature, namely the article "Why Do I Write Pornographic Books?" (*Wo weishenme xie huangshu* 我为什么写黄书), published first on his blog and then in *Bu'er*'s afterword (Feng Tang 2011: 211-214).

But first, let's focus a second on the term *huangshu* 黄书 ("yellow books"), which in the Chinese context refers to pornographic books. The yellow color in ancient China had always carried a strong positive connotation since it was associated with the emperor's persona and the origins of Chinese civilization in the plain of the Yellow River. However, at the beginning of the Republican era (1911), Chinese newspapers influenced by the US press began to use it as synonymous for sensationalist

---

<sup>13</sup> Muzi Mei's blog has been censored, but many young Chinese have managed to see it. See the interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leS6hCwy308> (2022-11-11).

investigations, and shortly thereafter for gossip, stories of crimes, violence, and sexual transgressions. The definitive semantic transformation occurred at the end of World War II, due to the yellow binding of the French Belle Époque books dedicated to sexually salacious material (Huang Xingtao and Chen Peng 2010: 95).

It was important to dwell on this, because when Feng says “yellow books” he does not mean just erotic, but something that is transgressive and explicit, such as pornographic literature.

So why does Feng write pornographic books? As is his habit, Feng answers by points:<sup>14</sup>

First, since *Rouputuan*, there has not been a good Chinese pornographic book in the past 300 years. But even Li Yu is too bigoted...

Second, it is not easy to write a pornographic book, and writing it without being dirty or in a way that is as simple and beautiful as eating, drinking, basking in the sun, and taking a nap, is even more difficult...

Third, ...Why can't a good drama be mixed with a porn movie? Wouldn't that give a complete picture of the beauty of life?

Fourth, I'm almost forty years old. If I don't start writing it right now, in a few years, my heart will be frozen, and I'll just be able to drink porridge and leaks rice...

Fifth, ...As a Chinese writer, I would feel guilty if our young people grew up with Japanese porn movies and foreign readings, like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Under the Roof of Paris*.

Sixth, I hope it helps me to overcome my midlife crisis (Feng Tang 2011: 211).

What distinguishes *Bu'er* from his previous works is therefore the end. While in novels like “Beijing Trilogy” sexuality is widely represented but still lies on the side of the narrative, in *Bu'er*, *Tianxia luan* and *Anyang* sexual descriptions are at the centre of the narrative, aiming to break once and for all with those taboos that still exist about sex. Nowadays there is indeed much more openness toward sexuality, but despite this, the numerous controversies surrounding Feng's works prove that sex is still something “known-to-all yet hardly being talked about” (Zhou Xuehua 2008: 68). It is no coincidence that the most unmentionable sexual habits are explored in the “Trilogy,” such as masturbation, fellatio, sexual fantasies, and strange perversions. According to Feng, sex must not be described in an allusive way, but in a direct, trivial, authentic way, because vulgar is the true nature of human desire. The lack of this triviality, in favour of lyrical and allusive descriptions of sex in literature, is what, according to Feng, has prevented literature from fully and truthfully representing human nature.

---

<sup>14</sup> Feng confessed to me that because of his habit of answering by points, his friends call him “Feng-three points” (Feng-sandian 冯三点).

### 3. "I'm not writing about sex, but about human nature"

The most common criticism of Feng's works is their overemphasis on the penis and male sexuality, to the point that some readers have accused him to have *Zhinan ai* (直男癌), that means "straight man cancer," a derogatory neologism coined by internet users referring to men who are stubbornly in favour of traditional gender roles and devalue and objectify women.

Indeed, in most of Feng Tang's works, male genitalia are prominently depicted. For example, in the *Tianxia luan* story alone, which has less than twenty-five thousand characters, the terms to define the penis (*jiba* 鸡巴, *yinjing* 阴茎) are named 23 times, while the testicles (*luan* 卵, *gaowan* 睾丸) are named 36 times, compared with only 8 times reserved for the female sexual organ (*yindao* 阴道, *yinmen* 阴门, *yindi* 阴蒂). In *Anyang*, which is much shorter, we have seven references to the penis (*jiba*, *guitou* 龟头) and none to the female organ. An exception must be made for the novel *Bu'er*, in which female sexuality is much more represented, given that one of the protagonists is a woman.

The omnipresence of the penis in Feng's works has often been interpreted as a demonstration of phallocentrism. Indeed, the penis and testicles in *Tianxia luan* symbolically represent power, but it is noticeable that at the end of the story, it is the eunuch Liu Jin who prevails over all the other men. In a society where power is intended to be male-dominated, Liu Jin's social and political ascent occurs solely through the mutilation of the symbols of masculinity. Although this alone would be enough to refute the thesis of phallocentrism in Feng Tang (describing male sexuality does not necessarily imply phallocentrism), it is noteworthy that the pornographic imagery typically portrays the female body as a tool for male pleasure. However, in *Tianxia luan*, the narrative shifts, placing the male body at the forefront, exposed to humiliation and even violence, including instances of rape. This departure from the norm invites scrutiny of the male body, laying bare its vulnerabilities and psychological depths for all to see.

This is what Feng meant when he said "I'm Not Writing About Sex, But About Human Nature" (*Wo xie de bu shi xing, shi renxing* 我写的不是性，是人性)? (Yin Weiyong 2015).<sup>15</sup>

Reflection on human nature (*renxing* 人性) has always played an important role in Chinese intellectual debate,<sup>16</sup> and it's in this framework that we will try to understand Feng's statement. Indeed, the emphasis on sex, the body and the phallus within the "Trilogy" can be understood as a criticism of

---

<sup>15</sup> See Yin Weiyong 尹维颖's interview on *Jingbao* 晶報, August 08.

<sup>16</sup> To deepen the debate on human nature in early Confucian thought, see Scarpari (2003).



the progressive disappearance of the body from Chinese literature, and of a dichotomous vision of human nature which conceives the mind and the body, mental and physical, reason and heart as two distinct organs.

Generally speaking, this dualistic perspective is attributed to modern “Western” philosophy, while we know that Chinese traditional thought adopted a more holistic approach by understanding “heart” and “mind” as one *xin* 心: “the core of affective and cognitive structure, conceived of as having the capacity for logical reasoning, rational understanding, moral will, intuitive imagination, and aesthetic feeling, unifying human will, desire, emotion, intuition, reason and thought” (Yu Ning 2007: 28).

While this is true in general terms,<sup>17</sup> it also needs to be considered the emphasis that Confucian orthodoxy throughout imperial history has given to philosophy, lyricism and historiography (intellectual activity), overshadowing the value of all those literary genres that were not openly written to educate the reader but instead to give him pleasure and entertain (body activity), such as erotic literature, but also narrative itself. This did not prevent the emergence of the “cult of *qing*” (feeling, love, passion) at the end of Ming era (1368-1644), nor the explosion of pornographic and erotic literature across a variety of forms—fiction, popular song, drama, etc. However, despite the influence of notable Chinese erotica masterpieces from the Ming and Qing periods (1644-1911), such as *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 and *Rouputuan* 肉蒲团 in reshaping the perception of the place of desire (Huang 2011, Brook 1999), it proved insufficient to dismantle the puritanism advocated by Confucian orthodoxy, as observed by Feng Tang.<sup>18</sup>

It has been said that, when this kind of scandalous novel emerged in the book market, people from every class or clan desired to read them, “even the blind attempted to hire a good storyteller to read these novels once in their lifetime” (Tangyuenyong 2017: 99). When the Qing court realized that they could endanger people’s morality and eventually threaten the family institution (considered the basis of Confucian society), they were banned. For different reasons, they were also banned during Mao’s era, and even when they were reprinted in the 1980s, much of their sexually explicit passages had been purged or modified. Feng remembers an episode from his childhood:

---

<sup>17</sup> On mind-body relationship in Chinese and Western thought, see Slingerland (2013), Raphals (2017).

<sup>18</sup> In *Sanshiliu da*, a collection of open letters written by Feng Tang to people and things he considers illustrious, we find the letter to Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680), traditionally considered the author of *Rouputuan*. In this letter, entitled *Daxian* 大闲 (“To the hero of leisure”), Feng, on the one hand, highlights the merits of *Rouputuan*, but on the other hand criticizes the excessive moralism of the novel. See Feng Tang (2012: Ch. 28).

I discovered sex thanks to a copy of the *Sanyan erpai* [Ming vernacular story collections] published by the Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House. Since it was a photographic print, it was not censored [...] I told my mother "I want to buy it", she asked "why?", I replied "to learn Classical Chinese" ("My forbidden reading..." in Feng Tang 2017: 5).

The spontaneity of Ming and Qing narratives in dealing with sex has never been recovered according to Feng Tang, not even by the sex-love narratives of the 1990s with their great straightforwardness and tolerance toward sexual concepts. As Feng often lamented "I don't know exactly when it happened, but real sex and desire have long since been erased [from Chinese literature]" ("About Erotism...", in Feng 2005b: 97). That caused "a schizophrenia" (*jingshen fenliezheng* 精神分裂症) in the mind of the reader (Feng Tang 2017: 28).<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, in order to rehabilitate the value of the body—or rather the "lower part of the body" (*xiaban shen* 下半身)—, Feng Tang brings "the real sex and desire" back into literature. In a letter titled *Wo de huangshu lixiang* 我的黄书理想 ("My pornographic book ideal") written before completing *Bu'er*, Feng writes:

[My book must be] enough to masturbate at least once. No illustrations are needed, I'm a great fan of fantasy. It has to be a genuine, beautiful and authentic pornographic book: as genuine as a man's yearning to remove a woman's undergarments, as beautiful as the delicate dewdrops adorning a flower's pistil, and as authentic as indulging in a feast when famished (*Wo de huangshu lixiang*, in Feng Tang 2005b: 115).

Here, as other scholars have already pointed out (Wang Duo 2018), Feng is similar to the so-called "Lower Body Literature" (*xiaban shen xiezu* 下半身写作), a literary trend (especially poetry) born between the late 90s and early 2000s, which use carnality and spontaneity as a tool to give a more authentic representation of human being, challenging the "Upper Body Literature" (*shangban shen xiezu* 上半身写作), which deals with the intellect, culture, lyricism and philosophy (Shen Haobo 2002).

However, Feng's intention is not to confront or oppose the "Upper Body Literature" by presenting content aligned with the "Lower Body Literature." Rather, its objective is to merge the two literary forms, in order to give a complete depiction of human nature. Therefore, the human body, sexual activities, sexual desires, sexual fantasies, and even perversions, all undergo a process of normalization within his literature, they are all "natural" expressions of the human being, all the human beings,

---

<sup>19</sup> See the entire chapter *Haose er yin, fei yuan er shang* 好色而淫，悻怨而伤 ("Lustful and lascivious, sorrowful and wounded") in Feng Tang (2017: 27-30).

without exception. As expressed in the third point of the aforementioned manifesto: “Why can’t a good drama be mixed with a porn movie? Wouldn’t that give a complete picture of the beauty of life?”

In this regard, Feng Tang aims to reclaim the traditional Chinese worldview based on the interconnectedness of the body-mind. If the body and mind are inherently linked, with one not existing without the other, then sexuality must also be understood as something that encompasses both mental and physical activities. Sexuality belongs to both realms, the mental and the carnal, possessing both a lyrical and vulgar dimension. It is for this reason that readers, when engaging with the novels of Feng’s “Unspeakable Trilogy,” particularly in relation to their depictions of sexuality, perceive sudden shifts in tone. The narrative transitions from references to Classic literature to the vulgar language employed by the protagonists. It also fluctuates from sterile descriptions of genitalia to explicit pornographic scenes intended to arouse the reader, and from poetic imagery of the genitals to horrifying depictions of mutilated bodies.

What Feng Tang attempts to achieve through his literature, which is unabashedly pornographic yet exquisitely poetic, is not to substitute or juxtapose low literature against high literature, the lower body against the upper body, the informal against the formal, the vulgar against the lofty. Instead, his aim is to create a new genre that encompasses both, drawing inspiration from the traditionally holistic view of human nature. If the body and mind are inseparable, sexuality becomes an expression of both the body and the mind. In this sense, representing sexuality equates to representing human nature itself.

#### 4. “I prefer to use human sexuality as a starting point to explore human nature”

We shall now scrutinize the literary devices employed by Feng Tang to articulate his distinctive conceptualization of human nature through the lens of human sexuality.

##### 4.1. Unity of nature and human(’s body)

The first aspect that captivates attention when delving into Feng Tang’s “Trilogy” is his conception of the individual as an integral part of the surrounding world. The world constructed by Feng Tang in *Tianxia luan*, *Anyang*, and *Bu’er* is a realm where humanity and nature converge, intertwining and communicating with one another. In this context, humans are not merely constituents of nature but also possess a heightened sensitivity to the messages conveyed by the universe, reflecting their own essence through natural manifestations.

This idea of human beings as an integral part of nature once again seeks to evoke the ancient concept of "Unity of Nature and Humans" (*Tian ren heyi* 天人合一), as expressed in the Chinese philosophical classics. *Tian ren heyi*, often translated also as "Unity of Heaven and Humans," encapsulates a profound philosophical notion within Chinese thought. Generally speaking, it signifies the inseparable union and harmonious integration of the celestial realm (heaven or nature) and human existence. Rather than perceiving a dichotomy between the natural world and the human realm, this concept emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all phenomena. It implies that the actions and experiences of human beings are not isolated from the larger cosmic order but are intertwined with the rhythms and principles of the universe. It encompasses the idea that understanding one's own nature and aligning it with the principles of the universe leads to a balanced and virtuous life (Zhu Zhirong 2022: 127 ff.).

This concept encapsulates a perspective commonly found in traditional Chinese literature, wherein the universe is depicted as inherently ordered and predisposed towards human understanding. One can consider, for instance, narratives from the Ming and Qing periods, where virtuous individuals are capable of deciphering celestial messages and communicating with beings from the otherworldly realm (Benedetti 2010).

In modern times, Chinese authors, influenced by Western postmodernism, evolved from the traditional "anthropocentrism" to a post-modern view for which the return to the primitive and nature become a way to express dissatisfaction with the present reality. This has found a specific place in the texts of the so-called New Period novelists, such as Su Tong 苏童, Ge Fei 格非 and Mo Yan 莫言, who express disgust for artificial things by recalling past and natural things (Wang Ning 2018).

In Feng's works the nostalgia for the past is expressed in a return to a bygone era in which education and taboo had not yet altered the traditional concept of *Tian ren heyi* for which humans and nature's relationship was spontaneous, symbiotic and direct. Given that for Feng Tang describing the human nature is synonymous with exploring human sexuality, it is not only through the mind that Feng's characters communicate with nature but also through the body.

The corporeal realm serves as a conduit for dialogue and interaction between human beings and the encompassing forces of the natural world. Through intimate and sensual experiences, Feng's characters establish a profound connection with the rhythms and energies of the universe, transcending the boundaries of individual existence to merge with the larger cosmic fabric. In this way, the body becomes a vessel for understanding, communion, and self-realization. Through the exploration of human sexuality, Feng Tang portrays a narrative in which the physicality of the characters becomes a channel for harmonious integration with the natural order. He recovers the

“Unity of Nature and Humans” conception found in traditional literature, and evolved it to “Unity of Nature and Human(’s Body),” from anthropocentrism to bodycentrism, whereby the human body becomes the measure for understanding nature, just as nature is the measure for understanding the body.

In the “Unspeakable Trilogy,” this worldview is conveyed through a plethora of rhetorical figures that highlight the sometimes highly imaginative resemblance between the natural world and the human body, as in:

Her pubic hair swayed like the leaves of the sacred fig tree, the vulva opened and closed like a lotus flower. Her lips had been moist for a while, sticky like the fluff on the back of lotus leaves on a rainy day. The smell they were releasing was discreet but pervasive (Feng 2011: 15).

Similarly, parts of the human body are often used to describe natural phenomena, such as:

The sun sets in the West, it is red and round like the open wound of an emasculated penis (*Tianxia luan*, in Feng 2012c: 18).

Lastly, the narrative features characters who, through their sexual experiences, gain a heightened understanding of natural signs and symbology, such as:

The night Zhenya penetrated a pussy for the first time, the sky was much brighter than usual. He immediately rushed out of the room screaming, *I felt a tremor, there will be an earthquake, there will be an earthquake!* (*Anyang* in Feng 2012c: 70).

#### 4.2. Human sexuality seen from within the body

In addition to exploring the relationship between the human (body) and nature, Feng Tang offers a unique perspective on human sexuality within the “Trilogy,” delving into it from within the human body. Using his knowledge of medicine (Feng holds a PhD in gynaecology), Feng is able to describe the chemistry and physics behind basic body functions. Under his pen, the body is described as if it is in a medical book and the reader is a student who is observing it through a magnifying glass. The genital organs are obviously chiefly represented, mainly the male one, and attention is given to bodily secretions (mainly sperm) which may make the reader feel disgusted and shameful. As in the following depiction of the male orgasm:

The seminal fluid, when the signal exceeds the threshold, triggers the contraction of the epididymis and the vas deferens, pushing sperm towards the posterior urethra. Contraction of the peripheral smooth muscle of the prostate, contraction of the seminal vesicles, secretion of prostatic and seminal fluid, propel the seminal fluid forward. Contraction of the ischiocavernosus and

bulbocavernosus muscles causes a rhythmic increase in internal pressure of the erectile tissues, expelling the seminal fluid from the urethra outside the body. Externally, onto the vagina, mouth, breasts, or stomach of the woman. A tissue is used to wipe the semen from the vagina, mouth, breasts, or stomach, and then discarded into the sewer system (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2012c: 18).

There is a subtle irony in dealing with certain topics in such a direct way, as if the writer is making fun of social taboos by talking about things that are fascinating and repellent at the same time. This rehabilitation of disgust through the tool of irony places Feng in the still current debate on the role of disgust in literature and art,<sup>20</sup> drawing attention to the fact that—as Freud affirmed—the frisson of fascination comes in the private space, whereas repulsion belongs to the public. Just like the so-called *Abject*, or *Post-organic* artworks that since the 1980s have populated museums and galleries all around the world, Feng uses images that transgress our sense of decorum as a tool to dismantle taboos and provide a more sincere and authentic version of reality. Here is another example:

Bu'er distinctly heard the sound of Hongren's right big toe slam against the sole of his boot, the sartorial muscle in his left thigh stiffen, the piliferous bulbs contract, the hairs on his scrotum stand up like swords, the penis rise like a pagoda. A drop of semen escaped and clung to his robe, creating a thin thread of semen that went up and down like a dewdrop hesitating to detach itself from the bamboo leaf (Feng 2011: 23-24).

Feng Tang's exploration of human sexuality encompasses not only references to Western medicine but also draws inspiration from the principles of Chinese traditional medicine. In *Tianxia luan*, for example, Liu Jin, the emperor's personal doctor, advises him to use the "Master's sexual battle," a method for delaying male ejaculation and enhancing pleasure for the woman. This practice can be found in the eighth-century handbook "True Manual of the Perfected Equalization."<sup>21</sup>

Following Liu Jin's instructions, he brandishes the dagger and begins to move it, from side to side, inside and out, slow and fast. He very carefully chops Ruxue's pussy, pushing the tip of the blade into every corner of the vagina. The blade sinks by one finger, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight fingers. Beyond the eight fingers, when the tip of the blade reaches the cervix, Ruxue emits a meow, a spring dew spray bursts violently. In that moment, the emperor stops, counts down to nine, and then pulls out his penis, which is still straight as a dagger (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2012c: 45-46).

Finally, the texts also include various passages that emphasize the interplay between the mind and bodily reactions, specifically by describing the imaginative processes occurring in the brain during sexual arousal. In this context, particular emphasis is placed on adolescent sexuality, as exemplified in

---

<sup>20</sup> For the role of disgust in art, see Feloj (2021: 326-342).

<sup>21</sup> For more information on this text, see Fang Furuan (1991: 59-61).

the following instances: the first depicts a young boy's first erotic dream, foretelling his future career as a diviner; the second portrays the erotic fantasy of a young monk:

That year at the end of spring, Zhenya had his first nocturnal ejaculation. He asked his father: "In my dream the penis was swollen like when I have to pee, I looked for a tree but I couldn't piss. In the end, I got it on myself. But it wasn't pee! What was it? What should I do?" (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2012c: 70).

Bu'er imagined using the urethral orifice to smell and touch Xuanji's head. [...] Caressing her shaved head, her short and hard hair stimulated the skin of his glans, which swelled and stretched. At that moment, he felt that Xuanji's hair began to lengthen, until it became a thick and heavy bun, in which Bu'er sank the entire penis: the glans, the frenulum, the foreskin, the rod, the scrotum. A tangle of pubic hair and hair now covered his penis. Bu'er began to poke up and down in that soft bun, which after a few strokes became a mass of dishevelled hair that imprisoned his penis (Feng 2011: 40).

#### 4.3. The universality of sexuality

One final significant device employed by Feng Tang to depict human nature is the portrayal of the universality of sexuality. Within the "Trilogy," many characters, despite their elevated social status as members of the *élite*, exhibit vulgarity and sexual depravity. Examples include an emperor whose preoccupation with sex overshadows his governance (*Tianxia luan*), Buddhist patriarchs seduced by the allure of a nun (*Bu'er*), and a fortune-teller who regains his supernatural abilities after engaging in sexual intercourse (*Anyang*). Feng occasionally employs satire to poke fun at these characters, evoking the ironic tone often reserved for individuals fixated on sexual desires in Ming-era erotic literature. An exemplary case is Prince Miguli 迷骨离 in *Tianxia luan*, who, constantly craving sex, stands out as one of the most hilarious characters in the novel.

Prince Miguli hid on one side of the main hall, standing on the shoulders of two eunuchs, peeping through the window as the beautiful women filed out. His eyes were wide open, and saliva dripped down. Miguli muttered to himself, 'Wow, she's good, and so is she.' Miguli asked the two eunuchs below him, 'Why can my father choose, but I can't?'" (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2015: 25).

Conversely, through irony, Feng seems to convey the notion that everyone, regardless of social class, harbours sexual desires, even unconventional ones. There exists no distinction between the noble and the humble, the virtuous and the foolish; they all think the same thing in their hearts and do the same thing in bed.

Another way to highlight the universal dimension of sexuality is through the incorporation of quotations from classical literature. By doing so, sexuality becomes a domain that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, as sexual desire is something experienced by all and even documented by

ancient writers. Feng Tang skilfully integrates quotes from a wide range of sources, including historical, narrative, and even poetic texts, lending an elevated tone to his portrayal of sexuality. Through these citations, that allude (or could allude) to sexual activities, he highlights the universality of human sexual experiences and establishes a connection between contemporary narratives and the rich literary traditions of the past.

One last example can be observed in *Bu'er*, where a plethora of quotations from Tang literature are skilfully integrated. Below is the passphrase that the assistants of the Daoist nun Xuanji demand from clients as a prerequisite for entry into the Convent Xianyi, which is portrayed in the novel as a kind of brothel.

One of the two girls recited the line, "Tell me could we play the flute, riding a phoenix to the sky?" and clients had to answer, "Did we learn dancing, wasting all our youth years and not shy?" (Feng 2011: 89).

This is a Tang-era *qiliu* (ballad of seven-character lines) titled "Memories of Chang'an" (*Changan guyi* 长安古意)<sup>22</sup> written by Lu Zhaolin 卢照邻 (634?-689). The image of a girl who plays the flute (*chuixiao* 吹箫) is very likely a metaphor that alludes to fellatio.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has tried to discuss Feng's works by changing the framework in which he is usually studied. Studies on his sexual representations usually enlighten four aspects:

1. The similarity with Wang Xiaobo, and more generally with the sex-love narrative of the 90s (Wu Congju 2010);
2. The connection with the other authors born in the 70s (Zhou Xuehua 2008, Xu Qingzhuo 2015), or with other literary trends such as the "Lower Body Literature" (Wang Duo 2016);
3. The subversive value of his works (Dong Xiaoxia 2010);
4. Phallocentrism (Zhang Mingjia 2016).

My analysis of the "Unspeakable Trilogy" has identified the following aspects:

1. The author's will to distance himself from modern and contemporary literature, and to connect to traditional Chinese literature, of which Feng imitates the style and philosophical assumptions.

---

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Alan Ma for the translation in English, see:

[http://chinese poetry in english verse.blogspot.com/2013/12/blog-post\\_10.html](http://chinese poetry in english verse.blogspot.com/2013/12/blog-post_10.html).

<sup>23</sup> See: [https://www.wikisexguide.com/wiki/Mandarin\\_Sex\\_Phasebook](https://www.wikisexguide.com/wiki/Mandarin_Sex_Phasebook)



Feng not only uses the ancient past as a setting, that is usual in traditional narrative but quite unusual for the authors of his generation (Zong Renfa, Shi Zhanjun, Li Jingze 2000), but he also imitates the style of traditional narrative by using a refined language, enriching the narration with implicit or explicit cultured quotations, and building a manageable world inclined to human understanding.

2. Feng seems quite uninterested in the individual, but he is rather interested in human nature, in what all human beings have in common. In *Bu'er* in particular, where the narrative is centred on the descriptions of the body and sex, the plot of the story and the characters seem to recede into the background, until they almost disappear. If as Larson argued “Zhang Xianliang’s novels go from history to the individual, searching for the individual’s place within history; Wang Xiaobo’s novels go from the individual to history, and revolution becomes a background”, Feng Tang goes from individual to humanity, and sexuality becomes a tool to uncover the human nature.
3. More than just telling a story, Feng’s “Trilogy” seems focused on addressing existential and philosophical issues. This article has highlighted his contribution to the philosophical debate on human nature, breathing new life into and reshaping the traditional holistic view of nature.
4. The tendency is not to shock readers, but rather to cultivate an inclination towards a more genuine, discerning, and organic understanding of one’s own body and sexual impulses.
5. The “Trilogy” is an unprecedented attempt to raise the status of pornographic literature. Through the use of explicit sexual and pornographic descriptions, Feng aims to position himself at the centre of a broader and elevated scholarly discourse. By incorporating these unconventional elements into his work, Feng explores the profound depths of human existence, challenging conventional boundaries and prompting contemplation on the intricacies of our shared humanity. Through this intentional fusion of pornographic imagery and philosophical inquiry, Feng endeavours to illuminate the complexities of the human condition, encouraging readers to critically examine their own understanding of what it means to be human.
6. The concept behind the “Trilogy” seeks to go beyond cliché, restoring dignity to the male erotic imagination. It aims to understand and decode its complexities, including its perversions, frustrations, and desires, while allowing for the free expression of fantasies and an acknowledgment of vulnerabilities. It strives to give a voice to a segment of erotic literature that has been culpably silenced for too long: the male body.

Perhaps, as the author desires, “in four hundred years, people will still remember *Jin Ping Mei*, *Rouputuan*, and *Bu'er*” (Feng 2012: Ch. 28) as three masterpieces of erotic literature.

### Feng Tang's works cited

- Feng Tang. 2001. *Wanwu shengzhang* 万物生长. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2005a. *Shiba sui gei wo yi ge guniang* 十八岁给我一个姑娘. Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2005b. *Zhu he hudie*. 猪和蝴蝶. Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2007. *Beijing Beijing* 北京北京. Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2011. *Bu'er* 不二. Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2012a. *Sanshiliu da* 三十六大. Huangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2012b. *Shiba sui gei wo yi ge guniang* 十八岁给我一个姑娘. Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2012c. *Tianxia luan* 天下乱. Beijing: Tiandi tushu chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2017. *Huozhe Huozhe jiu lao le* 活着活着就老了. Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe.
- Feng Tang. 2020. *Palle imperiali e altri racconti* (translated into Italian by Lavinia Benedetti). Roma: Orientalia.

### References

- Benedetti, Lavinia and Marco Meccarelli. 2019. "L'insidioso fascino di narrare l'erotismo della Cina imperiale: un'analisi semiotica delle traduzioni del *Rouputuan* (il tappeto da preghiera di carne), XVII secolo." *Enthymema* 24: 311-330.
- Benedetti, Lavinia, Alba Rosa Suriano and Paolo Villani. 2020. *Stigma, censure e oscenità. L'indicibile nelle culture del Mediterraneo e dell'Asia Orientale*. Roma: Orientalia.
- Benedetti, Lavinia. 2010. "The Supernatural and Chinese Crime Fiction." *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society* 4/2: 117-134.
- Brook, Timothy. 1999. *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chang Kang-i Sun; Saussy, Haun; Kwong, Charles Yim-tze. 1999. *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dikötter, Frank, 1995. *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period*. London: C Hurst & Co.
- Dong Xiaoxia 董晓霞. 2010. "Feng Tang chengzhang xiaoshuo de 'dianfu' yiyi. Lun 'Wanwu shengzhang sanbuqu'" 冯唐成长小说的颠覆意义. 论《万物生长三部曲》(The subversive significance of Feng Tang's coming-of-age novels: A discussion on the "Trilogy of All Things Growing"). *Journal of Southwest Agricultural University (Social Science Edition)* 8/2: 161-164.
- Dong Yingchun 董迎春 and Yang Yu 杨戩. 2016. "Shenti de lanyong: 'Xiabanshen xiezuo' tanxi" 身体的滥用: '下半身写作'探析 (The Abuse of the Body: An Analysis of "Writing from the Lower Body"). *Journal of Yibin University* 16/3: 34-40.

- Fang Fu-ran. 1991. *Sex in China. Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*. Berlin: Springer Science Business Media.
- Feløj, Serena. 2021. “Arte e tabù: il disgusto e i limiti della rappresentazione.” *Materiali di Estetica* 8/2: 326-342.
- Ferguson, Francis. 2004. *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2012. *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 2: The use of pleasure*. New York, NY: Vintage (orig.: 1984. *Histoire de la sexualité. Tome 2: L’Usage des plaisirs*. Paris: Gallimard).
- Goldin, Paul R. 2001. *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hua, Zhen 桦 祯. 2016. “Feng Tang xiaoshuo zhong de yuwang yu xuyu” 冯唐小说中的欲望与虚无 [Desire and Nothingness in Feng Tang]. *Xiaoshuo pinglun* 2: 176-181.
- Huang, Martin W. 2001. *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Huang Xingtao 黄兴涛 and Chen Peng 陈鹏. 2010. “Jindai Zhongguo “huangse” ciyi bianyi kaoxi” 近代中国“黄色”词义变异考析 [An Analysis of the Meaning Variation of “Yellow” in Modern China]. *Historical Research* 6: 83-98.
- Jin Defen 金德芬. 2013. “Zuojia Feng Tang de ‘liumang shi’ qingchun” 作家冯唐的“流氓式”青春 [Writer Feng Tang’s ‘hooligan’ youth]. *Journal of Luoyang Normal University* 32/9: 60-62.
- Jia Yuxin. 2008. “The body in Chinese Characters and Philosophy—the Experiential Nature of Chinese Philosophy.” *Intercultural Communication Studies* 17/2: 31-51.
- Kongzi 孔子. 2015. *Lunyu 论语*. Beijing: Beijing book co. ink.
- Larson, Wendy. 1999. “Never This Wild, Sexing the Culture Revolution.” *Modern China* 25/4: 423-450.
- Larson, Wendy. 2003. “Okay, Whatever: Intellectuals, sex, and time in Wang Xiaobo’s *The Golden Years*.” *China Review* 3/1: 29-56.
- Li Jingze 李敬泽. 1998. “Chuan yue chenmo—guanyu 70 niandai ren” 穿越沉默—关于“70 年代人” [Through Silence—About The Authors of the 70s]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 4: 70-75.
- Owen, Stephen. 1994. “La poesia nella tradizione cinese.” In: *L’eredità della Cina*, edited by Paul S. Ropp, 345-362. Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli. (orig.: 1990. *Heritage of China. Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).
- Raphals, Lisa. 2015. “Body and Mind in Early China and Greece.” *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 2/2: 134-182.
- Scarpari, Maurizio. 2003. “The Debate on Human Nature in Early Confucian Literature.” *Philosophy East and West* 53/3: 323-339.
- Shen Haobo 沈浩波. 2002. “Xiabanshen xiezuojie fandui shangban shen” 下半身写作及反对上半身 [Lower Body Writing and Opposing Upper Body]. *Poetry Magazine* 15: 77-80.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2013. “Body and Mind in Early China: An Integrated Humanities–Science Approach.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81/1: 6-55.

- Tangyuenyong Patchanee. 2017. "Banned Books as a State Apparatus in the Qing Dynasty: Ethnicity, Power and Concupiscence." *Thammasat Review* 20/1: 92-107.
- Wang Duo 王铎. 2017. "Wenxue chang yu shi yu xia zuo jia Feng Tang de wenxue diwei kaocha" 文学场域视阈下作家冯唐的文学地位考察 [An Investigation of the Literary Status of Writer Feng Tang from the Perspective of the Literary Field]. *Contemporary Literature* 3: 79-82.
- Wang, Duo 王铎. 2016. "Ganga qing'ai—lun Feng Tang de "xiabanshen xiezuo" 尴尬情爱—论冯唐的“下半身写作 (Awkward Love—On Feng Tang's "Lower Body Writing")." *Mingzuo xinshang: wenxue yanjiu (Zhongxun)* 12: 76-77.
- Wang, Jiao 王皎. 2013. "Feng Tang yong wenzi dabai shijian" 冯唐用文字打败时间 [Feng Tang defeated time with words]. *Dongxi nanbei* 东西南北, 14: 26-27.
- Wang, Ning. 2000. "On the Man-Nature Relationship Represented in Chinese and Western Literary Works." *Comparative Literature, East & West* 1/1: 80-93.
- Wang, Y. Yvon. 2021. *Reinventing Licentiousness: Pornography and Modern China*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Wu Congju 仵从巨. 2010. "Wang Shuo, Wang Xiaobo zhi hou shi Feng Tang" 王朔王小波之后是冯唐 [After Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo is Feng Tang]. *Mingzuo xinshang: wenxue yanjiu (Zhongxun)* 3: 138-138.
- Xu Qingzhuo 徐青斫. 2015. "Feng Tang de wuli 'maofan'" 冯唐的无力‘冒犯’ [Feng Tang's powerlessness "offensive"]. *Wenxue bao (Xin piping)* 22: 1-2 (China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House).
- Yu Ning, 2007. "Heart and Cognition in Ancient Chinese Philosophy." *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 7: 27-47.
- Yu Ning. 2009. *The Chinese heart in a cognitive perspective*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Zhang, Mingjia. 2016. "Youth Narrative in Feng Tang's. The Beijing Trilogy." Masters Theses. University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Zhou, Xuehua 周雪花. 2008. "Chengshi zhong de xing yu ai. Zuo jia de shenti tuwei yu lunli chonggou" 城市中的性与爱——“70后”作家的身体突围与伦理重构. *Dangdai wentan* 6: 67-69.
- Zhu, Zhirong. 2022. *Chinese Aesthetics in a Global Context*. Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Zong Renfa 宗仁发, Shi Zhanjun 施战军 and Li Jingze 李敬泽. 2000. "Bei zhebi de 70 niandai ren" 被遮蔽的“70年代人” [The obscured "Generation of the 1970s"]. In: *Zhongguo "Qishi hou" wenxue yanjiu* 中国“70后”文学研究, edited by Zhang Lijun 张丽军. 26-33. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.

Lavinia Benedetti is Associate Professor in Chinese language and literature at the University of Catania. Her field of research is literature and cultural studies. She has worked on crime fiction and erotica. Among her latest publications: Benedetti *et al.* (eds), *Stigma, censure e oscenità. L'indicibile nelle culture del Mediterraneo e dell'Asia Orientale* (2020); Feng Tang, *Palle Imperiali e altri racconti* (trad. 2020); and *Storia del Giallo in Cina. Dai racconti giudiziari al romanzo di crimine* (2017).

Lavinia can be contacted at: [lavinia.benedetti@gmail.com](mailto:lavinia.benedetti@gmail.com)



## Sex and irony in Zhang Dachun's *Bildungsroman Wo Meimei*

Ludovica Ottaviano

Growing up in the *juancun* 眷村 (soldiers' villages) communities of Taiwan during the 1980s, contemporary Taiwanese author Zhang Dachun 张大春 (b. 1957) appears to have embraced the postmodern ideas and techniques, drawing inspiration from writers like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco in his literary work. Since the publication of his novel *Da Shuohuangjia* 大說謊家 ("The Big Liar," 1989), Zhang Dachun earned the moniker "the big liar," and his novels have been described as metafictional, employing a postmodern approach that playfully utilizes signs and symbols to convey meanings or "lies" (Peng 2009). In 1993, under the pen name Datou Chun 大头春 ("Big-head Spring"), the author published a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* (*qingchun xiaoshuo* 青春小說) titled *Wo Meimei* 我妹妹 ("My Kid Sister"), adopting a sarcastic teenage narrative voice. The novel depicts his own growth, as well as that of his sister, who is eight years younger, within the complex historical and political backdrop of 1980s Taiwan. Throughout the novel, there are numerous references to children's sexual instincts and behaviors, often reinterpreted through a Freudian lens. These references are intertwined with the author's personal experiences rooted in contemporary Taiwan's reality and metafictional discussions on narrative meaning and strategies. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to gather these references and shed light on Zhang Dachun's reception of postmodernism while reconstructing his distinct "poetics of the lie."

**Keywords:** Zhang Dachun; *Wo Meimei*; lies; sexual consciousness; Taiwan literature

### 1. Introduction

Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwanese literature experienced a vigorous expansion both in terms of quantity and quality. The literary impulses, which had been hidden within a society subjected to Japanese occupation before World War II, Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang* 國民黨, GMD) political authoritarianism, and Taiwan's "non-nation" status, eventually emerged with newfound energy. A multifaceted literary scene began to grow day by day, giving voice to feminist, queer, *juancun* 眷村 (military-compound), nationalist, and aboriginal issues that were previously classified as ideologically forbidden and marginalized. According to Chen (2007), these "marginal"

social groups all arrived simultaneously and were interested in the interrelated issues of recognition, identity, and subjectivity (Chen 2007: 45).

Among these social groups, the *juancun*’s writers struggled to reconstruct their identity while facing an existential crisis due to the specific sociohistorical conditions they lived in. The *juancun* communities accommodated the vast majority of Chinese Nationalist military personnel and their families—the “mainlanders” (*waishengren* 外省人)—after they retreated to Taiwan in the late 1940s at the end of the Chinese Civil War, believing that the GMD would retake the mainland and allow them to return home. At the time, these communities were obsessed with the mainland and felt alienated from Taiwanese society, defining their identity through this sense of alienation. However, as time passed, it became clear that the retaking of the mainland would never happen, and the vast majority of the *juancun* gradually fell into disrepair.

During the early years of post-martial law period,<sup>1</sup> the new generation of mainlanders born in the *juancun*, who were vividly encouraged to believe in the GMD official historical narrative, faced the disruption of the *juancun* and experienced traumatic disillusionment toward the GMD unification ideology. They also started to distrust new nationalist ideologies, which they saw as another form of totalizing narratives. Scholars suggest that “the *juancun*’s younger generation, besides questioning the ‘truthiness’ of politics, questioned even more the ‘truth’ of history” (Wang 2012: 49).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the younger generation of *juancun*’s writers such as Huang Fan 黃凡 (b. 1950), Ping Lu 平路 (b. 1953), Zhu Tianwen 朱天文 (b. 1956), Zhang Dachun 張大春 (b. 1957), and Zhu Tianxin 朱天心 (b. 1958), to name just a few, began embracing the progressive agenda of postmodernism, challenging conventional notions of truth, identity, and authorship. Inspired by foreign models, these authors blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, incorporated metafictional elements, and adopted a playful and experimental approach to storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “post-martial law period” typically refers to the period immediately following the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987. However, it is important to note that the significant social, political, and cultural transformations can be traced back to the early 1980s. During this time, rapid economic growth, the increasing autonomy of the media, and the government’s endeavors to promote liberalizing and internationalizing policies converged, leading to the erosion of social norms from the previous era. These developments paved the way for new political, social, and cultural changes in Taiwan. See Chang 2004, 190-201.

<sup>2</sup> Besides the excerpts from *Wo Meimei*, that are taken from Michael Berry’s translation (Zhang 2000), all other translations in this work are my own.

<sup>3</sup> The advent of postmodernism in Taiwan was first announced by Luo Qing 羅青 in 1985, who observed that a postmodernist cultural tendency had already been emerging in Taiwanese society during the 1980s. Since then, various literary critics have attempted to apply the term postmodernism to discussions of contemporary Taiwanese literature, to the extent that the



In particular, Zhang Dachun developed philosophical doubts about conventional truths and dismissed the utilitarian dimension of literature since the mid-late 1980s. He abandoned the use of a “target language” and even denied its existence. As Peng (2009) states, the author questioned whether language is “a useful mean to convey meanings” and believed that language or narrative is “a signifier of an external referent [that] is put into question” (Peng 2009: 377-378). Zhang Dachun embraced the postmodern approach to the use of signs, similar to Umberto Eco’s perspective, considering them merely shells that convey meanings while dismissing the referent, essentially just “lies.”

Zhang Dachun’s exploration of the “poetics of the lie” expanded even further with his novel *Da Shuohuangjia* 大說謊家 (“The Big Liar,” 1989), which he referred to as a “spontaneous news novel.” It combined elements of detective fiction, political satire, facts, and lies. Since then, Zhang Dachun often came to be known as “the big liar,” as he claimed that “the first commandment of a liar is never to believe oneself” (Zhang 1989: 70) and argued that “lies exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other, mutually feeding and assisting one another” ((Zhang 1989: 37). Umberto Eco observed that lies about lies are meta-lies, something that cannot be used to tell a lie and, conversely, cannot be used to tell the truth either. In fact, they cannot be used “to tell” at all (Eco 1976: 9). However, according to Ng (2007), Zhang’s philosophy of the lie neglects the truth of the lie itself, namely the truth of poetry, reducing it to mere performative posturing or literary acrobatics.

In the early 1990s, continuing his journey of experimentation, Zhang Dachun created a sort of literary *alter ego* named Datou Chun 大頭春 (“Big Head Spring”), who served as the first-person narrator of a trilogy of *Bildungsroman* (*qingchun xiaoshuo* 青春小說).<sup>4</sup> The three volumes are “autobiographic” to a certain extent, but differed in contents and style. The second volume, titled *Wo Meimei* 我妹妹 (“My Kid Sister”) and published in 1993, represented a reinvention of Datou Chun. In this novel, he abandoned the sarcastic teenage voice and, with a retrospective approach in adulthood, reinterpreted the psychological and moral growth of both his little sister and himself in the context of the *juancun* during the 1980s.

---

conventional periodization of Taiwan literature now categorizes the post-martial law era under the general framework of postmodernism. However, it is important to note that the concept of postmodernism itself did not originate within Taiwanese society but was primarily imported from the West. Consequently, many scholars have criticized the application of the label “postmodernism” to the specific Taiwanese context. See Liao (1997), Liao (2000) and Chen (2007).

<sup>4</sup> The other two novels in the trilogy are *Shaonian Datou Chun de Shenghuo Zhouji* 少年大頭春的生活周記 (“The Weekly Journal of Young Big Head Spring,” 1992) and *Ye Haizi* 野孩子 (“Wild Child,” 1996). The latter was translated by Michael Berry and published alongside “My Kid Sister” in the volume titled “Wild kids” (Zhang 2000).

The novel intricately weaves together the stories of Datou Chun and his sister, incorporating references to the children’s psychosexual development and sexual behavior during the transition to adulthood. These references, often interpreted through a Freudian lens, play a prominent role. Craftily created as pretexts, they serve to discuss political-historical narratives, fictional narrative techniques, and aesthetics, all in a perpetual tension of searching for meaning. In other words, through the loss of innocence and conflicts faced by the two children, Zhang Dachun fabricates his lies, intending to undermine the utilitarian dimension of language and literature. Instead, he embraces the notion of fiction as a “minor art” and the importance of the trivial, prioritizing its entertaining function (Ng 2007, 261). By examining these lies, this paper aims to investigate Zhang Dachun’s reception of postmodern strategies and their influence on the construction of the “poetics of the lie” in *Wo Meimei*.

## 2. Sexual references and lies

In this paragraph, we will focus on three key references in the novel regarding the child’s psychosexual development and sexual behavior:

1. the infantile sexual instinct;
2. the sexual act; and
3. a reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex.

Furthermore, we will explore how these references are connected to political-historical allusions and/or narrative strategies.

### 2.1. The infantile sexual instinct

In the second chapter of the novel *Wo Meimei*, titled “Nausea” (*Outu 嘔吐*), the first-person narrator Datou Chun mentions Freud and his theories that had entered his home when he was a child. Specifically, he references the Oedipus complex (which will be discussed further) and narrates an episode of particular interest: his little sister once ate her own feces. Datou Chun uses this episode to fabricate a story that demonstrates a conscious use of postmodern strategies. One part of the story involves the father’s reaction to the incident. He becomes estranged from the surrounding environment and refers to psychoanalytic theories that were popular at that time. He exclaims, “Freud was right on the money! She is going through the oral pleasure receptor to rediscover the enjoyment of her anal pleasure receptor” (Zhang 2000: 23). By directly mentioning Freud’s name in this manner, Zhang Dachun seems to evoke Umberto Eco’s definition of the “postmodern attitude.” According to

Eco, revisiting the past and reiterating what has already been said can achieve two successful results: conveying the same message and engaging in a conscious and pleasurable game of irony (Eco 1994a: 67-8).

Additionally, this story contains a memory that functions as a platform for discussing a crucial political-historical matter in 1980s Taiwan and the power of narratives. The memory revolves around a letter that Datou Chun wrote to his sister while serving in the military and the consequences of the letter being inspected by a security officer. In the letter, he teases his sister with the following words:

That very moment when the shit entered your mouth, the heavens collapsed and the earth was shattered. The wind rushed and the clouds rolled. The demons wailed and the gods howled. In the next day's paper came the news of Chiang Kai-shek's death. Oh, what sorrow! (Zhang 2000: 23).

By juxtaposing his sister's disgusting episode with Chiang Kai-shek's death in the same paragraph, Datou Chun intends to evoke laughter from his sister and any reader, including the security officer. However, this specific reader does not find it funny but instead takes it seriously, threatening Datou Chun with court-martial and the death penalty for defiling the former president of the Republic of China. Only through kneeling and begging for forgiveness, an "ethical rite" to deceive the guard or an act of his cowardice, does Datou Chun manage to spare his life.

As Zhang Dachun theorizes in a later work on narrative thoughts, the *Xiaoshuo Bailei* 小說稗類 ("Fiction of Miscellaneous Kinds"), he seeks the comic effect of language, as narratives can have two coexisting levels of signification. Readers can become engrossed in the emotional aspects of the work or detect its satirical aspects (Zhang [1998] 2004: 81). This dualistic model echoes Umberto Eco's concept of the "referential fallacy," wherein language becomes a device to convey lies. Lies in fiction can provoke two different responses in the reader's mind: fear or laughter (Eco 1976: 64). In *Wo Meimei's* context, the security officer represents a scared reader who trusts language, likely influenced by the persistent political propaganda and hegemonic historical accounts that he is accustomed to believing in.

Even if the reader is unwilling to perceive the irony and still retains some doubts, Datou Chun further emphasizes the ironic content of his memory by asserting, "I'm not making this up—that is exactly what the scene was like on that day" (Zhang 2000: 23). This statement deals with the truth of the story and winks at the reader, attempting to demonstrate that there is no absolute truth and that meaning is not fixed. Zhang Dachun appears to embrace the idea that there is nothing outside language and that language itself cannot fully capture the external "real" referent, which is a common theme in postmodernism. In *Image Music Text*, Barthes (1977) explicates this notion provocatively, stating:

Narrative does not show, does not imitate [...] ‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; ‘what happens’ is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming (Barthes 1977: 124).

The concept of the “nothing” as the absence of reality corresponds to what Eco terms the “referential fallacy.” The sign-function does not necessarily have to align with the actual states of the world, so whenever there is a sign-function, there is the potential for lying, and vice versa (Eco 1976: 58). Once the referential fallacy is acknowledged, the distinction between lies and truths becomes irrelevant.

## 2.2. The sexual act

In the seventh chapter of *Wo Meimei* entitled “All That Remains Is Our Shell of Flesh” (*Women Shengxia Quqiao* 我們剩下軀殼), Datou Chun delves into his sentimental and sexual life as a teenager and young adult who dated many girls. In this chapter, Datou Chun honestly describes his feelings and experiences in love, emphasizing that he never felt a genuine connection with any of his girlfriends. He expresses this by referring to them as “chicks” (*mazi* 馬子), “babies” (*xiao mazi* 小馬子), or “old ladies” (*lao mazi* 老馬子),<sup>5</sup> and he truly means what he says. Upon meeting them, he relies on his intuition to determine if he can pursue a sexual relationship with them. Subsequently, he gets to know them to some extent, solely to estimate how quickly they would engage in sexual activities (Zhang 2000: 81).

Datou Chun demonstrates no interest in establishing sentimental relationships with his partners. He is focused on pursuing sex, which he describes as “too simple, too easy, too commonplace. It was like nothing” (Zhang 2000: 81). This concept of “nothing” resonates with Barthes’ perspective. Love, in Datou Chun’s view, is reduced to a mere physical expression, resembling “a kind of orthodox ritual” (Zhang 2000: 82) that can be experimented with. Bodies, in turn, are nothing more than vessels of flesh. Since individual body parts cannot be altered, the diversity lies in the overall composition. This is why Datou Chun had “a series of women, all with completely different features” (Zhang 2000: 83). Toward the end of the chapter, he confesses:

---

<sup>5</sup> The use of the sexist term “*mazi* 馬子” (chick) modified by the adjectives “*xiao* 小” (little) and “*lao* 老” (old) may potentially offend female readers. However, the subtle irony behind this choice can be easily explained. It is the little sister who, having gone through a feminist phase and previously unearthed hidden ideological issues in Datou Chun’s writings (Zhang 2000: 29), grants authorization to the “evils” of male language simply by employing her signature phrase: “What’s the point? [...] Moreover, I like to say whatever is on my mind” (Zhang 2000: 35).

If I had died during the time I was a tiny feverish ant, I probably never would have become a guy who only knew how to carry out *ceremonies of the game of the flesh* (*quti youxi yishi* 軀體遊戲儀式) (Zhang 2008: 143).<sup>6</sup> Or maybe a part of me really did perish in the flames of my high fever, and the part left only knew how to seek out shells of flesh of the same nature as my own—shells of flesh that don't even like themselves (Zhang 2000: 84).

These shells of flesh, engaging in the “ceremonies of the game of flash,” are analogous to the empty shells of words devoid of meaning—lies—that Datou Chun employs to celebrate other ceremonies, those of language and narrative. Interestingly, Datou Chun, the protagonist of *Wo Meimei*, is a professional writer and bears a striking resemblance to Zhang Dachun himself. In the chapter “On Treatment” (*Guanyu Zhiliao* 關於治療), Datou Chun reveals the titles of his published short-stories: the winning-prize story *Touming Ren* 透明人 (“The Invisible Man;” Zhang 2000: 66) and *Jiangjun bei* 將軍碑 (The General’s Monument;” Zhang 2000: 69)—which actually two works by Zhang Dachun published respectively in the literary supplement of the *Zhongguo Shibao* 中國時報·人間副刊 (“China Times”) on the 13th-14th of April 1986, and on the 3rd-4th of October 1986.

This transition from fiction to nonfiction blurs the distinction between the two and allows readers to question the fictional nature of Datou Chun, even entertaining the possibility that he serves as Zhang Dachun’s *alter ego*. Notably, Zhang Dachun’s literary journey underwent extensive experimentation, much like Datou Chun’s sexual experience. He explored various literary genres, styles, and narrative techniques, employing lies and other devices in an attempt to revive the fundamental entertainment function of fiction.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Zhang Dachun enhances the dual layers of meaning and postmodern irony in the novel. Readers can choose between two possible interpretations: one may entrust the content of the novel and believe the autobiographical references, or one may engage with its ironic elements and appreciate the absurdity to celebrate, as Barthes puts it, the adventure of language.

---

<sup>6</sup> The text highlighted in italic is my own translation. Berry translated it as “a redundant ceremony of flesh,” which, in my opinion, misleads the reader regarding the playful linguistic game crafted by the author.

<sup>7</sup> A different interpretation of Datou Chun’s lies on sex and his literary experimentation is offered by Wu Chiu Feng, who perceives them as a means of evading the irreparable injustices he has witnessed. These include the disintegration of his family, his father’s role in driving his mother to madness, and the patriarchal structure of the society in which he lives. This perspective aligns with Ng’s viewpoint, as he believes that beneath Zhang Dachun’s writing strategy lies a single voice that holds disdain for everything. See Wu (2017: 124-127) and Ng (2007: 275).

### 2.3. The Oedipus complex

The Oedipus complex, which was mentioned in “Nausea,” resurfaces in the eighth chapter, “The Awakening of Laughter” (*Xiao de Suxing* 笑的甦醒), where Datou Chun reformulates it. The little sister, having learned about it in school during her sophomore year, discusses it:

Man’s invention of the multitude of differing mythologies is a result of their jealousy of their fathers having possession of their mothers. In these myths, the hero slays an evildoer or monster and saves the kingdom. The saved kingdom is also another symbol for a kind of father. After the hero rescues the kingdom, the readers (naturally that includes the inventors of these myths) feel that they have repaid the debt owed to their fathers for raising them. Thus, with their consciences perfectly clear and their actions justified, they sever all relations with their fathers. The other meaning of ending relations with their father is that they can feel justified when, on a spiritual level, they possess their mothers (Zhang 2000: 101).

The little sister’s words recall theories popular in Taiwan during the 1990s, particularly the “power complex” (*lian quan qingjie* 戀權情結). Coined by Zhu Yongxin 朱永新 in 1993, it reinterprets the Oedipus complex (*lian mu qingjie* 戀母情結) from a non-sexual perspective, considering the Chinese family structure, value systems, and social order.

However, Datou Chun brings the discussion back to Freud’s theories on the incest wish and confesses that, although he “never had the ability to go head-to-head with Freud on anything” (Zhang 2000: 102), he grew up with a constant fear of harboring a hidden monster within him capable of killing his father and raping his mother. After speaking with his sister, he “dreamed of her riding on a statue of a strange monster” and realized she was astride him. Thus, the Oedipus complex is reformulated, displacing mother-son incest with sister-brother incest. Horrified by this thought, Datou Chun admits to himself, “Actually, you can fall in love with your sister,” confirming an accusation made by one of his girlfriends. Though the sexual desire for a blood relative frightens him, “all that was left of [his] grimace were two slightly upturned edges of the mouth. It looked like a smile” (Zhang 2000: 103).

In Freudian terms, admitting and accepting his sexual drive for his sister implies that the castration threat, which inhibits primitive desires, failed to work, and thus, these primal desires were not repressed. Consequently, the second stage of the Oedipus complex, the identification with the father, could not occur. In other words, Datou Chun did not internalize the parental authority in his psyche, resulting in the absence of a super-ego (Freud 1964: 66-67). Moreover, if we consider that the “father” can be seen as the representation of national or cultural identity, it can be concluded that Datou Chun did not identify himself with his father and did not desire to be like him. One could argue that this attitude is closely tied to Zhang Dachun’s personal experience as is a second-generation

mainlander, a writer who experienced a “representation crisis” during the post-martial law era, consequently struggling to identify with the Taiwanese experience.

Yet, we must bear in mind that Datou Chun’s reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex and its acceptance, regardless of its frightfulness, are resolved with a smile. This resolution extends to language and narrative as well. Once again, readers are presented with a choice: they can either immerse themselves in the emotional aspects of the authenticity of language and narrative, or they can detect the ironic elements stemming from their inherent propensity for falsehood. With the smile that concludes the chapter, Datou Chun suggests following the second path.

### 3. The “death” of the lying author

The references to the child’s psychosexual development and sexual behavior play a crucial role in *Wo Meimei*, leading to the reconstruction of Zhang Dachun’s poetics of the lie with its ironic aspects. However, further discussion on the ambiguity of half-fictional and half-factual Datou Chun is needed to demonstrate the referential fallacy of those lies. While the readers are encouraged not to trust the novel’s “referential” content due to the lying essence of language and narrative, they may also be justified in suspecting that the numerous references to the real Zhang Dachun’s literary and personal experiences are “real” after all. This ambiguity can be resolved by trusting the author when, in *Wo Meimei*’s preface to the 2008 edition, he reveals, “that I almost wasn’t a real I” (*nage wo, sihu bushi zhen wo* 那個我，似乎不是真我) (Zhang 2008: 8). Alternatively, we can look at the entire structure of the novel, including its paratext, in search of an answer.

When the novel was published in 1993, the author’s name that appeared on the front cover and spine of the book was Datou Chun’s, while Zhang Dachun’s name faded into the background and was only shown on the back cover. Consequently, Datou Chun is not only the narrator and the writer of the short-stories mentioned in the novel but is also purportedly the “author” of *Wo Meimei*. Drawing on Eco’s terminology, Datou Chun appears to be the “empirical author” of both the stories described in the novel and the novel itself. As an empirical author, he discusses story-telling and fictional writing, asserting his rights over his texts. With its focus on the process of fictional authorship and composition, *Wo Meimei* can be considered a metafictional novel that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to raise questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. This approach aligns with Waugh’s characterization of metafiction, which highlights the novel’s deliberate intention to explore the intricate connections between fiction and reality (Waugh 2003: 2).

On the other hand, the little sister, who behaves like the first reader of the brother’s published stories, can be regarded as the “empirical reader.” She analyzes Datou Chun’s stories by comparing their contents with the experiences of the brother, showcasing her ability to perceive the profound intricacies of language manipulation (Zhang 2000: 65). She even accuses the brother of concealing real people within the characters of his short-stories, including individuals from their own family. For example, she finds references to their mother in “The Invisible Man” (Zhang 2000: 68) and to their grandfather, with a bit of their mother and their father, in “The General’s Monument” (Zhang 2000: 69-70). In Eco’s terms, she “use[s] the text as a container for [her] own passions” and “superimpose[s] [her] own expectations” (Eco 1994b: 8, 10).

In response, the empirical author Datou Chun cannot help but confirm her hypotheses and confess his textual strategies in composing fiction:

All I do is take those little details of life that are lacking and add a little of something else; I take D that occurred during A time at B place to C person, and rewrite it in E time at F place to G person. Then I add a bit of material H or remove a tad of K—did I forget I and J? Oh, I’m saving them so critics and readers will have space to exercise their imagination. In that space, the critics and readers will believe that enclosing a living person in an eleven-square-foot cement coffin is a stroke of originality, full of symbolism and hidden meaning (Zhang 2000: 64).

However, the relationship between the brother and the sister—the empirical author and the empirical reader—appears to be imbalanced. They engage in debates about the composition and meaning of fiction, with each of them advocating their own opinions, and Datou Chun asserting his rights. As noted by David Wang in 1993, this relationship is not even clear in the title itself, as *wo* 我 (“I”)—the first-person narrator Datou Chun—and *meimei* 妹妹 (“little sister”) are the two components of the novel’s title and its linguistic construction allows for three different interpretations based on the suitable grammatical relations of the Chinese language. *Wo* can be read as a possessive adjective (*wo de* 我的), as Michael Berry interpreted it in his English translation of the title “My Kid Sister.” However, there are two other possibilities: one is the juxtaposition of *wo* and *meimei*, which may indicate an equivalence, i.e. *wo yu meimei* 我與妹妹 (“My sister and I”); the other is the apposition of the two terms, meaning that one describes or defines the other, i.e. *wo-meimei* 我妹妹 (“I, my sister;” Wang [1993] 2001: 28).

Wang’s observations, as remarked in the title of his article “Wo Meimei VS. Meimei Wo” 我妹妹 VS. 妹妹我 (“I sister VS. Sister I”), can serve as a valuable resource for exploring the relationship between the empirical author and the empirical reader. They can also aid in resolving the ambiguity



surrounding the connection between Datou Chun and Zhang Dachun, thereby uncovering Zhang Dachun's ideas about the interplay between fiction and reality.

The first interpretation—"my kid sister"—highlights the supremacy of *wo* over *meimei* and, consequently, the dominance of the author Datou Chun over the reader, the kid sister. This emphasizes the author's function, enabling Datou Chun to provide his subjective viewpoint and "impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 1977: 147). The author's "person" remains of paramount importance and continues to reign.

In contrast, the other two interpretations emphasize the "birth of the reader," but in different ways. According to the first one, where *wo* and *meimei* are placed on the same level as "my sister and I," it implies that the functions of the author and the reader are also on equal footing. They can cooperate or even engage in arguments while seeking meaning, leading to the pursuit of a final signified. This is the game Datou Chun and the little sister play in the novel. It can be observed that the "persons" of the author and the reader still remain the main focus, and thus, "the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic" (Barthes 1977: 147).

Lastly, the most suggestive interpretation brings a change of perspective that aligns with the loss of identities. Through the interpersonal identification between *wo* and *meimei* "I, my sister"—the author coincides with the reader, and both become "subjects" rather than "persons." As Barthes asserts, "linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*" (Barthes 1977: 145), and the same applies to the reader. By creating the idea of the reader, the reader also becomes a narrative construction. In Eco's terms, *wo* represents the model author, while *meimei* represents the model reader. This defined model reader is genetically imprinted in the text, and "[s]ince the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text" (Eco 1992: 64). In this way, the empirical author Zhang Dachun, through the model reader *meimei* and the model author Datou Chun, emphasize the genetically imprinted fictional significance of narrative.

Drawing on Barthes's concept, this marks the "death of the author," which reveals that "writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 1977: 142). It is through this perspective that we can potentially resolve the ambiguity in the relationship between Datou Chun and Zhang Dachun, declaring the "death of the lying author" and embracing the plurality of the text and, ultimately, the entertaining function of fiction.

#### 4. Conclusion

As illustrated, Zhang Dachun appears to have been strongly influenced by postmodern techniques and aesthetics. Specifically, he seems to have embraced Eco’s and Barthes’s ideas regarding the inherent deceitful nature of language and the negation of the author’s and the writing’s identities. In *Wo Meimei*, the exploration of sexual instincts and experiences of two adolescent children is intentionally fabricated to lose their referentiality and convey deeper meanings. Freudian theories are reinterpreted, personal experiences are given a political twist, and even the role and function of the author, the reader, and the text itself are examined, all with the intention of eliciting a smile from the reader.

However, it is important to note that Zhang Dachun’s reception of postmodernism is localized to a Taiwanese perspective. By emphasizing the personal experience during the military service, the author’s “representation crisis,” the reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex, and the creative process of writing, Zhang Dachun’s lies do not reflect the broader Taiwanese postmodern condition but rather represent the experiences of some writers within the *juancun* literary movement. The outcomes of these lies may have both tragic and comic outcomes: they can entangle readers in the existential dilemmas of a particular group of Taiwanese writers or reveal the ironic underpinnings of *Wo Meimei*’s fabrications.

Moreover, the metafictional discussion on the roles of the writer and the reader, which highlights the self-reflexivity of the story, prompts us to delve into their function and significance. David Wang’s intriguing interpretation of the title as an equivalence—“I, my sister”—can be expanded to proclaim the “death of the lying author” and interpret the text in Barthes’s lens as a writing where plurality thrives. Post-martial law Taiwan can be aptly described as a place of multiplicity and hybridity, as emphasized by a political scientist who stated, “There is practically no place like Taiwan—great tradition, small island; conservative state, drastic change; cultural imperialism, committed Nationalism; localist sentiment, cosmopolitan sophistication” (Winckler 1994: 22). This quote captures the unique characteristics and complexities of Taiwan, where diverse elements coexist and intertwine, creating a distinct socio-cultural landscape.

#### References

- Barthes, R. 1977. *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana.
- Chang, Sung-sheng Yvonne. 2004. *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

- Chen, Fangming. 2007. "Postmodern or Postcolonial? An Inquiry into Postwar Taiwanese Literary History." In: *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History*, edited by David D.W. Wang and Carlos Rojas, 26–50. Durham, NC – London: Duke University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1976. *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington, IN – London: Indiana University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1994a. *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. Translated by William Weaver. London: Minerva [Italian original: *Postille a "Il nome della rosa."* Milano: Bompiani: 1984].
- Eco, Umberto. 1994b. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press.
- Eco, Umberto, J. Culler, R. Rorty and C. Brooke-Rose. 1992. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1964. *New Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth [German original: *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*. Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag: 1933].
- Liao, Ping-hui. 1997. "Postmodern Literary Discourse and Contemporary Public Culture in Taiwan." *Boundary 2*/24, 3: 41–63.
- Liao, Sebastian Hsien-hao. 2000. "Becoming Cyborgian: Postmodernism and Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan." In: *Postmodernism and China*, edited by Xudong Zhang and Arif Dirlik, 175–202. New York, NY: Duke University Press.
- Ng, Kim-chu. 2007. "Techniques behind Lies and the Artistry of Truth: Writing about the Writings of Zhang Dachun." In: *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History*, edited by David D.W Wang and Carlos Rojas, 253–284. Durham, NC – London: Duke University Press.
- Peng, Hsiao-yen. 2009. "Representation Crisis: History, Fiction, and Post-Martial Law Writers from the 'Soldiers' Villages.'" *Positions* 17/2: 375–410.
- Wang, David D.W. 王德威. (1993) 2001. "Wo Meimei VS Meimei Wo: Ping Datou Chun *Wo Meimei*" 我妹妹 VS. 妹妹我——評大頭春《我妹妹》. In: *Zhong Sheng Xuanhua Yihou: Dianping Dangdai Zhongwen Xiaoshuo* 眾聲喧嘩以後——點評當代中文小說 [After Heteroglossia: Critical Review of Contemporary Chinese Fiction], 27–29. Taipei: Maitian.
- Wang, Guoan 王國安. 2012. *Taiwan Houxiandai Xiaoshuo de Fazhan: yi Huang Fan, Ping Lu, Zhang Dachun yu Lin Yaode de Chuangzuo wei Guancha Wenben* 台灣後現代小說的發展：以黃凡、平路、張大春與林耀德的創作為觀察文本 [The Development of Postmodern Novel in Taiwan: Observations on the Literary Creation of Huang Fan, Ping Lu, Zhang Dachun and Lin Yaode]. Taipei: Xiuwei zixun keji.
- Waugh, Patricia. 2003. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London – New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Winckler, Edwin A. 1994. "Cultural Policy on Postwar Taiwan." In: *Cultural Change in Postwar Taiwan*, edited by Stevan Harrell, & Chun-chieh Huang, 22–46. London – New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Wu, Chiu Feng 吳秋鳳. 2017. *Zhang Dachun de shuohuang shi* 張大春的說謊史 [The Lying History of Zhang Dachun]. MA Thesis, National Chengchi University.
- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. 1989. *Da Shuohuangjia* 大說謊家 [The Big Liar]. Taipei: Yuanliu.

- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. 1993. *Shaonian Datou Chun de Shenghuo Zhouji* 少年大頭春的生活周記 [The Weekly Journal of Young Big Head Spring]. Taipei: Lianhe wenzue chubanshe.
- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. 1996. *Ye Haizi* 野孩子 [Wild Child]. Taipei: Lianhe wenzue chubanshe.
- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. 2000. *Wild Kids: Two Novels About Growing Up*. Translated by Michael Berry. NY: Columbia University Press [Contents: *Wo Meimei* 我妹妹 [My Kid Sister]. Taipei: UNITAS: 1993; and *Ye Haizi* 野孩子 [Wild Child]. Taipei: Lianhe wenzue chubanshe: 1996].
- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. (1998) 2004. *Xiaoshuo Bailei* 小說稗類 [Fiction of Miscellaneous Kinds]. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe.
- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. 2008. *Wo Meimei* 我妹妹 [My Kid Sister]. Taipei: INK yinke wenzue.
- Zhang, Dachun 張大春. 2015. “The General’s Monument.” In: *Worlds of Modern Chinese Fiction: Short Stories & Novellas from the People’s Republic, Taiwan & Hong Kong*, edited by Michael S. Duke, 13-28. London and New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Zhu, Yongxin 朱永新. 1993. “Lun Zhongguoren de Lian Quan Qingjie 論中國人的戀權情結 [The Discussion of Power Complex in Chinese].” *Journal of Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies* 1: 242-266.

---

Ludovica Ottaviano received her PhD in Science of Interpretation from the University of Catania, with a research focus on the reception of Umberto Eco’s works in China and Taiwan. Her scholarly contributions include: “Il nome della rosa’s translations in the Chinese language.” *Signs and Media* 2 (2022): 1-20; “Lies and fiction in Zhang Dachun’s *Xiaoshuo bailei*.” In: 異口同「聲」—探索臺灣現代文學創作的多元發展 [Exploring Sinophone Polyphony – Voices of Modern Literature in Taiwan], edited by Christian Soffel 蘇費翔 and Chien Juo-ping 簡若珮, 211-238. Taipei: Xiuwei zixun: 2022.

She has taught Chinese language and philology at the University of Catania and enriched her academic background by attending courses at various universities in China, including BFSU (Beijing), Wuhan University (Wuhan), and Sichuan University (Chengdu). Currently, she is a postdoctoral researcher for the ERC project “INSCRIBE: Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings” at the University of Bologna, where her research interests span the invention of Chinese writing and cognitive approaches to the development of ancient Chinese scripts.

Ludovica can be reached at: [ludovica.ottaviano@unibo.it](mailto:ludovica.ottaviano@unibo.it)

## Mobility and identity in Chinese Italian writings

*Valentina Pedone*

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 300,000<sup>1</sup>. 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

---

<sup>2</sup> 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-term<sup>3</sup>, 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 imply<sup>4</sup>. 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

---

<sup>3</sup> 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/>.

<sup>4</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 Germany<sup>5</sup> (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.

---

<sup>5</sup> 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](http://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.

## References

- Benton, Gregor. 2011. "Chinese in Europe: Origins and transformation." *Religions & Christianity in Today's China* 1/1: 62-70.
- Bernards, Brian. 2016. "7. Sinophone Literature." In: *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, edited by Kirk A. Denton, 72-79. New York, NY and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press.
- Bernards, Brian. 2016. *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*. Singapore: NUS.
- Chen, Xi. 2015. *Dreams and Shadows. Tales from Planet Xi Teahouse*. Cambridge: Line of Intent Publishing.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2006. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2010. "Towards a Politics of Mobility." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28: 17-31.

- Deng, Yuehua 邓跃华. 2010. “Hui dao jia de ren” 回到家的人 [“Those who come back home”]. *Cina in Italia* 3: 41.
- Faulconbridge, James and Allison Hui. 2016. “Traces of a Mobile Field: Ten Years of Mobilities Research.” *Mobilities* 11/1: 1-14.
- Gao, Liang 高粱. 2014. *Qing chen* 轻尘 [“Light dust”]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe.
- Hannam, Kevin, Mimi Sheller and John Urry. 2006. “Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings.” *Mobilities* 1/1: 1-22.
- Heng, Zhi 衡之. 2018. *Feichang mie* 非常灭 [“Eternal Cessation”]. Taipei: Bokesi Chubanshe.
- Hirst, Bamboo. 2005. *Blu Cina*. Segrate: Piemme.
- Hu, Lanbo 胡兰波. 1993. *Sichou xin lu shang de Zhongguo guniang* 丝绸新路上的中国姑娘 [“A Chinese girl on the new silk road”]. Beijing: Lüyou jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Hu, Lanbo. 2009. *La strada per Roma*. Roma: La.Ca Editore.
- Hu, Lanbo. 2012. *Petali di orchidea*. Siena: Barbera Editore.
- Hu, Lanbo 胡兰波. 2015. *Shuo zou jiu zou! Cong Beijing dao Luoma* 说走就走！从北京到罗马 [“Ready, steady, go! From Beijing to Rome”]. Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe.
- Jin, Zicai. 2006. “Voglio tornare a casa.” In: *Parole sopra Esquilino* (supplement to the magazine “Cielo... l’Esquilino!”), edited by Associazione Culturale Il cielo sopra Esquilino, 1: 16-18.
- Li, Shuman 李树蔓. 2002. *Binfen Luoma* 缤纷罗马 [“Colorful Rome”]. Beijing: Guoji wenhua chubanshe.
- Long, Santiao 龙三条/Chen, Xi 陈曦 2010. *Luoma tiankong xia* 罗马天空下 [“Under the sky of Rome”]. Xi’an: Shanxi shifan daxue chubanshe.
- Merriman, Peter and Lynne Pearce. 2017. “Mobility and the Humanities.” *Mobilities* 12/4: 493-508.
- Pedone, Valentina. 2013. *A Journey to the West. Observations on the Chinese migration to Italy*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. 2006. “The New Mobilities Paradigm.” *Environment and Planning A* 38/2: 207–226.
- Shi, Yang Shi. 2017. *Cuore di seta*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2007. *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2010. “Against diaspora: The Sinophone as places of cultural production.” In: *Global Chinese Literature*, edited by Jing Tsu David and Der-Wei Wang, 29-48. Leiden: Brill.
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2011. “The concept of the Sinophone.” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 126/3: 709-718.
- Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wan, Zimei 万子美. 2012. *Yidali Yidali* 意大利，意大利 [“Italy, Italy”]. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Wen, Mao. 1999. *La storia della grande campana*. Milano: CUEM.
- Wen, Mao. 2001. *Wu gou yue: La luna a forma di spade dell'imperatore Yue*. Milano: CUEM.

- Yang, Xiaping. 2003. *La Cenerentola cinese*. Firenze: Idest.
- Yang, Xiaping. 2008. *Il serpente bianco*. Firenze: Idest.
- Yang, Xiaping. 2011. *Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia*. Firenze: Idest.
- Yang, Yi. 2021. *Eazy Breezy*. Milan: Bao Publishing.
- Yang, Yi. 2022. *Deep vacation*. Milan: Bao Publishing.
- Zhai, Ran 翟然. 2000. *Yuan jia Ouzhou 远嫁欧洲* [“European marriage”]. Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe.
- Zhang, Changxiao 张长晓. 2018. *Gaogui de xuezi 高贵的靴子* [“The noble boot”]. Beijing: Chaohua chubanshe.
- Zhang, Changxiao/Sean White. (2020). *La costellazione del dragone*. Segrate: Piemme.
- Zhang Gaoeng. 2019. *Migration and the Media: Debating Chinese Migration to Italy, 1992-2012*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

---

Valentina Pedone is Associate Professor in Chinese Studies at the Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology, University of Florence, where she coordinates the research unit SILC (Sino-Italian Links and Connections). Her academic interests lie in the languages and cultures of people of Chinese origins in Italy, Italian Orientalism and Sino-Italian cultural production. She recently co-edited a volume titled *Cultural Mobility between China and Italy* (Palgrave 2023). She is co-editor in chief of the book series *Florientalia: East Asian Studies Series* (Firenze University Press).

Valentina can be contacted at: [valentina.pedone@unifi.it](mailto:valentina.pedone@unifi.it)

## Representation and symbolism of *Huaixiang* in Ji Xian's nostalgic poetry

Silvia Schiavi

This paper aims to examine the representation and symbolism of *huaixiang* 懷鄉 (“homesickness”) in the nostalgic poetry of Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913-2013), with a specific focus on the symbolism of trees. Ji Xian was among the Chinese writers who relocated to Taiwan in the late 1940s. On the island, he played a pivotal role in the diffusion of modern poetry, advocating for a modernist movement through the publication of poetry magazines and the establishment of a Modernist School, which attracted more than a hundred poets. Ji Xian's theories and poems mainly promoted the introduction of Modernism to Taiwan through the incorporation of Western literature and experimentation with new imagery, language and style. However, amidst Ji Xian's writings, one also finds several nostalgic poems that reveal the poet's distress upon leaving Mainland China and the alienation and loneliness experienced on his arrival on the island. His nostalgic poetry features new symbols often related to Chinese and Taiwanese vegetation. Trees of different species, such as the Acacia and Wutong trees, as well as the Betel palm, become carriers of his homesickness or self-referential symbols through which he expresses the hardship of settling into Taiwan and the complex process of establishing roots in a foreign land.

**Keywords:** poetry; nostalgia; tree symbolism; Sinophone literature; post-war Taiwan.

### 1. Introduction

Ji Xian 紀弦 (1913-2013), a poet and painter from Mainland China, is amongst the Chinese writers who followed the Nationalist Party to Taiwan in the late 1940s to escape the Civil War (1945-1949). On the island, he strongly contributed to the development of poetic Modernism, introducing the modern poetic theories, techniques, and themes he learned in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, where he worked with prominent authors such as Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003), Du Heng 杜衡 (1907-1964) and Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905-1950).

Many of Ji Xian's poetic theories promoted Modernism and modern poetry in Taiwan and aimed to create a new generation of poets. In 1953, he published a poetry magazine titled *Xiandai shi* 現代詩

(“Modern Poetry”) to encourage the introduction of Western literature and experimentation with new language and style. Additionally, in 1956, he established the *Xiandai pai* 現代派 (“Modernist School”), which marked the beginning of Taiwanese Modernism.

However, throughout his life, Ji Xian also wrote nostalgic poems, which never truly caught the attention of critics, who instead have historically focused more on Ji’s Modernist verses. As Yang demonstrated (2017), Ji Xian’s poetry collection contains numerous *Xiandai xiangchou shi* 現代鄉愁詩 (“Modern Nostalgic Poems”), which were written in two defining moments: in the 1950s when he left his homeland to move to Taiwan, and in the 1970s when he settled in the United States.

In Taiwan, as well as in the West, studies on Ji Xian have mainly examined the author’s role as the pioneer of Modernism and the poetic theories he postulated, such as the renowned *Heng de yizhi* 橫的移植 (“Horizontal Transplantation”) on the introduction of elements of Western poetry into local poems.<sup>1</sup> Few studies, mostly carried out by Taiwan scholars (Yang 2017; Ying 2011), have examined to some extent the subject. These scholars analyze various poems written by Ji Xian in the 1950s, which seemingly feature fascinating and peculiar attributes, albeit referring to the Anti-Communist literature launched by the Guomindang in post-war Taiwan. Ji Xian addresses the theme of *huaixiang* 懷鄉, which could be defined as “the yearning for one’s native place” or “homesickness,” in a rather conventional way, drawing from classical poetry and well-known images often associated with the subject. However, concurrently, he explores new and subjective symbols, which, as a contemporary poet, he seeks fervently throughout his lifetime. Particularly, he demonstrates a keen interest in the vegetation of Mainland China and Taiwan and appears to find symbols and carriers of his nostalgia in various plants and trees.

This paper aims to rediscover Ji’s nostalgic poetry through an analysis of the *huaixiang* representations in his work, drawing particular attention to the symbolism of trees often employed by the poet. Specifically, it examines poems written from the 1950s onwards, revealing how the author’s nostalgic writings provide further insights into his own poetry production and a better understanding of the complex process of settling into a foreign land, which is a process experienced by many Chinese mainlanders who moved to Taiwan in the post-war era.

---

<sup>1</sup> For Ji Xian’s *Heng de yizhi* 橫的移植 (“Horizontal Transplantation”) and other poetic theories, see Xu (2011) and Ji (1954).

## 2. The origin of Ji Xian's nostalgic poetry

Lu Yu 路逾, best known by his pen name Ji Xian, was born in Baoding city, Hebei, on April in 1913. His father, Lu Xiaochen 路孝忱 (1888-1932), also known as *Tiger Lu*, was a general of the Nationalist Party who took part in the Xinhai Revolution and witnessed the first Republic of China's establishment in 1912. With the following rise to power and dictatorship of Yuan Shikai, Sun Yat-Sen's exile and the persecution of Sun's followers, Ji Xian's family fled from Hebei in search of refuge in different parts of the country. The family began a life of predicament that greatly affected Ji Xian, who would eventually reveal he never completed a school semester before the age of eleven, until they finally settled in Yangzhou (Ji 2001a: 24-31). The city assumes a pivotal role in his poetry, as the author later associated feelings of safety and peace with Yangzhou, recalling this period as a very joyful time in his life. It is indeed in the city where he composed his first poems at the age of sixteen and decided to become a poet (Ji 2001a: 21). The first part of Ji's autobiography, published in three volumes in 2001, focuses on his life in Mainland China (*Dalu shiqi* 大陸時期 1913-1948) and contains many references to Yangzhou, a city that Ji establishes as his first *guxiang* 故鄉 (“hometown”). The poet states that he is a *Yangzhou ren* 揚州人 (“a man from Yangzhou”) and he forged an emotional bond with the town, which he evokes in his memoirs and poetry nostalgically and fondly (Ji 2001a: 16).

In 1928, Ji Xian moved to Wuhan with his father and enrolled in the Wuchang Fine Arts Academy,<sup>2</sup> where he attended only one semester before returning to Jiangsu to join Suzhou Fine Arts Academy, eventually graduating in 1933 (Ji 2001a: 21-31). He pursued his studies on art in Japan at Waseda University for a short period, but because he failed his second art exhibition in Suzhou in 1934, he ultimately decided to focus primarily on poetry. He then moved to Shanghai, where he published his first modern poems under the pen name *Luyishi* 路易士 (“Louis”), entering local poetry circles and starting his literary and editorial career. His verse appeared in the famous magazine *Xiandai* 現代 (*Les Contemporains*), edited by Shanghai's Modernist School, and he became acquainted with local Modernists like Du Heng, who introduced him to Dai Wangshu and Shi Zhecun. Ji was particularly interested in Dai Wangshu's symbolist poetry, which seemingly inspired him to compose his own free verse poetry (Manfredi 2014: 33-37). Ji's poems are highly evocative and rich in symbols drawn from his life experience, Western literature, Baudelaire's work, and modern Chinese poetry. Additionally, he

---

<sup>2</sup> *Wuchang meishu zhuanmen xuexiao* 武昌美術專門學校 (“Wuchang Fine Arts Academy”), currently *Hubei meishu xueyuan* 湖北美術學院 (“Hubei Institute of Fine Arts”), is among the oldest and most famous art academies of China.

often resorts to astronomy, a subject of which he was deeply fond, finding new poetic images in stars and constellations.

In Shanghai, the poet published several collections of modern verse and collaborated in creating poetry magazines. In 1936, he contributed in producing *Xinshi* 新詩 (“New Poetry”) with Dai Wangshu, Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910-2000), Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905-1993), Sun Dayu 孫大雨 (1905-1997) and Liang Zongdai 梁宗岱 (1903-1983). In 1944, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), he launched a magazine entitled *Shi lingtu* 詩領土 (“Poetry Territory”), demonstrating his dedication to diffusing and developing modern poetry, along with his aim to pursue the reflection on new poetic style, content and language started by *Xiandai* and *Xinshi*, even in such a difficult time.

Due to his continuous traveling and relocation to different places, Ji Xian’s life in Mainland China is permeated with a sense of non-belonging, alienation, and discontentment. Nonetheless, when reading his autobiography and poems, one can detect an attachment to three cities: Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai. It is in these very cities that the author made the pivotal decision to pursue a career as a poet and painter. Although critics have drawn more attention to the poet’s connection with Shanghai, Taipei, and San Francisco, all serving as background of the three main periods in Ji’s lifetime and literary production, scholars, such as Zhu (2020: 116), instead claim that Yangzhou and Suzhou also contributed to the poet’s literary and artistic growth. In Yangzhou, Ji Xian finally settled down after an endless flee and developed an interest in poetry, while in Suzhou, he attempted to publish his first verses and held his first art exhibitions.

In November 1948, Ji Xian moved to Taiwan with his wife, children, and close friend Du Heng. On the island, he began a new life and thus a new phase of his literary career under the famous pseudonym Ji Xian (Xu 2011: 58). In his memoirs, he recalls the hardships of his first years. The author’s sense of nostalgia and loss was deepened by the difficulties of adapting to a new environment and the responsibilities of caring for a newborn son, which necessitated working multiple jobs simultaneously (Ji 2001b: 27). Upon his arrival in Taiwan, Ji could not dedicate himself to poetry. Although, from the 1950s onwards, he wrote and published a considerable number of poems inspired by two literary trends: Modernism and Nostalgic Anti-Communist literature. The latter, established in 1949 and strongly supported by the Nationalist government, disseminated the three principles of Anti-Communism, Nationalism, and Traditionalism that allowed the new Nationalist rulers to seize power on the island and keep a close watch on literary and cultural production. This trend, also known as *Huaixiang wenxue* 懷鄉文學 (“Nostalgic Literature”), *Fangong wenxue* 反共文學 (“Anti-Communist Literature”), or *Zhandou wenyi* 戰鬥文藝 (“Assault Art and Literature;” Passi 2007: 58), encouraged



realist novels and poems to propagate Nationalist ideology. However, it also allowed people to process the trauma of Chinese diaspora and the defeat of the Guomindang in the Civil War. Such works are often permeated with nostalgia for Mainland China and reveal the suffering of those writers who left their country. The topic of homesickness, though, also had a political implication, as it supported the Nationalist goal of reunification with the Mainland.

Although Ji Xian was an outspoken Nationalist, as stated in his memoirs (Ji 2001a: 84), he seemingly began publishing nostalgic Anti-Communist poems primarily to win conspicuous monetary awards established by the Nationalist government for writers who foster mainstream literature and collaborated in spreading the Guomindang's political agenda. The author was awarded repeatedly for political poems that supported the Nationalist ideology, such as *Nuhou ba Taiwan* 怒吼吧台灣 (“Roar Taiwan”), *Xiangchou* 鄉愁 (“Nostalgia”), and *Geming, geming* 革命, 革命 (“Revolution, Revolution”), which obtained the Fourth May Award from 1950 to 1954 (Xu 2011: 58-59). Due to winning said awards, he was able to launch his literary and editorial career on the island and devote himself to Modernism with less political involvement (Yeh 2000: 125).

Ji Xian labelled his nostalgic Anti-Communist poems as *Zhengzhi shi* 政治詩 (“Political poems”)<sup>3</sup> to distinguish these works from his Modernist poetry published in apolitical magazines (Yang 2010: 73). However, among his *Zhengzhi shi*, one can still find poems with a milder political tone, where the topic of the *huaixiang* goes beyond the purposes of mere militancy. Instead, Ji Xian's nostalgia is indeed primarily associated with other feelings, such as loneliness, sadness, and the sense of non-belonging experienced after being forced to leave his homeland. His nostalgic poetry uses a modern structure unconstrained by fixed rhymes and prosody. Yet, it differs significantly from the poet's Modernist compositions in terms of images, symbols, and content, as he often refers to the more conventional and familiar repertoire of classical poetry.

As Yang claims (2017), Ji Xian evokes nostalgia with symbols and patterns drawn from masterpieces of old poetry, like the *Shijing* 詩經 (“Classic of Poetry”) and the *Gushi shijiu shou* 古詩十九首 (“Nineteen Old Poems”), as well as Tang poetry. The poet's *huaixiang* for Mainland China is conveyed through the description of natural beauty in his native country, the frequent and conventional

---

<sup>3</sup> Some of Ji Xian's nostalgic Anti-Communist poems, such as *Nuhou ba Taiwan* 怒吼吧台灣 (“Roar Taiwan”), were collected in Ji's (1951) *Zai feiyang de shidai: fangongkang'e shiji* 在飛揚的時代: 反共抗俄詩集 (“In the Rising Era: Anthology of Anti-Communist and Anti-Soviet Poems”). The anthology helped in introducing Ji Xian to the literary circles of the time and allowed the poet to win several prizes. See Ji (1951).

reference to autumn, and the depiction of sorrowful sunsets. Additionally, Ji Xian brings life to the *huaixiang* through the image of his eyes fixed on the moon or a picturesque horizon, where he attempts to catch a glimpse of his homeland.

*Yun he yue* 云和月 (“The Cloud and the Moon”) is an example of a conventional description of *huaixiang*. In the poem, Ji Xian imagines transforming into a white cloud and floating back to his country. He then changes shape, transforming into the moon looking at his own reflection in the Danshui river in Taiwan and in the Yangtze (Yang 2017). As Cai claims (2007: 210), the round full moon in Chinese poetry “often carries connotations of unity and family togetherness,” thus it makes the poet think of home, becoming a symbol of homesickness. Yet, seemingly, in the poem the *huaixiang* is best conveyed when the poet reveals to the cloud and moon that he spends his days looking toward the West, hoping to see a glimpse of his beloved China across the Taiwan Strait.

In other poems, Ji’s nostalgia surfaces while recalling childhood places, as we may note in *Fahaisi* 法海寺 (“Fahai Temple”) or *Wuting qiao* 五亭橋 (“Wuting Bridge”). Both works refer to Ji Xian’s *guxiang*, i.e. Yangzhou, through the depiction of the city’s attractions at sunset, using the traditional pattern of the poet admiring a touching sunset that amplifies the yearning for home (Ji 2001b: 237-9).

Thus, it’s not far-fetched to suggest that Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry seems to stand in a transitional space between old and modern poems, as the author often employs the classical repertoire that he would repudiate in his Modernist works. However, it is noteworthy that he assigns new meanings to some of the symbols he draws from classical poetry. The image of the floating cloud in “The Cloud and the Moon,” for example, is associated with Ji Xian’s desire to return home. Yet, it also echoes the floating clouds in Baudelaire’s poetry, which refer to the need to escape reality. The symbol of the cloud appears in other works as well, such as *Ai yun de qiren* 愛雲的奇人 (“The Eccentric Cloud Lover”), written in 1935. In the poem, Ji Xian dreams of being a white cloud and fleeing from reality, leaving behind those who criticize his poetry. He directly addresses Baudelaire, calling him the first “Eccentric Cloud Lover,” and proclaims himself as the last poet in this category of misunderstood geniuses, and, consequently, as the heir of French Symbolism (Ji 2001a: 89-90).

Ji’s recurring references to classical poetry could be attributed to two main reasons. First, although he was a Modernist who advocated for a renovation of poetry, Ji received a traditional education and was a connoisseur of the *jiushi* 舊詩 (“old-style poetry”). Second, echoing classical poetry, resorting to well-known imagery, and therefore maintaining cultural ties with the homeland could have also been a strategic move to meet the audience’s expectations while also satisfying the government’s expectations, thus allowing him to win poetry contests sponsored by the Nationalist

regime in the 1950s. Promoting Traditionalism was indeed one of the three principles of the Nostalgic Anti-Communist literature launched by Chiang Kai-shek and a key element in the ideology of the Guomindang, which aimed to preserve and restore classical culture and tradition in Taiwan to legitimize Chinese rule over the island (Chang 1993: 25), as well as to oppose the communist government of Mainland China that was about to destroy this cultural heritage.

However, albeit the predictability of themes and references, along with the “undying love for China” shown by the author (Yeh 2000: 125), Ji’s nostalgic poems also appear to be a space to experiment with new symbolism and meanings, as we saw in *Yun he yue*. This happens more often when the poet employs the symbolism of trees.

### 3. Tree symbolism in Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry

The most fascinating and innovative feature of Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry is the symbolism of trees. The poet pays particular attention to Mainland China’s and Taiwan’s vegetation, resorting to trees of different species to convey his *huaixiang* and other emotions. As he affirms in *Shu* 樹 (“Trees”), a poem written in 1985 in California (Ji and Ding 2008: 68-69), trees play a fundamental role in his poetry. On one hand, they are potent symbols that represent the *guxiang* and sorrowful separation from his country; on the other, they are also the witnesses of the distress, loneliness, and hardship experienced in his first years in Taiwan.

The trees mentioned most often by Ji Xian are the *Huaishu* 槐树 (“Acacia tree”), *Yushu* 榆树 (“Elm”), and *Wutong* 梧桐 (“Wutong tree” or “Chinese Parasol tree”). These plants, typical of Chinese vegetation, refer to Ji Xian’s cultural and geographic roots, as is the case in *Yi pian huaishuye* 一片槐樹葉 (“The Acacia Leaf”), a well-known composition written in 1954. Ji Xian (2001b: 63) considers this specific work to be “the most touching and beautiful poem among his nostalgic poetry.” The poet recalls his native land through the image of an Acacia leaf found in an ancient book of poetry, where it had been kept in hopes of preserving a memory of his homeland (Ji 2001b: 63-64). To his great surprise, the Acacia leaf is still intact, much like his memories of Mainland China and his deep affection for the country. It has a grey yellowish colour that recalls autumn leaves, evoking a season typically associated with nostalgia. The Acacia leaf is “precious and delicate” (Ji 2001b: 63). Yet, at the same time, it arouses the painful memory of leaving his homeland, which is amplified by the presence of native soil on the leaf.

In the second stanza, Ji Xian directly mentions the *guxiang* as he wonders about the leaf’s origin point. He quotes famous rivers and mountains in Mainland China, such as the Yangtze (which

traditionally refers to the whole country, as in the aforementioned poem *Yun he yue*). Marijnissen (2008: 29) examines the choice of the Acacia tree as a symbol of *huaxiang* from a linguistic point of view as well due to the homophony between the word Acacia, *Huai* 槐, and the term *huai* 懷 (“to long for”) in *huaxiang*. Additionally, the term *huai* 懷 also appears in the last stanza in the expression *huaibao* 懷抱 (“to cherish, carry in the arms”) when Ji Xian describes his country as a loving mother, imagining returning to her bosom. In the final stanza, the poem reaches its climax as the author wonders if he will ever return to his homeland to admire the beloved Acacia trees in blossom. The poem thus conveys the suffering experienced by the mainlanders who were unable to reunite with their homeland for a long time.

故國啣，啊啊，要到何年何月何日  
才能讓我再回到你的懷抱裡  
去享受一個世界上最愉快的  
飄著淡淡的槐花香的季節？(Ji 2001b: 63-64)

Ah, motherland, what day, what month, what year,  
will you allow me to return to your bosom  
to enjoy the most joyful season in the world  
permeated with the delicate scent of Acacia flowers?<sup>4</sup>

Ji’s use of trees as nostalgic symbols echoes classical poetry. Although there seems to be no relevant imagery associated with the *Huashu* and *Yushu*, the symbolism regarding the Wutong could rather be traced back to the *Shijing*, where Wutong trees are often related to music and can be a metonymy for zithers manufactured from their wood. At the same time, the Wutong is associated with the phoenix and carries a legendary connotation, as the auspicious bird of Chinese mythology is often depicted while perching on that tree (McCraw 1988: 84-86). Among the numerous poetical references to Wutong trees, their significance for Ji Xian may be due to the association between the tree and autumn sadness and melancholy. This connection is often found in Tang poetry, such as Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770)’s *Qiu xing qi ba* 秋興其八 (“Autumn Meditations, No. 8”) or Su fu 宿府 (“Night at the Headquarters”), and Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852)’s *Qi’an ou ti* 齊安偶題 (“Casually Inscribed at Qi’an”). In the latter, the Wutong’s dejected

---

<sup>4</sup> If not otherwise mentioned, all translations are made by the author. For the English translation of the whole poem, see Marijnissen (2008: 27).

moaning in the last line amplifies the poet's grief about departing (McCraw 1988: 84), but it is not clear whether he has left his hometown or perhaps one of his lovers. The Wutong also appears to be an emblem of sorrowful love in Tang and Song poetry, as is the case in a few of Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1151)'s *ci* poems addressed to her dead husband, such as *Sheng sheng man* 聲聲慢 (“To the Tune ‘One Beat Followed by Another, a Long Tune;’” Cai 2007: 273-274). Ji Xian, however, does not seem to give such significance to trees, which are instead purely representative of the love felt for his homeland. On the other hand, his poetry may also lead one to recall the Wutong symbolism in Li Yu 李煜 (937-978)'s *Wu ye ti* 烏夜啼 (“To the Tune ‘Crows Call at Night’”), whose lone trees in the first stanza allude to the “speaker's loneliness, confinement and aging” (Cai 2007: 248).

Ji Xian was likely familiar with the Wutong imagery, as demonstrated by his memoir, in which he references poetry related to the subject, such as Du Fu's *Autumn Meditations* (Ji 2001a: 25). However, the Wutong trees in his poems are not merely an ideal symbol invoking *huaixiang*, solitude, or sadness, but rather a direct indication to the specific Wutong trees he used to play with when he was a child. For example, in *Chongyang yu* 重陽雨 (“Rain on the Double Ninth Festival,” 1975) (Ji and Ding 2008: 64-64), *Wutong shu* 梧桐樹 (“The Wutong Tree,” 1976), *Zai Taiping yang yaoyuan de na yibian* 在太平洋遙遠的那一邊 (“On the Other Far Side of the Pacific Ocean,” 1986), and *Yangzhou, Shanghai he Taiwan* 揚州、上海和台灣, (“Yangzhou, Shanghai, and Taiwan,” 2002), they are directly associated with the poet's time in Yangzhou, seemingly serving as witnesses to Ji Xian's childhood and adolescence. In the poems, the author recalls the courtyard at his old house and describes the beauty of the mighty Wutong trees planted in the garden, revealing that he carved his name on them as wishing to leave a shred of his identity in Mainland China with these cherished trees.<sup>5</sup>

However, Ji Xian's tree symbolism is not limited to the aforementioned Acacia, Elm, and Wutong trees. The poet explores various species of palms, including the Betel palm, and assigns them new significances in his work. The Betel palm, also known as Betel nut palm or *Areca catechu*, is an innovative symbol that Ji Xian selected from the tropical vegetation of Taiwan to evoke his homesickness, as well as feelings of non-belonging and alienation. As we read in several poems from the early 1950s onwards, the tree also becomes a self-referential symbol of Ji Xian who associates himself with the palm because

---

<sup>5</sup> For the poems mentioned in the text, *Wutong shu* 梧桐樹 (“Wutong Tree,” 1976), *Zai Taiping yang yaoyuan de na yibian* 在太平洋遙遠的那一邊 (“On the Other Far Side of the Pacific Ocean”), and *Yangzhou, Shanghai he Taiwan* 揚州、上海和台灣 (“Yangzhou, Shanghai, and Taiwan”), see Ji (2020).

of the thin and slender shape of the plant, which is similar to his tall, slim physique. As Ying noticed (2011, 279), Ji Xian defined himself as “the Betel palm of the local literary circles” and published a series of poetry anthologies under the pseudonym *Binglangshu* 檳榔樹 (“Betel Palm”). One of the first poems regarding the Betel palm is *Binglangshu: wo de tonglei* 檳榔樹：我的同類 (“Betel Palm: My Counterpart”), written in 1951. The five-stanza poem is about Ji Xian's first years on the island. He talks to the Betel palm, a “lonely creature” (Ji and Ding 2008: 28) with anthropomorphic features, which seems to share and understand his feelings of loneliness. The palm whispers its grief to the poet by gently swaying in the wind and delivers a monologue that arouses Ji Xian's longing and alienation.

In the second stanza, the author ponders on the feeling of non-belonging through a comparison to the Betel palm: the plant has solid roots in its native land and could never be taken away from it, whereas the poet seems destined to a life of “endlessly wandering from city to city” (Ji and Ding 2008: 27). His *huaixiang* is mainly conveyed in the third stanza: Ji Xian, exhausted from his constant wandering, appeals to the palm to let him lean on its trunk and rest. Then he starts singing a *Huaixiang de diaozi* 懷鄉的調子 (“Nostalgic melody”) and reveals that he is on an “autumnal island” (Ji and Ding 2008: 28), evoking homesickness once again through the imagery of fall.

The Betel palm provides a new symbol to reference the *huaixiang* and the author's feelings. Nonetheless, he also resorts to conventional images, such as the “autumnal island” in the third stanza and the touching sunset that appears at the beginning of the poem.

In the short composition *Wo: binglangshu* 我：檳榔樹 (“Me: A Betel Palm”), also written in 1951 (Ying 2011: 284), Ji Xian states the choice of the palm as a self-referential symbol. In the work, he is standing under the moonlight, tall and slender like a Betel palm, which whispers when the wind blows between its leaves. The *huaixiang* is conveyed through the symbol of the plant, yet the tree is also the personification of the poet who is looking at the moon and thinking of his homeland, echoing the poetic motif found in *Yun he yue*, which also seems referring to Li Bai 李白 (701–762)'s famous poem *Jing ye si* 靜夜思 (“Quiet Night Thoughts”).

Self-referential symbols play a significant role in Ji Xian's poetry, particularly in his early works from the 1930s. He employs a pipe and a black walking cane as symbols that reflect his personal interests and everyday experiences. Ji Xian, indeed, enjoyed pipe smoking and long solitary walks. The pipe and the walking cane also portray the author as a gentleman and seem to imply his will to be recognized as a modern man and poet. In *Zai diqiu shang sanbu* 在地球上散步 (“Walking on Earth,” 1937), for example, Ji has a bizarre walk on the surface of the Earth, when suddenly he decides to plant his black cane on the ground as a symbolic gesture of self-affirmation and assertion of his status as a

modern man and poet (Ji and Ding 2008: 12). As for the pipe, Ji likely drew inspiration from his mentor Dai Wangshu, who in turn heavily borrows from the symbolist work of Francis Jammes, as Lee claimed (1989: 164), referring to the pipe mentioned in Dai's poem *Qiutian* 秋天 ("Autumn"). However, given Ji's background as a painter, it is highly probable that he was influenced by Modernist art, drawing inspiration for his literary and artistic creations from surrealist paintings in particular. This is the case for his 1942 poem *Fei yue de quan* 吠月的犬 ("Dog Barking at the Moon"), which clearly recalls Miró's homonymous painting, and of his 1952 self-portrait *Sishi sui de kuangtu* 四十歲的狂徒 ("A Forty Years Old Madman"). The latter depicts a tired Ji Xian staring coldly at the audience, with dark sunken eyes and a pipe between the lips, similar to Dalí's self-representation in his 1921's "Self-Portrait" (*Figueres*). Both Manfredi (2014: 68) and Liu (2000: 279-80) noticed a possible connection between the two paintings, which may also suggest that Ji Xian had been influenced by pipe representations in Surrealism.<sup>6</sup>

Resorting to the Betel palm is, in fact, also not accidental. The poet's choice of the tree is certainly due to the palm shape. However, once in Taiwan, Ji seemingly acquired the local habit of chewing Betel nut, which is used as a stimulant in several Asian countries.

The same symbol also appears in *Tiaowang* 眺望 ("Looking into the Distance"), a poem written in 1952. The tree personifies Ji Xian, who looks to the clouds in search of solace and thus becomes the poet's emblem, namely the "Eccentric Cloud Lover" who escapes reality by dreaming of transforming into a white floating cloud. The tree-poet then fixes his gaze on a sorrowful horizon, looking into the distance to catch sight of his homeland (Yang 2017). In another poem from 1952 entitled *Ai de binglangshu* 哀的檳榔樹 ("The Sad Betel Palm"), Ji Xian reveals that he finally returned to oil painting (Ji 2020), driven by the desire to depict the beautiful palm.

In 1976, Ji Xian decided to leave Taiwan and move to the United States, where he once again experienced the well-known feelings of nostalgia, loss, and non-belonging that permeate his literature. He spent his final years in San Francisco, where he primarily wrote poetry, collected and published old poems, and began writing his memoirs. He also continued writing nostalgic verses, whose *huaixiang* is now two-fold. Other than remembering Mainland China fondly, the poet also reveals his longing for Taiwan, which he would define as his second *guxiang*. The island is often evoked through the beloved

---

<sup>6</sup> It's not far-fetched to evoke the idea that another source of inspiration for Ji's poetic creation was perhaps surrealist painter Magritte, whose works recurrently show pipes, trees, and clouds, which are symbols we find very often in Ji's poetry. However, at least in Ji's diary, there is no clear evidence that the poet took inspiration from the French author, nor are there paintings which demonstrate any direct borrowing from Magritte's art.

Betel palm symbol, which assumes a new meaning in his latest poems and shows that the poet indeed established roots in Taiwan, eventually overcoming the feeling of non-belonging that he felt in his early years in the island.

In Ji Xian’s late nostalgic poetry, trees remain the dominant symbols used to express his *huaixiang* and remind him of his two homelands. In 1985, at the age of seventy-two, he wrote the aforementioned poem “Trees,” which explains the recurrent tree symbolism in his nostalgic works. In the poem, he mentions the different species of trees found in his poetry, namely the Betel palm and other palm species which refer to Taiwan, as well as the Wutong, Acacia tree, Elm, and other deciduous plants which are instead associated with Mainland China. In the five-stanza poem, Ji Xian wishes to see the beloved trees for one last time and embrace them in a symbolic gesture of reunion with Mainland China and Taiwan. The poet affirms that he would cry for weeks thinking of those trees to prove that, albeit old, he is still capable of showing his deep affection for his homelands (Ji and Ding 2008: 69). In the opening two verses of the poem, we read:

在我還有一大把可以哭的能力時，  
快讓我回去看看那些樹吧！ (Ji and Ding 2008: 68-69)

As long as I still have the strength to cry,  
let me go back to see those trees!

#### 4. Conclusions

Although associated with Taiwan 1950s Nostalgic Anti-Communist literature, Ji Xian’s *huaixiang* poetry appears to go beyond the sole purpose of expressing a shared feeling of homesickness. Even if many of his *Xiandai xiangchou shi* are written to recall Mainland China and convey an undying love for his motherland, his poems employing tree symbolism focus primarily on the hardship of settling into Taiwan and the complex process of putting down roots in a foreign land. The longing for a sense of belonging and a place to call home is a recurring theme in Ji’s poetry, undoubtedly influenced by his personal life experiences. Bearing this in mind, I believe one can finally identify the symbolism of trees found in Ji Xian’s nostalgic poetry. Beyond the reference to some connotations of the Wutong in classical poetry, Ji’s trees principally represent the poet’s sense of rootlessness and desire to belong somewhere, as if he were a tree firmly rooted in its native land. The 1951 poem “Betel Palm: My Counterpart” presents a significant example of this, as the author compares himself to the Betel palm and appears to envy the tree that, unlike him, will never bear the sorrow of leaving its homeland.



Furthermore, the *binglangshu* can arguably represent the uniqueness of Ji's nostalgic poems. Among the trees he mentions, the Betel palm is chosen to be a self-referential symbol and is the result of Ji's pursuit of new and subjective imagery to employ in modern poetry. This suggests that Ji's *huaixiang* poems were also part of his Modernist agenda and therefore are worth considering to further the understanding of the poet's Modernist production. The search for new symbolism is a key element in Ji's poetic theory, as the author's ultimate goal was to promote more intellectual poetry where feelings and thoughts are evoked in a detached and rational way. In doing so, he aimed to surpass lyrical sentimentalism and Romanticism (which still influenced written poetry in post-war Taiwan) and promote Modernism as an alternative path for the development of new poetry.

## References

- Cai, Zong-qi. 2007. *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Chang, Sung-sheng Yvonne. 1993. *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ji, Xian 紀弦. 2001a. *Ji Xian huiyilu diyi bu 紀弦回憶錄【第一部】* [Ji Xian's Memoir, First Volume]. Taipei: Unitas Publishing.
- Ji, Xian 紀弦. 2001b. *Ji Xian huiyilu dier bu 紀弦回憶錄【第二部】* [Ji Xian's Memoir, Second Volume]. Taipei: Unitas Publishing.
- Ji, Xian 紀弦. 2020. "Ji Xian shiji 紀弦詩集 [Ji Xian's Poetry Collection]." *Pinshiwenzhang 品詩文網*. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://mip.pinshiwenzhang.com/shiji/jixuan/>.
- Ji, Xian 紀弦 and Ding Xuhui 丁旭輝. 2008. *Taiwan shiren xuanji 3: Ji Xian ji 台灣詩人選集 3 紀弦集* [Anthology of Taiwanese Poets n. 3: Ji Xian Collection]. Tainan: National Museum of Taiwan Literature.
- Ji, Xian 紀弦. 1951. *Zai feiyang de shidai: fangongkang'e shiji 在飛揚的時代: 反共抗俄詩集* [In the Rising Era: Anthology of Anti-Communist and Anti-Soviet Poems]. Taipei: Baodao wenyi.
- Ji, Xian 紀弦. 1954. *Ji Xian shilun 紀弦詩論* [Ji Xian's Poetic Theories]. Taipei: Xiandai shishe.
- Lee, Gregory. 1989. *Dai Wangshu: The Life and Poetry of a Chinese Modernist*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Liu, Jihui 劉紀蕙. 2000. *Gu'er. Nüshen. Fumian shuxie: wenhua fuhao de zhengzhuang shi yuedu 孤兒. 女神. 負面書寫: 文化符號的徵狀式閱讀* [Orphan, Goddess, and the Writing of the Negative: The Performance of Our Symptoms]. Taipei: Lixu Publisher.
- Manfredi, Paul. 2014. *Modern Poetry in China: A Visual Verbal Dynamic*. New York, NY: Cambria Press.

- Marijnissen, Silvia. 2008. "From Transparency to Artificiality: Modern Chinese Poetry from Taiwan After 1949." PhD diss., Leiden University.
- McCraw, David R. 1988. "Along the Wutong Trail: The Paulownia in Chinese Poetry." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 10/1-2: 81-107.
- Passi, Federica. 2007. *Letteratura taiwanese: un profilo storico*. Venezia: Cafoscarina.
- Xu, Wenwei 須文蔚. 2011. *Taiwan xian dangdai zuojia yanjiu ziliao huibian, 9 Ji Xian 臺灣現當代作家研究資料彙編 09 紀弦* [Compilation of Research Materials on Modern and Contemporary Taiwanese Writers, n. 9: Ji Xian]. Tainan: National Museum of Taiwan Literature.
- Yang, Jiaxian 楊佳嫻. 2010. "Louis (Ji Xian) zai lunxian qi Shanghai de huodong — yi Shi lingtu wei zhongxin de kaocha 路易士 (紀弦) 在「淪陷期」上海的活動——以《詩領土》為中心的考察 [Louis (Ji Xian)'s Activities in Occupied Shanghai: On Poetry Territory]." *Journal of Taiwan Literary Studies* 11: 45-88.
- Yang, Jinglong 楊景龍. 2017. "Heng yi zhong de zong cheng: Ji Xian shige zhuanti (shang) 橫移中的縱承——紀弦詩歌專題 (上) [Vertical Inheritance in the Horizontal Transplantation: Ji Xian's Poetry Special Topic, First Part]." *Zhongguo shige wang*, June 9, 2017. <http://www.zgshige.com/c/2017-06-09/3547857.shtml>.
- Yeh, Michelle. 2000. "From Surrealism to Nature Poetics: A Study of Prose Poetry from Taiwan." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 372: 119-56.
- Ying, Fenghuang 應鳳凰. 2011. "Shitan binglangshu: Ji Xian 詩壇檳榔樹: 紀弦 [The Betel Palm of the Poetry Circles: Ji Xian]." In *Taiwan xian dangdai zuojia yanjiu ziliao huibian, 9 Ji Xian 臺灣現當代作家研究資料彙編 09 紀弦* [Compilation of Research Materials on Modern and Contemporary Taiwanese Writers, n. 9: Ji Xian], edited by Xu Wenwei 須文蔚, 279-88. Tainan: National Museum of Taiwan Literature.
- Zhu, Qinyun 朱欽運. 2020. "Xianxiang zuihao shiren zhu: Ji Xian yu Suzhou de wenxue yinyuan 仙鄉最好詩人住：紀弦與蘇州的文學因緣 [To the Land of Immortals the Poet Belongs: Ji Xian's Literary Ties with Suzhou]." *Shanghai Wenhua* 1: 112-17.

Silvia Schiavi is an adjunct professor of Chinese Language and Literature at 'Gabriele d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara. She is also a former Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Taiwan Literature at the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Roma Tre University. Her primary research interests include Modernism in China and Taiwan, Taiwan Literature, Modern Sinophone Poetry, and Transcultural and Transnational studies.

Silvia can be contacted at: [silvia.schiavi@unich.it](mailto:silvia.schiavi@unich.it)



## The fantastic dimension in Mo Yan

### A new way of narrating the supernatural encounter?

Eugenia Tizzano

In the enthusiastic revival of the marginal genre of the *zhiguai* tale that characterized the 1980s, Mo Yan's tales of the supernatural deserve particular attention. In stories such as *Qiyu* 奇遇 ("Strange Encounter") and *Yeyu* 夜渔 ("Night Fishing") collected in *Xuexi Pu Songling* 学习蒲松龄 ("Learning from Pu Songling," 2011), the protagonists experience an unexpected and unsettling encounter with the supernatural, especially when returning to their home villages from modern cities. While borrowing themes already present in the *Liaozhai*, Mo Yan's return to this ancient genre shows stylistic innovations that recall rhetorical devices described as central in the Western fantastic tale. In Mo Yan, this especially concerns the new context in which the strange event takes place and the new reactions of his modern protagonists towards the supernatural.

Adopting some descriptive categories proposed by critics of the Western fantastic, this analysis focuses on the frontier space of the countryside as a central rhetorical device that activates a fantastic mode of 'hesitation' towards supernatural encounters. As soon as they 'cross the threshold' to the fantastic dimension, Mo Yan's modern protagonists are led back into a world in which the unforeseen return of an ancient and apparently overcome order causes bewilderment and incredulity.

**Keywords:** *zhiguai* tales, fantastic (*qihuan*), countryside, return, Pu Songling, *uncanny*.

### 1. Introduction

This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the fantastic dimension in *Qiyu* 奇遇 ("Strange Encounter") and *Yeyu* 夜渔 ("Night Fishing"), two tales with supernatural elements collected in *Xuexi Pu Songling* 学习蒲松龄 ("Learning from Pu Songling," 2011), by the contemporary author Mo Yan 莫言 (1955).

Celebrated for his distinctive style, which seamlessly blends reality and imagination, in this collection Mo Yan (2011: 1-2) openly draws inspiration from the work of the famous Qing (1644-1911) author Pu Songling 蒲松龄 (1640-1715), who brought the ancient genre of the *zhiguai* 志怪 (anomaly

tale) to its apex. The selected works, however, not only imitate themes typical of Pu's collection, but also foreground a new sense of bewilderment experienced by protagonists of rural origin as they return to the countryside, physically or through memory, and unexpectedly come into contact with the supernatural. This sense of loss becomes significant if we consider that the author has partially engaged with the tradition of the Western fantastic tale, whose distinctive feature has been described as a sense of 'hesitation' (Todorov 1975) or 'incredulity' (Lugnani 1983) experienced by the protagonist of a strange encounter who no longer believes in the supernatural.

The two short stories by Mo Yan will be compared to tales written by Pu Songling which revolve around similar themes or employ similar rhetorical devices. This will allow us to highlight common features as well as innovative ones. Following a proposal by Ceserani (1996), the analysis will focus on the 'crossing of the threshold' (here the liminal space of the nocturnal countryside), a central rhetorical device that activates or enhances the fantastic mode by leading the protagonists back into a world in which the unforeseen return of an ancient and apparently overcome order causes bewilderment and incredulity.

## 2. Returning to a marginal genre: A new way of narrating the supernatural encounter?

Born in Northeast Gaomi Township, not far from Pu Songling's birthplace, as a child, Mo Yan grew up listening to the stories of the grand master, whose style inevitably influenced the way of narrating halfway between reality and imaginary he developed in his adult life. After leaving school, Mo Yan was thrown into the adult world, where he "embarked on the long journey of learning through listening" (Mo 2012: 4); all of the strange stories that had filled his ears during that period of time unexpectedly became material for his novels and short stories in a way similar to Pu Songling, famous for recording "many fantastic tales, perchance heard or made up on the spot" by the passersby (Mo 2011, as cited in Liu and Lee 2009).

Despite their great success, one should not forget that the two storytellers have known the suffering that comes from failure and marginalization since childhood, an experience that has certainly forged their ability to formulate their own "minor discourses."<sup>1</sup> While Pu Songling (1880: 21-22) described himself as a thin child, "constantly ailing, and unable to hold my own in the battle of life," Mo Yan has declared that he was often mocked by villagers and beaten up by bullies because of his ugliness. Things did not improve for Pu Songling as he got older: after failing the imperial

---

<sup>1</sup> On Pu Songling as a writer of minor literature, see Luo (2009).

examinations, he lived in solitude and poverty for most of his life, forced to live far from home and earn money as a secretary of high officials or a private tutor of wealthy landlords. Although Mo Yan was able to enjoy success due to his works, the judgement of his style by Chinese critics has been controversial (see Song 2018, for more detail); however, as he declared, his ability to imagine alternative worlds and to give rise to all sorts of fanciful images was generated by the deep sense of loneliness that he had experienced when becoming a sheep-herder shortly after leaving school (Mo 2012: 3). Thus, it is no wonder that, in the literary fervor of the 1980s—when Mo Yan goes from being the boy who listens to stories to the experimental writer that pens them—he almost immediately chooses to talk not about good people or model citizens, but about *his* people: the bad heroes and outcasts from his hometown on the edge of the Chinese countryside.

If it is by following in the steps of two masters such as Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014) and William Faulkner (1897–1962) that he learns “that a writer must have a place that belongs to him alone” (Mo 2012: 5) (Northeast Gaomi Township), it is perhaps also from Italo Calvino (1923–1985) that he learns the “surreal vein” and “taste for the fairytale” which are so evident in the collection *Xuexi Pu Songling* (Mo, as cited in Del Corona 2015: 21). Most of the tales from the collection were written right after the 1980s, a period that not only saw Chinese contemporary writers coming into contact with foreign literature, but also witnessed a revived interest in the ancient genre of the *zhiguai* tale in mainland China as well as in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Wang 2004: 265–266). This enthusiastic revival deserves particular attention, especially if one considers the traditionally subordinate position that such narratives have always had in the rigid hierarchy of the genres of discourse in China,<sup>2</sup> and the radical questioning, in modern times, of a particular worldview that has always included the supernatural within the realm of the natural.

Born from the transcription of stories and legends previously circulating in oral form, the *zhiguai* 志怪 (lit. “anomaly accounts”) developed as a literary genre during the Six Dynasties Period (220–589), an era of political and social turmoil in which ghost stories served as a medium to explore the delicate and complex relationships between the living and the dead, often aiming to convince the skeptics that “ghosts do exist and that they exert serious claims on the living” (Campany 1991: 34). Whether authors and readers believed it or not, the *zhiguai* remain the richest literary testimony of an ancient worldview that never distinguished the “supernatural” from the “natural,” but sees the beyond as “an inherent part of the natural system” (Huntington 2001: 110). This allowed the literary ghosts, not only to return

---

<sup>2</sup> Confucius refused to talk of prodigies, feats of violence, disorders, and spirits (Analects 7/20).

to earth to avenge a wrong suffered in life or repay a debt, but even to rejoin the world of the living.<sup>3</sup> This is still true in many of Pu's stories revolving around the encounters between young scholars and beautiful women eventually turning out to be supernatural beings who aspire to remain in the earthly realm.<sup>4</sup> From a literary point of view, compared to the position of absolute authority that history has occupied for its ability to narrate true facts and thus transmit moral teachings,<sup>5</sup> the *zhiguai* tales, although presented by the authors as integrations of the official history, were seen as mere annotations of fabricated events written only to satisfy the authors' desire to escape from reality. Loved and widely practiced by literati, they were nevertheless considered a subcultural genre and consequently suffered from major marginalization. Despite renewed popularity among literati and readers during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) eras, during which Pu Songling achieved exceptional success, the *zhiguai* tale was nearly completely abandoned in the modern epoch, when progressive writers took 19<sup>th</sup> century European canons of realism as a model. With very few exceptions, ghosts and other supernatural elements were therefore associated with obsolete superstitions.<sup>6</sup>

After coming to a halt in the period of revolutionary literature, the tradition of narrating the supernatural eventually made a wide comeback in the works of renowned contemporary writers such as Bo Yang (1920-2008), Mo Yan, Su Tong (1963),<sup>7</sup> and others (Wang 2004). However, the radical questioning, in the modern epoch, of a traditional worldview that has always considered the supernatural as an integral part of the natural may have laid the groundwork for a new way of

---

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Yu (1987) talks of “the avenging ghost” (415-422) as a vengeance seeker who often makes their appearance because they have suffered bad deaths and are victims of injustice, and of “the amorous ghost” (Yu 1987: 423-434) to refer to those ghosts who make their appearances to reunite with living mates or when “the lovers are not allowed to be united until one or both of them have passed through death” (Yu 1987: 423).

<sup>4</sup> This interest of the stories—and thus of critics—in the interactions between spirits and humans continues in more recent times. One example is Barr's (1989: 501-517) analysis of the descriptions of “alien women” in Pu Songling. While proposing a new interpretation of these female figures, he continues to focus on the dynamics at work in their relationships with humans and within society.

<sup>5</sup> According to Zhao (2001: 57), the hierarchy of genres was at the basis of the Confucian definition of social order.

<sup>6</sup> Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881-1936) *Zhufu* 祝福 (“New Year's sacrifice”) perfectly exemplifies this tendency. The protagonist, who refuses to take part in the ceremony of “the sacrifice” to the God of Fortune, embodies the typical modern intellectual who rejects anything supernatural. The end of the story, which explains the strange encounter with a ghost as part of a dream, also confirms the modern tendency to lead every supernatural phenomenon back to a rational dimension.

<sup>7</sup> The collection *Secrets* by Bo Yang (1985), translated in English by David Deterding, contains at least two short stories which may be analyzed from the perspective of the fantastic tale, namely “Dragon-eye Rice Gruel” (*Longyan zhou* 龙眼粥) and “Chiang-shui Street” (*Qiangshui jie* 强水街). For the Chinese version of the tales, see: Bo Yang (2013). Su Tong has also published at least three collections (2004 a, b, c) that contain tales with supernatural elements, such as *Yishi de wancheng* 仪式的完成 (“The Completion of the Ritual”), *Zhi* 纸 (“Paper Cut”), and *Hudie yu qi* 蝴蝶与棋 (“Butterflies and qi”).



narrating the supernatural encounter. One that focuses less on the interactions between humans and spirits, and more on a general sense of disorientation experienced by modern protagonists faced with the possible re-emergence of partly forgotten beliefs, thus coming closer to the Western tradition of the fantastic tale.

Distinguishing it from the ‘marvelous’ (in which the supernatural is accepted as part of the natural), and the ‘uncanny’ (in which it eventually finds a rational explanation), Todorov (1975: 25) defined the fantastic as “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” Albeit numerous critiques and revisions (Lazzarin 2016), Todorov’s definition has the merit of having catalyzed the attention of international critics on an important caesura in the way modern protagonists—and readers—react to the supernatural encounter. It is not by chance that their reactions are the main focus of authors who lived during the period of rigorous scientific and philosophical discourse known as the European Enlightenment, as if the fantastic was the other side of the enthusiastic leap towards scientific and technological progress that characterized that epoch.

In China, while the modern era had already witnessed a first timid attempt to explore the dark sides of modernization in a way similar to what the authors of the Western fantastic did,<sup>8</sup> contemporary Chinese authors are certainly not immune to contact with Western works interpreted by critics with the categories of the fantastic, as Mo Yan’s admiration for Calvino shows. The attempt to analyze Mo Yan’s short stories with supernatural elements with descriptive categories proposed by critics of the European and American fantastic finds in this its *raison d’être*.

Todorov’s essay was only translated into Chinese in 2015 (Todorov 2015) and, as Tan (2014) notes, has received very little attention among Chinese critics. Even when Western critics have tried to apply Todorov’s theory to Chinese literature on the supernatural, the concept of ‘hesitation’ was either not in the main interests of scholars or was essentially different from that described by the Bulgarian-

---

<sup>8</sup> Both close to Shanghai’s modernist current, Xu Xu 徐訏 (1908-1980) and Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003) used themes typical of traditional ghost stories in urban and cosmopolitan settings, with modern protagonists and plots largely influenced by masters of the Western fantastic such as Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), in the case of Shi (Wang 2013: 37-39), and Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870) in the case of Xu (Rosenmeier 2017: 82). In comparison to traditional works, these modern tales are not only longer, but also display a psychological characterization that the former lacked (Lee 1999: 155-177; Shi 1992: 1-13). Works such as *Yecha* 夜叉 (“Yaksha,” 1933) or *Modao* 魔道 (“Devil’s Road,” 1933) by Shi Zhecun and *Lusenbao de yi su* 鲁森堡的一宿 (“A Night in Luxembourg,” 1936) by Xu Xu display a rupture with traditional religious beliefs that leads characters not only to fear the supernatural, as was already the case in the *zhiguai* tales, but to openly doubt and reject it, attempting to explain it rationally as a product of hallucination or mental illness (Shi) or as an externalization of the fears and anxieties of the protagonists (Xu Xu).

French critic. In general, critics in and outside China drew on Todorov for their analysis of classical Chinese works (Kao 1985: 2; Company 1996: 207-209; Wei 2011), but it is likely more appropriate to use the category of the fantastic to describe works belonging to the modern and contemporary eras, like Chen (2007) does.

Although Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition has always seen the supernatural as part of the natural world, the penetration of foreign literary and philosophical works that began during the May Fourth movement and continued in the 1980s, together with the 20<sup>th</sup> century's anti-superstition campaigns (Macdonald 2019: 8-14), may have laid the foundations for a shift in the perception of the supernatural. If scholars have documented significant differences in style, themes, plotting, and worldview between early *zhiguai* and those of the late Qing period (1644-1911), emphasizing an increasing tendency of the latter to “mingle the human and the ghostly” (Wang 2004: 264), it is legitimate to wonder if the extraordinary flourishing of the genre in the contemporary epoch shows even more explicit differences. This is especially true when considering that, with the advent of the modern era, the traditional tendency to censor any discourse on the supernatural takes on the characteristics of a true caesura with the aforementioned traditional worldview.

While there are certainly hints, in Mo Yan, of a return to Pu Songling's way of narrating and themes, is it true that some of the stories in the collection are merely “a pale mimicry of the *Liaozhai* in format and thematics” (Wang 2004: 288)? Or rather, focusing on what seems to be a peculiar feature in Mo Yan, i.e. the liminal space of the nocturnal countryside to which a modern adult protagonist comes back, we may not glimpse something more than imitation in these tales?

As Liu and Lee (2009: 30-31) noticed, Mo Yan combines the Enlightenment nativist tradition represented by Lu Xun with the cultural conservatism of Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902-1988) in his works. On one hand, he transforms his homeland into the object of representation at the manner of Lu Xun. On the other hand, he turns his gaze to that primitive and magical state of existence previously depicted by Shen Congwen.<sup>9</sup> In the collection *Xuexi Pu Songling*, the countryside on the edge of the village is not only a background for the events narrated, but also becomes a central rhetorical device that activates or enhances a fantastic mode of ‘incredulity’ (Ceserani 1996; Lugnani 1983). This is particularly evident in short stories like *Qiyu* and *Yeyu*, in which the rural landscape on the margins of the native village becomes a central space that activates a series of anomalous events that cause not only fear, but also a sense of loss and bewilderment in the modern protagonists.

---

<sup>9</sup> For the centrality of the hometown as a fictional space in Mo Yan, see also: Zhang (2014), Wang (1993).

### 3. *Qiyu*: An uncanny return of the supernatural in the liminal space of the countryside

*Qiyu* narrates a man's encounter with an old neighbor who was waiting for him to repay a small debt he had contracted with his father. The protagonist, an officer of the liberation army, a member of the Communist Party and a materialist, meets him on his way back to his home village from the county-level town of Baoding, where he now resides. Unable to use his money, the old man gives him a pipe mouthpiece and asks him to bring it to his father. Come for a visit to his parents, the protagonist eventually meets them at home, only to discover that the old neighbor had died three days before.

The plot is typical of many ghost stories found in the *Liaozhai*: a man encounters a ghost, thinking it is a human being; despite more or less explicit hints suggesting it might be a spirit, he only discovers its true identity later on; the ghost enters in contact with the human to complete a task that kept it tied to the earthly realm, in Mo Yan's case, to repay a debt. However, many are the differences, the more evident being the new identity of Mo Yan's protagonist and his reaction to the strange encounter, reflecting both the different identities of the authors and their respective life experiences and cultural backgrounds.

The encounter with ghosts of deceased people is a recurring theme in the *Liaozhai* and one of the most popular ever. In many cases, the protagonist of Pu's ghost stories is an aspiring scholar-official travelling far from his usual adobe. Residing temporarily near a semi-abandoned temple, during the night he receives the visit of a beautiful young woman who turns out to be a ghost of a girl dead prematurely.<sup>10</sup> She often asks the man to help her recover her bones and rebury them in a more appropriate place, or is taken as a wife or concubine by the man. Whether they are spirits of unknown women or recently deceased relatives, ghosts in Pu Songling come into contact with humans mainly out of interest or because something still binds them to the earthly world. In the case of spirits of relatives, these are mostly benevolent ghosts who manifest themselves to help relatives who are still living, sometimes in exchange for something.<sup>11</sup> Whether they act in a benevolent or malignant way, Pu's ghosts testify to a close link between the afterlife and the earthly realm. This link is, in most cases, accepted by the protagonists, who welcome the supernatural encounter at most with an initial reaction of surprise.

According to Luo (2009: 80), ghosts in the *Liaozhai* "exist on several levels: they manifest themselves as concrete evidence of popular belief, as projections of the human unconscious, as the author's private metaphors, and as allegorical vehicles for social and cultural commentary." In Mo Yan,

---

<sup>10</sup> It is the case of the famous *Nieh Hsiao C'ien*.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *The Shui-mang Plant* (Pu 1880: 136).

popular beliefs about the close relationship between the world of the living and the dead are recovered in *Qiyu*, manifesting in the ghost's gesture of gratitude towards a living. However, these beliefs are repeatedly questioned in the story, and Mo Yan seems more interested in describing the perceptions and emotions of his modern and materialist protagonist when confronting the sudden and unexpected re-emergence of the supernatural.

In *Qiyu*, the protagonist's neighbor had died three days earlier at dawn, but he still lingers at the village's edge, waiting to meet the narrator to settle a debt incurred during his lifetime with his father. Mo Yan thus recovers and develops a theme already dominant in Pu Songling's works: the appearance of a benevolent ghost that manifests to a human in order to complete an important task. As Santangelo (2019: 18) noted, gratitude and loyalty are among the "virtues extolled in the *Liaozhai*, where they stand for the basic moral structure of love, friendship, and affection." In the tale "Tian Qilang" a hunter scrambles to repay the money he received from a high-ranking gentleman by sending material goods such as hides, hares, and deer until he is forced to repay him with his own life. As Santangelo (2019: 21) observes with respect to this story, "the favor one receives establishes mutual expectations and reciprocal duties." These duties often extend beyond one's lifespan, as Mo's *Qiyu* demonstrates: the ghost of the neighbor, aware of his debt, appears to the living and, unable to repay his debt with money, he does so by giving an object to his son. Mo Yan thus brings together two important themes present in Pu Songling's works (the appearance of the ghost and gratitude/loyalty) and reiterates something already clear in the *Liaozhai*: alongside malevolent ghosts who harm humans, there also exist benevolent ghosts.<sup>12</sup>

Mo Yan, however, does not merely reiterate a critique of certain negative representations of ghosts already evident in Pu. This critique is only subtly hinted at in the conclusion of *Qiyu*, implicit in the benevolent gesture of the ghost, which ultimately proves that ghosts do exist,<sup>13</sup> and they are sometimes more human and loyal than humans themselves. However, this message does not appear central to the story, which focuses more on the protagonist's perceptions, sensations, and emotions in a way never seen in Pu Songling's work.

In *Qiyu*, the protagonist starts experiencing conflicting feelings as soon as he comes back to his home village and penetrates the rural landscape just outside of it. Arrived at the train station, a sense

---

<sup>12</sup> Despite, as Zeitlin (2007: 17) notes, the fox-spirit is more often associated with "healing, laughter, warmth, and wisdom; the ghost with disease, melancholy, coldness, and infatuation," in the *Liaozhai* ghosts are most often not fearful but sentimental and lovable beings, in some cases even better than humans (Santangelo 2009: 38).

<sup>13</sup> In *Qiyu*, we see the protagonist trying to convince himself of the impossibility of encountering a ghost, even if it seems much more a way to take courage as he walks alone through the nocturnal countryside (see section 3).

of attraction of landscape elements such as the moon accompanies him, foreseeing the fantastic encounter and, ultimately, the return of ancient beliefs:

举头看天，见半块月亮高悬，天清气爽，我便决定不在县城住宿，乘着明月早还家，一可早见父母，二可呼吸田野里的新鲜空气。(Mo 2011: 3)

I raised my head and saw the half-moon shining high in the clear sky, so I decided to take advantage of the moonlight to walk home rather than spending the night in the county town. That way I would be able to see my parents sooner, and also breathe the fresh air of the open fields.<sup>14</sup>

The rural landscape located just outside of his hometowns is not only attractive. Soon we realize it is also the perfect threshold for an unsettling return of ancestral fears. While being close to the native village (which is certainly a place of familiarity to the protagonists), it is also a space in which the human presence starts to withdraw and give way to wild nature, particularly at night. In this moment of the day, the semi-anthropized landscape of the countryside, with its semi-abandoned roads extending through dense crop fields, seems once again populated with spirits, and the natural world is again a threat for men:

土路因为近年来有些地方被挖断了。行人稀少，所以路面上杂草丛生，只是在路中心还有一线被人踩过痕迹。路两边全是庄稼地，有高粱地、玉米地、红薯地等[...]路越往前延伸庄稼越茂密，县城的灯光早就看不见了。(Mo 2011: 3)

In recent years, the dirt road had been dug up in several places. Not many people walked that way, so the road surface was covered with weeds and brush, with just a trace of a trail down the middle, trampled down by people. Crops were growing on both sides of the road: sorghum, corn, sweet potatoes... [...] As the crops became denser further down the road, the lights of the county town disappeared.

The countryside is an in-between space, a bordering area that separates the space of humans (the village) from the natural, non-anthropized landscape. Describing the ‘crossing of the threshold’ as a recurring rhetorical device in the fantastic tale, Ceserani (1996: 80) points out that “the main character suddenly finds himself in two different dimensions, with different codes to orient himself and

---

<sup>14</sup> Translations from Chinese are mine.

understand.” As soon as he enters the fields, alone in the darkness, Qiyu’s protagonist seems to enter into a different dimension in which his senses are amplified as a consequence of a lack of clear vision:

我忽然感觉到脖颈后有些凉森森的，听到自己的脚步声特别响亮与沉重起来。我有些后悔不该单身走夜路，与此同时，我感觉到路两边的庄稼地里有无数秘密，有无数只眼睛在监视着我，并且感觉到背后有什么东西尾随着我，月光也突然朦胧起来。(Mo 2011: 4)

Suddenly, I felt a biting coldness behind my neck, and heard my own footsteps becoming louder and heavier. I began to regret coming this way alone at night. I felt that countless secrets were hidden under the crops on each side of the road and that countless eyes were scrutinizing me. I also felt that something was tailing me. All of a sudden, the moonlight grew dim.

Unable to see clearly in the darkness, he returns to an ancient method of orienting himself in the natural landscape, where noises, smells, and tactile sensations become fundamental. However, this old modality has a frightening effect on him, as it offers an incomplete representation of the surrounding world, especially if compared to the more reliable sensation of sight, the most important sense of modern rationalism.

The obsession of modern men for (the lack of) vision is a feature worth noting here as it is also central to Western fantastic tales (Jackson 1981: 30-31). In *Qiyu* it is evident, including in the reference to “countless eyes scrutinizing me,” followed by the renewed awareness that “nature is full of mysteries” (Mo 2011: 4). As soon as the faint light of dawn comes back to illuminate his path, the protagonist looks back in relief, making fun of himself for believing that nature could be full of invisible dangers. However, immersed in the liminal space of the nocturnal countryside, such dangers had seemed more than real to him.

The in-between status of the countryside, frequently described as a space that frightens and disorients, echoes the condition in which the protagonist of *Qiyu* finds himself. Coming from a rural culture that believes in spirits, he moved to the city and adopted the rational and material conception of reality typical of the modern era. His reluctance to believe in the possibility of a supernatural encounter, or its total rejection (有鬼吗? 有邪吗? 没有! 有野兽吗? 没有! *You gui ma? You xie ma? Meiyou! You yeshou ma? Meiyou!* “Are there ghosts or evil creatures here? No! Are there wild beasts here? No!” Mo 2011: 4) come from his complete adherence to modern urban culture and materialism, in which all forms of spiritualism have no place.

As Lugnani (1983: 196) noticed, the ‘incredulity’ that surrounds the protagonist as soon as he crosses the threshold to the fantastic dimension “is the resistance of the established order to the possible disorder induced [...] by the unexpected reappearance of an ancient order that was believed

to be forever overcome.” In Mo Yan such disbelief is the result of the background of the protagonist, a self-declared materialist and member of the Communist Party who had fully experienced the erasure of the supernatural from literature in the Maoist period. Thus, it is no coincidence that this re-emergence of an ancient order occurs precisely when *Qiyu*'s protagonist returns to his native village, a cradle of beliefs in spirits and monsters strongly rooted in his culture of origin.

While in traditional ghost stories the encounter with spirits often took place in a desolate space far from home to where the aspiring scholar-official traveled in order to take part in the imperial examination, or in their own house,<sup>15</sup> in *Qiyu*, the ghost appears to the protagonist as he is about to enter his native village (正欲进村). The desolation of the surrounding landscape and the absence of human traces typically foreseeing the appearance of a spirit in Pu's tales<sup>16</sup> are still present, but the fact that here the ghost returns in a place that was once familiar to the protagonist leads to the idea of a fantastic closely linked to the Freudian concept of *unheimliche* (“uncanny”).<sup>17</sup>

Described by Freud (1919: 13) as a form of anxiety coming from “something repressed which recurs,” the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (emphasis in original).<sup>18</sup> According to Amigoni (2004: 29), this ambivalence of the word *unheimliche* “accompanies the fantastic hero without abandoning him for a moment, and from him, it is propagated to the rather but immune reader.”<sup>19</sup> That sense of bewilderment that captures Mo Yan's protagonist when he returns to the countryside is a sign of the contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion, or familiarity and unfamiliarity, that he has towards the countryside itself and the cultural heritage it represents. The rural landscape is part of the protagonist's past, like all of the beliefs and superstitions typical of a popular culture that revolves around the countryside. The semi-abandoned road cutting across the fields taken by the protagonist of *Qiyu* to return home is both familiar and unfamiliar: it is the shortest way to one's birthplace, the familiar place par excellence, but it is also a path that leads back to a system of beliefs that questions the modern world to the point that the protagonist is momentarily pushed to

---

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, “Miss Lien-Hsiang” (Pu 1880: 168-185).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, “The Magic Sword” (Pu 1880: 124-135).

<sup>17</sup> Note that the Freudian concept of ‘uncanny’ is different from Todorov's ‘uncanny’ as opposed to ‘marvelous.’

<sup>18</sup> Wang (1993: 110) says something similar about writers of native soil fiction such as Mo Yan, who describe “the homeland as a both familiar and foreign place, [...] taking objects seen and experienced as ‘ordinary’ in their own land and ‘making them strange.’”

<sup>19</sup> According to Todorov (1975), thanks to the use of a first-person narrator the reader can experience the feelings and emotions of the protagonist.

take into consideration the disturbing possibility of the existence of a vast unknown space extending beyond the boundaries of what is known and visible. It is *that* path that makes the encounter with strange phenomena still possible, shaking the modern man in spite of his alleged materialistic and rationalistic certainties, “like an atavistic and dissonant voice not yet included in the world system” (Fišer 2012: 42) or, in the case of Mo Yan, not anymore.

#### 4. Literal realization of metaphors in *Yeyu*: autosuggestion or perfect fantastic tale?

*Yeyu* opens with an everyday scene that may well be part of the author’s childhood memories in Northeastern Gaomi Township. One mid-autumn evening, the protagonist finally gets permission to accompany Ninth uncle to catch crabs at the river. After leaving the village and crossing the sorghum fields, they arrive at the dam, set the traps, and wait. But the animals take a long time to arrive. It is here, in the vacuum of a wait filled with expectations, that the child starts noticing a series of oddities in his uncle’s behavior and appearance. The surrounding landscape also seems to change in an unexpected and frightening way. Soon after, attracted by the delicate scent of a lotus flower, the child becomes quiet and, as if hypnotized by its beauty, enters the water to reach it. Suddenly a hand grabs him by the scruff of his neck and pulls him out. Convinced to see his uncle, he is surprised to find a woman whose ethereal beauty reminds him of the celestial beings of legends, and whose ability to catch the crabs leaves him astonished. Insisting she is a human being, she eventually leaves the child with what sounds as a promise: in twenty-five years they will meet again on an island on the south-west; then, he will understand. Waken up by the worried voices of his relatives, the child discovers that shortly after leaving the village, Ninth uncle had lost sight of him and is now surprised to find him with two sacks full of crabs. The tale closes in a Singapore marketplace where the protagonist, now an adult, feels faint at the charms of a woman whose elusive smile reminds him of the beautiful lady met exactly twenty-five years earlier at the river.

Upon reaching the river, the first event that the child perceives as anomalous (怪事 *guaishi*) occurs when he and his uncle set the traps and awaits the arrival of the crabs: 怪事怪事真怪事，今夜里应该是过蟹子的大潮啊，又说西风响蟹脚痒，蟹子不来出了鬼了 (*Guaishi guaishi zhen guaishi, jinye li yinggai shi guo xiezi de dachao a, you shuo xifeng xiang xie jiao yang, xiezi bu lai chu le gui le* “Strange, really strange! There should be plenty of crabs tonight. They even say: ‘When the northwest wind hisses, the crab’s leg itches.’ There must be something strange if the crabs are not coming;” Mo 2011: 9), says Ninth uncle. It is precisely the “literalization” of this popular saying that generates the fantastic: from this moment, a series of strange events start to occur. According to Zeitlin (1993: 145),



what Todorov (1975) has defined as the literal realization of metaphoric language is one of Pu Songling's most common mechanisms for generating fantasy. As Ceserani (1996: 78) points out, it is not a rhetorical device exclusive of the fantastic mode, however, the fantastic tale uses it “in a systematic and original way.”<sup>20</sup>

Used in narrative terms, become a narrative procedure, metaphor can enable those sudden and unsettling threshold and frontier crossings that are a fundamental feature of fantastic fiction.

As observed in *Qiyu*, the threshold to the fantastic dimension is again, in *Yeyu*, the countryside surrounding the home village. As he walks through the sorghum fields, *Yeyu*'s protagonist enters into a different dimension in which his distorted perceptions of time and space (感到走了很长很长时间, 才从高粱地里钻出来 *Gandao zou le hen chang hen chang shijian, cai cong gaoliang di li zuan chulai* “I had the feeling that we took a long long time to get out of the sorghum fields;” Mo 2011: 7) are a first clue of the fantastic events that follow. Lugnani (1983: 195-196) defines such clues as “threshold signals,” i.e. hints that signal the threshold between a familiar dimension and an alien one, “between what is codified and what is not (or not yet, or not anymore),” adding that “they intervene where a certain cultural code imposes them as its safeguard [...] and as a guarantee of its endurance.” We have already seen in *Qiyu* that the new cultural code accepted by the protagonist—or rather, that the protagonist was forced to accept as part of his new identity—completely rejects the possibility of the supernatural. Thus, as Lugnani (1983) suggests, the news the protagonists bring back from their travel into the fantastic dimension generate incredulity precisely because they imply the existence of something previously negated, as in the case of Mo Yan. If in *Qiyu* this incredulity is expressed by the hesitation of the protagonist's father to accept the pipe mouthpiece in the final scene (我把烟袋嘴递给父亲, 父亲竟犹豫着不敢接 *Wo ba yandaizui digei fuqin, fuqin jing youyu zhe bugan jie* “I handed the mouthpiece of the pipe to my father, but he hesitated, as if he did not dare to accept it;” Mo 2011: 6) in *Yeyu* it is implicit in the silence of the child, unable to tell Ninth uncle how he was able to catch the crabs.

Interestingly, the child's fear in *Yeyu* are directly related to the changes he observes in the behavior of his uncle, who takes a leaf and begins to whistle on it, emitting strange sounds (怪声 *guai sheng*). Frightened to the point of shivering (我感到我身上很冷 *Wo gandao wo shenshang hen leng*), the

---

<sup>20</sup> Two examples quoted by Ceserani (1966: 78) are E.T.A. Hoffmann's famous tale “The Sandman” (*Der Sandmann*, 1816) and Luigi Pirandello's (1867-1936) novella *Soffio* (“A Breath,” 1931), the latter built on the literal realization of a common Italian saying.

child asks him to stop because: 俺娘说黑夜吹哨招鬼 *An niang shuo heiye chuishao zhao gui* “Mother says whistling at night attracts spirits (Mo 2011: 9).” Another literal realization of a metaphor brings to fantastic phenomena: as Ninth uncle continues whistling his “exceedingly strange” gaze (好生怪异 *haosheng guaiyi*; Mo 2011: 9) makes him appear “absolutely unfamiliar” (十分陌生 *shifen mosheng*; Mo 2011: 9) to the child.

What has been observed in *Qiyu* with respect to the countryside applies here to the uncle: what was familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar for the child, who begins to sense strangeness in the landscape around him as well:

天上不知道何时出现了一朵黄色的、孤零零的云，月亮恰好钻了进去。我感到这现象古怪极了，这么大的天，越来那个有的是宽广的道路好走，为什么偏要钻到那云团中去呢？(Mo 2011: 10)

I don't know when, a lonely yellow cloud appeared up in the sky, pierced by some strange combination, by the moon. It seemed really strange to me: with such a big sky and all that space to go, why on earth did the moon have to come up right behind that pile of clouds?

If analyzed from a psychological point of view, the child's reaction of surprise is not uncommon: Ninth uncle is the only familiar element in an unfamiliar space he has been fantasizing about for a long time. To make the nocturnal countryside appear even more dangerous in the child's eyes were not only the prohibition by the adults to go there and the mother's worried comments right before departure, but also the memories of all the supernatural stories the child had heard. Mo Yan skillfully plays with this body of popular beliefs and literary representations, something the child in *Yeyu* is well aware of. Immersed in strange stories in a way similar to what Mo Yan has described for his own childhood, he immediately fears that Ninth uncle may have transformed into some kind of supernatural being. As soon as he touches him, the cold from his back penetrates his bones (冷得刺骨 *leng de cigu*), recalling a common feature of the spirits described in Pu Songling's stories.

Another way Mo Yan incorporates references to popular beliefs and representations of spirits is by inserting a female character whose extraordinary beauty reminds the supernatural beings of legends. Although, when touching her backside to make sure she is not a fox, the child finds it as smooth as Princess Lotus Flower's body in Pu Songling's omonymous tale, the woman in *Yeyu* repeatedly claims she is human. In Pu Songling's tale “The Fox Dream,” on the contrary, the beautiful woman soon reveals the man she is a fox. This not only confirms the supernatural encounter has happened, but also

that it has happened with no surprise from part of the protagonist, an aspect that places Pu Songling's tale nearer to Todorov's definition of the 'marvelous.'

Mo Yan's choice to let the woman claim she is a human being, on the contrary, seems to echo the negation of the supernatural which is at the basis of the fantastic tale and already present in *Qiyu*. Interestingly, in *Yeyu* it is the supernatural (i.e. the apparently supernatural woman) to deny its own supernatural status. We may be tempted to conclude, as Lei (2008: 104) and Zhu (2002: 6-8) do, that the supernatural apparitions in *Yeyu* are part of the child's hallucination, clearly imbued with strange stories heard from the adults. However, the presence of an 'object mediator of reality' (Lugnani 1983: 177-288), i.e. the fishing net full of crabs that the woman had helped him to capture, proves that the fantastic encounter with the woman has indeed happened. Described by Ceserani (1996: 81) as that object whose "concrete insertion in the text proves that the protagonist has actually crossed the threshold for the fantastic dimension," this rhetorical device ensures the prolongation of the doubt until the end, thus making *Yeyu* a perfect fantastic tale for its ability to maintain the hesitation until the end (Todorov 1975).

In support of the possibility of describing *Yeyu* as a perfect fantastic tale, it is useful to reflect on the use of the child narrator in Mo Yan. Pesaro (2016) finds Foster's description of the juxtaposition of the adult's perspective and the child's one appropriate to Mo Yan:

La voix enfantine est utilisée pour mettre en avant la tension entre adulte et enfant, créant une crise d'identité que souvent l'adulte ne réussit pas à résoudre. De tels récits renvoient au passage de la recherche de l'identité nationale, si prévalente au début du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, à des réflexions, dans la fiction, sur l'identité individuelle, à la fin du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle. (Foster 2013, as cited in Pesaro 2016 : 148)

The inability to answer, peculiar to the child as much as to the adult (朋友问我怎么回事，我心不在焉地摇摇头，没有回答 *Pengyou wen wo zenmehuishhi, wo xinbuzaiyan de yao yao tou, meiyou huida* "When my friends asked me what had happened, I absentmindedly shook my head and did not answer;" Mo 2011: 15), would then be a direct expression of this never-solved identity crisis, a crisis that here affects a modern man as he returns to his childhood's memories in the home village.

Although the Chinese tradition has always considered the "supernatural" as part of the real, the marginal position traditionally reserved to any discourse about the strange, and the total rejection of the supernatural in the modern and Maoist eras, contributed to create such a juxtaposition of irreconcilable orders of reality. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the apparitions witnessed by the child at the river occur in the mid-1960s, right at the dawn of a Cultural Revolution that aimed to unhinge a system of thought considered backward and harmful. As it is probably no coincidence that

the mysterious woman reappears on an island located on the edge of the motherland, a setting certainly not frequent in Mo Yan's works.

Masi (2000: 20) also speaks of uncertainty about one's identity in some of Mo Yan's stories, expressed precisely by a first-person narrator:

Far from the ubiquitous and anonymous figure who observes and records men and facts in the realist novel, the narrating self is a subject who is somewhat uncertain about his own identity and the attitude to take, between rational knowledge and identification with the magical world, between participation in the intellectual-urban culture and elite dimension [...] and belonging to the submerged sphere. Where animals [...] carry a message comprehensible to those who share their corporeality and are not unaware of the mystery, but indecipherable (intolerable) to the urban intellectual's bodiless mind.

By "submerged sphere" Masi (2000: 15) means that "subsoil" consisting of both the deep self and the immense and submerged sphere of the subaltern, that is, that "deep and submerged popular reality" that resurfaces in Root-seeking writers such as Mo Yan. Interestingly, what she calls "uncertainty" about the attitude to take comes close to Todorov's 'hesitation' or Lugnani's 'incredulity,' and when she speaks of "indecipherable (*intolerable*)" message that certain magical encounters carry, she seems to come close to Lugnani's (1983: 225) description of the 'object mediator of reality' as that object whose presence disturbs because it proves a passage between different levels of reality that is not considered as possible by the code, therefore is *not tolerated* and left *submerged*.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Concluding remarks

As this preliminary analysis has tried to show, from a thematic point of view, Mo Yan's short stories *Qiyu* and *Yeyu* both borrow themes widely explored in Pu Songling's collection, such as the return of a ghost who enters in contact with the human to accomplish a task (*Qiyu*), or the encounter with a woman whose extraordinary beauty recalls that of supernatural beings of legends (*Yeyu*). However, they also present significant differences deeply related to the respective identities of their protagonists (and authors), and the diverse cultural contexts that surround them. These differences are especially evident in Mo Yan's characters' reaction of bewilderment and incredulity to the strange encounter, a central feature in the fantastic tale, according to Western critics.

---

<sup>21</sup> Italics are mine.

“Learning from Pu Songling” certainly means coming back to a storytelling tradition that has starved to make minor discourses on the supernatural accepted by the Confucian elite. But for a contemporary author of rural origins such as Mo Yan, this come-back bears further significance. It inevitably means coming back to something that his formation as a young adult living during the period of the Cultural Revolution has firmly negated, but which is deeply rooted in his childhood experience as a cattle herder living in contact with nature and listening to adults’ most extraordinary stories. For this reason, this return cannot but have an unsettling effect on his protagonists, clearly bearing autobiographical traits. As we have tried to show, this effect is activated as soon as the protagonists come back, physically or through memory, to the rural landscape on the edge of the home village, an in-between-space that mirrors the condition of the author and the protagonists.

According to Zeitlin (1993), Pu wrote in an era in which the expectations of readers were not based on an idea of shared reality (as in the Western fantastic described by Todorov), but on their familiarity with other literary texts. In Mo Yan, we can find both. On one hand, readers are familiar with the genre of the *zhiguai* tale. On the other hand, they are led to doubt about the supernatural based on their modern and rationalistic idea of reality. If Pu’s supernatural beings testify to beliefs in a close link between the afterlife and the earthly realm that is recovered by Mo Yan, in the first such beliefs are mostly accepted by the protagonists, while in the latter they are repeatedly questioned. Mo Yan seems more interested in describing the perceptions and emotions of his modern and materialist protagonists when confronting the sudden and unexpected re-emergence of the supernatural, in a way similar to what masters of the Western fantastic like Hoffmann and Pirandello had done.

In Mo Yan, the in-between status of the countryside is a central rhetorical device that, echoing the contradictory condition in which the protagonists find themselves, activates and amplifies their sense of loss as they cross the threshold to the fantastic dimension. Moreover, as observed in *Qiyu*, the fact that the ghost returns in a place once familiar to the protagonist leads to the idea of a fantastic closely linked to the Freudian concept of *uncanny*. In *Yeyu*, the literal realization of metaphors, already present in Pu Songling, becomes a narrative procedure that enables an unsettling threshold crossing. Although the supernatural apparitions in *Yeyu* may be dismissed as mere suggestion of an imaginative mind imbued by the strange stories, the child’s travel to the fantastic dimension is proved by the presence of an ‘object mediator of reality’, thus making *Yeyu* a perfect fantastic tale for its ability to maintain the hesitation until the end.

## References

- Amigoni, Ferdinando. 2004. *Fantasma nel Novecento* [Ghosts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century]. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Barr, Allan. 1989. "Disarming Intruders: Alien Women in Liaozhai zhiyi." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49/2: 501-517.
- Bo, Yang. 1985. *Secrets. A Collection of Short Stories by Bo Yang*. Translated by David Deterding. Boston and Hong Kong: Cheng & Tsui Company.
- Bo, Yang 柏杨. 2013. *Nu hang mimi 怒航秘密* [Rage Boat, Secrets]. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe.
- Campany, Robert Ford. 1991. "Ghosts Matter: The Culture of Ghosts in Six Dynasties *Zhiguai*." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 13: 15-34.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/495051>
- Campany, Robert Ford. 1996. *Strange Writing. Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*. Albany, New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ceserani, Remo. 1996. *Il fantastico* ("The Fantastic"). Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Chen, Jian-hua 陈建华. 2007. "Zhang Ailing 'Chuanqi' yu qihuan xiaoshuo de xiandaixing" 张爱玲《传奇》与奇幻小说的现代性 [Zhang Ailing's *chuanqi* and the Modernity of Fantastic Literature]. *Hubei Daxue xuebao* 34/3: 30-36. CNKI.
- Del Corona, Marco. 2015. *Un tè con Mo Yan e altri scrittori cinesi* [A Tea with Mo Yan and other Chinese Writers]. Milano: O barra O edizioni.
- Fišer, Srečko. 2012. "Definire il fantastico, punto interrogativo" [Defining the Fantastic?]. In: *Cose dell'altro mondo. Metamorfosi del fantastico nella letteratura italiana del XX secolo* [Otherworldly Things. Metamorphoses of the Fantastic in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Literature], edited by Patrizia Farinelli, 35-46. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1919. "Das Unheimliche" [The Uncanny]. *Imago. Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften* [Imago. Journal for the application of psychoanalysis to the humanities] 5:5/6: 297-324.  
<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>
- Huntington, Rania. 2001. "The Supernatural." In: *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Victor Mair, 110-131. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Jackson, Rosemary. 1981. *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion*. London and New York, NY: Methuen.
- Kao, Karl. 1985. *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic. Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Lazzarin, Stefano, ed. 2016. *Il fantastico italiano. Bilancio critico e bibliografia commentata (dal 1980 a oggi)* [The Italian Fantastic. Critical Appraisal and Annotated Bibliography (From 1989 to Nowadays)]. Milano: Le Monnier Università/Mondadori Education.

- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. 1999. "The Erotic, the Fantastic, and the Uncanny: Shi Zhecun's Experimental Stories." In: *Shanghai Modern. The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, edited by Leo Ou-fan Lee, 153-189. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Lei, Hongying 雷红英. 2008. "Xiaoshuo 'Yeyu' de ganjue miaoxie yishu" 小说《夜渔》的感觉描写艺术 [The Art of Depicting Feelings in the Tale 'Yeyu']. *Wenxue jiaoyu* 7: 104. CNKI.
- Liu, Hongtao and Lee Haiyan. 2009. "Mo Yan's Fiction and the Chinese Nativist Literary Tradition." *World Literature Today* 83/4: 30-31.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20621649>
- Lugnani, Lucio. 1983. "Verità e disordine: il dispositivo dell'oggetto mediatore di realtà" [Truth and Disorder: The Device of the Object Mediator of Reality]. In: *La narrazione fantastica* [Narrating the Fantastic], edited by Remo Ceserani *et al.*, 177-288. Pisa: Nitri-Lischi.
- Luo, Hui. 2009. *The Ghost of Liaozhai: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and its History of Reception*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto.
- Macdonald, Sean. 2019. "Notes on the Fantastic in Chinese Literature and Film." *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 13/1: 1-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.3868/s010-007-019-0001-2>
- Masi, Edoarda. 2000. "Dalla ricerca delle radici al realismo magico: Mo Yan" [Mo Yan: From Root-Seeking to Magical Realism]. In: *La letteratura cinese contemporanea: invito alla lettura. Atti del Convegno 22-23 ottobre 1999*, 15-23. Roma: Associazione Italia-Cina.
- Mo, Yan 莫言. 2011. *Xuexi Pu Songling* 学习蒲松龄 [Learning from Pu Songling]. Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe.
- Mo, Yan 莫言. 2012. *Storytellers. Nobel Lecture 7 December 2012*. Translated by Howard Goldblatt. The Nobel Foundation (1-10). *Jiang gushi de ren. Nuobei'er yanjiang 2012 nian 12 yue 7 ri* 讲故事的人. 诺贝尔演讲 2012 年 12 月 7 日 ["Storytellers. Nobel lecture 7 December 2012"].  
[https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/yan-lecture\\_ki.pdf](https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/yan-lecture_ki.pdf), accessed 07/02/2025.
- Pesaro, Nicoletta. 2016. "Mo Yan et Italo Calvino : la voix du conteur et les modèles narratifs." In: *Mo Yan, au croisement du local et de l'universel : actes du colloque international Paris-Aix-en-Provence, octobre 2013-septembre 2014*, edited by Yinde Zhang, Shuang Xu and Noël Dutrait, 133-150. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Pu, Songling. 1880. *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio: Translated and Annotated by Herbert A. Giles*. London: Thos. De la Rue & Co.
- Rosenmeier, Christopher. 2017. *On the Margins of Modernism. Xu Xu, Wumingshi and Popular Chinese Literature in the 1940's*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Santangelo, Paolo. 2019. *Revisiting Liaozhai zhiyi. Ming Qing Studies Monograph No. 1*. Roma: WriteUp Site.
- Shi, Zhecun 施蛰存. 1992. *Xinli xiaoshuo* 心理小说 [Psychological Novel]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe.

- Shih, Shu-Mei. 2001. *The Lure of The Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Song, Binghui. 2018. “Mo Yan’s reception in China and a reflection on the postcolonial discourse.” *Comparative Literature and Culture* 20/7: 2–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3334>
- Su, Tong 苏童. 2004 a. *Shennu feng* 神女峰 [The Goddesses’ peak]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe.
- Su, Tong 苏童. 2004 b. *Qibing* 骑兵 [Cavalrymen]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe.
- Su, Tong 苏童. 2004 c. *Xiangrikui* 向日葵 [Sunflowers]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe.
- Tan, Fang 谈方. 2014. “Qihuan wenxue yanjiu de yi bu lilun jingdian – Ping Ciweitan Tuoduoluofu de ‘Qihuan wenxue daolun’” 奇幻文学研究的一部理论经典——评茨维坦·托多罗夫的《奇幻文学导论》 [A Theoretical Classic in the Study of Fantastic Literature—A Review of Tsvetan Todorov’s “Introduction to Fantastic Literature”]. *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* 34/6: 201-207.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1975. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca, New York, NY: Cornell University Press [original: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Editions du Seuil: 1970].
- Todorov, Tzvetan 茨维坦·托多罗夫. 2015. *Qihuan wenxue daolun* 奇幻文学导论 [Introduction to Fantastic Literature]. Translated by Fang Fang 方芳. Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe [original: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Editions du Seuil: 1970].
- Wang, David Der-Wei. 1993. “Imaginary and Nostalgia: Shen Congwen, Song Zelai, Mo Yan, and Li Yongping.” In: *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, edited by Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang, 107-132. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Wang, David Der-Wei. 2004. “Second Haunting.” In: *The Monster that is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*, edited by David Der-Wei Wang, 262-291. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Wang, Tao 王涛. 2013. “Ninong: Shi Zhecun ‘xiandai’ zhiguai xiaoshuo de yiyi” 《妮侬》：施蛰存“现代”志怪小说的意义 [Shi Zhecun’s Modern Grotesque Novel Debt to *Ninong*]. *Xin wenxue shijie* 5: 35-39. CNKI.
- Yu, Anthony C. 1987. “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’ Ghosts in Traditional Chinese Prose Fiction.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47/2: 397-434. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2719188>
- Zeitlin, Judith. 1993. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Zeitlin, Judith. 2007. *The Phantom Heroine. Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Zhang, Yinde. 2014. *Mo Yan, le lieu de la fiction*. Paris : Éditions du Seuil.



- Zhao, Henry. 2001. “Storiografia e *fiction* nella gerarchia culturale cinese” [Historiography & Fiction in Chinese Cultural Hierarchy]. In: *Il Romanzo. La Cultura del Romanzo* [The Novel. The Culture of the Novel], edited by Franco Moretti, 47-69. Torino: Einaudi.
- Zhu, Xuchen 朱旭晨. 2002. “Mo Yan ‘Yeyu’ zhong de huanjue huanhua yishu” 莫言《夜渔》中的幻觉幻化艺术 [Hallucination and Magical Arts in Mo Yan’s “Night Fishing”]. *Xiaoshuo chuanguo* 2/17: 6-8. CNKI.

---

Eugenia Tizzano received her Ph.D. from the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures of Roma Tre University. Her research project focused on the supernatural and fantastic elements in Mo Yan’s short stories. She is the Italian translator of the novel “Death Fugue,” by the contemporary Chinese writer Sheng Keyi. She is currently teaching as an adjunct professor of Chinese Language and Literature at ‘Gabriele d’Annunzio’ University of Chieti-Pescara and is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Naples “L’Orientale.” Her research interests include modern and contemporary Sinophone fantastic literature, literary translation and Chinese postmodernism. Eugenia can be contacted at: [eugenia.tizzano@uniroma3.it](mailto:eugenia.tizzano@uniroma3.it)



# Literature in Imperial China



## Between refinement and vulgarity Apparent contradictions in Ouyang Xiu's song lyrics

Massimiliano Canale

Revered as one of the greatest Confucian scholars of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) also went down in history for his reputation as a libertine and his involvement in a series of sexual scandals. A persistent contradiction between the public orthodoxy of the great statesman and the heterodoxy of his private experiences has marked Ouyang's life and was reflected in his work. This paper aims to investigate the traces of such tensions in the song lyrics (*ci* 詞) attributed to the author. In fact, his songbook includes compositions that fully embody the ideal of “refinement” (*ya* 雅) generally appreciated by the elite alongside others that show a clear affinity with a diction and style typical of the vulgar (*su* 俗) tradition. If criticism has often been divided in the evaluation of these heterogeneous components, sometimes viewing them as expressions of separate *corpora*, I intend to explore the possibility of an organic reading of the two. Therefore, I seek to present the disparate lyrics attributed to Ouyang as potentially ascribable to a single, multifaceted literary sensibility.

**Keywords:** Chinese literature; Chinese poetry; *Ci* song lyric; song lyric; *Ci*; erotic songs; Ouyang Xiu; Song dynasty; Northern Song dynasty.

### 1. Introduction

Statesman, classicist, historian, political theorist and, above all, writer and poet, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) was one of the most versatile and relevant figures in Song dynasty (960–1279) elite culture and, indeed, the entire Chinese tradition. He was at the center of important processes of political and literary transformation that took place during the Northern Song (960–1127), making a decisive contribution to the renovation of several genres. In prose, as in classical poetry (*shi* 詩), his action was generally aimed at limiting the importance of formal aspects to give a new centrality to contents, in adherence with the Confucian revival that he and other fellow intellectuals promoted during the eleventh century. In this sense, he diverged from the trends prevailing in the early Northern Song, inherited from the Middle and Late Tang traditions, and helped shape a new literary identity that was

typical of the Song dynasty. It is therefore not an exaggeration to define Ouyang as one of the founders of Song high literature.

In light of this, it might appear surprising that, alongside his orthodox image of venerable Confucian, an alternative narrative of Ouyang Xiu exists as a dissolute libertine, fond of wine, song lyrics (*ci* 詞) and courtesans, and repeatedly tried for incest. Likewise, one might not anticipate encountering erotic songs that hinted at secret trysts with teenagers in his songbook—but this is exactly what we find in a part of his collection that many critics have long considered a forgery, in apparent attempts to preserve Ouyang's good name from embarrassing associations.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the existence of a contradiction between a dignified public image and the heterodoxy of some private experiences was not uncommon among Northern Song scholar-officials, who were even provided with government courtesans. Still, in Ouyang's case this chasm was seen as particularly deep. And that is especially because Ouyang Xiu was no Liu Yong 柳永 (ca. 987–1053): he wasn't a minor official who had strived all his life to have a successful career without significant results and could, thus, be excused if, as an average contemporary elite observer would probably see it, he cultivated a minor art such as the song lyric and wasted his time with courtesans. Ouyang was a “prince” of the literati class, and many refused to believe that such a pivotal figure could act the same way as a renegade like Liu Yong.

The aim of this work is precisely to mitigate the contradiction between Ouyang's solemn public image and his “immoral” private behaviors, as it appears to be, to a certain extent, the result of an unnecessary “sanctification” of the scholar proposed by some observers. I will do so by analyzing a variety of sources which provide evidence on Ouyang's libertine attitude or his widespread reputation as a *viveur*. I will then try to suggest a new way of reading the erotic song lyrics attributed to the author, which have often been portrayed as an alien corpus within his production. My goal is to stress the potential connections between this corpus and Ouyang's well-known image as a playboy as well as similar instances of erotic writing in the eleventh century. Ultimately, I wish to reconcile the two

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a group of seventy-three songs included in only one of the two extant versions of Ouyang's songbook, the late twelfth-century “Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard's Zither Delights” (*Zuiweng qinqu waipian* 醉翁琴趣外篇). I will return to this issue later. The authenticity of these and several other erotic lyrics attributed to Ouyang when he was still alive has been questioned by many since the eleventh century. Supporters of the “forgery theory” include Ouyang's friends or disciples, such as the Buddhist monk Wenying 文瑩 (fl. 1060), editors of song collections, namely Zeng Zao 曾慥 (?–1155 or 1164), Luo Bi 羅泌 (1131–1189), and Mao Jin 毛晉 (1599–1659), song lyric critics like Wang Zhuo 王灼 (1105–1181), and so on. On this traditional critical stance, that has been largely accepted until the nineteenth century, see Egan (1971: 163–165) and Canale (2023a: 168–174).

conflicting representations of the scholar described above and support the idea that he combined high and low styles in his songs,<sup>2</sup> which would contribute to redefining his overall literary identity.

## 2. Ouyang Xiu's reputation as a libertine

Since the early years of his career in Luoyang, Ouyang gained a reputation as a libertine. The close relationships he entertained with courtesans are attested to in several poems and anecdotes that have circulated since the eleventh century (Liu 1967, 29). The poet Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–1060), who became friends with Ouyang Xiu in Luoyang, wrote about the latter's household courtesans in a poem of which I quote some lines here:

The eight or nine maidens of your house,	公家八九妹
hair as black as ravens.	鬢發如盤鴉
Scarlet lips, white jade skin;	朱唇白玉膚
only with the new year will they lose their virginity.	參年始破瓜
(...)	(...)
You girls, you don't have to play!	群妹莫要劇
For Ouyang do sing out loud! <sup>3</sup>	為公歌啞啞

Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), a disciple of Ouyang's, also reported on his senior colleague's ties with courtesans. In 1071, nineteen years after Ouyang's death, on a visit to the West Lake in Yingzhou, a place that Ouyang had been fond of, Su was amazed at how local singers still performed a song to the tune "Mulan hua ling" 木蘭花令 that the "Old Drunkard" (Ouyang's sobriquet) had composed decades earlier. He noted these circumstances in the following lines written to the same tune:

The beautiful girls still sing the songs of the Old Drunkard.	佳人猶唱醉翁詞
Forty-three years went by like lightning.	四十三年如電抹
(...)	(...)
Besides me, the only one who knows the Old Drunkard	與余同是識翁人

<sup>2</sup> This hypothesis has long been dismissed by traditional critics, who have generally described songs in a low style as "forgeries" meant to slander Ouyang.

<sup>3</sup> Mei Yaochen, "In Response to a Poem by Yongshu, on the Same Rhyme" (*Ciyun hechou Yongshu 次韻和酬永叔*). Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see *Wenyuange Siku quanshu 文淵閣四庫全書* (2003, vol. 1099: 146).

is the moon on the waves of the West Lake.<sup>4</sup>

惟有西湖波底月

Su Shi refers to the fact that Ouyang had held a post in Yingzhou forty-three years before him, having arrived in that city in 1048.

Chen Shidao 陳師道 (1053–1101), a member of Su Shi's literary circle, left us another account of the close relationships between Ouyang Xiu and courtesans:

Mr. Jia Wenyuan was the prefect of Zhending, and Ouyang Yongshu [Ouyang Xiu] was returning from a mission in the north. Mr. Jia announced to the government courtesans that he wanted to organize a banquet with song lyrics and wine; the courtesans were thrilled. (...)

During the feast, courtesans offered the goblets and sang, wishing long life. [Ouyang] Yongshu listened carefully, holding the cup in his hand and filling it to the brim every time. Mr. Jia found it strange; upon inquiring, he found out that all the songs that had been performed were Ouyang's lyrics.<sup>5</sup>

文元賈公居守北都，歐陽永叔使北還，公預戒官妓辦詞以勸酒，妓唯唯。(…)既燕，妓奉觴歌以為壽，永叔把琖側聽，每為引滿。公復怪之，召問，所歌皆其詞也。

Similar stories on the ties between Ouyang and courtesans circulated widely during the Northern Song. Apart from Ouyang's friends and contemporary scholars, those who most contributed to his reputation as a libertine were the authors of anecdotes, a genre that showed a significant vitality during the Song dynasty. Some of these anecdotes were intended to provide context for the composition of a song lyric, which discredits somewhat their reliability. Still, their very existence reveals how deeply rooted the author's reputation as a romantic was as early as the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For instance, "Mr. Qian's Private Notes" (*Qian shi si zhi* 錢氏私誌), a Northern Song collection of anecdotes of uncertain attribution,<sup>6</sup> reported a story on the origin of an apparently conventional song that points to a tryst between Ouyang and a courtesan that allegedly took place while guests were waiting for the two latecomers before they could start a party. The anecdote would be later retold by other sources.

During the Southern Song (1127–1279), another episode on Ouyang's fondness of courtesans was related by Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202):

---

<sup>4</sup> Su Shi, "To the tune 'Mulan hua ling'" 木蘭花令. Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Tang (1965, vol. 1: 283).

<sup>5</sup> Chen Shidao, "Houshan Collection of Conversations" (*Houshan tan cong* 後山談叢). See Yan (1993: 194).

<sup>6</sup> The collection is attributed by some sources to Qian Mian 錢愐 (fl. Northern Song) and by others to his nephew Qian Shizhao 錢世昭 (fl. Northern Song). See the chapter dedicated to "Mr. Qian's Private Notes" in Chen (2019).



When Ouyang Yongshu [Ouyang Xiu], Xie Xishen, Tian Yuanjun, and Yi Shilu [Yi Zhu] were in Henan, they took government courtesans on a trip to Longmen and didn't return for a fortnight. The official who remained, Qian Si [Qian Weiyuan], wrote a letter to call them back, but they did not reply (Hong 1994: 57).

歐陽永叔、謝希深、田元均、尹師魯在河南，攜官妓游遊門，半月不返，留守錢思公作簡招之，亦不答。

Such stories suggest that, among certain circles, an image of Ouyang had formed as a libertine who came to neglect his official duties in order to enjoy the company of courtesans. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that Ouyang's fame as a playboy was used as a weapon against him during the multiple sexual scandals in which he was implicated. Now, not only were particularly close ties with courtesans perceived as problematic; being associated with song lyrics was itself a bad thing for an eleventh-century scholar-official. Before Su Shi greatly enhanced the process of legitimization and elite appropriation of *ci* during the last quarter of the eleventh century, the form was still commonly seen as a disreputable, minor art, often compared to the "lascivious" songs of Zheng (*Zheng sheng* 鄭聲) for its focus on romance and the world of female entertainers.<sup>7</sup> That is why lyricists of Ouyang's generation never included song lyrics in their literary collections, and were generally wary of associating their names publicly with the form. It is understandable, then, that erotic songs were circulated under Ouyang's name during trials to support the charges of sexually improper behaviors brought against him.

Ouyang was first accused and tried of incest with a young niece in 1045, at a time when the reformist faction led by Fan Zhongyan 範仲淹 (989–1052) that he supported was being ousted from power by political opponents; this is known as the niece Zhang scandal. As the context suggests, political motivations could be hidden behind the rumors and the trials that followed. Though acquitted, Ouyang left the court along with other fellow reformists who had lost imperial favor, and held minor positions far away from the capital until 1054. In 1057, when he was responsible for administering the imperial examinations, Ouyang favored participants who wrote in the ancient style of prose (*guwen* 古文) and was apparently slandered by unsuccessful candidates who leveraged on the 1045 scandal and his fame as a libertine and circulated erotic songs under his name, if later accounts on the matter are to be believed. This time, though, Ouyang didn't have to go into exile. In 1067, upon Emperor Yingzong's

---

<sup>7</sup> On the disrepute of *ci* during the Song dynasty and the different strategies adopted to tackle it, see Egan (1994), Lam (2002), and Canale (2023b).

(r. 1063–1067) death, Ouyang's power was jeopardized anew, and he was accused at court of incest with a daughter-in-law. Once again, rumors of his sexual behavior—whether true or false—were used to attack him politically. Despite the fact that the new emperor, Shenzong (r. 1067–1085), finally cleared him of the charges, Ouyang decided to leave the capital and gradually retire from public life, right at the time when Wang Anshi's 王安石 (1021–1086) reformist faction, to which Ouyang opposed, was to begin its long hold on power.<sup>8</sup> As can be seen from these events, being known as a libertine could prove to be quite dangerous for a prominent scholar-official.

And it is in this context that we can briefly discuss the question of the seventy-three “contested” erotic songs attributed to the author. These songs are generally called “contested” because only one of the two collections of Ouyang's song lyrics that appeared during the late twelfth century included them.<sup>9</sup> This is the “Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard's Zither Delights” (*Zuiweng qinqu waipian* 醉翁琴趣外篇, hereafter “Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard”), part of a cycle of eight *ci* collections published in Fujian during the Southern Song. If the “Unofficial Sections,” as the title suggests, represent extensively the unorthodox production attributed to Ouyang, the other collection of his lyrics that appeared during roughly the same period, “The Modern Style Ballad” (*Jinti yuefu* 近體樂府), was based on a radically different conception. Compiled by Luo Bi 羅泌 (1131–1189), “The Modern Style Ballad” was included in the complete work of Ouyang produced between 1191 and 1196 by Zhou Bida 周必大 (1126–1204) and other inhabitants of Luling, the place of origin of the distinguished scholar. Similar enterprises that local intellectuals made in honor of a famous ancestor were necessarily inspired, to some extent, by a celebratory intent. As might be expected, the editors did take care to provide a representation of Ouyang as much as possible in keeping with the more conservative ethical models that were prevalent at the end of the twelfth century. Luo Bi himself admitted that he had deliberately left out from his collection the more vulgar songs circulating under Ouyang's name:

Those songs that are particularly shallow and unrefined were considered by most people in the past as forgeries done by Liu Hui [an unsuccessful candidate at the 1057 exams]. Therefore, I will exclude them.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> For more detailed accounts of these scandals and how they were linked to Ouyang's political career, see Egan (1971: 5–10) and Liu (1967: 65–67, 70; 79–82).

<sup>9</sup> These are the two earliest collections of Ouyang's song lyrics that have been transmitted.

<sup>10</sup> Luo Bi, Postscript to “The Modern Style Ballad” (*Jinti yuefu ba* 近體樂府跋). Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Huang (1998: 431). Another translation of this passage is available in Egan (1971: 164).

其甚淺近者，前輩多謂劉輝偽作，故削之。

The existence of these two divergent versions of Ouyang's *ci* production sparked a long philological controversy on the attribution to the author of the seventy-three lyrics excluded from "The Modern Style Ballad." Many critics have tried for centuries to deny Ouyang Xiu's authorship of these erotic songs, described as too 'vulgar' (*su* 俗) to have been written by a refined scholar-official, regardless of the fact that other eleventh-century literati were also known to have composed rather explicit lyrics. 'Vulgar' is one of several terms used by Song dynasty critics to refer to those song lyrics that were not written in the high or refined style (*ya* 雅) which was more commonly associated with elite lyricists. Now, it is true that most of the songs in Ouyang's corpus that deal with sex with a more direct rhetoric or appear closer to a popular style are to be found within the group of seventy-three lyrics transmitted to us only by the "Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard." However, not all of the contested songs treat the subject of love explicitly. On the other hand, even among the lyrics collected in "The Modern Style Ballad"—whose attribution has not been, in general, questioned—it is possible to occasionally identify some expressions that could be considered vulgar according to the standards of the time.

This is just one of many possible arguments that may be used to show how the critical tradition on Ouyang's contested erotic songs was often deeply influenced by ethical-political rather than purely literary considerations. Supporters of the "forgery theory" were probably motivated by a moralistic intent to preserve Ouyang's reputation as a great master of the literati culture rather than by a genuinely philological analysis. This is especially true in light of the new intellectual regime in which most critics operated from the twelfth century onwards, when the importance of moral conduct progressively grew alongside the affirmation of Neo-Confucianism. According to Peter Bol's (1994: 341) analysis, during the Southern Song a new "ethical culture" replaced the literary culture that had characterized the eleventh century. In this new intellectual climate, actions, and no longer literary works, became the most important parameter by which a scholar was judged by society. Therefore, it was essential to maintain high standards of behavior even in private life.

In addition to these philosophical factors, some internal dynamics in the evolution of the song lyric during the late eleventh century were also beginning to discourage certain types of erotic representations. Stephen Owen (2019: 171) noted that in the second half of the eleventh century the biographical aspect, which had long been a central feature of classical poetry, took on increasing

importance for the song lyric as well. In Owen's words, in this renewed context, "the lyricist is identified with and held responsible for what he writes—or, in the case of Ouyang Xiu, what circulated under his name. A song can no longer be 'just a song'" (Owen 2019: 171). In the eyes of many moralists, lyricists whose work appeared too uninhibited were consequently judged as immoral people in their turn. If *ci* had long been interpreted as a largely impersonal form, allowing authors to conceal their own personal expression behind the mask of convention, during the second half of the eleventh century a new correspondence started to be established between the poet and their songs.

These elements help explain why a longstanding critical tradition strived to dissociate Ouyang's name from the most controversial lyrics that were attributed to him. But was Ouyang really incapable of writing erotic songs? Was his fame as a libertine just an invention? The authorship of song lyrics that mainly circulated orally through informal channels one thousand years ago is difficult to ascertain,<sup>11</sup> but some comments by Ouyang's friends, like those by Mei Yaochen and Su Shi quoted above, indicate that we should not outright dismiss this alternative representation of him. What is more, not only contested song lyrics, but even some uncontested classical poems (*shi*) by Ouyang contribute to strengthening the credibility of this narrative. Let us see, as an example, the following lines from a classical poem that Ouyang wrote to his friend Liu Chang 劉敞 (1019-1068):

I remember that time when you were sent on a mission in the north	憶昨君當使北時
and I came to say goodbye to you and drink in your house.	我往別君飲君家
I loved the little concubine that you had just bought,	愛君小鬟初買得
like a newly blossomed flower still untouched by men's hand. <sup>12</sup>	如手未觸新開花

In the last line quoted here, Ouyang compares his friends' young concubine to an untouched blossom. Beverly Bossler noted that this line "not only expresses his appreciation for the physical charms of Liu's new playmate, it frankly acknowledges the erotic nature of those charms by emphasizing the girl's virginal appearance" (Bossler 2013: 88). While clarifying that similar *shi* poems are not as sexually explicit as some song lyrics of the period, Bossler pointed out that they still have a significant erotic

---

<sup>11</sup> For an essential outline of some of the main issues related to the circulation of the song lyric during the Northern Song, see Owen (2019: 5-8).

<sup>12</sup> Ouyang Xiu, "To Liu Yuanfu" (Chong zeng Liu Yuanfu 重贈劉原父). Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see *Wen yuan ge Siku quanshu* (2003, vol. 1102: 59).

charge, especially in view of the fact that, unlike most of the lyrics, such classical poems are not directed to courtesans but, usually, to concubines, “women who at least theoretically might someday become mothers of other literati” (Bossler 2013: 88–89). Therefore, a rather explicit erotic rhetoric was not limited to some of Ouyang’s song lyrics, many of which were believed by premodern critics to be forgeries, but it could also be found in some of his classical poems—whose authenticity nobody appears to have questioned. Therefore, it seems safe to say that Ouyang’s image as a libertine was not an invention and that the author did deal with eroticism quite explicitly in his writing, though with a more refined register than that found in some of the contested songs. Although most of these songs are not particularly explicit compared to the uncontested songs, a minority of them featured colloquialisms that significantly contributed to increase their sense of scandal. And this is the issue that we are going to address now: what should we make of the tension between the ideal of refinement expressed by some songs in Ouyang’s corpus and the vulgar style that emerges in other songs? Are these two elements incompatible as many premodern critics have tried to show, or might they instead be subsumed into a single, complex literary sensibility?

### 3. Refinement and vulgarity in Ouyang Xiu’s song lyrics

We should first acknowledge that the coexistence of refined and vulgar songs was by no means a feature unique to Ouyang Xiu’s collection. The refined style of song lyrics came to be considered as the only legitimate one by many compilers of *ci* collections during the twelfth century, for a series of reasons that include the two we have already mentioned—the more austere moral regime of the Southern Song and the growing habit of reading song lyrics autobiographically. Moreover, this was also related to the fact that the process of appropriation of the song lyric by the elite, which was still largely in progress during the eleventh century, had already reached a mature phase by the twelfth. The situation was much more complex before that. It is worth bearing in mind that only in the tenth century did the elite tradition of refined *ci* writing receive its first significant recognition in Ouyang Jiong’s 歐陽炯 (896–971) preface to the “Collection From Among the Flowers” (*Huajian ji* 花間集), where the author defended the high style of the song lyric and asserted its superiority over the popular style by expressing a wish that Southern singers “stopped singing songs on the lotus boats” (休唱蓮舟

之引).<sup>13</sup> The absolute predominance of the high style in literati *ci* was attained gradually, and during the eleventh century the influence of the popular style might have had a much wider reach than we could expect by looking at currently available collections.

Things changed during the Southern Song. We can see instances of the new hegemony of the refined style even in the titles of several anthologies produced in that period, such as “Refined Lyrics and Ballads” (*Yuefu yaci* 樂府雅詞) or “Song Lyrics Recovering the Refined Style” (*Fuya geci* 復雅歌詞). But this retrospective attempt at redefining the genre’s history must not lead us to think that eleventh-century or early twelfth-century elite lyricists really wrote predominantly in the refined style that later compilers overwhelmingly favored in their selections. On the contrary, we have proof from the same compilers that a consistent part of eleventh-century song lyrics was excluded from Southern Song anthologies precisely because it was deemed too vulgar by the new standards of that age: several editors openly admitted their deliberate choice of censoring lyrics that didn’t comply with the high style standards, as the statement from Luo Bi quoted above shows. Stephen Owen has described this process as the early twelfth-century “split between the ‘high style’ and vernacular or mixed-register lyrics associated with witty and playful eroticism” (Owen 2019: 385); and this process led, among other ramifications, to the vilification of authors who openly favored the vulgar style, most notably Liu Yong, in twelfth-century sources (Owen 2019: 386). To appreciate how “artificial” and retrospective this rereading of the song lyric was, we might mention the fact that during the period of transition to the supremacy of the refined style, some lyricists, such as Moqi Yong 万俟詠 (fl. 1135), even divided their collections into two sections, one devoted to refined songs (*yaci* 雅詞) and one to “voluptuous” (*ceyan* 側豔) songs; according to the critic Wang Zhuo 王灼 (1105–1181), though, Moqi Yong later removed his own voluptuous songs (Owen 2019: 395).

We should, therefore, entertain the possibility that refined and vulgar lyrics included in Ouyang’s collection may have been written by the same hand, whatever Southern Song commentators thought about the issue. One of the reasons for entertaining such a possibility is that, as mentioned above, we know that this combination of refined and vulgar songs characterized other elite lyricists’ songbooks as well, and nobody tried to raise attribution issues about them. Let us just see, for instance, the following song by Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) in Ronald Egan’s translation:

---

<sup>13</sup> On the rise of popular song lyrics during the Tang dynasty (618–907), see Wagner (1984).

To the tune <i>Qian qiu sui</i>	千秋歲
One of life's greatest joys, Being together here with you. Just when nights are long. The air cool. Light rain drips outside the curtain. Incense words lie in the dish. I often dream of you, But tonight it's really you.	世間好事 恰恁廝當對 乍夜永 涼天氣 雨稀簾外滴 香篆盤中字 長入夢 如今見也分明是
The pleasure over, lovely and listless Jade turns soft, flowers droop to fall. The hairpin dangles on my sleeve, Cloudlocks pile on my arm. The lamp shines on her lovely eyes, Perspiration-soaked, intoxicated. 'Go to sleep darling, Sleep darling, go to sleep' (Egan 1971: 175-176).	歡極嬌無力 玉軟花軟墜 釵冒袖 雲堆臂 燈斜明媚眼 汗浹薈騰醉 奴奴睡 奴奴睡也奴奴睡

Some of the most controversial elements of the erotic song lyric appear in this composition, including a direct rhetoric on passion and physical intimacy between the lovers. These elements recur in some of Ouyang's contested songs as well, as we can notice in the following one:

To the tune <i>Yan jiao er</i>	鹽角兒
If you add something to her, she becomes too long; if you take away something, too short: an out-of-the-ordinary bearing. If powder is applied she becomes too red, if blush too white: a complexion so beautiful to make kingdoms collapse!	增之太長 減之太短 出群風格 施朱太赤 施粉太白 傾城顏色
Very intelligent, graceful in abundance.	慧多多 嬌的的

Heaven gave her; who does it allow to love her?	天付與教誰憐惜
Apart from me who cuddles her, hugs her,	除非我偎著抱著
what other person could enjoy her? <sup>14</sup>	更有何人消得

This contested song attributed to Ouyang doesn't seem more overtly sexual than the previous one by Huang Tingjian, whose attribution has not been contested. One is then left to wonder why an eleventh-century scholar-official like Huang Tingjian could have written explicit erotic songs while another eleventh-century scholar-official like Ouyang Xiu couldn't. Was Ouyang a stern moralist who would have never indulged in or written about sensual pleasures? It wouldn't seem so, judging from the evidence I have examined above. And Huang Tingjian was by no means the only scholar-official to have apparently composed erotic songs. We can find the following song in the collection of another elite author of that time, Yan Jidao 晏幾道 (1038?-1110?):

To the tune <i>Mulan hua</i>	木蘭花
Young shoot of fourteen, beautiful hips;	阿茸十五腰肢好
Heaven prematurely gave her the erotic taste of spring.	天與懷春風味早
She paints her eyebrows, powders her face, not knowing about melancholy.	畫眉勻臉不知愁
For the malaise of intoxication, for the narcotic effect of incense, she is still young.	殢酒熏香偏稱小
Willows from the eastern quarter, herbs from the western quarter; rendezvous under the moon, dates in the midst of flowers: few follow her expectations.	東城楊柳西城草 月會花期如意少
She thinks of heart affairs, of men as fickle as clouds; but in the mirror in front of the dressing table, she smiles to herself. <sup>15</sup>	思量心事薄輕雲 綠鏡台前還自笑

The lyric we have just seen adds one more controversial motif to those mentioned so far: implicit male desire for a very young girl, represented as still sexually immature. Again, it should be noted that this

---

<sup>14</sup> Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Qiu (2001: 322) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 155-156).

<sup>15</sup> Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Wang (2007: 132) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 234).



song is included in the collection of Yan Jidao, a scholar-official—though holding minor positions—and the son of Yan Shu 晏殊 (991–1055), a prominent politician and, by the way, a mentor of Ouyang’s. Thus, Yan Jidao was not a popular lyricist, but a member of the elite. Now, while this song sexualizes a fourteen-year-old girl, critics never seem to have raised issues on its attribution. We should then wonder why they did so when it comes, for instance, to the following contested lyric by Ouyang Xiu:

To the tune <i>Wang Jiangnan</i>	望江南
Southern willow, leaves are small and do not cast shadow. Its fronds like light silk... Who could ever break them? The oriole regrets that the delicate branches do not support his singing and leaves them, waiting for late spring.	江南柳 葉小未成陰 人為絲輕那忍折 鶯嫌枝嫩不勝吟 留著待春深
Thirteen or fourteen years old, she walks idly with a lute in her hand. On the steps, we were playing with coins; then she ran down. That time I saw her, and immediately she attracted me. Even more so today! <sup>16</sup>	十四五 閑抱琵琶尋 階上簸錢階下走 恁時相見早留心 何況到如今

The two songs appear quite easily comparable, as they both represent a young teenager who is still not concerned about sex and voice male sexual fantasies about her. Though the fantasies are stated explicitly in Ouyang’s song while kept more implicit in Yan’s, it seems undeniable that both lyrics share a similar erotic purpose. Why could Yan Jidao have written such a song, while Ouyang Xiu couldn’t? The reasons for being suspicious about such unequal critical receptions are many. We could thus suggest that critics tried to dissociate Ouyang Xiu from the erotic songs attributed to him but didn’t do the same for the likes of Huang Tingjian or Yan Jidao because Ouyang played a much more crucial role

---

<sup>16</sup> Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Qiu (2001: 349) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 158). Other translations of this lyric are available in Egan (1971: 171) and Egan (2006: 277).

in the elite tradition than the latter.<sup>17</sup> This hypothesis would strengthen the idea that Ouyang might have potentially written most or all of the erotic songs attributed to him, despite the prevalent stance among premodern critics that he hadn't. During the Qing (1644-1911), though, some observers finally admitted the possibility that Ouyang did write erotic songs,<sup>18</sup> paving the way for the common opinion on the matter held by scholars today that most of the contested songs might really be authentic.<sup>19</sup> Can we then read Ouyang's refined and vulgar lyrics organically, as if they represented different aspects of a single literary persona? I believe so. To support such an approach, which has recently attracted attention from scholarship,<sup>20</sup> we could emphasize that motifs such as the impulse to satisfy sexual desire can also be found among Ouyang's refined songs, as the following example shows:

To the tune <i>Jian zi Mulan hua</i>	減字木蘭花
I would like to hold back spring, but it does not stay. The swallows get old, the orioles get tired... there is no place to look for them.	留春不住 燕老鶯慵無覓處
It seems like spring is gone... Once you get older, you can't be young again.	說似殘春 一老應無卻少人
The wind and the moon, magnificent. If you have money, you have to go buy smiles! Love and cherish the fragrant time; do not wait to break a branch without flowers. <sup>21</sup>	風和月好 辦得黃金須買笑 愛惜芳時 莫待無花空折枝

---

<sup>17</sup> This includes the fact that Ouyang, as a more prominent official, was more exposed to attacks by rival political factions. Therefore, the later critics' attempts at questioning Ouyang's authorship of controversial songs while ignoring issues of attribution for other poets could also be explained by their willingness to protect Ouyang from a perceived political use of erotic songs against him, as in the sexual scandals in which he was involved.

<sup>18</sup> Xie Zhangting 謝章铤 (1820–1903) and Chen Tingzhuo 陳廷焯 (1853–1892) were among the first supporters of this new stance during the late Qing. See Canale (2023a: 174) and Tang (1986, vol. 4: 3465, 3721).

<sup>19</sup> Scholars holding such a view include Tanaka Kenji, Xia Chengtao, James T. C. Liu, and Tang Guizhang, whose position on the matter is mentioned in Egan (1971, 165). More recently, Ronald Egan (1971: 169–172), Li Qi (1982), Huang Wenji (1996), Tao Erfu (2014: 48–54), and Stephen Owen (2019: 149) have also adopted a similar stance.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, He (2014: 34–38).

<sup>21</sup> Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Qiu (2001: 31) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 124).

If the first stanza expresses typical concerns of the literati song lyric, such as the melancholy caused by the passing of spring and the awareness of impermanence, the second stanza introduces an interesting element: the conventional exhortation to enjoy present pleasures is not limited to the more common motifs of wine and banquets but is made explicitly erotic by an urge to “buy smiles” (*mai xiao* 買笑), i.e., visiting courtesans.<sup>22</sup> The style and the diction of this song are clearly refined and its models can be easily identified in a long tradition of banquet poetry and, more generally, *carpe diem* poetry on the vanity of pursuing wealth and honor. Nevertheless, the author has transformed some of its more immediate models, in particular the Tang poem “The Robe of Golden Thread” (*Jin lü yi* 金縷衣) attributed to Du Qiuniang 杜秋娘 (?-825?), which already had a sexual connotation, by adding an overt reference to courtesans and brothels—the world of sensual pleasures that characterizes many of the erotic songs attributed to Ouyang. Though written in different modes, it wouldn’t be difficult to imagine that an uncontested lyric like this one may have been composed by the same author of the contested songs in the vulgar style.

#### 4. Conclusions

It is undeniable that some of the more controversial contested songs in Ouyang Xiu’s collection show a decidedly colloquial diction and other popular elements such as dialogues between lovers that contrast starkly with what is generally found in the refined lyrics. Indeed, several modern scholars such as Ronald Egan (1971: 169–172) concede that some of the more explicit colloquial songs attributed to Ouyang could be forgeries, given their high slanderous potential when associated with a man who has been tried multiple times for sexual scandals. Still, we may ask again: why could some literati like Liu Yong have written particularly scandalous vernacular songs while Ouyang couldn’t? We do know that some of Liu Yong’s songs are at least as colloquial and sexually explicit as the most controversial songs by Ouyang Xiu. Is there an ontological difference between the two authors that prevents the latter from having occasionally cultivated the same style as the former? I do not believe so.<sup>23</sup> While it is important to stress once more that we cannot be sure about the real authorship of eleventh-century songs for a variety of reasons related to their precarious ways of circulation, I think that it is fair to conclude, in light of the analysis carried out above, that Ouyang Xiu’s songbook could have plausibly included markedly different modes, from the refined style of the venerable Confucian master to the

---

<sup>22</sup> Qiu Shaohua has noticed that the expression had already been used in classical poetry. See Qiu (2001: 32).

<sup>23</sup> For a comparison between Liu Yong’s and Ouyang Xiu’s erotic songs, see Canale (2023c).

“sordid” language of the defiant libertine. These two “souls” of his production should not be seen as incompatible but rather as complementary as we know that Ouyang was both things at the same time—and unlike several other fellow literati, he doesn't seem to have made too much effort to conceal it.

## References

- Bol, Peter K. 1994. *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bossler, Beverly. 2013. *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China, 1000-1400*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Canale, Massimiliano. 2023a. “Dissolute Libertine or Venerable Confucian? Ouyang Xiu's Erotic Lyrics and the Conflict Between Freedom and Morality.” *Annali Sezione Orientale* 83: 154–180.
- Canale, Massimiliano. 2023b. “Inferior Art or Legitimate Pleasure? Yan Jidao's and Huang Tingjian's Contribution to the Defense of the Song Lyric.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 45: 49-70.
- Canale, Massimiliano. 2023c. “Liu Yong's and Ouyang Xiu's Erotic Song Lyrics and the Bias of Traditional Criticism.” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 96: 11-27.
- Chen, Shangjun 陳尚君. 2019. *Song Yuan biji shuyao 宋元筆記述要* [An Outline of Miscellanies of the Song and Yuan Dynasties]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Egan, Ronald C. 1971. *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu (1007-72)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Egan, Ronald C. 1994. “The Problem of the Repute of Tz'u During the Northern Sung.” In: *Voices of the Song Lyric in China*, edited by Pauline Yu, 191–225. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Egan, Ronald C. 2006. *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- He, Lei 何蕾 and Hu Lingui 胡林貴. 2014. “Ouyang Xiu yanqing ci xin lun: jian bo Ouyang Xiu 'shuangzhong renga' shuo” 歐陽修艷情詞新論—兼駁歐陽修「雙重人格」說 [A New Theory on Ouyang Xiu's Erotic Song Lyrics: Refuting the Argument of Ouyang Xiu's 'Dual Personality']]. *Neijiang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 29/5: 34–38.
- Hong, Mai 洪邁. 1994. *Rongzhai suibi 容齋隨筆* [Casual Notes From the Studio of Tolerance]. Changsha: Yuelu shushe.
- Huang, Jinde 黃進德. 1998. *Ouyang Xiu ping zhuan 歐陽修評傳* [A Critical Biography of Ouyang Xiu]. Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe.
- Huang, Wenji 黃文吉. 1996. *Bei Song shi da cijia yanjiu 北宋十大詞家研究* [A Study on Ten Major Lyricists of the Northern Song Dynasty]. Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe.
- Lam, Lap. 2002. “Elevation and Expurgation: Elite Strategies in Enhancing the Reputation of Ci.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 24: 1–41.

- Li, Qi 李栖. 1982. *Ouyang Xiu ci yanjiu ji qi jiaozhu* 歐陽脩詞研究及其校注 [A Research on Ouyang Xiu's Song Lyrics, With an Annotated Anthology]. Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe.
- Liu, James T. C. 1967. *Ou-yang Hsiu: An Eleventh-Century Neo-Confucianist*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Owen, Stephen. 2019. *Just a Song: Chinese Lyrics from the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Qiu, Shaohua 邱少華. ed. 2001. *Ouyang Xiu ci xin shi ji ping* 歐陽脩詞新釋輯評 [A New Critical Edition of Ouyang Xiu's Song Lyrics]. Beijing: Zhongguo shudian chubanshe.
- Tao, Erfu 陶爾夫 and Zhuge Yibing 諸葛憶兵. 2014. *Bei Song ci shi* 北宋詞史 [A History of the Song Lyric During the Northern Song Dynasty]. Harbin: Beifang wenyi chubanshe.
- Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋. ed. 1965. *Quan Song ci* 全宋詞 [The Complete Collection of Song Lyrics of the Song Dynasty]. 5 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋. ed. 1986. *Cihua congbian* 詞話叢編 [A Collection of Comments on the Song Lyric]. 5 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Wagner, Marsha L. 1984. *The Lotus Boat: The Origins of Chinese Tz'u Poetry in T'ang Popular Culture*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Wang, Shuangqi 王雙啟. ed. 2007. *Yan Jidao ci xin shi ji ping* 晏幾道詞新釋輯評 [A New Critical Edition of Yan Jidao's Song Lyrics]. Beijing: Zhongguo shudian chubanshe.
- Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 [The Complete Collection of the Four Branches of Literature of the Imperial Wenyuange Library]. 2003. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- Yan, Jie 嚴杰. ed. 1993. *Ouyang Xiu nianpu* 歐陽修年譜 [A Chronological Biography of Ouyang Xiu]. Nanjing: Nanjing chubanshe.

Massimiliano Canale is an Adjunct Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Naples “L’Orientale,” where he has also been teaching Chinese Philology (Classical Chinese) and Chinese Language (Mandarin Chinese). He received his PhD from the same university in 2021, carrying out research on the song lyric (*ci* 詞) of the mid-Northern Song period. During his PhD, he has tried to characterize the song lyric as a means to respond to a variety of inner and social conflicts felt by scholar-officials of that time. In particular, he has been investigating tensions between desire and reality in the work of some representative authors of that tradition. He was subsequently awarded a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange to explore the relationships between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in a selection of eleventh-century songbooks. Massimiliano can be contacted at: [mcanale@unior.it](mailto:mcanale@unior.it)

## Body, cross-dressing, identity

### Mulan “in his shoes” in Xu Wei’s play

Alessandro Tosco

“Four Cries of a Gibbon” (*Si sheng yuan*) by Xu Wei (1521-1593) presents four plays with varying outcomes that are nevertheless united by the common thread of fluctuating identity. In the last two works, the playwright focuses on the ideas of gender and cross-dressing. In fact, the stories of two heroines are told who, denying their bodies and concealing their identities, don men’s clothing in order to take on more masculine features and thus attempt to participate in activities normally considered purely within the realm of men: *wu* (martial arts) and *wen* (arts). Focusing on *wu*, this paper examines the work entitled “The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father” (*Ci Mulan tifu congjun*), inspired by the famous 6th-century poem *Mulan shi*. Xu Wei builds a narrative plot on Mulan’s transition from woman to man through a series of scenes highlighting her undressing, her unclad body, and the idea of disguising it with a new identity. The denouement is, however, exactly the opposite process, a reacquisition of her feminine looks and role in the family and society. This paper pays particular attention to the unbinding and rebinding of her feet and the preservation of virginity. These elements are crucial to the heroine’s “Confucian” (*xiao* and *jie*) character. “In his shoes,” Mulan demonstrates her talent and skills. Her story shows that it is the clothes that make the difference, not the body wearing them. Hinged on the contrast between being and appearing, between what is seen and what is not, this paper reflects on the presentation of the body on stage and the relative audience reaction.

**Keywords:** Mulan, Chinese theatre, Confucian’s thought, cross-dressing, identity, body.

Tragedy is a deception, where those who deceive are more just than those who do not deceive, and those who are deceived are wiser than those who do not allow themselves to be deceived.

Gorgia from Lentini

### 1. Introduction

伏以藐然閨秀，描眉月鏡之嬌。突爾戎裝，掛甲天山之險，替父心堅似鐵；秉虎豹姿，羞兒女態，從軍膽大如天。換莫莢葉，歷十二年。移孝為忠，出清於濁。雙兔傍地，難迷離撲朔之分；[...]

Now, as a young lady, beautiful and talented, / A beauty of brows painted in the moon-shaped mirror. / Suddenly, dressed in martial array, / Hung with armour, in Tianshan’s dangerous passes. / Substituting for your father, heart as firm as steel, / You held to the form of tiger and leopard. / Ashamed of your female appearance; / You joined the army, brave to the heavens. / With the changing of the *mingjie* leaves, / And twelve years passed. / Displaying filial piety for loyalty, / You emerged pure from the mud. / A pair of rabbits, side by side on the ground, / It is hard to tell apart male from female. [...] (Xu Wei 1986: 85; Kwa 2012: 220)

The talented Huang Chuntao 黃春桃, protagonist of the play “The Girl Graduate” (*Nü zhuangyuan* 女狀元),<sup>1</sup> disguises herself in men’s clothes and secretly assumes the male identity of Huang Chonggu 黃崇嘏 to participate in the formidable imperial examinations and thus rise above her miserable condition ensuing from the premature loss of her parents. In a refined game of intertextual referencing, Chuntao/Chonggu composes the aforementioned lines inspired by the legendary character of Mulan who, cross-dressing as a man and donning military armour, went off to war in her father’s place and ended up, defeating the enemy.

“The Girl Graduate” was composed by the eclectic scholar Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593) who, in the same collection “Four Cries of a Gibbon” (*Si sheng yuan* 四聲猿),<sup>2</sup> also included a short comedy dedicated to Mulan.<sup>3</sup> The four plays of the collection, though independent of each other, are all in the *zaju* 雜劇 style contaminated by the conventions of the Southern theatre (*chuanqi* 傳奇)<sup>4</sup> with one specific thread in common: identity change.<sup>5</sup> In particular, in the last two works the playwright focuses on gender identity via reflection on body and cross-dressing. Furthermore, these plays reject the fantastic and otherworldly aspects present in the first two, setting the story exclusively in the here and now. The implicit message is that changing one’s identity does not involve transcendental actions as

---

<sup>1</sup> The complete title of the play is “The Girl Graduate Rejects the Female Phoenix and Gains the Male Phoenix” (*Nü zhuangyuan cihuang defeng* 女狀元辭凰得鳳).

<sup>2</sup> On the work of Xu Wei, cf. Chen 陳 (2002).

<sup>3</sup> It refers to the play “The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father” (*Ci Mulan tifu congjun* 雌木蘭替父從軍), also known as “The Female Mulan” (*Ci Mulan* 雌木蘭).

<sup>4</sup> On the *zaju* plays of the Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644), cf. Qi 戚 (2001) and Xu 徐 (2003).

<sup>5</sup> The other two works included in the collection are: “The Mad Drummer Plays the Yuyang Triple Rolls” (*Kuanggushi Yuyang sannong* 狂鼓史魚陽三弄) and “The Zen Master Yu Has a Dream of Cuixiang” (*Yu chanshi Cuixiang yimeng* 玉禪師翠鄉一夢). In the first one, the hero is a wronged man who, in a postmortem trial that takes place in the spirit underworld, challenges and triumphs over his enemy Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220), one of the most famous generals in imperial China. In the second one, the eponymous monk of the title is seduced into violating his vows of chastity and is thus reincarnated in the next act so he can get his revenge (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 152).



in changing one's body: identity can be altered by something as commonplace as the simple changing of clothes (Kwa 2012: 64).

Often in traditional Chinese literature<sup>6</sup> and, in particular, in Chinese theatre, female protagonists have been represented as heroines<sup>7</sup> who, as if to challenge traditional morality, contradict the Confucian proverb that lack of intellect is a virtue for a woman. Through the characters of Mulan and Chuntao, in fact, the stories of two heroines are staged who, denying their bodies and hiding their identities, don male attire to take on more masculine features so as to excel in activities considered to be purely virile: *wu* 武 (martial arts) and *wen* 文 (arts). On the other hand, as Ma Qian pointed out, it is the clothes that make the difference, not the body wearing them (Ma 2005: 35). Leaving aside the analysis of this last scholar, which would well deserve a separate study, this paper analyses the play inspired by the *wu* in the broader framework of the gender issue in the rewriting of Mulan's character. In particular, an attempt is made to understand how 'transgressive' this character actually is in relation to traditional Chinese morality. To conclude we shall examine the sexuality or eroticization of Mulan's body when shown on stage and consequent audience reception.

Xu Wei's comedy is inspired by the famous "Poem of Mulan" (*Mulan shi* 木蘭詩) by an anonymous author of the sixth century AD. It focusses, however, on those aspects only vaguely hinted at the poem, all aimed at exalting the Confucian precepts of filial devotion (*xiao* 孝) and loyalty (*zhong* 忠).<sup>8</sup> Before proposing the analysis of "The Female Mulan," however, it is necessary to present some general considerations regarding Xu Wei's plays. First of all, as critics have pointed out (Kwa 2012: 9), the works were composed to be recited, not just read; this can be deduced from the numerous and detailed stage directions. This aspect has far-reaching repercussions on both audience reception concerning body as shown on stage and the assumption of a new identity through cross-dressing. It should also be noted that the audience is "omniscient," that is, they know the real identity of the female lead (*dan* 旦) assuming the male identity. The comic aspect of the plays also stem from this, where some lines base the dramatic action on a veritable "comedy of errors."<sup>9</sup> In addition, fiction mixes with reality: in the plays it is, generally, a male actor playing the *dan* roles, especially from the Ming dynasty onwards. Therefore, there is a male actor playing the role of a woman disguised, however, as a man.

---

<sup>6</sup> On the narrative dedicated to cross-dressing and gender identity, cf. Zeitlin (1997: 98-131).

<sup>7</sup> On the concept of 'hero' (*yingxiong* 英雄) declined in the feminine and applied to the context of Mulan, cf. Lauwaert (2020: 105-107).

<sup>8</sup> On Confucius and Confucianism, cf. Yao (2013). On Confucius and the gender issue, cf. Li (2000).

<sup>9</sup> This aspect is emphasised more in the play "The Girl Graduate."

In “The Female Mulan” the reflection on body, cross-dressing and identity unfolds through three fundamental issues: the undoing of footbinding, virginity preserved and the relationship with fellow soldiers. Before proceeding with the analysis of these issues, however, it is necessary to present a brief description of the play in order to better frame the discourse proposed later, as well as a comparison with the “Poem” and the other sources available to Xu Wei from which he drew inspiration and suggestions.

## 2. The Female Mulan: content of the work

The play has a rather thin plot; the cornerstone of the comedy is, in fact, the transition from female to male appearance and vice versa. Audience enjoyment in watching this play stems from the tension between what is hidden and what is not, therefore becoming the subject of the play itself. In the last aria, Mulan sings:

我做女兒則十七歲，做男兒倒十二年。經過了萬千瞧，那一個解雌雄辨？方信道辨雌雄的不靠眼。

I was a woman till I was seventeen, / Was a man another twelve years. / I passed under thousands of glances, / Who among them could tell cock from hen? / Only now do I believe that to tell cock from hen, you can't rely on eyes.<sup>10</sup>

Alluding to the zoological allegory of the two hares running together in the fields, taken from the “Poem,” the girl reflects on how she passed under thousands of glances without her true identity being discovered. Considering that the physical differences between a man and a woman can be difficult to distinguish in the figure of a soldier in uniform, the play demonstrates that these differences, after all, are not so important. However, if Mulan’s gender did not matter, then the plot would not exist. Not surprisingly, therefore, before leaving the scene, the girl recites this last couplet:

世間事多少糊塗，院本打雌雄不辨。

The affairs of the world are all such a mess, / Muddling boy and girl is what this play did best.

---

<sup>10</sup> The analysis of the play was conducted on the text contained in: Xu Wei (1986: 44-59). The English translation is taken from: Kwa (2012: 169-187). All the following quotes from the original Chinese text and the related translation are taken from these sources. In this context, in the English translation the use of the terms “cock” and “hen” is a free interpretation of Shiamin Kwa, while the Chinese text uses the terms *ci* 雌 and *xiong* 雄, which, in the zoological lexicon, respectively indicate “female, feminine” and “male, masculine.”

The play, set during the Northern Wei 北魏 (386-534) dynasties among the Xianbei 鮮卑 tribe, is divided into only two acts. The first one begins with the female lead (*dan*) introducing herself as Hua Mulan 花木蘭.<sup>11</sup> The girl is aware that all adult men are called to arms to tame the rebellion led by Leopard Skin (Baozi Pi 豹子皮), the bandit leader. Worried that her father is too old and weak to fight, Mulan decides to take his place, citing two model female figures who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their fathers.<sup>12</sup> The resolute decision is followed by a series of arias in which at first the girl presents the military equipment she has just acquired, and then shows off her technical skills in martial arts, in particular with the sword, the lance and the bow, described through the songs. Here the expressive power of the actor/actress is manifested through his/her mimicry. The climax is reached, however, in the third aria (the object of analysis *infra*), when Mulan sheds her female clothes to don a military uniform, that is, ostensibly male garments, and, with a gesture of great visual impact, though perhaps somewhat anachronistically, she unwraps the bandages from her feet. She assumes the male identity of Hua Hu 花弧 (*hu 弧*, lit. “bow”), leaves her parents and, in the company of two comrades, sets off towards the hiding place of the bandit leader.

The second act begins with Commander-in-Chief Xin Ping 辛平 who, having tested Hua Hu’s military skills, hires him to lead the punitive expedition against Leopard Skin. Though not the main character, Xin Ping is afforded the possibility of singing and joins in a choir of soldiers telling the story of the capture of Leopard Skin thanks to a decisive action by Hua Hu. The latter is publicly praised before the sovereign and receives the imperial cap and girdle (*guandai* 冠帶), symbols of “his” promotion to a position in the Imperial Secretariat (*shulang* 書郎).<sup>13</sup> Thus Mulan is sent home, still wearing Hua Hu’s clothes, in the company of two soldiers. On the way back, the aria Mulan sings reveals the fact that it was not actually she who had captured Leopard Skin but someone else. She, therefore, cannot take credit for the victory:

萬千般想来都是幻，誇什麼吾成算。我殺賊把王擒，是女將男換。這功勞得將來不費星兒汗。

---

<sup>11</sup> This is the first source mentioning Mulan’s presumed surname. On this topic, cf. Chen (2005: 23-43).

<sup>12</sup> The female figures mentioned by Mulan in the text are Qin Xiu 秦休 of the Three Kingdoms 三國 period (220-280) and Ti Ying 緹縈 of the Western Han 西漢 dynasty (202 BC-9 AD). Qin Xiu was sentenced to death, a penalty later pardoned, when she avenged her father by killing his assassin. Ti Ying begged to become a slave in Emperor Han Wendi’s 漢文帝 (202-157 BC) court as a substitute for her father, who had been sentenced to death (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 153).

<sup>13</sup> Same position assigned to Mulan in the “Poem.”

Everything is —when I think of it— an illusion, after all; / Why should I boast that I succeeded in this scheme? / The “I” who killed bandits, and captured their king, / Was a female officer who switched to a man. / After all, these successes did not cost me a drop of sweat.

As Shiamin Kwa notes, this is the most personal, indeed the most self-reflective, of the arias. At the same time, however, it is also the most impersonal, inasmuch as Mulan categorically denies having had anything to do with the person who carried out acts of valour. In fact, the girl dissociates herself from the “I” who went to war, retreating into vague Buddhist talk about everything being illusory (Kwa 2012: 82). The surprising statement will find justification in the attitude maintained by the protagonist in the end of the work. As she travels with the soldiers, they comment on how strange it is that they have never seen Hua Hu relieving himself. Mulan, on the other hand, tells them about a mysterious statue of a guardian deity (*jingang* 金剛), with male features, in her village, whose face has changed into that of the moon goddess Chang’e 嫦娥,<sup>14</sup> thus anticipating the epilogue of the story.

When she returns home, she first of all regains her female identity by putting on both her old clothes and her face. Only later does she rejoin her parents. Mulan shares with them her successes, showing them the imperial cap and girdle that she had been given only then to confirm that she had returned to them still a virgin, a topic to which we shall return later. The two soldiers, stunned to discover that Hua Hu is actually a girl, leave the scene. At the same time, an actor enters in the role of the male lead (*sheng* 生) also wearing the official cap and girdle: he is Mr. Wang (Wang lang 王郎), the neighbour who recently passed the highest level in the imperial examinations. Mulan and Mr. Wang had previously been promised in marriage to each other by their respective parents and thus marry,<sup>15</sup> celebrating the family happy reunion (*datuanyuan* 大團圓). In this way, since Mulan is a woman who is not allowed to wear the imperial cap and girdle, she can at least marry someone who is. In this manner she can keep the honours that she had won on the battlefield.

---

<sup>14</sup> The term *jingang*, used to translate the Sanskrit word “vajra,” a thunderbolt or mythical weapon, represents, in Buddhist iconography, a guardian deity. Chang’e, on the contrary, is the name of the legendary goddess of the moon.

<sup>15</sup> The marriage is another of Xu Wei’s innovations in Mulan’s story. Luo Qiuzhao 羅秋昭 suggests that this reflects the influence of the *chuanqi* representations of the Ming dynasty, which conventionally end with a meeting scene or a wedding. Cf. Luo (1979: 76). Another breach of the conventions of Yuan 元 (1279-1368) dynasty *zaju* plays is the possibility for a supporting actor to sing arias, as noted earlier with the character of Commander Xin Ping.

### 3. The sources

There are two main sources from which Xu Wei drew inspiration to compose the play. The first one is the famous “Poem of Mulan” (*Mulan shi*), by an anonymous author. This work is believed to have been composed during the Northern Wei period, between the 5th and 6th centuries. The playwright expands the information about her protagonist based on the dating of the work, making her a member of the Xianbei tribe, which ruled during that period. The second source, deeply inspired by the first one, is another poem, also known as “Song of Mulan” (*Mulan ge* 木蘭歌),<sup>16</sup> composed by the high official Wei Yuanfu 韋元甫 (Mid-8th century) of the Tang 唐 (618-907) dynasty.<sup>17</sup> The “Poem,” considered the main source, had an important legacy in subsequent dynasties in the construction of the legend of Mulan as a female warrior.

The “Poem of Mulan,” composed of 62 irregular lines, presents a circular structure unfolding on two reading planes: one internal (*nei* 內) and feminine and one external (*wai* 外) and masculine. The work begins on the internal reading plane, then moves on to the external one and finally closes again on the internal reading plane.<sup>18</sup> The poem opens with Mulan intent on carrying out the typically female activity of weaving,<sup>19</sup> while she sighs for the impossibility of finding a solution to a problem that grieves her: the khan (*kehan* 可汗)<sup>20</sup> has called all the men in the area to arms to defeat the barbarian leader who rages on their lands. Reasoning that she has no older brothers, Mulan makes a firm decision to go to war in her father’s place. This decision is expressed in the sole desire to buy a saddle and a horse (*Yuan wei shi anma, congci ti ye zheng* 願為市鞍馬, 從此替爺征 “I want to buy a saddle and a horse, / To

---

<sup>16</sup> To distinguish the two works, in this paper we will refer to the first source as “Poem of Mulan” or “Poem,” the second source instead as “Song of Mulan” or “Song.”

<sup>17</sup> Both works are contained in the “Collected Works of the Music Bureau” (*Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集), the Song 宋 (960-1279) anthology compiled by Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩 (att. 1264-1269). He states that “Poem of Mulan” is taken from the “Musical Records, Old and New” (*Gujin yuelü* 古今樂錄), a text that has not come down to us and dating back to around the sixth century AD. On the gestation of this work, cf. Wang 王 (1962: 119-120).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Allen, taking up the narrative theories of Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017), analyses the structure of the “Poem of Mulan” as a series of events starting from a state of “equilibrium” and then moving on to one of “disequilibrium” and finally returning to a state of “equilibrium” (Allen 1996: 346).

<sup>19</sup> Several scholars have shown how the opening lines of the “Poem” take up similar expressions found in various *yuefu* 樂府 compositions, where female figures are described intent on loom work; among others, cf. Allen (1996: 347-349) and Lan (2003: 232).

<sup>20</sup> On the use in the “Poem” of the term *kehan* to indicate the Chinese ruler, cf. Chen (2002: 289-326).

take my father’s place and join the army”).<sup>21</sup> With no mention whatsoever of the gender issue and the assumption of a male identity, her transformation into a man takes place by simply donning a soldier’s uniform. The lines, which will be analysed later, imply that the assumption of a male identity consists mainly in wearing the right clothes and taking up arms.

After assuming the identity of a soldier, the central section of the work moves from the internal reading plane to the external one, sanctioned by this couplet: *Chao ci ye niang qu, mu su Huanghe bian* 朝辭爺孃去，暮宿黃河邊 “At dawn she said good-bye to her dear parents, / At night she rested by the Yellow River.” This section details Mulan’s departure from home and her new life as a soldier, without, however, getting to the heart of the war story. The battles, in fact, are not told, and the narration is only based on descriptions expressed mainly through auditory perceptions, often in onomatopoeic forms. The story proceeds with Mulan presenting herself in the presence of the khan, where she receives titles and emoluments, and then ends with the return to her native village as a victorious hero, still in men’s clothes.

As soon as Mulan arrives home, the structure of the work returns to the internal reading plane. First, the girl is wearing her old female clothes again. Here the “Poem” lingers on the steps that she takes to return to her previous “self.” In the lines, to which we shall return in detail later, she takes off her armour, then puts on her old skirt again, adorns her hair and puts on makeup: all fundamental actions to regain female identity. Returned to her true “self,” Mulan goes out and shows herself to her comrades in arms; they are amazed to discover that their valiant companion is actually a girl:

出門看伙伴，伙伴皆驚惶：同行十二年， / 不知木蘭是女郎。

She went outside and saw her army buddies / Her army buddies were all flabbergasted: / “We marched together for these twelve long years / And absolutely had no clue that Mulan was a girl!”

The work ends with the analogy of the aforementioned hares, added as a sort of moral to the story, demonstrating how appearances can indeed be deceiving:

雄兔腳撲朔，雌兔眼迷離。 / 兩兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌？

The male hare wildly kicks its feet; / The female hare has shifty eyes, / But when a pair of hares runs side by side, / Who can distinguish whether I am in fact male or female?

---

<sup>21</sup> The analysis of the “Poem” was conducted on the text contained in *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 (1979: 373-374). The English translation is taken from: Kwa and Idema (2010: 1-3). All the following quotes from the original Chinese text and the related English translation are taken from these sources.

There are concrete ways to distinguish the male from the female. Hares have specific gender characteristics, however these can be obscured by their natural activities: when they are in motion, for example, these characteristics are difficult to discern. Men and women have no overtly distinctive characteristics determined by gender, like hares' legs or eyes. Consequentially, the curious analogy proposes that men and women, in addition to natural physical differences, like (hidden) reproductive organs, also have culturally imposed differences, such as, in the case of "The Female Mulan," footbinding. But even these can be blurred. In the human analogy, in fact, the evasive effect of the hares running side by side is given by the clothing. When the hares run, their physical differences are blurred; similarly, when people wear certain clothing, their bodily differences are blurred (Kwa 2012: 69-70). By the time Mulan dressed as a man, her statements and her actions were accepted as unhesitatingly as a man's.

Wei Yuanfu's "Song of Mulan" consists of 44 lines closely based on the content of the "Poem." It also opens once again with the girl intent on weaving and sighing. When asked why she is so worried, she replies that her father has been called to arms, but he is so old and weak: how will he ever be able to bear the harsh conditions of the northern lands?—Her daughter wonders. Furthermore, the elderly parent has no older children. Mulan thus makes the firm decision to leave in her father's stead. In the "Song," the disguise as a man and the assumption of a masculine identity passes not only through the dressing of a soldier, but also through the removal of female clothing and make-up; the lines will be analysed in detail later. Mulan thus goes to war. The narrative does not enter the heart of the story of the battles, but only mentions them. According to the historical circumstances of his time,<sup>22</sup> the author introduces in the work the theme of the Tibetan invasions in the legend of Mulan: *Geng xie yu tian Qiang* 更攜于闐羌 "[And she] also captures the Tibetans from Khotan."<sup>23</sup> Without mentioning the visit in the presence of the sovereign and the reception of positions and honours, the girl, in the role of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Wei Yuanfu was prime minister during the period of the Tang dynasty that followed the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山 (703-757) and Shi Siming 史思明 (703-761), which went down in history precisely as the "An-Shi Rebellion" (*An Shi zhi luan* 安史之亂; 755-763). This caused a strong weakening of the Tang power. The adjacent territories, such as the Mongolian or Tibetan ones, took advantage of the opportunity: in the year 763 the capital Chang'an 長安 was occupied by Tibetan troops. Wei Yuanfu, who probably had the opportunity to witness these events, decided to include them in his "Song." On this topic, cf. Roberts (2011: 68-70).

<sup>23</sup> The analysis of the "Song" was conducted on the text contained in *Yuefu shiji* (1979: 374-375). The English translation is taken from: Kwa and Idema (2010: 5-7). All the following quotes from the original Chinese text and the related English translation are taken from these sources. In this line, the term Qiang 羌 refers to the Tibetan ethnic group, settled in the region now known by the modern name of Khotan/Hotan.

victorious general, returns home. Feng Lan argues that Wei Yuanfu decided to omit this detail because, presumably, he deemed it inappropriate to offer a woman a share in political power (Lan 2003: 233). Unlike the “Poem,” in the “Song” Mulan, still wearing military clothes, presents herself to her parents who have sorrow painted on their faces. The daughter immediately understands their concerns:

父母見木蘭， / 喜極成悲傷。 / 木蘭能承父母顏， / 卻卸巾幘理絲黃。

When her father and mother see Mulan, / Extreme joy turns into sadness and worry. / Mulan can understand the expressions on their face, / So she discards turban and gauntlet and then tunes the strings.

Therefore, in order to appear as their devoted daughter, Mulan removes her turban (*jin* 巾) and gauntlet (*gou* 幘), the very symbols of her cross-dressing and masculine appearance as a general. The girl then pronounces these words:

昔爲烈士雄，今復嬌子容。

Before, I was a hero among warriors, / But from now on I’ll be your darling girl again!

Returning to being their “darling girl” (*jiao zi rong* 嬌子容), Mulan regains her identity and her role in the family and society. Then follows this couplet:

親戚持酒賀，父母始知生女與男同。

Relatives bring wine in congratulations: / “Only now do we know that a daughter is as useful as a son!”

These lines are deeply meaningful. While the “Poem” emphasised the difficulties in perceiving the difference between male and female, the “Song” makes this distinction more explicit, even going so far as to affirm that parents become aware of the fact that generating a daughter is like having a son. This, however, does not imply that Wang Yuanfu affirms gender equality. The comparison is not made to emphasise the analogous qualities of women and men, but rather to demonstrate how one exceptional woman may reveal the inadequacy of many men (Kwa and Idema 2010: xvi). This is best explained in the end of the “Song” where Mulan’s Confucian moral qualities of filial devotion and loyalty are more clearly emphasised than in the “Poem:”

世有臣子心， / 能如木蘭節， / 忠孝兩不渝， / 千古之名焉可滅！



If in this world the hearts of officials and sons / Could display the same principled virtue as Mulan's,  
/ Their loyalty and filiality would be unbroken; / Their fame would last throughout the ages – how  
could it be destroyed?

Before the end, however, Mulan is recognised as a woman by her fellow soldiers; teased out more fully in the “Song” than in the “Poem,” this theme, after all, hints at the unfailing fraternal oath sanctioned on the battlefield:

門前舊軍都， / 十年共崎嶇。 / 本結兄弟交，死戰誓不渝。 / 今者見木蘭， / 言聲雖是顏貌殊。  
 / 驚愕不敢前， / 嘆重徒嚙齷。

Her old army buddies, assembled outside, / For ten years shared in her trials. / At the outset they  
swore friendship as brothers, / An oath never broken even in the death of battle! / But when now  
on this occasion they see Mulan, / Though the voice is the same, the features are quite different! /  
Stunned and perplexed, they don't dare approach; / Heaving heavy sighs, in vain filled with  
wonder.

We will return to the topic of the relationship with fellow soldiers later to note how this aspect is developed in Xu Wei's play.

#### 4. Cross-dressing, eroticization and identity in “The Female Mulan”

As already mentioned, in Xu Wei's drama the topic of cross-dressing, involving, as it does, both undressing and redressing, and of gender identity unfolds on three different levels: the unwrapping of footbinding, virginity preserved, and the relationship with fellow soldiers.

With regard to the first level, the undressing of Mulan and the assumption of a male identity involve the removal of the foot bandaging. Footbinding is an absolutely anachronistic element in the historical period in which the play is set, as this “fashion” spread throughout China only in the much later Song dynasty. Furthermore, it was a typical practice of Chinese women, that is, those of the Han 漢 ethnicity, and not those of the Xianbei ethnicity as Mulan is presented in this play. However, Xu Wei presumably decided to insert this strongly symbolic element to make Mulan's transition from woman to man/soldier visually significant. The erotic element of footbinding (cf. Ko 2005: 145-186) and unbinding causes the scene to oscillate between the voyeuristic (in theory, the exhibition of female feet) and the comic (in practice, if the *dan* role was played by an actor, then the exhibition was of male

feet, which had nothing disturbing about it; Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 159). Note that, in the stage directions, the playwright emphasises the physical pain felt by the girl in removing the bindings:<sup>24</sup>

要演武術，先要放掉了這雙腳，換上那雙鞋兒，纔中用哩。(換鞋作痛楚狀)(唱)

【油葫蘆】生脫下半折凌波襪一彎，好些難。幾年價纔收拾得鳳頭尖，急忙得改抹做航兒泛。怎生就湊得滿幫兒檀。

If I want to practice martial arts, I've got to first let out these feet and change to this pair of boots. Only then will I manage! (As she changes footwear, she acts out pain) [To the tune Youhulu:] Just-removed, the half-folded “tiny ripple socks” bindings, / How it hurts! / It took me several years to bind together these phoenix-head points. / Now I quickly turn them into floating boats. / How will I now fill up these boots?

However, Mulan is aware that, once the war is over and she has returned to her life and identity, she will still have to marry: only in this way can she truly be a devoted daughter, in the Confucian sense of the term. Thus she immediately warns the audience that the unwrapping of the footbinding is not an irreversible process, but her family knows a remedy to bring back the “big” feet (metaphorically described as “floating boats,” *hanger fan* 航兒泛) to elegant feet (called in Chinese “Golden lotuses of three inches,” *sancun jinlian* 三寸金蓮). From these lines it is already clear that the girl is not rebelling against the traditional value system, but simply intends to regain her female identity after returning from the war:

回来俺還要嫁人，却怎生？這也不愁他，俺家有個漱金蓮方子，只用一味硝，煮湯一洗，比偌咱還小些哩。(唱)把生硝提得似雪花白，可不霎時間漱癟了金蓮瓣。

When I return, I'll still want to get married. So what can I do? Well, no need to mope about that! My family has a method for shrinking golden lotuses: just take a bit of saltpeter, boil it, and use it to wash the feet. In this way, we make them even smaller! (Sings) Take the raw saltpeter, / Boil it so it is white like snowflakes, / And in a moment, you've shrunk them back into golden lotus petals.

Saltpeter (*xiao* 硝) thus proves to be the solution for Mulan to regain the requisites to be a woman and a wife. Dwelling on the element of the feet, a synecdoche at it were has the function of eroticising Mulan's entire body. As Louise Edwards (2008: 6) points out, in fact, the body of the heroine has never

---

<sup>24</sup> On this topic, as Shiamin Kwa points out, “A note on an early printed edition of the play, which is not included in the later printed edition, hints at the entertainment value of such a scene: ‘Let the changing of clothes and shoes be performed [for the audience] to watch for a while’” (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 159).

been celebrated in its entirety, but only for individual parts: the eyebrows during the Tang dynasty; the feet in the Ming period, presumably because of the erotic fashion of bandaging; the upper body and breasts in twentieth century rewrites. After the reference of removing the bindings, a scene of strong visual impact, Mulan proceeds to dress up as a soldier:

鞋兒倒七八也穩了，且換上這衣服者。(換衣，戴一軍氈帽介)(唱)【天下樂】穿起来怕不是從軍一長官，行間，正好瞞。緊繃鈎，廝趁這細褶子繫刀環。軟嘍嘍襪鎖子甲，煖烘烘當夾被單，[...]。

In these boots, I'm pretty much steady. Now I'll put on these clothes! (*She changes clothes and puts on a man's felt military cap*) [*To the tune Tianxiale:*] Dressed up, I daresay I am a senior campaigning officer, / Among their ranks, it will be easy to hide. / Hook the belt tighdy / I shall hang my sword on the plates, / The chain mail is pliant and supple, / Its quilted lining is comfy and warm [...].

Like in the “Poem,” the assumption of male identity does not presuppose undressing. This act is in fact indicated as a simple stage action (*huanyi, dai yi jun zhanmao jie* 換衣，戴一軍氈帽介 “She changes clothes and puts on a man's felt military cap”) which precedes the act of donning the military trappings. The “Poem,” in rhythmic lines, narrated the dressing up in this way:

東市買駿馬，西市買鞍韉。/ 南市買轡頭，北市買長鞭。

The eastern market: there she bought a horse; / The western market: there she bought a saddle. / The southern market: there she bought a bridle; / The northern market: there she bought a whip.

The purchase of the tools sanctions Mulan's transition to a man/soldier. Xu Wei seems to be inspired by this source, placing little emphasis on the action of discarding female clothing. Instead, this is an element on which Wei Yuanfu dwells in his “Song:”

秣馬備戎行。/ 易卻紈綺裳，/ 洗卻鉛粉妝。

Feeds his horse and takes his place in the ranks. / She changes away her white silk skirt; / She washes away her powdered, rouged face.

As can be gleaned from these lines, the assumption of male identity implies first of all the removal of the symbols of femininity: the skirt and makeup. Presumably, in the intentions of the playwright, these actions were of little significance, as this passage in his play was sublimated by the action of the foot unbinding.

In the second act, instead, the reverse process leads Mulan to regain her true identity. When she arrives home, before talking with her parents, the girl wears her old clothes again. Xu Wei does not linger on this narrative element, but only provides a simple stage direction:

(木對鏡換女粧，拜爺娘介)

(Mulan, facing her mirror, changes back to female makeup, then bows in greeting to her parents)

Then, Mulan immediately sings an aria concerning her heroism in battle rather than any gender issue. The redressing in female clothes was, instead, an important element in the reconstruction of Mulan’s character in the “Poem:”

開我東閣門，坐我西閣床。 / 脫我戰時袍，著我舊時裳。 / 當窗理雲鬢，對鏡貼花黃。

Open the gate to my pavilion on the east, / Let me sit down in my old western room. / I will take off the dress I wore in battle; / I will put on the skirt I used to wear. / Close to the window she did up her hair; / Facing the mirror she applied makeup.

In rhythmic lines, the sequence of images leads the girl to regain her identity and her place in the family context: to be a devoted daughter (*xiao*), Mulan must wear a skirt, comb her hair and put on makeup. Referring to the Confucian theory of the “rectification of names” (*zhengming* 正名) (*Lunyu* 論語 XII.11; cf. ed. Chin 2014: 186-187), it could be said that only in this female appearance does the girl conform to what she represents for her family and society. In the “Song” of Wei Yuanfu, however, the redressing is only hinted at.

Xu Wei does not dwell on this narrative element in this case either. The reappropriation of female identity is expressed in the marriage celebrated in the end, suggesting not only the “happy ending” (*datuanyuan*) for the story, but rather also the return to the Confucian condition of harmony (*he* 和), after the equilibrium had been disturbed.

Referring to the doctrine of the three cardinal guides (*sangang* 三綱),<sup>25</sup> Feng Lan argues that there are four Confucian virtues exalted in the rewritings of the legend of Mulan, starting from the first source: in addition to the aforementioned filial devotion and loyalty, there is also heroism (*lie* 烈) and chastity (*jie* 節; Lan 2003: 233). This latter virtue is particularly emphasised in Xu Wei’s play—helping

---

<sup>25</sup> Three cardinal guides are: ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife.

to eroticize the girl's body—indeed so much so that it becomes fundamental in the definition of gender identity, unlike the *Poem* and the “Song” which mainly exalted Mulan's heroism.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the work, the playwright returns to this aspect. In the first act, as Mulan is taking leave of her parents, her mother makes these recommendations:

(娘) [...] 又一樁，便去呵，你又是個女孩兒，千鄉萬里，同行搭伴，朝飡暮宿，你保得不露出那話兒麼？這成什麼勾當？

Mother: [...] And another thing, if you go, you are still, after all, a girl. Through a thousand provinces and a million miles, you'll be marching with men and keeping their constant company – breakfasting together in the morning, lodging together at night – how can you keep your – you know what – from showing? Don't you think that this will create problems?

The mother, therefore, proves to be more concerned about virginity than for the safety of her daughter on the battlefield. The parent's worries, on the other hand, are understandable and justifiable in the value system of the traditional Confucian society: the woman's naked body could not be seen by any other man besides her husband,<sup>27</sup> therefore Mulan would be ruined forever, as she would not be able to find a man willing to marry her. However, the daughter immediately reassures her mother:

(木) 娘，你儘放心，還你一個閨女兒回來。

Mulan: Mom! Don't worry. I will return to you as a virgin.

Mulan promises that she will be faithful to the Confucian female precept of chastity (*jie*). Xu Wei here uses the term *gui* 閨, which refers to a lady's chambers and, by extension, women. In a lady's chambers, in fact, women are far from the male libido and can, therefore, preserve their chastity. The concept of *nei* (internal; cf. Goldin in Li Chengyang 2000: 146-149), mentioned earlier, and the clear separation from *wai* (external) returns here.

---

<sup>26</sup> This aspect of Mulan's character will be developed in “The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts” by the Sino-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston (1940), also introducing the aspects of the menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth; cf. Kingston (1976: 30-31; 39-40) and Allen (1996: 372-373).

<sup>27</sup> Compare the statement of Zhongzi 仲姿, protagonist of a story by an anonymous author reported in the “Collection of Inlaid Jades” (*Diaoyu ji* 瑀玉集): “The body of a woman cannot be seen by another man, so please do not refuse me” (*nüren zhi ti, bu dei zai jian zhangfu, jun wu ci ye* 女人之體，不得再見丈夫，君勿辭也); cf. Huang 黃 (2003: 51).

In the second act, after having returned victorious from the war and from the encounter with the sovereign who rewarded her with positions and emoluments, Mulan appears before her parents. The first question her mother asks her is the following:

(娘) 你這官是什麼官?

Mother: What is your position?

The first parents’ worries are to understand what honours the daughter has brought to the family. Here, another typical aspect of traditional Chinese culture is revealed: the idea of “face” (*mian* 面), that is, reputation, to be exhibited in the social context. Mulan responds to her parents in this way:

(木) 是尙書郎，奶奶，我緊牢拴，幾年夜雨梨花館，交還你依舊春風荳蔻函。怎肯辱爺娘面？

Mulan: It is “Secretarial Gentleman.” Mother! / I have been bound up tightly so many years in a hall with the nighty rain of pear-blossom petals, / But I return to you / As before, a little box of dogwood bud in spring winds. / How could I shame my parents?

After declaring the position obtained in the imperial bureaucratic apparatus, Mulan, in poetic lines, informs her mother that, although she has shared several nights in the company of many men (*ye yu lihua guan* 夜雨梨花館 “the nighty rain of pear-blossom petals”), yet she came home as “a little box of dogwood bud in spring winds” (*chunfeng doukou han* 春風荳蔻函), and not as a blossomed flower: she is still untainted. It would have been unthinkable for the girl to dishonour her parents (*ru ye niang mian* 辱爺娘面), therefore “to make them lose face” (*diumian* 丟面), that is, to lose their reputation.

One last interesting aspect emphasised in Xu Wei’s play is the relationship between Mulan and her fellow soldiers. Both in the “Poem” and in the “Song” reference is made, as we have seen, to the amazement of the comrades in arms in discovering the true identity of the victorious soldier. In this work, the playwright jokes about this aspect, creating a sort of comedy of errors. In the first act, when fellow soldiers first meet Mulan as Hua Hu, they secretly comment on “his” intriguing aspect:

(二軍私云) 這花弧倒生得好個模樣兒，倒不像個長官，倒是個秫秫，明日倒好拿來應應急。

Soldiers: This Hua Hu doesn’t look bad at all. He doesn’t look like a senior officer, but he’d be a nice morsel. Tomorrow we can take him to meet our needs.

In the original Chinese text, the final statement of this line is not exactly clear, so it is not easy to establish precisely what is meant by the sentence *mingri daohao nalai yingyingji* 明日倒好拿來應應急.

Shiamin Kwa, interpreting the line in the light of the general context of the relationship between Mulan/Hua Hu and his comrades in arms, translates it as “Tomorrow we can take him to meet our needs,” thus directing the text towards that aforementioned comedy of errors (Kwa 2012: 176).<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the reference to attraction between two men during the Ming dynasty is not surprising, as there was a strong development of homoerotic literature during this period.<sup>29</sup> Ma Qian, instead, perhaps more faithful to the original text but losing the ironic tone inherent in the line, translates “Later we can use him for emergency” (Ma 2005: 139).

In the second act, however, on the way back to the heroine’s hometown, the fellow soldiers comment on Hua Hu’s attitudes as follows:

(二军唱) [...] 想起花大哥真希罕，拉溺也不教人见。

Soldiers: [...] When you think of it, Big Brother Hua is really queer! / Whether he’s pissing or shitting, he won’t allow anyone to watch.

Comrades in arms consider the behavior of Hua Hu as *xihan* 希罕, that is, *xishao* 希少 and *xiqi* 希奇 or “rare” and “uncommon” (cf. *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 1994, 3: 696). Shiamin Kwa translates the term as “queer,” in the original etymology of “strange” or “peculiar,” fully capturing the perplexity of the character’s ambiguity raised by the soldiers (Kwa 2012: 182). Ma Qian, instead, translates the term with the more generic “weird,” glossing over once again the comic side of the relationship between Mulan/Hua Hu and her/his comrades in arms (Ma 2005: 144). The soldiers, in fact, in realising that their “big brother” (dage 大哥) Hua has never relieved himself in their presence, do not consider his *xihan* behavior in terms of ambiguity, but rather as a distinctive trait of refinement (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 164).

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of Xu Wei’s play shows that, in the character of Mulan, transgressions from traditional morality are not so transgressive after all: the girl uses the means she deems appropriate to complete a task and, after having succeeded, not only returns to her initial condition, but also rejects the actions

---

<sup>28</sup> This aspect is particularly emphasised in the 1939 film “Mulan Joins the Army” (*Mulan congjun* 木蘭從軍) written by Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889-1962), Chinese playwright, Peking opera actor and writer, film screenwriter and director, and drama educator. Cf. Kwa and Idema (2010: 53-102).

<sup>29</sup> On this topic, cf. Vitiello (2011).

performed as if she had nothing to do with them. So the heroine distances herself from the merits won on the battlefield. Mulan, therefore, cannot be considered a “rebel,” at least in the meaning of the term in Western culture. In fact, the Chinese audience not only appreciated her for the heroism (*lie*) shown on the battlefield dressed as a male soldier, but also for her filial devotion to her family (*xiao*), for the loyalty she shows the sovereign and empire (*zhong*), and for her chastity (*jie*), in the utmost respect for the Confucian tradition.

All in the norm, then. However, something special happens in this play. It is not mere gender fluidity, but the total denial of the fact that this is rare or uncommon: herein lies the *xihan* component of the work. The play, in fact, despite its apparent lightness and superficiality, raises some important issues about the performance of self. Such issues, even if only hinted at, were already presented in the “Poem” and in the “Song.” In “The female Mulan,” on the other hand, the spectacularisation of the transition from feminine to masculine and then back to feminine is used to mock the idea that one can only rely on sight to discern gender categories. Cross-dressing and ‘floating’ gender, so to speak, via eroticization of the body, are, therefore, the real protagonists of Xu Wei’s comedy. The audience, going along with the general suspension of judgment, knowingly lets itself be deceived and observes with pleasure the changing of clothes and identity. If this isn’t theatre, then what is?

## References

- AA.VV. 1979. *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 [Collected Works of the Music Bureau]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Allen, Joseph R. 1996. “Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Warrior.” *Positions* 4/2: 343-379.
- Chen, Fang 陳方. 2002. *Xu Wei ji qi “Sisheng yuan” yanjiu* 徐渭及其四聲猿研究 [A Study on Xu Wei and his *Four Cries of a Gibbon*]. Hong Kong: Hongda Chubanshe.
- Chen, Sanping. 2005. “From Mulan to Unicorn.” *Journal of Asian History* 39/1: 23-43.
- Chen, Sanping. 2002. “Son of Heaven and Son of God: Interactions among Ancient Asiatic Cultures regarding Sacral Kingship and Theophoric Names.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3/12: 289-326.
- Confucius. 2014. *Analects*. Edited by Chin Anping. London and New York: Penguin Books.
- Edwards, Louise. 2008. “Re-Fashioning the Warrior Hua Mulan: Changing Norms of Sexuality in China.” *Internation Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 48: 6-7.
- Goldin, Paul R. 2000. “The View of Women in Early Confucianism.” In: *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, edited by Li Chenyang, 133-161. Chicago, IL and LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Huang, Ruiqi 黃瑞旗. 2003. *Meng Jiangnü gushi yanjiu* 孟姜女故事研究 [Research on Meng Jiangnü’s Story]. Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe.



- Ke, Qianting 柯倩婷. 2012. “Xingbie, jiaguo, zhanzheng: Mulan chuanshuo de xiandaihua yu shijuehua 性别、  
家国、战争：木兰传说的现代化和视觉化” [Gender, Family/State, and War: The  
Modernization and Visualization of Mulan Legends]. *Huadong Shifan Daxue Xuebao* 3/3: 12–18.
- Kingston, Maxime Hong. 1976. *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York, NY:  
Alfred A. Knopf.
- Ko, Dorothy. 2005. *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, Berkeley, CA: University of  
California Press.
- Kwa, Shiamin. 2012. *Strange Eventful Histories: Identity, Performance, and Xu Wei’s Four Cries of a Gibbon*.  
Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Kwa, Shiamin. 2022. “The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father. Gender and Performance.” In:  
*How to Read Chinese Drama. A Guided Anthology*, edited by Patricia Sieber and Regina Llamas, 151–  
167. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Kwa, Shiamin and Idema, Wilt L. 2010. *Mulan. Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend, with related Texts*.  
Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Lan, Feng. 2003. “The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and  
Kingston’s Woman Warrior.” *Comparative Literature* 55/33: 229–245.
- Lauwaert, Françoise. 2020. “*Quel dommage que tu ne sois pas un garçon!*” *Rencontres avec des femmes  
remarquables de la Chine impériale*. Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique.
- Li, Chenyang, edited by. 2000. *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*. Chicago, IL  
and LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Luo, Qiuzhao 羅秋昭. 1979. *Xu Wei “Sishengyuan” yanjiu 徐渭四聲猿研究* [A Study on *Four Cries of a  
Gibbon* by Xu Wei]. Taipei: Qiye Shuju Youxian Gongsi.
- Luo, Zhufeng 羅竹風, edited by. 1994. *Hanyu dacidian 漢語大詞典* [Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the  
Chinese Language]. Shanghai: Hanyu Dacidian Chubanshe, 12 vols.
- Ma, Qian. 2005. *Women in Traditional Chinese Theater. The Heroine’s Play*. Lanham, Boulder, CO – New York,  
NY – Toronto – Oxford: University Press of America, Inc.
- Qi, Shijun 戚世隽. 2001. *Mingdai zaju yanjiu 明代雜劇研究* [A Study of Ming Dynasty Zaju Plays].  
Guangzhou: Guangdong Gaoji Jiaoyu Chubanshe.
- Roberts, John A.G. 2011. *A History of China*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vitiello, Giovanni. 2011. *The Libertine’s Friend. Homosexuality & Masculinity in Late Imperial China*. Chicago,  
IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wang, Yunxi 王運熙. 1962. *Yuefu shi luncong 樂府詩論叢* [Collected Essays on Yuefu Poems]. Beijing:  
Zhonghua Shuju.
- Xu, Wei 徐渭. 1986. *Sisheng yuan 四聲猿* [Four Cries of a Gibbon]. Edited by Zhou Zhongming 周中明.  
Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe.
- Xu, Zifang 徐子方. 2003. *Ming zaju shi 明雜劇史* [A History of Ming Zaju Plays]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Yao, Xinzong. 2013. *The Encyclopedia of Confucianism*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2 vols.

Zeitlin, Judith T. 1997. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

Alessandro Tosco holds a PhD in Euro-Asian Studies from the University of Turin. He studied at East China Normal University in Shanghai in 2014 as the recipient of a scholarship granted by Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters under the “New Sinologists” project (*Xin Hanxuejia jihua*). He is currently Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Kore University of Enna, Italy. His research focuses on imperial Chinese literature, particularly theatrical works, and he also studies the reception of Chinese thought and literature in European culture during the 17th to 19th centuries.

Alessandro can be contacted at: [alessandro.tosco@unikore.it](mailto:alessandro.tosco@unikore.it)

# Thought and religion



# Chinese thought in the writings of Simone Weil

## Encounter and translation

Raissa De Gruttola

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a French philosopher who left many writings addressing issues in philosophy, mysticism, theology, social science, political activism, and many other fields. Her *Notebooks* (1941-1942) include frequent references to the Chinese thought in different sections of the text, yet rarely explored to date. The aim of this paper is to detect and analyze these references, with a particular focus on keywords such as Dao, Daoism, Laozi, *wu wei*, the water metaphor. What proves to be remarkably interesting in the presence of the frequent references to Chinese thought in the writings of Weil is the general association of these elements with Christian concepts.

After a brief outline of the life and activity of Simone Weil, the paper will present the sources and translations through which Weil encountered Chinese philosophy, and the role she gave it in her thought and her writings. A comparison with the extracts of the Chinese texts addressing the issues quoted will also be included. To conclude, some features of the studies by Chinese scholars on Simone Weil will be presented, to explore the eventual importance given to this particular aspect of her thought and the corresponding translating issues concerning the Chinese edition of her works.

**Keywords:** Simone Weil; Daodejing; Sino-Western relations; Chinese and Western philosophy; Dao; Laozi; *wuwei*.

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The thought and writings of Simone Weil have been explored from numerous perspectives and analyzed in deep by different authoritative scholars in the field. The analysis of her writings shows that

---

<sup>1</sup> The research for this paper was conducted thanks to the research fellowship granted by the Centro Universitario Cattolico (CUC) of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI) 2020-2023. I am particularly grateful to Professors Massimiliano Marianelli and Emmanuel Gabellieri for sharing with me the starting point of this research, to Professor Luca Alici for being my

she drew inspiration from different sources and traditions, and many of these have been explored. Nevertheless, the portion of her thought and writings with frequent reference to concepts and authors of the Chinese thought has not been researched in detail to date. After a brief outline presenting her life and writings, the paper is divided into two sections addressing two different issues. In the first section, some extracts of Weil's writings where China or Chinese thought are mentioned will be discussed, comparing their function in the French philosopher's texts and their meaning in the original Chinese context. In the second section, a presentation on the research on Weil in the Chinese language will be provided with the aim of analyzing the perspectives chosen by Chinese scholars to address her thought and writings. The purpose of the paper is to detect and analyze the references to Chinese thought in the writings by Simone Weil and to present the contemporary research on Weil by Chinese scholars, so as to outline if and in what terms this peculiar aspect of her works is considered and addressed.

## 2. Simone Weil: life and writings

Simone Weil was born in Paris in 1909 to a secular cultured family with a Jewish background but with an agnostic attitude. Her elder brother was the famous mathematician André Weil, in comparison to whom, she would often feel less brilliant. Weil soon developed a deep sensitivity for social issues, and after completing her studies, she taught philosophy but also worked in factories and farms. She was interested in political thought and was in a constant search for the truth, showing deep social awareness and moral sensitivity:

Her persistent desire for truth and justice led her to both elite academies and factory floors, political praxis and spiritual solitude. At different times she was an activist, a pacifist, a militant, a mystic, and an exile; but throughout, in her inquiry into reality and orientation to the good, she remained a philosopher (Rozelle-Stone and Davis 2022).

The 1934-35 working experience in factories led her to support strikes and to report the miserable conditions of the working class in articles and essays. In the same years, she would criticize the modern industrial world and every form of totalitarianism and oppression. In 1936, Weil decided to join the Spanish Civil War as an anarchist in the Republican faction, however, she was forced to go back to Paris shortly after, being wounded and for her poor health conditions. One year later, she was in Assisi, in

---

supervisor during the research project, to the Professors of the board of the Center, and to all the young researchers I met during the activities of the Center.

---

Italy, where she declared she had an intense experience of the presence of the Christian God. While discarding the violent Old Testament God and Jew beliefs, in fact, she was interested in Catholic Christianity and its dogmas and liturgies. Despite being grown in an agnostic environment:

One could almost say that her outlook was Christian from the start. 'I might say that I was born, I grew up and I always remained within the Christian inspiration' (Perrin and Thibon 2003: 19).

She would recall the experience in Assisi and a retreat in France in 1938, writing:

Something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees. In 1938 I spent ten days at Solesmes, from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday, following all the liturgical services. I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all (Weil 1951: 67-68).

In 1940, after the German invasion of Poland and the outbreak of the Second World War, Simone Weil moved with her parents to Marseille where, while confirming a nonviolent and pacifist attitude, she had the occasion of knowing in deep not only Western classical texts and philosophy, but also texts, thoughts, and traditions from Asia.

Greek civilization is considered alongside several ancient and extra-European civilizations, according to a cross-cultural and multi-focal perspective linking Greece to Egypt, Mesopotamia and Eastern traditions (Simeoni 2021).

In particular, she studied the Sanskrit language, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Upanisad*, that would have relevant space in the elaboration of her system of thought. In those same years, Weil would also come in contact with the Chinese tradition. In 1941, in Marseille, she met the Dominican Father Jean-Marie Perrin (1905-2002) who became a friend and a guide to her, and introduced her to the philosopher Gustave Thibon (1903-2001), in whose farm she worked as an agricultural laborer.<sup>2</sup> In Spring 1942, she

---

<sup>2</sup> On the role of Perrin and Thibon in the life of Weil and in the edition of her writings see: Perrin and Thibon 2003 and related bibliography.

and her parents left Marseille and, after some days spent in Casablanca, they arrived in New York, where they lived up to November 1942, when Simone went to London.

When she arrived in London at the end of November 1942 it was a bitter disappointment for her. She had only one aim: to be given some arduous and dangerous mission, to sacrifice herself in some useful way, either saving lives or carrying out some act of sabotage (Perrin and Thibon 2003: 24).

She was disappointed because she was assigned to work in an office and felt useless for all who suffered. Nevertheless, she continued to feel compassion and empathy for the hardship of her compatriots and refused to eat more than them, despite already being very weak. Simone Weil contracted tuberculosis and her health conditions worsened so much that, in April 1943, she was admitted to hospital, and in August was moved to the Ashford sanatorium. She died there on August 24, 1943.

She had been writing since she was very young, and many of her articles and essays were published and circulated during her life. However, the most famous collections of her writings were published posthumously. Diaries, letters, comments, and reflections were, in fact, collected and printed in French from 1947 to 1968, and in 1973 the two volumes on *La vie de Simone Weil* edited by Simone Pétrement were published (Pétrement 1973; 1976). These became precious sources to know the life and works of Weil, furthermore, from the '50s many translations in other languages were made and published.<sup>3</sup> The focus of this paper is on the contents of the *Cahiers*, a collection of notebooks written between 1941 and 1942, including the notebooks written in those years in Marseille and New York (*Cahiers*, *Cahiers d'Amérique*), with the addition of a *Pre-war Notebook* (1933 – (?) 1939) and the *London Notebook* (*Carnet de Londres*) written in 1943. The English reference editions here used are Weil 1956 and Weil 1970.<sup>4</sup> The *Notebooks* were written in the years when Weil came to know the traditions from East Asia, especially Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, and Daoism,<sup>5</sup> and the references to these are very frequent

---

<sup>3</sup> For a list of the published and unpublished works by Weil, see Weil (1982: 81-100).

<sup>4</sup> The two English volumes of Weil 1956 are the translation of the notebooks written in Marseille from 1941 to April 1942, published by Plon in French in three volumes as *Cahiers* in 1951 (I-IV), 1953 (V-VIII), 1956 (VIII-XI). The French *La connaissance surnaturelle* (1950) included the "Prologue" and the notebooks written in New York and London. These three are available in English, with the *Pre-war Notebook*, in Weil 1970. The *Cahiers* were revised in the '70s by Simone Pétrement and André Weil and published by Gallimard, the same publishing house of *La connaissance surnaturelle*, edited by Albert Camus. For details on the editorial process of the notebooks and their translations, see Weil (1982: 11-35).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper the words *Dao* and *Daoism* 道家 (*Daojia*) will be used following the Chinese *pinyin* transcription. *Pinyin* will be used also for all the other Chinese words, thus resulting in *Laozi*, *Daodejing* 道德經, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Liezi* 列子 instead of "Lao tzu" or "Lao-tseu," "Tao Te Ching/King/Qing," "Chuang tzu" or "Chuang-tseu," "Lieh-tzu," commonly found in the *Notebooks*. Exceptions are made only for direct quotations.



in these writings. The pages that host the most recurrent occurrences of keywords such as *Dao* 道, *Laozi* 老子, or *wuwei* 無為 are, in particular, those written in Marseille.

### 3. Chinese sources and references in the *Notebooks*

The first mention of something referred to China in the life of Weil is her sad reaction to the news of a severe famine in China reported in the memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), where she recalled:

I'd heard that she'd broken into sobs at the news of a famine in China, I envied a heart able to beat across the world (de Beauvoir quoted in Du Plessix Gray 2001: 5).<sup>6</sup>

Simone Weil was shocked by the number of victims and the sufferings of Chinese people and could not admit others neglecting the situation. More than ten years later, when in Marseille, she would meet again China, but from another perspective.

The field of the influences of Chinese thought in the writing of Simone Weil has not been explored in deep to date. Only three authors addressed the issue in the last decades and, today, four papers are available on the topic.<sup>7</sup> In 1971, Wu took into account the mysticism in *Gravity and Grace* and compared some Daoist notions addressing the same concepts. Sourisse in 1999 briefly outlined the main features of Daoism and compared them with some concepts expressed in the writings by Weil. More recently, Gabellieri addressed the issue from an aesthetic perspective, considering the characteristics of Chinese painting, and looking for similarities in Giotto, also analyzing the relationship between philosophy and art, space and emptiness, and looking at the features of *logos*, *Dao*, and non-acting action (2016); he later recalled these elements in a study focused on Chinese painting, Weil and Francois Cheng (2020). The preliminary data provided by these contributions are fundamental to continuing the research in the field. New perspectives will also be provided by the analysis of Chinese studies on the same topic presented below.

The first official occasion during which Simone Weil came in close contact with China was in Marseille by the end of 1940, when she participated in a conference by Marcel Brion on Chinese art and philosophy.

---

<sup>6</sup> The episode of de Beauvoir and Weil meeting is also reported in Pétremont (1976: 42). They met in 1928 and the famine is the Chinese famine of 1928-1930 when in Northern China the estimated mortality for a drought was 10 million and the estimated disaster victims were 57.3 million. The famine affected mainly the provinces of Henan, Shaanxi, and Gansu (Li 2007: 284).

<sup>7</sup> These are: Gabellieri (2016; 2020); Sourisse (1999) and Wu (1971).

M. Marcel Brion, who is known for his work in aesthetics, among other subjects, undertook a highly interesting investigation of the relation between painting and philosophy in China. This, of course, dealt with Taoism. Rightly, he only mentioned Confucius in passing; the marvelous texts that he cited were entirely drawn from Taoist writings and Buddhist writings near to Taoism. Listening to them, one soon sensed that claiming a relation between philosophy and painting was nothing forced, for these texts have a clear relation to artistic meditation. Unfortunately, the limited time of a lecture hardly lets one be as precise about the relation as one would like, and M. Brion had to stop at the very moment that his audience wanted him to say more, for he had just gotten to the heart of his subject. At least he left them wanting to spend some hours of contemplation before Chinese paintings. Or, not being able to do that, they could meditate on the Taoist formulas. M. Brion spoke of how to get the interest and sympathy of those who continually compare the East unfavorably to the West. Certainly, whenever one makes the East one's subject, it is a good idea to compare it to the West only when one wants to do so in favor of the East, but perhaps it is too much to even insist on any opposition between the two. What is foreign to us in this thought? If we paid attention to it, we should recognize it as being something that is already present to us. Each Taoist formula strikes a chord in us, and these texts evoke one by one Heraclitus, Protagoras, Plato, the Cynics, the Stoics, Christianity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Not that Taoist thought is not original, profound, or new to a European; but, like all that is truly great, it is both new and familiar (Springsted 2015: 38).

The content of the conference and the references to Chinese paintings fascinated and stimulated Weil, who wrote a report on it, and later published an article on the topic (Gabellieri 2016: 76). In this article, published only a few months after the event, she underlined the “surprising parallelism” between Chinese and Western thought (Sourisse 1999: 170). However, although she became acquainted with Chinese art through Brion, she would diverge from the constant opposition he presented when mentioning Western and Chinese painting. Weil did not accept the claim by Brion that the two ways of expression were in contrast when addressing symmetry or balance, and argued that, on the contrary, the differences in using perspective and painting technique were in any case the result of the same human need to look for the infinite (Gabellieri 2020: 165).

The possibility to deal with other traditions was warmly welcomed by Weil. She had been constantly in search of elements from different sources to set up her personal view of the world and rapidly assimilated the Chinese concepts to those of Christianity.

At this period [*the 'axial age'*] there arose a series of teachers in India and China and Persia and Greece, who laid the foundations of all the great cultures which have survived the present day, and who were moreover contemporary with the Prophets of Israel. What is the relation of this religious tradition to Christianity? This is the question which occupied Simone Weil continually. She was deeply impressed with the wisdom of this tradition, which she considered to be identical in many

respects with that of Christianity, yet she feared that if she became a Christian she might be compelled to renounce it (Griffiths 1953: 233).<sup>8</sup>

The reflection Weil made on Chinese painting represented the opportunity for her to get in contact with the wider Chinese tradition, choosing as a privileged path the knowledge of Daoism. The texts available to her were Wieger (1913), Salet (1923) and Granet (1934), three volumes in French that presented the key concepts of Daoism and included translations from the *Laozi* (or *Daodejing* 道德經), the *Liezi* 列子, and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.<sup>9</sup> Weil came to know Chinese thought through translated texts that were the result of the attitude towards them of their translators. Wieger, for example, was a Jesuit missionary in China, and would easily compare the idea of the Daoist Dao to that of the Christian God. Nevertheless, the indirect knowledge she had of the Chinese tradition, would not prevent her from welcoming it and using its features in her wider reflections.

Certainly, during the first half of the twentieth century, and particularly for those who were literally on the run during the Second World War, there was not an abundance of excellent sources in France to learn about Chan Buddhism and the Daoist tradition to which it owes so much. But the confidence with which Weil interprets this and other Chan dialogues according to the dualisms of her formative training is astonishing for an intellectual who was extraordinarily meticulous, who read texts in many languages (French, Latin, Greek, English, Sanskrit, and German), and who was more appreciative of Asian traditions than most of the Anglo European philosophers of her generation (Pirruccello 2008: 307-308).

The elements that most frequently are addressed, or simply mentioned by Weil in the writings here analyzed are Dao and *wuwei* ('acting non coercively,' 'non-doing'), and often reference is made to the theme of water in the Daoist texts. Remarkably, the common association made by Weil is that of comparing and assimilating Daoist concepts to Christian ones.

Weil quotes the *Zhuangzi* in the *Notebooks* with reference to *wuwei*:

No void other than the non-manifested – Chuang-Tse. 'While doing nothing, there is nothing which he does not do' (Weil 1956: 62).

The original has:

---

<sup>8</sup> On the 'axial age' see Bellah and Joas (2012) and Jaspers (1953).

<sup>9</sup> These were also the sources from where she copied some extracts reported in the *Notebooks*. See: Weil 1982, 398. It is likely that she didn't have access to the works by Stanislas Julien (Sourisse 1999: 173-174).

故曰：「天地無為也，而無不為也。」

Thus it is said, 'Heaven and earth do nothing, and yet there is nothing they do not do.' But as for human beings, who among them can attain to this non-doing? (*Zhuangzi* 18, Ziporyn 2020: 145).

The reference is to the *Daodejing*, Chapters 37 and 48:<sup>10</sup>

道常無為而無不為

The way never acts yet nothing is left undone (*Laozi* 37, Lau 1963: 42).

無為而無不為

when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone (*Laozi* 48, Lau 1963: 55).<sup>11</sup>

In another passage, Weil wrote:

Love your enemies, the wicked, the ungrateful, etc. *like* your heavenly Father (not otherwise); compare with Chinese non-action (Weil 1956: 106).<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that the tendency of Weil is that of detecting similarities between Daoist and Christian concepts. This attitude is criticized by Sourisse, who argues that the idea of Dao cannot be compared to that of the biblical God (Sourisse 1999, 178) and that the motivation beyond *wuwei* and the Christian behavior should be differentiated. According to the French scholar, while acting (or non-acting) in a Christian perspective is assimilated to the intention to do good deeds, on the model of the good Samaritan (as in the Gospel of Luke 10: 25-37), the Daoist *wuwei* is indifferent to human sufferings and is not directed to those in need; on the contrary, exerting *wuwei* the sage king of the *Laozi* rules over the masses by keeping them ignorant. In this view, the Daoist sage cannot be assimilated to Christ, as,

---

<sup>10</sup> The distinguished 1963 English translation by D.C. Lau was chosen despite being dated, as the features of this version are closer to the versions used by Weil.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to notice the similarity of the passage to the Prologue of the Gospel of John (1: 1-3: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be"). The Greek term for 'Word' is *logos*, a key term often used by Weil. In her writings, she seems to assume that both *logos* and *Dao* are essential to the existence of everything.

<sup>12</sup> The sentence is followed by the Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew 5: 45.48: "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. [...] Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (both quoted in Weil 1956: 106).

despite both being a form of mediation (*metaxu* in the language of Weil), the former is ‘stoically’ unperturbed, while the latter dies on the cross for his people (Sourisse 1999: 193-196).<sup>13</sup>

In the thought and writings of Weil, at the same time, *wuwei* is often considered together with the notion of Dao, and with reference to the Christian God or to Jesus Christ. In the *Notebooks* she states, for example:

I am the Way. The Tao, non-active action, is an equivalent form (Weil 1956: 284).<sup>14</sup>

And also:

Taoists. To call by the same name *Tao*, way, on the one hand the way leading toward God, and on the other hand, God himself – doesn’t this imply an idea of mediation? ‘I am the way.’ And in those passages concerning the Tao and the man of perfect wisdom, isn’t there a foreshadowing of the incarnation – or more than that even? (Weil 1956: 457).

Quoting the starting of an extract from the Gospel of John (14:6: ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’), Weil uses the literal meaning of the Chinese word *Dao* (‘way’) and compares the identity of Jesus to its features. Gabellieri underlines that, in extracts like this, the idea of *Dao* is connected to that of *logos* and that, therefore, the two factors can both be seen as a mediation (Gabellieri 2020: 168). Moreover, Wu claims that from the emptiness caused by the absence of God, people get the desire of his presence and that the acceptance of that emptiness is the basis of the Daoist thought in Weil. The difference that Wu detects is the metaphysical nature of the *wuwei* in Daoism and the ethical meaning assigned to it by Weil (Wu 1971: 129).

Through the text, other references to China and Chinese thought and authors are found, all concerning Daoist key elements and using them from a Christian perspective. The case of Daoism is an example of the peculiar way by which Weil makes use of another system of thought and integrates it

---

<sup>13</sup> Sourisse also added that the idea of comparing the essence of water was controversial, as the meaning of water in Christian tradition, linked as it is to the rite of baptism or to a new creation after the crossing of the Red Sea during Easter night, marks the sense of a passage from death to life in a sort of eschatological aim. On the contrary, the idea of water in Daoism is only connected to the flow of the Dao and to a peaceful return to the lost innocence of childhood. Notably, Sourisse also criticizes the attempt of Weiger at comparing Christianity and Daoism, rejecting the narrative according to which Chinese people already knew God even before the arrival of missionaries (Sourisse 1999: 179; 189-190).

<sup>14</sup> The same expression is found in Weil (1970: 322).

into her personal reflections and is just a small part of the rich exchange of philosophy, culture, tradition, and religion she developed in her writings.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Chinese studies on Weil

This section includes a literature review of the research on Weil in the Chinese language. A preliminary analysis of the available works on Simone Weil, her thought, and writings by Chinese scholars shows that, as of today, there is a lack of studies on the references she made to Chinese philosophy, authors, texts, and concepts. Significantly, the scholars whose name is recurrent in the contemporary field of research on Simone Weil,<sup>16</sup> are also translators of her main works.

Professor Xu Weixiang 徐衛翔 is the Director of the School of Humanities of Tongji University in Shanghai and a specialist in French philosophy, Christian philosophy, and political philosophy. Xu translated “The Need for Roots” (*Zhagen* 《扎根》, Weil 2003a) and edited a volume of selected works of the early production of Weil (Weil 2007). Xu also published a paper on Weil’s political philosophy where neither Dao nor Daoism are mentioned, and the focus is on roots, duty, and patriotism (Xu 2006).

In 2018 Yang Yiling 楊依陵 published in Taiwan the translation of “Oppression and Liberty” (Weil 2018) and in 2021 a new translation of “The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind” was published (Weil 2021).

Both retired professors of Beijing Daxue, Du Xiaozhen 杜小真 and Gu Jiachen 顧嘉深<sup>17</sup> have translated and edited several important works by Weil. In 1994 they published the first Chinese edition of “Waiting for God” that would be revised and republished in 2019 by the same translators and the same publishing house. It is interesting to observe the change in the Chinese title of the book: the 1994 edition was, in fact, *Qidai Shangdi* 《期待上帝》 (Weil 1994), a literal translation of the original title, while the 2019 version is titled *Zai qidai zhi zhong* 《在期待之中》 (Weil 2019b), literally ‘While waiting’, with the absence of the word referring to God. Furthermore, in the previous title, the Chinese word chosen to translate ‘God’ was *Shangdi*, which is the common term used in the Chinese language

---

<sup>15</sup> For other occurrences of Chinese elements in the *Notebooks* of Weil and their connection with the Chinese Daoist texts, especially the metaphor of water, see De Gruttola (2020a).

<sup>16</sup> The transliteration of the surname of Simone Weil in Chinese is found in two variants of characters, the *pinyin* always being Weiyi. These are: 薇依 and 韋伊 (or, in simplified characters, 韦伊). The name is always given as Ximeng’nuo 西蒙娜. In the present work, the characters of the surname are reported as in the quoted texts.

<sup>17</sup> Gu Jiachen is specialized in French language and Du Xiaozhen in Comparative literature, with a focus on French.

to indicate in general the Christian God; however, it is actually the specific term adopted by the Protestant groups, in contrast with the typical Catholic terminology that uses *Tianzhu* 天主.<sup>18</sup> Professors Du and Gu also translated and published the Chinese version of “Gravity and Grace” in 2003 (Weil 2003b), and the volume was republished in 2019 by the same translators but from another publishing house (Weil 2019c). Gu Jiachen and Du Xiaozhen are also the translators and editors of the Chinese translation of the work by Jacques Cabaud *L’expérience vécue de Simone Weil*, published in Beijing in 1997 (Cabaud 1997). This was probably the first complete biography of Simone Weil available in the Chinese language. In 2004 two volumes were published in Shanghai with the translation of the book by Simone de Pétrement “Simone Weil: a Life” (Pétrement 2004), providing another biography of the philosopher in Chinese, translated by Wang Susheng 王蘇生 and Lu Qi 盧起. In 2021 a Chinese language biography was published by Lin Zao 林早, outlining the life of Simone Weil focusing on the fields of philosophy, religion, politics, and social issues (Lin 2021).

Professor Wu Yaling 吳雅凌, author of many papers on Simone Weil and her thought, is a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and translated three works by Weil. In 2012, the Chinese version of “God in Plato” was published in Beijing and a new edition was released in 2017 (Weil 2012; 2017).<sup>19</sup> In 2019, Wu published the translation of *Venice saved* (Weil 2019a), and in 2020 the same publishing house printed Wu’s Chinese version of the “London Notebooks” (Weil 2020). As shown before, there is no direct reference to Daoist texts or Chinese thought in these works by Weil, so it was not possible to explore the way Wu and the other Chinese scholars dealt with the topic.

In an essay, Liang Lianhua 梁艷華 addresses the ideology of Weil on labour (Liang 2005), and in another article, the thought of Weil with regard to modern science and social crisis is analyzed (Liang 2007a). In the doctoral thesis submitted in the same year, Yang discusses political philosophy in Weil (Yang 2007b). The role of the Greek classics in Weil is also discussed in the Master thesis by Yang Xiaoyi 楊瀟儀, focusing on the roots of culture and Weil’s literary thoughts (Yang 2019), and in a paper by Dong Bo 董波 exploring the view of Homer in Weil (Dong 2012).

Many other papers and studies on Simone Weil are available in the Chinese language, and it is likely that other translations and studies will be published in the near future, so as to expect further

---

<sup>18</sup> On the debate on the terminology to translate the Christian God into Chinese language, see Barriquand (2011), De Gruttola (2020b), Golden (2009), Wong (2004) and Zhao (2010).

<sup>19</sup> The word chosen to translate ‘God’ in this title is in both cases *Shen* 神, a term admitted even in Christian terminology (more Protestant than Catholic), but discarded in the last century with reference to God, and used only with reference to ‘a spirit’.

analysis on these issues. With this recent interest in the works by the French philosopher and her thought, the scientific community can expect that some research could also focus on the Daoist features included in the writings by Weil, as they prove to be significant in her thought, despite mostly neglected to date.

## 5. Conclusive remarks

This paper has shown that, despite representing a minor section of the wide system of thought by Weil, the use of Chinese philosophy she made was frequent and peculiar. The presentation of the translated sources available to her helps us in understanding some of her choices, such as the comparison between the Christian God and the Daoist Dao, or the similarities she found between the Chinese *wuwei* and the behavior of Christ or of Christians. In the second section, a preliminary outline of the literature available in the Chinese language on Simone Weil is provided. It focuses on the translated volumes and extends to a selection of studies published by the same translators or the main scholars working on her. This review has revealed that the translation of the *Notebooks* into Chinese language has not been a priority to date; as a consequence, Weil's references to Daoism and other issues concerning the Chinese tradition are not yet available in Chinese at the moment. To our knowledge, even studies carried out by Chinese scholars who can access French sources do not seem to address the subject matter of the present study. However, the review has also shown a remarkable and growing interest in her by scholars in the fields of French studies and Western philosophy. As the presence of traces of Chinese thought in Weil's writing is only a marginal aspect of her thought, we can expect that it will soon attract the interest of Chinese scholars as the field advances and a translation of the *Notebooks* is published. We hope that the present study adds a distinctively sinological perspective to the existing literature on the topic, enriching the research in the field and encouraging new research projects both for European and Chinese scholars.

## References

- Ames, Roger T. and David Hall. 2010. *Dao de jing: A Philosophical Translation*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Andreini, Attilio. 2018. *Laozi. Daodejing: il canone della Via e della Virtù*. Milano: Einaudi.
- Andreini, Attilio and Maurizio Scarpari. 2007. *Il daoismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Barriquand, Francois. 2011. "Biblical Names of God in Chinese: A Catholic Point of View with Ecumenical Perspectives." In: *Shengjing de Zhongwen fanyi* 聖經的中文翻譯 [The Chinese



- Translation of the Bible], edited by Francois Barriquand, 456-560. In: *Tianzhujiao yanjiu xuebao* 天主教研究學報 (Hong Kong Journal of Catholic Studies) 2.
- Bellah, Robert N. and Hans Joas. 2012. *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Bianchi, Ester. 2009. *Taoismo*. Milano: Electa.
- Cabaud, Jacques, Yake Kabo 雅克·卡博. 1997. *Xinyang yu zhongfu. Ximeng'nuo Wei yi zhuan* 信仰與重負. 西蒙娜·韋伊傳 [L'expérience vécue de Simone Weil]. Translated by Gu Jiachen 顧嘉深 and Du Xiaozhen 杜小真. Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe 北京大學出版社.
- De Gruttola, Raissa. 2020a. "Dao e pensiero cinese negli scritti di Simone Weil: un'analisi preliminare." *Simone Weil protagonista della filosofia del '900. Ritrovare l'umano*, edited by Massimiliano Marianelli. Monograph volume of *Studium* 116/3: 51-66.
- De Gruttola, Raissa. 2020b. "Il Dio cristiano in lingua cinese: dibattiti e traduzioni." *Bridges. La Nottola di Minerva. Journal of Philosophy and Culture* 18: 20-38.
- Dong Bo 董波. 2012. "Ximeng'nuo Wei yi de Hema guan 西蒙娜·薇依的荷馬觀" [Simone Weil's view of Homer]. *Guowai wenxue* 國外文學 (Foreign language literature) 2/126: 153-157.
- Du Plessix Gray, Francine. 2001. "At Large and at Small: Loving and Hating Simone Weil." *The American Scholar* 70/3: 5-11.
- Duyvendak, J.J.L. 1942. *Tau-te-tsjing. Het boek van weg en deugd*. Arnhem: VanLoghum Slaterus.
- Gabellieri, Emmanuel. 2016. "Entre Logos et Tao, forme et sans-forme. L'esthétique de S.Weil et la pensée chinoise." In: *Mises en scène de l'invisible. Esthétique et Herméneutique, Frontières de l'image et du sens Chine-France*, edited by Stéphane Kalla Karim, 75-91. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Gabellieri, Emmanuel. 2020. "Taoïsme et peinture chinoise chez Simone Weil et François Cheng." In: *Epistémologie du dessin. Concepts, lectures et interprétations (XIX-XXI e siècles)*, edited by Agnès Callu, 163-171. Lyon: Editions Jacques André, coll. Atomos.
- Golden, Sean. 2009. "'God's Real Name is God.' The Matteo Ricci-Niccolò Longobardi Debate on Theological Terminology as a Case Study in Intersemiotic Sophistication." *The Translator* 15/2: 375-400.
- Graham, Angus C. (trans). 1981. *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Granet, Marcel. 1934. *La Pensée Chinoise*. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel.
- Griffiths, Bede. 1953. "The Enigma of Simone Weil." *Blackfriars* 34/398: 232-236.
- Jaspers, Karl. 1953. *The Origin and Goal of History*. Translated by Michael Bullock. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.
- Lau, D. C. 1963. *Tao te ching. Lao Tzu*. Harmondsworth: Penguin books.
- Li, Lillian M. 2007. *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s-1990s*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Liang Lianhua 梁艷華. 2005. “Ximeng’nuo Wei yi de laodong sixiang 西蒙娜·韋伊的勞動思想” [Simone Weil’s Ideology on Labour]. *Ha’erbin gongye daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 哈爾濱工業大學學報 (社會科學版 [Journal of HIT (Social Science Edition)] 7/6: 40-44.
- Liang Lianhua 梁艷華. 2007a. “Xiandai kexue yu shehui weiji. Ximeng’nuo Wei yi dui xiandai kexue de fan’si 現代科學與社會危機 — 西蒙娜·韋伊對現代科學的反思” [Modern Science and Social Crises. Simone Weil’s Reflections on Modern Science]. *Ziran bianzhengfa yanjiu* 自然辯證法研究 [Studies in Dialectics of Nature] 23/11: 66-70.
- Liang Lianhua 梁艷華. 2007b. “Zai chenshi de ziyou yu tianguo de ziyou zhijian. Ximeng’nuo Wei yi zhengzhi zhaxue yanjiu 在塵世的自由與天國的自由之間. 西蒙娜·韋伊政治哲學研究” [Between earthly and heavenly freedom. A study on the political philosophy of Simone Weil]. PhD. Dissertation, Zhejinag University.
- Lin Zao 林早. 2021. *Ximeng’nuo Wei yi* 西蒙娜·薇依 [Simone Weil]. Wuhan: Huazhong keji daxue chubanshe 華中科技大學出版社.
- Perrin, Joseph Marie and Gustave Thibon. 2003. *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*. London: Routledge.
- Pétrément, Simone, Ximeng’nuo Peiteileimengte 西蒙娜·佩特雷蒙特. 2004. *Ximeng’nuo Wei yi. Shang, xia* 《西蒙娜薇依》上、下 [Simone Weil: a Life. 2 voll.]. Translated by Wang Susheng 王蘇生 and Lu Qi 盧起. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin chubanshe 上海人民出版社.
- Pétrément, Simone. 1973. *La vie de Simone Weil*. Paris: Fayard.
- Pétrément, Simone. 1976. *Simone Weil. A Life*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Pirruccello, Ann. 2008. “Philosophy in the Ten Directions: Global Sensibility and the Imaginary.” *Philosophy East and West* 58/3: 301-317.
- Poole, Adrian. 1992. “War and Grace: The Force of Simone Weil on Homer.” *A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2/1: 1-15.
- Rozelle-Stone, A. Rebecca and Benjamin P. Davis. 2022. “Simone Weil.” In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2022 Edition, edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/simone-weil/>.
- Salet, Pierre. 1923. *Lao Tseu, Tao te King. Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu*. Paris: Payot.
- Simeoni, Francesca. 2019. “Lavoro e attenzione: aspetti della mediazione nel pensiero di Simone Weil.” *Metodo. International Studies in Phenomenology and Philosophy* 7/2: 89-112.
- Simeoni, Francesca. 2021. “‘To Turn with All One’s Soul’. On Some Aspects of the Platonic Legacy according to Simone Weil.” *Cosmopolis* 18/1: 3.  
<https://www.cosmopolisonline.it/articolo.php?numero=XVIII122021&id=10>.
- Sourisse, Michel. 1999. “Simone Weil et le Taoïsme.” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 22/2: 165-196.
- Springsted, Eric O., ed. 2015. *Simone Weil. Late Philosophical Writings*. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 1994. *Qidai Shangdi* 《期待上帝》 [Waiting for God]. Translated by Du Xiaozhen 杜小真 and Gu Jiachen 顧嘉深. Hong Kong: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian 生活、讀書、新知 三聯書店.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2003a. *Zhagen* 《扎根》 [The Need for Roots]. Translated by Xu Weixiang 徐衛翔. Hong Kong: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian 生活、讀書、新知三聯書店.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2003b. *Zhongfu yu shen'en* 《重負與神恩》 [Gravity and Grace]. Translated by Gu Jiachen 顧嘉深 and Du Xiaozhen 杜小真. Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue chubanshe 中國人民大學出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2007. *Ximeng'nuo Weiyi zao qi zuo pin xuan* 西蒙娜·薇依 早期作品選 [Selected early works by Simone Weil]. Translated by Xu Weixiang 徐衛翔. Shanghai: Tongji da xue chu ban she 同濟大學出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2012. *Bolatu duihua zhong de shen* 《柏拉圖對話中的神》 [God in Plato]. Translated by Wu Yaling 吳雅凌. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2017. *Bolatu duihua zhong de shen* 《柏拉圖對話中的神》 [God in Plato]. Translated by Wu Yaling 吳雅凌. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2018. *Yapo yu ziyou* 《壓迫與自由》 [Oppression and Liberty]. Translated by Yang Yiling 楊依陵. Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu 臺灣商務.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2019a. *Bei zhengjiu de Weinisi* 《被拯救的威尼斯》 [Venice Saved]. Translated by Wu Yaling 吳雅凌. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2019b. *Zai qidai zhi zhong* 《在期待之中》 [Waiting for God]. Translated by Du Xiaozhen 杜小真 and Gu Jiachen 顧嘉深. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2019c. *Zhongfu yu shen'en* 《重負與神恩》 [Gravity and Grace]. Translated by Gu Jiachen 顧嘉深 and Du Xiaozhen 杜小真. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2020. *Lundun wengao* 《倫敦文稿》 [London Notebook]. Translated by Wu Yaling 吳雅凌. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社.
- Weil, Simone, Ximeng'nuo Weiyi 西蒙娜·薇依. 2021. *Zhagen: renlei yiwu xunyan xulun* 扎根：人類義務宣言緒論 [The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind]. Translated by Yang Yiling 楊依陵. Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu 臺灣商務.
- Weil, Simone. 1951. *Waiting for God*. Translated by Emma Craufurd. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Weil, Simone. 1956. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. Translated by Arthur Wills, 2 vols., New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Weil, Simone. 1970. *First and Last Notebooks*. Translated by Richard Rees. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weil, Simone. 1982. *Quaderni, Vol. I*. Edited by Giancarlo Gaeta. Milano: Adelphi. [original: *Cahiers, I*, 1970, Paris: Librairies Plon].

- Wieger, Léon. 1913. *Les Pères du système taoïste: Lao-Tzeu, Lie-Tzeu, Tchoang-Tzeu*. Hokienfu: Catholic Mission Press.
- Wong, Timothy, M. 2004. “The Rendering of God in Chinese by the Chinese: Chinese Responses to the Term Question in the *Wanguo Gongbao*.” In: *Mapping Meanings. The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China*, edited by Michael Lackner and Natasha Vittinghoff, 589-615. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
- Wu, Lin-yi C., 1971. “Du taoïsme chez Simone Weil.” *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 25/4: 127-138.
- Xu Weixiang 徐衛翔. 2006. “Weiyi zhengzhi zhexue de ji ge wenti 薇依政治哲學的幾個問題” [Some Issues in Simone Weil’s Political Philosophy]. *Tongjin Daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban* 同濟大學學報社會科學版 (Journal of Tongji University, Social Science Section) 17/3: 9-16.
- Yang Xiaoyi 楊瀟儀. 2019. “Jingyou ‘zhongjie’ (Mediation) de xungen zhilü 經由“中介 (Mediation) 的尋根之旅” [Searching for the roots of culture through ‘Mediation:’ The Study of Simone Weil’s Literary Thought]. Master Degree. Shandong University.
- Zhao Xiaoyang. 2010. “In the Name of God: Translation and Transformation of Chinese Culture, Foreign Religion, and the Reproduction of ‘Tianzhu’ and ‘Shangdi.’” *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 4/2: 163-178.
- Ziporyn, Brook (trans.). 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company.

---

Raissa De Gruttola holds a PhD in Asian and African Studies (Chinese) at Ca’ Foscari University, Venice, where she is currently a Research Fellow. Her field of research include the historical and linguistic features of biblical translation in the Chinese language, with a particular focus on the Catholic version Sigao Shengjing. Her research also covers the presence of Christians and Franciscan missionaries in China in the 20th century and the influences of Chinese thought in the writings of Simone Weil. She is currently working on Marco Polo and the Franciscan presence in China during the Middle Ages.

Raissa can be contacted at: [raissa.degruttola@unive.it](mailto:raissa.degruttola@unive.it)

## Chinese descriptions of Sanskrit

### The concept of ‘root’ and *puruṣa* nominal declension

Chiara Pette

The paper focus on two aspects: the acceptability of some previous interpretations of the term *zìtǐ* (字體) as ‘word root’ or ‘word stem’ in Chinese descriptions of Sanskrit lexemes; and the phonological analysis of the declension of *puruṣa* ‘man,’ transcribed into Chinese characters by the monk Hui Li (慧立, 629-665 A.D.). As will be seen, *zìtǐ* seems to refer to the description of Sanskrit words as they are composed in the writing system (by letter addition), rather than to their grammatical structure. With regard to the declension of *puruṣa*, it appears that the phonetic reconstructions proposed by Pulleyblank (1991) for the Middle Chinese pronunciation of the characters employed seem to be accurate with respect to the corresponding Sanskrit syllables.

**Keywords:** Chinese historical phonology; Chinese linguistic tradition; Sino-Indian contact; Chinese description of Sanskrit.

#### 1. Introduction

This paper proposes a reflection on two related topics: on the one hand, it explores the possible interpretation of the term *zìtǐ* (字體) as applied in some Chinese descriptions of Sanskrit word formation processes; on the other hand, it analyzes from a phonological point of view Hui Li’s declension of *puruṣa* “man” in the well-known *The Biography of Xuanzang*.

Both issues discussed share some essential features: first, the fact that the various passages referred to and commented on are taken from texts belonging to the so-called Chinese Buddhist canon, thus constituting accounts extracted from a corpus that is quite homogeneous in content and cultural background. Second, Hui Li’s *Biography of Xuanzang* seems to be an extremely significant work for both purposes, as not only it contains the nominal declension of *puruṣa* in Chinese characters, but the text also offers an interesting occurrence of *zìtǐ* that can be compared with uses of the same term in other accounts.

The complete title of Hui Li’s work is *Dà Táng dàcí ‘ēnsì Sānzàng fǎshī zhuàn* (大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳), translated by Beal (1914) as “The Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Ci’en Monastery” and commonly abbreviated as “The Biography of Xuanzang” by Hui Li. It should be pointed out that “The Biography of Xuanzang,” as it has come down to us, was actually completed by the monk Yancong in 688 A.D. on the basis of Hui Li’s earlier text. However, in this paper we will refer to the *Biography* as Hui Li’s authentic work as a matter of tradition and simplicity.

A probably better known text is the *Dà Táng Xīyù Jì* (大唐西域記) (“The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions”) written by the monk Bianji on the basis of Xuanzang’s (玄奘 600/602-664 A.D.) oral account in 646 A.D. In this famous work the monk describes the long journey performed by Xuanzang to the West, the places, customs and people he encountered, and the religious life he experienced. Hui Li’s “Biography” is a renarration of Xuanzang’s enterprise, and it is particularly valuable from a linguistic perspective, containing considerable detail regarding Xuanzang’s grammatical studies.

For example, Hui Li mentions different Indian books about language, naming in particular a treatise learnt by Xuanzang on the so called *shēngmíng* (聲明), the “science of sounds.” Its Chinese name *pí-jiā-luó* (毘伽羅)<sup>1</sup> or *pí-yē-jié-là-nán* (毘耶羯刺謫) is a transcription of the Sanskrit term *vyākaraṇa* “grammar:”

(1) 兼學婆羅門書，印度梵書名為記論 [...] 即舊譯云毘伽羅論者是也；然其音不正：若正應云毘耶羯刺謫[...]。此翻名為聲明記論<sup>2</sup>

(He) also studied the Brahmanical books, the Indian book with the name 'mnemonic treatise' [...]. This is the book that was called *Pí-jiā-luó* treatise in the old translations; however, this pronunciation is incorrect: to be exact it should be called *pí-yē-jié-là-nán* [...]. It is also called ‘mnemonic treatise on the science of sounds’ (see also Beal 1914:121-122).

Another important source of information concerning Chinese descriptions of Sanskrit is the *Nánhǎi jìguī nèifǎ zhuàn* (南海寄歸內法傳) by Yi Jing (義淨 635-713 A.D.), translated by Takakusu (1986) as “A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea” (henceforth abbreviated as Ji Jing’s “Record”).

---

<sup>1</sup> For previous Chinese uses of the term *pí-jiā-luó* in association with texts about words and sounds see Teng (2014).

<sup>2</sup> CBETA Vol. 50, n.2053, Chap. 3, p. 24.

Both texts offer a significant number of important annotations regarding the most salient grammatical features of Sanskrit (see Staal 1972), although they were not specifically meant for the purpose of conveying linguistic information. The *Biography of Xuanzang* by Hui Li and Yi Jing's "Record" are in fact quite remarkable from the linguistic point of view. Among the other technical features of Sanskrit morphology alien to Chinese, Hui Li explains the 'eight cases' (*bā zhuàn* 八轉), or the distinction between *tinanta* (*dǐyànduō* 底彥多) 'verbal' and *subanta* (*sūmànduō* 蘇漫多) 'nominal' terminations. He also tries to express the concepts of grammatical number and gender applying a very interesting terminology. As for the notion of singular, dual and plural number, Hui Li uses the expressions *shuō yī* (說一) 'talking about one', *shuō èr* (說二) 'talking about two' and *shuō duō* (說多) 'talking about many' respectively. These are directly translated from the native Sanskrit terms *ekavacana*, *dvivacana* and *bahuvacana*. Regarding gender, Hui Li refers to 'masculine sounds' (*nán sheng* 男聲), 'feminine sounds' (*nǚ sheng* 女聲), and 'neither- masculine nor-feminine sounds' (*fēi nán fēi nǚ sheng* 非男非女聲).

The same grammatical notions are also dealt in Yi Jing's account, with only slightly different terminology. For example, Yi Jing adopts the equivalent Chinese terms *yī yán* (一言), *èr yán* (二言) and *duō yán* (多言) to express the three categories of morphological number, and he calls the nominal cases of inflection the *qī lì* (七例), considering them seven in number, without the vocative, as in the Indian tradition.

However, it is my opinion that the richness of the linguistic material described in the texts of Hui Li and Yi Jing possibly led scholars to misinterpret the actual meaning of some of the terminology employed by the two monks. This is mainly due to the lack of broader contextualization of these same terms and how they are used in parallel texts in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. Moreover, it is crucial to examine this terminology from the perspective of its relationship with the heritage of Ancient Chinese linguistic conceptions. In particular, I propose a different interpretation of the term *zìtǐ* (字體), often intended as 'word root' or 'word stem' in a morphological sense (see for example Li 1959, Brough 1973), arguing that (at least in the texts here examined) it rather has a graphical application.

## 2. Terms for 'root' in Chinese texts about Sanskrit

In general it is important to point out that in Chinese Buddhist texts we find different terms generally associated with the concept of 'roots' or 'primary and original elements' for the formation of words. These terms are *zìyuán* (字元), *zìběn* (字本), and *zìtǐ* (字體). Their presence in annotations related to the

description of the Sanskrit language and Indian grammar books, such as those in the accounts of Hui Li and Yi Jing, is why they have been interpreted as belonging to a morphological dimension. ‘Root’ is thus intended in the sense of ‘morphological base’ or ‘minimal lexical element’ from which more complex linguistic units are derived. Consider the following example from Yi Jing’s record.

(2) 三. 謂馱觀章。有一千頌, 專明字元<sup>3</sup>

III. The book on Dhatu. This consists of 1000 slokas, and treats particularly of grammatical roots (Takakusu 1896: 172).

Nevertheless, such a technical approach to word formation mechanisms in Sanskrit is a metalinguistic competence not necessarily achieved by all Chinese monks, who were quite strongly influenced by their native understanding of language.

It is well known that Chinese tradition placed a special emphasis on the level of graphic representation of words. The study and classification of graphic forms has always been extremely important to the Chinese because of the specificity of their writing system, and in ancient China graphological considerations have played a central role as a method of lexical analysis, especially from an etymological perspective. In this regard, we can mention the example of the *Shuōwén Jiězì* (說文解字, II sec. A.D.), which is not a conventional lexicographical work simply listing the common meaning of words (Bottéro 1996: 2016; Bottéro and Harbsmeier 2008). In its glosses the *Shuōwén* pays attention to a word’s graphic composition, and assigns to characters the meaning suggested by their graphical etymology.

This native conceptualization, strongly focused on characters and their graphic composition, should be taken into consideration when dealing with a topic such as Chinese descriptions of foreign languages and linguistic traditions. In fact, in my view Chinese monks applied this same attention to graphic forms to Sanskrit, treating the formation of Indian lexemes as a combination of graphic units rather than of morphemes. As a result, the various terms meaning ‘root’ in Chinese Buddhist texts likely have graphic rather than grammatical application.

In (3) Yi Jing makes a brief reference to the process of word formation, applying the term *zìtǐ* (字體)

---

<sup>3</sup> CBETA, Vol. 54, n. 2125, Chap. 34: 35.



(3) 文荼則合成字體。且如，樹之一目梵云苾力叉。便引二十餘句經文，共相雜糅，方成一事之號也<sup>4</sup>。

Wencha (Manda or Munda) treats of the formation of words by means of combining (a root and a suffix or suffixes). For instance, one of many names for ‘tree’ in Sanskrit is Vriksha. Thus a name for a thing or a matter is formed by joining (the syllables) together, according to the rules of the Sutra, which consists of more than twenty verses (Takakusu 1896: 174).

According to Brough (1973: 253-254), Yi Jing’s description is not clear enough regarding the correct interpretation to give to *zìtǐ*, suggesting both ‘word-forms’ or ‘word-stems’ as possible readings. In any case, *zìtǐ* would be assigned a grammatical context of application. In my opinion a first question related to the term *zìtǐ* is to ask in what sense this mechanism of word composition was intended by the monk Yi Jing. It is crucial to understand whether the building material of his ‘combining together’ really belongs to a morphological dimension—and thus it makes sense to investigate if Yi Jing is referring to lexemes, stems, roots or other very specific linguistic units—or whether the word formation process is purely considered as a graphic addition of ‘letters.’ Before making assumptions regarding *zìtǐ*, we must also consider that the term *zì* is itself ambiguous, referring to both words and their graphic representations, i.e. characters. *Zì* is indeed used in different meanings in Chinese Buddhist texts, where it is associated with words, syllables and letters.

In this regard, it is interesting to see how *zìtǐ* was interpreted in different ways in its three occurrences within the same passage, this time from *The Biography of Xuanzang* by Hui Li:

(4) [...]又，有字體三百頌；又，有字緣兩種 [...]，此別辯字緣字體。又，有八界論八百頌；此中略合字之緣體<sup>5</sup>。

[...] again, there is one of 300 slokas on the roots (bases) of letters; again, there are (treatises on) two separate kinds of letter-groupings<sup>6</sup> [...], these distinguish letter-groupings from letter-roots. Again, there is one treatise called Ashta-Dhatu in 800 slokas; in this work there is a brief conjunction of letter-bases and letter-groupings (Beal 1914: 122).

In addition to Beal’s translation, where *zìtǐ* is significantly associated with graphic units (letters), other interpretations seem confusing with respect to its meaning. Julien (1853: 166) proposes three renderings, fluctuating between graphic units and morphological components. He translates the three occurrences of *zìtǐ* as ‘les formes des lettres,’ ‘la forme des mots,’ and ‘racines’ respectively. Similarly,

<sup>4</sup> CBETA (Vol. 54, n. 2125, Chap. 34: 35).

<sup>5</sup> CBETA (Vol. 50, n.2053, Chap. 3: 24).

<sup>6</sup> Here Beal’s translation seems to be wrong: the meaning of *zì yuán* is not ‘letter-groupings’ but the term renders the Indian *pratyaya* ‘suffix’ (see Brough 1973: 254, note 26).

Brough (1973: 249; 254) proposes the two interpretations ‘forms of characters’ and ‘word-stem,’ thus giving to *zītī* a morphological and a graphic application at the same time. Instead, Li (1959: 118) always translates the term with a generic ‘roots of words.’

I argue that *zītī* probably refers to the graphic or external structure of the Sanskrit word, and that the process of lexeme construction is understood by Hui Li as a combination of letters. A graphical interpretation is to be preferred from the internal perspective of Hui Li’s and Yi Jing’s texts, that contain explicit references to the Indian graphic system, and also from the perspective of other Chinese Buddhist works much more focused on Indian syllabary. These latter sources are mostly translations of Indian religious texts, which introduce Indian graphic symbols as a basic knowledge for reciting religious formulas.

Regarding what I called the ‘internal perspective’ of Yi Jing and Hui Li’s accounts, we can see that in the following description of an Indian treatise Yi Jing makes a reference to the *siddham*, i.e. the form of the Indian syllabary that became the standard transmitted to China (Chaudhuri 1997).

(5) 本有四十九字 [...] 成一十八章; 總有一萬餘字, 合三百餘頌<sup>7</sup>

There are forty-nine letters (of the alphabet) [...] arranged in eighteen sections; the total number of syllables is more than 10.000, or more than 300 slokas (Takakusu 1896: 171).

This treatise on ‘letters’, as Yi Jing says, is 300 slokas long. Brough (1973: 249) noticed that 300 slokas is also the same length of the text mentioned by Hui Li in (4). This probably means that the two monks were talking about the same Indian treatise. Crucially, if its content is a *siddham*, *zītī* in (4) cannot have a morphological interpretation. The term *zītī* in general identifies the Indian word structure, but this structure is graphically and not grammatically built.

While grammatical annotations about Sanskrit are not common, Chinese descriptions of the *siddham* are much more frequent (see Chaudhuri 1997, 1998). Terms meaning ‘base’ or ‘root’ in the sense of a primary element employed in the formation of more complex units often appear in these latter accounts, where the graphic application of the terminology is evident. In the example in (6), monk Kumārajīva defines Indian graphic symbols (*zi*) as ‘word roots’ (*zì gēnběn*) because of their function of generating lexemes, and thus to represent meanings<sup>8</sup>.

(6) 四十二字是一切字根本。因字有語，因語有名，因名有義。

The 42 letters are the roots of all words. From letters you get words, from words you get names, and from names meanings.

---

<sup>7</sup> CBETA (Vol. 54, n. 2125, Chap. 34: 35).

<sup>8</sup> Kumārajīva’s text (a Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*) is taken from SAT (V. 25, n. 1509). See also Mair (1992).

In addition to the other terms, *zìtǐ* also occurs in these kind of annotations, and it is interesting to see how it specifically designates the graphic form of the Indian word. Perhaps the most salient text in this case is Sengyou's (僧祐 435-518) account, here in (7), in which the author describes Indian lexemes as if they were Chinese characters. The description is part of a section entitled *Hú hàn yì jīng wén zì yīn yì tóng yì jì* (胡漢譯經文字音義同異記), "Notes concerning the similarities and differences of meanings, sounds, and graphic signs in sacred texts translated from Indian languages to Chinese," itself contained in the famous catalog *Chū Sānzāng jìjí* (出三藏記集).<sup>9</sup>

(7) [...] 梵書製文有半字滿字。所以名半字者義未具足，故字體半偏，猶漢文月字虧其傍也。所以名滿字者理既究竟，故字體圓滿，猶漢文日字盈其形也。[...] 又，半字爲體如漢文言字。滿字爲體，如漢文諸字。以者配言方成諸字。諸字兩合即滿之例也。言字單立即半之類也。半字雖單爲字根本，緣有半字得成滿字。

[...] Moreover among the figures made in Indian books there are 'half' characters and 'full' characters. In those which are called 'half' characters the meaning is incomplete, and for this reason the form of the character is partial, as in Chinese writing the character 'moon' is missing a part. Those which are called 'full' characters are finished entirely, and for this reason the form of the character (*zìtǐ*)<sup>10</sup> is perfectly realized, as in the Chinese script the character 'sun' has a full form. [...]. Furthermore, the 'half' characters with regard to structure are like the form of the character *yan* (言) in Chinese writing. With regard to the structure of the 'full' characters, they are like the form of the character *zhu* (諸) in Chinese writing. Through the combination of 者 with the component 言 the character *zhu* 諸 is formed. The character *zhu* with the combination between the two [graphic elements] is thus an example of a 'full' character. The *yan* character alone is of the 'half' character type. Although 'half' characters are simple they constitute the roots of words, and due to the fact that there are 'half' characters 'full' characters can be formed.

'Half-characters' are described as having an unfinished shape, similar to that of the character for 'moon' in Chinese writing, probably because the lower part of the character 月 is open. The so called 'half-characters' are also unable to convey meaning on their own. They are simple elements, regarded as word roots (*zì gēnběn* 字根本) in that they constitute the building blocks for the realization of 'full characters.' These latter units, on the other hand, are defined as having a complete graphic structure, associated with the perfectly closed shape of the Chinese character for 'sun' 日. The text offers a second

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the *Chū Sānzāng jìjí* see Nattier (2008), or Storch (2014) for information on other Buddhist catalogs. The text in (7) is also commented and translated in French by Bottéro (2016). For another English translation see Boucher (2005). Text from the SAT (Vol. 55, n. 2145).

<sup>10</sup> Note that here *zìtǐ* is clearly given a graphic interpretation also in Bottéro (2016: 16), where the term is translated as *structure graphique (corps)*. Bottéro points out how Chinese graphic terminology is used in Sengyou's text to explain Indian writing.

association between Indian writing and Chinese writing, this time using the Chinese characters *yán* 言 and *zhū* 諸 as examples of ‘half’ and ‘full’ character.

The difference between ‘half’ characters and ‘full’ characters corresponds to the difference between what we would call ‘letters’ and ‘words,’ or to the difference between simple graphic units and complex graphic units of the Sanskrit syllabary. Sengyou’s description, together with the remarkable insistence on *siddham* studies by Chinese monks, suggest that the mechanism of Indian word formation is probably intended in a graphic sense and not in a morphological perspective.

### 3. The phonological significance of Chinese characters: the case of *puruṣa*’s declension

A second aspect treated in this paper regards a very significant feature of “The Biography of Xuanzang” by Hui Li: the usage of some Chinese characters as phonographical devices in Hui Li’s transcription of *puruṣa* (‘man’) nominal declension. While the inflectional paradigm given in the text has been already studied from the point of view of the semantic definitions there associated with each grammatical case,<sup>11</sup> my intent is to describe *puruṣa* paradigm for its phonological significance. It is well known that Chinese transcriptions of foreign terms play a crucial role in reconstructing how Chinese characters were pronounced at different chronological stages of the language. The fortunate circumstance of knowing the Sanskrit forms corresponding to each Hui Li’s transcription renders *puruṣa*’s declension particularly informative, and allows us to compare different systems of reconstruction. In this study I mainly take the systems of Pulleyblank (1991) and of Baxter and Sagart (2014) as a reference, observing whether one or the other provides a better reconstruction for the same characters, i.e. a reconstruction more similar to the intended pronunciation of the Sanskrit syllable.

In the table below *puruṣa*’s (*bùlùshā* 布路沙) nominal declension is given in Chinese characters. Each character is followed by its pīnyīn transcription, and by its phonetic reconstruction according to Pulleyblank’s Late Middle Chinese (LMC) system. In particular, LMC is the designation Pulleyblank (1983, 1984, 1998, 1991, 1999) uses to define the new Chinese language developed in the Tang capital Chang’an during the VIIIth century, and which gradually spread to the rest of the Chinese empire. This idiom would be best represented by Song time Rime Tables, which are collections of characters arranged according to phonetic principles and used as a support during poetic production. LMC is particularly important to Pulleyblank because he considers this language to be a koiné of the period,

---

<sup>11</sup> See D’Antonio and Keidan (2022), Sun (2005: 167-168), Lǚ (1923: 21-22) and Zhang (2020: 250).

the common ancestor of all modern Chinese dialects except the Min dialects (against the existence of a Tang koiné and other Pulleyblank theories see, for example, Branner 2006, Coblin and Norman 1995, Coblin 2003).

Note that when there is a fanqie formula in Hui Li's text to specify the correct pronunciation of a transcribed Sanskrit syllable, the characters used for the phonetic formula were given in parentheses. In addition, an attempt was made to concretely apply the fanqie rule, which consists of combining together the initial consonantal sound of the first character of the gloss and the remaining sounds of the second character. In the table, the fanqie rule is applied to both the LMC reconstructions and the standard Mandarin pronunciation of the same characters. This may require a non-canonical pinyin notation for the syllables resulting from the fanqie combination, again in parentheses. The ? symbol corresponds to a missing or illegible character in Hui Li's transcription, i.e. a graphic form that do not correspond to any modern Chinese characters. Finally, the declined Sanskrit lexeme was provided for each grammatical case.

	SINGULAR	DUAL	PLURAL
NOM	布路殺 <i>bùlùshā</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:t</i> <i>puruṣaḥ</i>	布路筭 <i>bùlùshāo</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:w</i> <i>puruṣau</i>	布路沙 <i>bùlùshā</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:</i> <i>puruṣāḥ</i>
ACC	布路莖 <i>bùlùshān</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:m</i> <i>puruṣam</i>	布路筭 <i>bùlùshāo</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:w</i> <i>puruṣau</i>	布路霜 <i>bùlùshuāng</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:ŋ</i> <i>puruṣān</i>
INSTR	布路鑣拏 <i>bùlùshānǎ</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:t nra:</i> <i>puruṣeṇa</i>	布路?(音鞞借反) <i>bùlù?(biàn)</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ` (pīam`)</i> <i>puruṣābhyām</i>	布路鑣鞞 (or 呬) <i>bùlùshābǐng (or xì)</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:t pjiājǐ`</i> <i>puruṣaiḥ</i>
DAT	布路廈(沙詐反)耶 <i>bùlùshà (yé)</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:(jia)</i> <i>puruṣāya</i>	布路沙?(鞞借反) <i>bùlùshā?(biàn)</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:(pīam`)</i> <i>puruṣābhyām</i>	布路鑣韻(鞞約反) <i>bùlùshāyùn(bue/biao)</i> <i>puǎ`luǎ`sa:t` (piak)</i> <i>puruṣebhyaḥ</i>
ABL	布路沙哆(他我反) <i>bùlùshādūo(tuǒ)</i>	布路鑣?(鞞借反) <i>bùlùshā?(biàn)</i>	布路鑣韻(鞞約反) <i>bùlùshāyùn</i>

	<i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa: (tʰa`)</i> <i>puruṣāt</i>	<i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t (?piam`)</i> <i>puruṣābhyām</i>	(b-ue/biao) <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t` (piak)</i> <i>puruṣebhyaḥ</i>
GEN	布路緞? (子耶反) <i>bùlùshā? (zé)</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t (tsia)</i> <i>puruṣasya</i>	布路緞? <i>bùlùshā?</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t ?</i> <i>puruṣayoḥ</i>	布路緞請 (安威反) <i>bùlùshā`án (ān xiàn)</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t (?ja:m)</i> <i>puruṣānām</i>
LOC	布路? (所齊反) <i>Bùlù? (sí)</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ?(ʒiaj)</i>  <i>puruṣe</i>	布路殺諭 <i>bùlùshāyù</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t jyǎ`</i> <i>puruṣayoḥ</i>	布路緞縵 (所芻反) <i>bùlùshā (sú)</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t (ʒuǎ)</i> <i>puruṣeṣu</i>
VOC	布路殺 <i>bùlùshā</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t</i> <i>puruṣa</i>	布路稍 <i>bùlùshāo</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒaw`</i> <i>puruṣau</i>	布路沙 <i>bùlùshā</i> <i>puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:</i> <i>puruṣāh</i>

First of all, it can be seen that the declension of *puruṣa* is characterized by a certain degree of inconsistency. For instance, the text renders homonymic elements differently, such as the stem *puruṣa-* (布路沙 LMC *puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:*; Mandarin *bùlùshā*) and the vocative singular form *puruṣa* (布路殺 LMC *puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t*; Mandarin *bùlùshā*). The same happens for the dual vocative termination, which is written 稍 (LMC *ʒaw`*; Mandarin *shāo*) instead of 笱 (LMC *ʒa:w*; Mandarin *shāo*), as the identical dual nominative and accusative forms. Here Hui Li’s choice could be explained by the intention to represent some intonational aspect of the vocative. Note that the two characters have the same phonetic realization in Mandarin, while they differ only for vowel length and tone in Pulleyblank’s LMC reconstruction. There are also cases where the accuracy of Hui Li’s transcription cannot be verified, because some syllables (typically the termination) are missing. For example, the Sanskrit dual locative *puruṣayoḥ* is fully rendered as 布路殺諭 (LMC *puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t jyǎ`*; Mandarin *bùlùshāyù*), but the dual genitive, which is formally equal in Sanskrit, is incomplete. It is given as 布路緞 (LMC *puǎ` luǎ` ʒa:t*; Mandarin *bùlùshā*), without the ending syllable.

Another interesting fact in Hui Li's character choice is that the text freely alternates four different graphemes (殺, 沙, 緞, and 廈) for Sanskrit *ṣa* or *ṣā*. The character 緞 (LMC *ṣa:t*; Mandarin *shā*) is further applied to the syllable *ṣe* of the instrumental singular and of the dative, ablative and locative plural forms, and it is used to represent the final syllable *ṣaiḥ* of the instrumental plural *puruṣaiḥ*. The instrumental plural inflection is especially interesting, because for its realization Hui Li gives two options: 布路緞鞞 (LMC *puā` luā` ṣa:t pjiājḡ*; Mandarin *bùlùshābǐng*) or 布路緞呬 (Mandarin *bùlùshāxì*). No reconstruction is provided by Pulleyblank for the character 呬 (Mandarin *xì*), while 鞞 (LMC *pjiājḡ*; Mandarin *bǐng*) seems to suggest an alternative termination in *-bhis*. This would imply that Hui Li was aware of the existence of a dual option for the instrumental plural: an ending in *-aiḥ* and one in *-bhiḥ*.<sup>12</sup>

As regards Pulleyblank's (1991) phonetic reconstructions, some discrepancies arise regarding final consonants. Sometimes his reconstructions for characters employed by Hui Li display final consonants where the Sanskrit syllables end in a vowel: in particular, this is the case of the above mentioned characters 殺 and 緞 (both LMC *ṣa:t*; Mandarin *shā*). In Pulleyblank's system both characters are represented as LMC *ṣa:t*, while the Sanskrit form would not be closed by a dental consonant. In other words, the final *-t*—supposed to be present in the LMC version of the two characters 殺 and 緞—was not really necessary for the purposes of Hui Li's phonetic notation.

That being the case, it seems hard to explain why Hui Li adds the character 哆 (LMC *tʰa'*; Mandarin *tō*, according to the *fǎnqiè* indication) after 沙 (LMC *ṣa:*; Mandarin *shā*) specifically to represent the final dental of the ablative singular *puruṣāt*. The fact that Hui Li already had two options for rendering the syllable *ṣa:t*, and that he used them even when there was no need, makes it strange to think that he had to resort to a different solution for the ablative singular. When we compare Pulleyblank's reconstructed forms with that of Baxter and Sagart (2014), we find two Middle Chinese (MC) realizations for the character 殺 (LMC *ṣa:t*; Mandarin *shā*), each corresponding to a later development. These are: MC *sreat* > Mandarin *shā*; MC *sreajH* > *shài*. While the first reconstruction is almost the same as that of Pulleyblank, the second reconstruction seems to provide a less problematic phonetic profile for this character. The absence of the final dental consonant would not only make Hui Li's transcription better in all cases where 殺 *shā* is employed, but (more importantly) would give an explanation for his effort to find a way to signal the presence of a final *-t* at the ablative singular.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Edgerton (1953: 52).

By contrast, Pulleyblank’s reconstructions of final consonants seem to work well with nasals. Hui Li, for example, uses the characters 芟 (LMC *ša:m*; Mandarin *shān*) and 霜 (LMC *ša:ŋ*; Mandarin *shuāng*) for the accusative singular and accusative plural terminations respectively, where Pulleyblank’s forms perfectly fit with the equivalent Sanskrit ones.

Some other comments can be made about the analysis of *fǎnqiè* formulas. In several cases these indications appear crucial, as they suggest the reading of unknown characters or of a lacuna in the text. For example, the formula 鞞僭反 *bǐng jiàn fǎn* that follows the unreadable character employed for the dual instrumental, dative and ablative termination. 鞞 (LMC *pjiəŋ*; Mandarin *bǐng*) and 僭 (LMC *tsiam*; Mandarin *jiàn*) combination tell us that the character should be read in a way very close to *pjam*, which corresponds quite well to the Sanskrit termination *-bhyām*. When a *fǎnqiè* follows a still existing or perfectly readable character, sometimes it happens that the phonetic reconstruction of the *fǎnqiè* formula differs from the reconstruction of the glossed character alone. Interestingly, in almost all cases where this occurs the pronunciation resulting from the *fǎnqiè* is more similar to the reference Sanskrit syllable. For example, the locative plural termination given by Hui Li is 縹 (LMC *tʂəw*; Mandarin *zhòu*), which is glossed with a *fǎnqiè* as 所芻反 *suǒ chú fǎn*. If we combine the initial consonant of 所 (LMC *ʂǎʔ* or *ʂuǎ*; Mandarin *suǒ*) and the final of 芻 (LMC *tʂʰuǎʔ*, Mandarin *chú*) according to Pulleyblank’s (1991) reconstruction, we will obtain *-ʂuǎ*. Thanks to *fǎnqiè*, the resulting syllable is closer to Sanskrit *-ṣu*.

The only case in which the formula seems to deviate is that of the genitive plural termination, where the character employed is 謫 (LMC *nra:m*, Mandarin *nán*). Here Pulleyblank’s form fully corresponds to Sanskrit *-ṇām*, while his reconstruction of the graphemes 安 (LMC *?an*, Mandarin *ān*) and 咸 (LMC *xhja:m*, Mandarin *xiàn*) appearing in the *fǎnqiè* does not match well to Sanskrit. In fact, the result of the combination would be *?ja:m*. A corresponding reconstruction for the character 謫 is absent in Baxter and Sagart (2014), where it is only provided the Mandarin homophone character 南 (MC *nom*). The character 安 that opens the *fǎnqiè* formula is instead reconstructed as MC *ʔan* in Baxter and Sagart (2014), with an initial vowel.

#### 4. Conclusion

Regarding the question of a possible morphological interpretation of *zìtǐ* (字體), the texts under consideration in this study show a strong connection of this term with elements pertaining to the graphic system. *Zìtǐ* is generally used in reference to the formal structure of an Indian word, but the



word itself is seen as the result of letter compounding, and not as an aggregation of units having grammatical significance. This graphical approach to lexeme formation is typical of the Chinese tradition, and derives from the ancestral practice of decomposing Chinese characters in order to identify their basic graphic constituents. Hence the translation of *zītǐ* as ‘word root’ or ‘word stem’ (where ‘root’ and ‘stem’ are highly technical linguistic concepts) is inappropriate.

On the other hand, the declension of *puruṣa* (布路沙) constitutes an extremely interesting case of Chinese characters employed phonographically: its study reveals some inconsistencies in Hui Li’s character selection, as his rendering of Sanskrit isomorphic elements is treated with graphic alternations in Chinese. Similarly, the same character can be associated with different syllables. Regarding Pulleyblank’s (1991) phonetic reconstructions, with the exception of the two characters 殺 and 鑿, the presumed LMC pronunciation of the vast majority of Chinese forms is shown to be valid with respect to the corresponding Sankrit syllable.

#### References [NOMI COMPLETI DI TUTTI GLI AUTORI O CURATORI – NON SOLO LE INIZIALI]

- Baxter, William H. and Laurent Sagart. 2014. *Old Chinese. A New Reconstruction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Beal, Samuel. 1914. *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang, by the Shaman Hwui Li*. London: Trübner & Co.
- Bottéro, Françoise. 1996. *Sémantisme et classification dans l’écriture chinoise. Les systèmes de classement des caractères par clés du Shuowen Jiezi au Kangxi Zidian*. Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises.
- Bottéro, Françoise. 2016. “Théories chinoises sur l’écriture.” *Dossiers d’HEL, SHESL (2016), Écriture(s) et représentations du langage et des langues* 9: 6-20.
- Bottéro, Françoise and Christoph Harsbmeier. 2008. “The Shuowen Jiezi Dictionary and the Human Sciences in China.” *Asia Major, Third Series*, 21/1, *Star gazing, firephasing, and healing in China: Essays in honor of Nathan Sivin*: 249-271.
- Boucher, Daniel. 2005. “Buddhism and Language in Early Medieval China.” In: *Hawaii Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture* 42, edited by V. H. Mair P.R. Goldin and N. Steinhardt, 265-289. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Branner, David P. 2006. “What are Rime Tables and What do They Mean?” In: *The Chinese Rime Tables, Linguistic Philosophy and Historical – Comparative Phonology*, edited by David P. Branner, 1-34. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Brough, John. 1973. “I-Ching on The Sanskrit Grammar.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 36/2, *In Honour of Walter Simon*: 248-260.
- Chaudhuri, Saroj Kumar. 1997. “The Varnamala in China.” *The Gakusen management review (経営研究)* 10/3: 579-626.

- Chaudhuri, Saroj Kumar. 1998. “Siddham in China and Japan.” *Sino-platonic papers* 88: 1-124. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
- Coblin, W. South. 2003. “The Chieh-yunn System and the Current State of Chinese Historical Phonology.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123/2: 377-383.
- Coblin, W. South and Jerry Norman 1995. “A New Approach to Chinese Historical Linguistics.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115/4: 576-584.
- D’Antonio, Corinne and Artemij Keidan. 2022. “The Adventures of Pāṇini’s Grammar in China and Japan: The Case of the Kāraka/Vibhakti System.” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali, Nuova Serie* 95: 149-165.
- Edgerton, Franklin. 1953. *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit grammar and dictionary, Vol. 1*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Julien, Stanislas. 1853. *Historie de La Vie de Hiouen-Tsang et de ses Voyages dans l’Inde, depuis l’an 629 jusqu’en 645, par Hoëi-Li et Yen-Thsong*. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale.
- Li, Yung-Hsi. 1959. *The Life of Hsuan-Tsang, The Tripiṭaka – Master of the Great Tzu En Monastery, Compiled by the Monk Hui-Li*. Peking: The Chinese Buddhist Association.
- Lǚ Chéng 1923. *Shēngmíng lüè. Nánjīng, Zhīnà nèi xuéyuàn*.
- Mair, Victor H. 1992. “Two papers on Sinolinguistics: 1. A Hypothesis Concerning the Origin of the Term fanqie (‘Countertomy’); 2. East Asian Round-Trip Words.” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 34, 1-13. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nattier, Jan. 2008. *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations*. Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1983. “Stages in the transcription of Indian words in Chinese from Han to Tang. In: *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien*, edited by K. Rohrborn and W. Veenker, 73-102. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1984. *Middle Chinese: A Study in Historical Phonology*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1991. *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1998. “Qieyun and Yunjing: The Essential Foundation for Chinese Historical Linguistics.” *Journal of The American Oriental Society* 118/2: 200-216.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1999. “Chinese Traditional Phonology.” *Asia Major 3<sup>rd</sup> Series* 12/101-137.
- Staal, Fritz J. 1972. *A Reader on Sanskrit Grammarians*. Cambridge, MA – London: The MIT Press.
- Storch, Tanya. 2014. *The History of Chinese Buddhist Bibliography*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
- Sūn, Liángmíng. 2005. *Zhōngguó gǔdài yǔfǎ xué tànjiù*. Běijīng: Shāngwù Yìnshūguǎn.
- Takakusu, Junjiro. 1896. *A record of the Buddhist religion as practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Teng, Wei-Jen. 2014. “Medieval Chinese Buddhist Exegesis and Chinese Grammatical Studies.” *Táidà Fóxué yánjiū* [Taiwan Journal of Buddhist Studies] 28: 105-142.

Zhang, Xueshan. 2020. “Buddhists’ razor: how many vibhaktayaḥ are there?” *Acta Orientalia* 80: 244–260.

### Texts

CBETA, Vol. 50, n.2053 (*Dà Táng dàcí ‘ēnsì sānzàng fǎshī zhuàn* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳).

CBETA, Vol. 54, n. 2125 (*Nánhǎi jìguī nèifǎ zhuàn* 南海寄歸內法傳).

SAT, Vol. 25, n. 1509 (*Móhē bōrě bōluómì jīng* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經).

SAT, Vol. 55, n. 2145 (*Chū sānzāng jìjí* 出三藏記集).

---

After a Master degree in Chinese Language at Sapienza University of Rome, Chiara Pette completed her PhD in Linguistic Studies at the University of Pavia in 2023, defending a thesis on the concept of “root” in Chinese. Her main interests of research regard historical linguistics, etymology, Chinese writing system and lexicography.

Chiara can be contacted at: [pette.chiara@gmail.com](mailto:pette.chiara@gmail.com)



## Lexicographical questions and revealing quotations

New clues on *Pi shishi zhuwang*

Gabriele Tola

The article presents and analyses new materials and perspectives on *Pi shishi zhuwang* 闢釋氏諸妄 (“Confutation of all the absurdities of the Buddha”), frequently abbreviated as *Pi wang*. *Pi wang* is usually attributed to the Chinese scholar Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562–1633), but recent studies have questioned this hypothesis. However, while there is a variety of studies on the translations and prefaces composed by Xu Guangqi in cooperation with Western missionaries and scholars, such as Matteo Ricci (Li Madou 利瑪竇, 1552–1610) and Sabatino De Ursis (Xiong Sanba 熊三拔, 1575–1620), secondary literature on *Pi wang* is surprisingly limited. Among these precious and rare works of secondary literature, the focus has been correctly placed on the structure and different versions of *Pi wang* to determine attribution. Less attention has been devoted to the contents of the text, especially concerning some linguistic peculiarities in terms of possible attribution and relevant cross-cultural interactions. In order to provide new clues and different points of view for research on the attribution, this article illustrates some topics that should be further investigated and new possible keys in historical texts. It also indirectly provides new insights into the cultural interactions that took place between Chinese converts and Western missionaries.

**Keywords:** *Pi wang*; Xu Guangqi; Buddhism; attribution; Jesuits; *Tianzhu shilu*.

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Pi shishi zhuwang* 闢釋氏諸妄 (“Confutation of all the absurdities of the Buddha”), frequently abbreviated as *Pi wang*,<sup>2</sup> is usually attributed to the Chinese scholar and convert Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562–1633), but recent studies have questioned this hypothesis.<sup>3</sup> However, while there is a variety of studies on the translations and prefaces composed by Xu Guangqi in cooperation with Western missionaries and scholars, such as Matteo Ricci (Li Madou 利瑪竇, 1552–1610) and Sabatino De Ursis

<sup>1</sup> I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their precious suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> From here on shortened as *Pi wang*.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to section 2 of this article for detailed explanations.

(Xiong Sanba 熊三拔, 1575–1620), secondary literature on *Pi wang* is surprisingly limited. Among these precious and rare works of secondary literature,<sup>4</sup> the focus has been correctly placed on the structure and different versions of *Pi wang* to determine attribution. Less attention has been devoted to the contents of the text, especially concerning some linguistic peculiarities in terms of possible attribution and relevant cross-cultural interactions.

## 2. *Pi wang*: title, contents, and structure

*Pi wang* derives its name from a longstanding history of confuting Buddhism, Taoism, and other popular religions, starting from the sixteenth century by Christian “missionaries and converted Chinese literati” who began “a tradition of ‘awakening the misled’ or ‘rebutting absurdity’ (*pi wang* 闢妄)” (Chu 2008: 25).

The text is divided into eight sections, plus another that was added by a different author, due to linguistic differences with the previous eight (Dudink 2001a: 115): *poyu zhi wang* 破獄之妄 (“the absurdity of the destruction of hell”), *shishi zhi wang* 施食之妄 (“the absurdity of feeding hungry spirits”), *wuzhu guhun xiehu zhi wang* 無主孤魂血湖之妄 (“the absurdity of neglected spirits and of the lake of blood”), *shao zhi zhi wang* 燒紙之妄 (“the absurdity of burning joss paper”), *chizhou zhi wang* 持咒之妄 (“the absurdity of reading mantras”), *lunhui zhi wang* 輪迴之妄 (“the absurdity of *saṃsāra*”), *nianfo zhi wang* 念佛之妄 (“the absurdity of reading the name of Buddha”), *chan zong zhi wang* 禪宗之妄 (“the absurdity of Chan Buddhism”), and finally *bian bu feng zuxian shuo* 辨不奉祖先說 (“confuting the theory of ancestors who are not venerated”).<sup>5</sup>

In the first chapter, the author tries to demonstrate that if hell existed, it would be created by the Grand Lord (*dazhu* “大主”) and it would be impossible for humble humans to destroy it by the recitation of sacred formulas. In fact, this would imply that the power of men would be greater than the Grand Lord, which would also create discrimination between rich and poor. The first would be able to summon monks to make religious offerings and ceremonies, helping to liberate the souls from hell, while the poor would not have those means.

In the second section, the author tries to confute the existence of “hungry spirits,” known in Sanskrit as *Preta*, one of the six realms of rebirth. The idea of feeding the hungry spirits, in order to

---

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Dudink (2001a: 115–124).

<sup>5</sup> For the first integral translation into a European language of the text, see Tola (2020: 235–270).

appease them, would make the creation of hell by the Grand Lord useless; hungry spirits, in turn, served by people, would be unwilling to leave hell, deemed logically absurd by the writer.

The third chapter is devoted to demolishing the idea that neglected spirits, i.e., those for which nobody prepares religious offerings, become “lonely spirits:” since what heaven decides is called nature, all spirits are governed by the High Sovereign (皆上帝為主), while hell is ruled by Lucifer (路祭弗爾). In this section, the writer of *Pi wang* also confutes the idea that blood and other liquids secreted during childbirth are gathered in hell to create a lake of blood. The author here, as well as in other passages of *Pi wang*, abundantly makes references to Confucian texts and relevant quotations to better achieve his purposes, which were generally directed at Chinese literati and educated scholars. For example, “what heaven decides is called nature” derives from the *Zhongyong* 中庸 “Doctrine of the mean,” one of the “Four Books” of the Confucian canon: 天命之謂性 (“What is established by heaven is called nature”).

The fourth absurdity shattered in the text is the burning of joss paper: either the gods see real money in the paper or only burnt ashes—men would lack respect for them either way. The same logical reasoning is applied to other similar ceremonial habits, such as burning images of gods or pieces of tinfoil shaped as sycees, together with the usual adoption of quotations from Confucian classics. The latter is exemplified by the rhetorical question, “Who am I deceiving? Maybe heaven?”—echoing the “Dialogues,” or *Lunyu* 論語, section *Zi han* 子罕: “吾誰欺，欺天乎?”

The fifth section demystifies the habit of reading the name of Buddha multiple times to obtain desired things. Other than the usual logic and quotations of Confucian texts, this chapter also exemplifies popular folklore and legends referenced in *Pi wang*, such as the melody *lianhua luo* 蓮花落 (“the falling lotus”) used by beggars for requesting alms and an example of “money fever in sixteenth-century China” (Guo 2005: 134), and the two gods *Qianliyan* 千里眼 and *Shunfeng’er* 順風耳, servants of the goddess *Mazu* 媽祖, known respectively for their exceptional hearing and eyesight.

The sixth part in turn addresses one of the most renowned Buddhist concepts: *samsāra*, or the cycle of death and rebirth. The theory proposed by the author is that if *samsāra* really existed, it would be impossible for humanity to prosper and grow in number, since the amount of souls would be predetermined. Given that the High Lord represents the great origin of *qian* and the highest origin of *kun* (而上主為「大哉乾元」，「至哉坤元」), how would it be possible for him to create new souls? Also, the logical reasoning adopted in this case is reinforced by passages from the *Yijing* 易經, respectively hexagram *qian* 乾 and hexagram *kun* 坤: 大哉乾元，至哉坤元. In this chapter, the author also resorts to the Confucian canonical tradition to reinforce his logical statements. For example, to prove the illogicality of the idea of rebirth, he directly quotes *Mencius* 孟子, section *Gao zi* 告子, asking

rhetorically whether a dog's nature is the same as an ox's, and whether the nature of an ox is the same as a man's (然則犬之性猶牛之性，牛之性猶人之性與?).

The seventh section rebuts the idea of Mahāyāna, a branch of Buddhism, that the recitation of the name of Amitābha can help humans be reborn in the Pure Land. As in other sections of *Pi wang*, the author confutes this idea with logical reasoning, adding quotations from a variety of Chinese historical and philosophical traditional texts, such as *Yijing*, *Lunyu*, *Daodejing* 道德經, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Shiji* 史記 (“Historical records”) and *Shijing* 詩經 (“Book of odes”), but also from more purely literary works, such as *Ai lian shuo* 愛蓮說 (“On the love for lotus”).

The eighth section tries to confute different Buddhist theories, particularly referencing the most doctrinal and specific aspects of the religion; other than the usual mention of classical Chinese texts, this part of *Pi wang* is full of references to stories, characters, and legends of Buddhism, as well as the well-known paradoxes *koan* 公案, typical of Chan 禪 tradition.

The ninth and last chapter is devoted instead to the veneration of ancestors, which is one of the tenets of the adaptation of the Confucian tradition to Christian teachings. As stated by the author, according to rumour, the orthodox teaching of the Lord of Heaven does not venerate ancestors; since this has a close connection with the adhesion to the way (i.e., the doctrine of Christianity) such a topic needed to be discussed with urgency (天主正教，不奉祖先。此事關係入道極大，亟宜辨明).

### 3. The attribution of *Pi wang*: between Xu Guangqi and other hypotheses

As mentioned in the introduction of the article, *Pi wang* is usually attributed to Xu Guangqi, but recent studies have questioned this hypothesis with grounded theories. To provide a brief overview, the first theory is that the work appeared for the first time around 1670; the second is that there are at least three versions of it; the third is the problem of the writing collaboration between Jesuits and Chinese converts (Dudink 2001a: 115). However, particularly pertaining to the first and most important point, other studies place the appearance of *Pi wang* before 1615,<sup>6</sup> therefore confirming the attribution to Xu Guangqi.

When analysing the question of *Pi wang*'s author, the historical and religious context should not be forgotten, especially with regard to the involvement of the religious themes drawn in *Pi wang* in the later Chinese Rites Controversy; the latter certainly influenced the attribution of the work in the

---

<sup>6</sup> Zürcher (2001: 159). Consult this reference for more detailed discussions about questioning the attribution of *Pi wang* to Xu Guangqi.



decades and centuries following its composition. In fact, Xu Guangqi's religious writings were extensively used after his death by Jesuits, as well as in disputes with Buddhists, and there were also contradictory accounts of his attitude towards the use of religious terms, with their consistent implications on the Jesuit strategies of cultural accommodation (Blue 2001: 45–48).

In this section, the author would like to instead focus on sources that deal more closely with *Pi wang*, briefly analysing four that directly attribute the text to Xu Guangqi, two that directly or indirectly question this hypothesis, and some relevant linguistic elements that should also be considered. With reference to the six sources, all were composed after the supposed compilation date of *Pi wang* (Dudink 2001a: 115–116); four explicitly or indirectly refer to Xu Guangqi as its author, and two omit his name. Their importance is twofold: on the one hand, such sources were previously ignored in disentangling the various issues of the attribution of *Pi wang*; on the other, the great majority have been composed by “insiders,” that is, missionaries and scholars who, to different degrees, directly experienced or were at least familiar with the history of contact between Chinese converts and Western religious fellows.

From a chronological perspective, the first reference considered can be read in a text composed by the Belgian Jesuit François Noël (Wei Fangji 衛方濟, 1651–1729) and the German Jesuit Caspar Castner (Pang Jiabin 龐嘉賓, 1655–1709). The work gathers different documents of testimonies on the approval decree of the Jesuit Mission in China by Pope Alexander VII (1599–1667) and the later decision by Pope Clement XI (1649–1721) on the Chinese Rites Controversy. Under the section *Testimonia Litteratorum Sinensium Christianorum* (“Testimonies of Chinese Christian literati”), it is possible to read one by *Doctor, & primus Imperii Minister Siu quam Ki in suo Libello impresso Pie wam, idest errorum refutationes [...]* (“Doctor and first minister of the empire, Xu Guangqi, in his published booklet, *Pi wang*, i.e., confutation of errors [...];” Noël and Castner 1703: 83). Therefore, the short treatise on the refutation of errors, *Pie wam*, is explicitly attributed to “Siu quam Ki” and considered by the two Jesuits among the testimonies of faith by Chinese Christian literati.

The second text presented, illustrating the Chinese philosophical system in three parts, was also written by François Noël. In a chapter devoted to the dispute between the use of the terms *Shangdi* 上帝 and *Tianzhu* 天主 to refer to the Christian god, Noël quotes the adoption of the first in the text by Xu Guangqi: *Doctor & Imperatoris primus Minister, seu Colaui Siu Christianus in suo parvo celebri libro Pie Vam, sic: XamTi, inquit, est hominum vivorum, & mortuorum Dominus [...]* (“Doctor and first minister of the emperor, i.e. the Christian *gelao* Xu in his short and famous book *Pi wang*, says as follows: *Shangdi* is the lord of the living and dead men [...];” Noël 1711: 153). The booklet, also quoted later in the work by Noël (Noël 1711: 156–157), is indicated as *Pie Vam*, another romanisation of *Pi wang*; Xu Guangqi is referred

to by his surname, *Siu*, and the epithet *Cola*. The latter is a romanisation to indicate *gelao* 閣老, a semi-official title (Golvers 1995: 337) referring to the Grand Secretary; Xu was indeed appointed with this position in 1632. As for the terminological controversy referred to by Noël, it is worth noting that the contrary is true: the term *Shangdi* is used only once in *Pi wang*, while *Tianzhu* can be found six times.

The third reference is included in the librarian collection of the German sinologist Gottlieb Siegfried Bayer (also known as Theophilus Siegfried Bayer, Ba Yier 巴伊爾, 1694–1738); the reference should be dated after 1734, given the mention of this date in the passage quoted below, and before 1738, the year he passed away. In one of the volumes of the collection, after the “contemporary romanisation” of the title, on the cover a note handwritten by Bayer reads:

*De hoc libro sic. RR.PP. Kögler et Pereira A.1734 vii Kal. Sextiles. Liber contra sectas idolatricas singillatim disputans, typus expressus non habetur, manuscripta autem eius exempla perrara exstant: provide aliud eiusdem fere? Argumenti volume substituimas titulo pie vam a sin Paulo, qui sub dynasta Mim [Ming] inter supremos Imperii Ministres claruit, sublimi stylo scriptam et ab literatis magnii aestimatum. Ly Pauli imaginem vide in Kircheri China Illustrata ad. Pag. 114'. 3. Signed at foot: “T.S Bayeri” (Weston 2018: 201–202)*

About this book, the reverend fathers Kögler and Pereira seven days before the Kalends of Sextilis [stated] as follows. The book argues against the idolatrous sects, one by one. It does not have the publishing house printed; other examples of manuscripts of this are very rare; therefore, we propose another volume of the same argument, with the title *Pi wang*, by Paulus Xu, who was famous among the supreme ministers of the Empire under the Ming dynasty, written in a sublime style and estimated by great scholars. You can see a picture of him in *China Illustrata* by Kircher, p. 114 [...]

In this case, *sin Paulo* is probably a mistaken interpretation of Bayer’s handwritten note; it should read as *Siu Paulo*, a reference to *Paul Xu*, the baptismal name of Xu Guangqi. The *pie vam* is indicated as composed by him and was appreciated by the officials of the time. Other than attributing the text explicitly to Xu Guangqi, the mention of the Ming dynasty would put the compilation of *Pi wang* before its end date, in 1644.

The following and final reference ascribing *Pi wang* to Xu Guangqi is the *Miscellanea Berolinensia*, a text totalling seven volumes, published by the Prussian Academy of Sciences between 1710 and 1744. In volume five, we read a letter from *R. P. Ignatii Kögler & R. P. Andræ Pereyræ*, namely the German Jesuit Ignatius Kegler (also spelled as Ignaz Kögler, Dai Jinxian 戴進賢, 1680–1746) and the Portuguese Jesuit André Pereira (Xu Maode 徐懋德, 1689–1743), sent from Beijing in 1734 to Bayer; the three are the same people mentioned in the work before. The letter reads:

*Liber contra sectas idololatricas sigillatim disputans, typis expressus non habetur: manuscripta autem eius exempla perrara exstant. Proinde aliud eiusdem fere argumenti volumen substituimus, titulo Pie vam a Doctore Siu Paulo, qui sub dynastia Mim inter Supremos Imperii Ministros claruit, sublimi stylo conscriptum; & ab literatis magni æstimatum (Bayer 1737: 192)*

This book argues against the idolatrous sects, one by one; it does not have the publishing house printed; other examples of manuscripts of this are very rare. Therefore, we propose another volume of the same argument, with the title *Pi wang*, by Paulus Xu, who was famous among the supreme ministers of the Empire under the Ming dynasty, written in a sublime style and estimated by great scholars [...]

As evidenced in a comparison of the last two passages, they include almost the same comment, apart from a further reference in the former to a lithography of Xu Guangqi depicted together with Matteo Ricci, included in *China Illustrata* (Kircher 1667: 114).

Finally, it should be added that the same attribution to Xu Guangqi can clearly also be found in many works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, epitomised in “Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period.” In the entry composed by J. C. Yang (Yang Rujin 楊汝金, exact dates unknown), it is reported that Xu Guangqi retired to Tianjin due to illness and “wrote a number of articles, such as 闢釋氏諸妄 *P’i Shih-shih chu-wang* (commonly known as *P’i-wang*), 1 *chüan*, a short treatise denouncing Buddhism” (Hummel 1943: 317).

On the other hand, other sources did not mention the author or indirectly questioned the attribution to Xu Guangqi. An example of the first case is the catalogue of manuscripts of the French Bibliothèque du Roi. Among the list of *Libri Sinici, ex Missionariorum Extraneorum Bibliotheca in Regiam Bibliothecam illati anno 1720. Cætu omni volente atque ad voluntatem Regiam sese libenter adjungente* (“Chinese books, brought from the library of external missionaries to the royal library. With the consent of the entire assembly and the pleasure of the King”), number 129 is described as *Pie vam, id est, falsitas contradictionis, seu aperta falsitas. Tractatulus contra infernum Foistarum, quem auctor omnibus modis exagitat, quoad durationem, quoad locum, &c., Volumen 1* (“*Pi wang*, i.e., arguments against falsities, or blatant falsities. A small booklet against the Buddhist hell, that the author attacks in all manners, regarding duration, place, etc. One volume;” *Catalogus codicum manuscriptorum Bibliothecæ regiæ: tomus primus 1739: 410*). In this case, *Pi wang* is listed among the books moved to the library in 1720, and is described as a book opposing the Buddhist version of hell, which the author tries to confute with regard to various aspects. In the catalogue, therefore, the book is not explicitly attributed to Xu Guangqi. It is probable that in this case, contrary to the sources consulted above, the compiler of the catalogue was not an expert of missions in China or Chinese studies and did not know the attribution—either to Xu Guangqi or not—simply listing *Pi wang* as one of the texts of the Bibliothèque du Roi.

A source that directly questions the authorship of Xu Guangqi is a letter written by the Jesuit Francisco Gayosso (Hong Duliang 洪度亮, 1647–1702) to his Flemish fellow Ferdinand Verbiest (Nan Huairen 南懷仁, 1623–1688), dated November 23rd, 1683.<sup>7</sup> Addressing the problem of some Chinese rites for Christians, he lists a series of arguments trying to make the position of Jesuits more acceptable from a doctrinal perspective. One of the reasons concerns the offerings to the dead, dealt with in the second and fourth sections of *Pi wang*. As Gayosso states:

*Sed nec obstat quod in illo libello, a nostris scripto, qui titulo praenotatur P'ie vam refellitur usus cremandi papyros, quia ibi tantum asseritur quod cremare papyros in honorem defunctorum sit ritus vanus et futilis*  
(Golvers 2017: 512–13)

However, not even the fact that in that booklet titled *Pi wang*, written by one of ours, the practice of burning papers is confuted, represents a hindrance, since in the text it is only stated that burning papers in honour of the dead is a vain and futile rite)

He is therefore trying to demonstrate that, according to a book written *a nostris*, the burning of paper merely does not provide any benefit for the souls, though it is not a despicable practice as to be considered evil. The booklet referred to is exactly *Pi wang*; as affirmed in secondary literature, this letter by Gayosso might imply that its author is a Jesuit (Dudink 2011: 296). However, notwithstanding the question of the reliability of Gayosso's words compared to other primary sources—we can also reasonably suppose that he could have wrongly attributed *Pi wang* to one of his Jesuit fellows, perhaps in good faith—the plural of “nostris” might infer a co-authorship as well (Golvers 2017: 512, fn. 1500), not excluding the participation of Xu Guangqi.

To sum up, all the analysed passages, except two, attribute *Pi wang* exclusively to Xu Guangqi; it should be noted that they were composed by insiders or those with knowledge of relations between Chinese converts and Western missionaries, which represented the background of the *Pi wang*. Only the second to last document neglects all hints to the author's identity; this was instead composed by one or more “generalists.” Of course, the attribution by a number of secondary sources to Xu Guangqi's brush is significant, but not a diriment element in this debated topic. If the attribution is incorrect, it is possible that the error was committed without any textual verification by their authors. However, most of these sources had never been highlighted before in the debate about *Pi wang*. To provide further clues, in the next section I consider two terminological aspects that may cast a brighter light on the topic.

---

<sup>7</sup> Pointed out also in Dudink (2001a: 122–123).

#### 4. Quotation of earlier sources: a new key for the attribution of *Pi wang*?

Even though the above works bring new perspectives on the question of who composed *Pi wang*, they are not sufficient to determine which option is more plausible. Therefore, I would like to focus on two pieces of internal textual information that can provide new keys to clarify the attribution issue of *Pi wang*.

The first can be read in the section on “the absurdity of burning joss paper,” *shao zhi zhi wang* 燒紙之妄. The author of *Pi wang* disproves the habit of burning joss paper as offerings to the dead; since the paper was a material traditionally considered to be invented by the official Cai Lun 蔡倫 (ca. 61–121), it could not have been used before Cai Lun was born. Analogously, Tai Gong 太公, a nobleman who lived around the 11th century BCE and was also known as Zhou Gong Dan 周公旦, established a “system for managing money.” Therefore, according to the author of *Pi wang*, before him, money did not exist.<sup>8</sup> These historical figures are mentioned to prove that it would be religiously immoral and illogical to consider that burning paper money only started from a certain period of time—this would discriminate against all souls born before that date. As already seen in section 2, the strategy of logical reasoning is indeed one of the main stylistic features of *Pi wang*.

However, what is important to note here is that the “system for managing money” in the passage above is a translation of *jiufu yuan fa* 九府圜法, which in the original text is instead reported as *jiufu quan fa* 九府泉法. Based on manual textual research and the use of *Zhongguo jiben guji ku* 中國基本古籍庫 (“Database of Chinese classic ancient books”), the latter variant of the expression appears exclusively—regardless of before or after the presumed date of compilation of *Pi wang*—in the *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Compendium of materia medica), written by Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593) in 1578.

This factor can represent an important temporal indication that could be applied to other expressions and terms as well. In fact, Xu Guangqi was the author of an encyclopaedic treatise known as *Nongzheng quanshu* 農政全書 (“A compendium on the administration of agriculture”). The latter was revised and to some extent rearranged after Xu’s death by a group of scholars, to be published only in 1639; it can be therefore considered “in a sense, a group enterprise” (Bray and Métaillé 2001: 323). Nonetheless, it was based on a draft by Xu, and many historians consider *Nongzheng quanshu* as Xu’s greatest achievement (Bray and Métaillé 2001: 322–323). In any case, secondary literature has already demonstrated that almost half of the *Nongzheng quanshu* “contains up-to-date knowledge from Ming times such as *Bencao Gangmu* [...]” (Deng 1993: 86) and other texts as well. It is plausible, therefore, to

---

<sup>8</sup>The original passage reads: “太公造九府泉法，則周以前並無錢矣。”

suppose that if Xu Guangqi is the author of *Pi wang*, he might have used the expression *jiufu quan fa* 九府泉法 in the latter, also thanks to his lengthy experience in arranging materials from the *Bencao gangmu* for his *Nongzheng quanshu*. In case he was not, it is still possible to advance the hypothesis that the other compilers of *Nongzheng quanshu* adopted this term based on Xu Guangqi's draft. Of course, we can also speculate that it was one of the editors of *Nongzheng quanshu* who used these characters autonomously, but that is a rather low probability, considering that the only other occurrence is in *Pi wang*.

A second term considered here is the Chinese phonemic loan in *Pi wang* indicating Lucifer, *lujifuer* 路祭弗爾.<sup>9</sup> The latter is a peculiar heterograph of *lujifuer* 路濟弗爾, and can be found in only one work in the time frame considered in this article:<sup>10</sup> *Tianzhu shengjiao shilu* 天主聖教實錄 (“Veritable record of the holy doctrine of the Lord of Heaven”), composed by the Italian Jesuit missionary Michele Ruggieri (Luo Mingjian 羅明堅, 1543–1607) in 1584. The latter reads: [...]有一位總管天神，名曰：『路祭弗爾』，甚是聰明美絕，尤異於眾天神 (“[...] there was an angel who supervised, named ‘Lucifer.’ He was extremely clever and handsome, and particularly different from all the other angels”).<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that this is a later version, published around 1640<sup>12</sup> and stored in the Archive of The Society of Jesus, Jap. Sin. I-54, f. 13A, of the original text. The latter, titled *Xinbian Xizhuguo tianzhu shilu* 新編西竺國天主實錄, Jap. Sin. I-189, f. 16A, analogously stored in ARSI, reports instead: [...]有一位總管天人，名曰：『嚕只弗囉』，甚是聰明美貌，尤異於眾天人. The phonemic loan to indicate Lucifer here, therefore, is *luzhifuluo* 嚕只弗囉. which is different and appears to be based on a ‘Cantonese’ pronunciation, more so than *lujifuer* 路祭弗爾; *Xinbian Xizhuguo tianzhu shilu* was indeed published for the first time in Guangzhou. *Lujifuer* 路祭弗爾, therefore, was added in place of *luzhifuluo* 嚕只弗囉 at a later stage by the Portuguese revisers Emmanuel Diaz, Gaspard Ferreira (Fei Qiguan 費奇觀, 1571–1649), João Monteiro (Meng Ruwang 孟儒望, 1602–1648) and Francisco Furtado (Fu Fanji 傅泛際, 1589–1653).

---

<sup>9</sup> This transcription is particularly rare and is not listed in Ke (2017: 67–76).

<sup>10</sup> Other than *Pi wang* and the text analysed in this paragraph, it can be later found only in jian 24 of *Chun Changzi zhi yu* 純常子枝語 (“Notes by Chun Changzi”), by the Qing Chinese scholar Wen Tingshi 文廷式 (1856–1904); see the reprint Wen (1969: 1383).

<sup>11</sup> The punctuation is added by the author of this article. The same transcription is found in the fourth jian, f. 1A, of *Shengjing zhijie* 聖經直解 (“Direct explanation of the Bible”) by the Portuguese Jesuit Emmanuel Diaz (Yang Manuo 陽瑪諾, 1574–1659), stored in Fonds Chinois of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, 6722, published in 1739 by Lingbao tang 領報堂: “魔首謂之路祭弗爾。譯言待光” (The head of demons is Lucifer, whose meaning is “bearer of light”). However, since *Shengjing zhijie* was first printed in 1642 and its preface is dated 1636, it could not be consulted by Xu Guangqi.

<sup>12</sup> As indicated in Wang (2016: 81–90). See also Gernet (1979: 407–416).

Therefore, analogously to the first lexicological example presented in this section, the author may have consulted *Tianzhu shengjiao shilu*, adopting its peculiar transcription of Lucifer. If we assume that the author of *Pi wang* was Xu Guangqi, such a hypothesis might be encouraged by Xu Guangqi's personal connection with Matteo Ricci and other missionaries, who may have provided a copy of the text. In fact, Xu met a Jesuit for the first time in 1595 (Dudink 2001b: 401), so he would not have been able to converse in person with Ruggieri, who left China for good in 1588 (Goodrich and Fang 1976: 1149). This factor alone means we cannot infer with certainty that *Pi wang* was composed by Xu Guangqi; if we contemplate the theory that a Jesuit missionary wrote it, it is analogously possible that the latter consulted the work by Ruggieri. However, considering all the factors analysed thus far, the phonemic loan can be viewed as an additional factor to take into account for further consideration in this dispute on the attribution of *Pi wang* to Xu Guangqi.

### 5. Indirect references and possible connections

In order to get a better outlook on the attribution of *Pi wang*, I finally examine other general references to Xu Guangqi, which might help better put his work in the historical and cultural context presented, and advance some hypotheses.

The first reference to Xu Guangqi consulted comes from the work by the Italian Jesuit Daniello Bartoli (Ba Duli 巴笃里, 1608–1685). Discussing the moral works printed by Matteo Ricci, a mention of Xu Guangqi can be read, but not of *Pi wang*. Other than the *Libro dell'amicitia* ("Book on Friendship;" Bartoli 1663: 522) or *Jiaoyou lun* 交友論, Bartoli mentions *Le Venticinque parole* ("Twenty-five words") (Bartoli 1663: 522), namely the text translated in Chinese by Ricci as *Ershiwu yan* 二十五言, to which "Fummocam" added a preface. The latter is a reference to Feng Yingjing 馮應京 (1555–1606), a famous scholar and official of the province of Huguang 湖廣. "Fummocam" is a romanisation of his surname, Feng, and of his courtesy name, Mugang 慕岡; he was a very close friend of Ricci (Hsia 2010: 260) and *Governava la Provincia d'Huquan in ufficio di supremo Giudice criminale* ("he governed the province of Huguang as a judge;" Bartoli 1663: 380). Xu Guangqi is mentioned in this respect as he added a postface to the *Ershiwu yan*, a *maraviglioso discorso, in commendation della legge nostra* ("very brilliant praise of our doctrine;" Bartoli 1663: 522–523). It is therefore not surprising that Xu Guangqi, irrespective of the doubt of the authorship of *Pi wang*, was considered to be a champion of Christianity, not necessarily against the Buddhist religion, as there is almost no trace of anti-Buddhism in this postface. Being renowned among Western Christian missionaries for this might have also reinforced the attribution of *Pi wang* to his brush, if we accept the theory that he was not the composer.

Such conviction could also be reinforced by another statement attributed to him, reported by the Italian Jesuit missionary Prospero Intorcetta (Yin Duoze 殷鐸澤, 1625–1696) as *Pu ju; çive fe*.<sup>13</sup> The latter is a transcription of *bu ru jue fo* 補儒絕佛, “supplement Confucianism and refuse Buddhism;” its creation is attributed precisely to Xu Guangqi.<sup>14</sup> In Torcetta’s text, it is indicated in the *proemialis declaratio* as a *Laconismo [...] & voce & scripto* (“laconism [...] both in written and oral form”). In the famous *Confucius sinarum philosophus*, therefore, Intorcetta affirms that Xu Guangqi stated his refusal of Buddhism and the integration of Confucian values both orally and in writing.

Whether *Pu ju; çive fe* is a reference to *Pi wang* cannot be stated with certainty, but it is clear that the theory expressed in these four Chinese characters is promoted in the entire *Pi wang*. Other than the quotations from various Confucian classics throughout the first eight sections, it is particularly in the last and ninth one, *bian bu feng zuxian shuo* (“confuting the theory of ancestors who are not venerated”) that more stress is put on the purest Confucian values, particularly filial piety: 故父母生則養，盡志盡物；死則事，如生如存。斯為孝敬 (“For this reason, while the father and mother are still alive, they should be raised, with all the will and means.<sup>15</sup> Serve them also once they are gone, as though they are alive and living: this is a demonstration of filial piety”).

As already mentioned, however, this last section of *Pi wang* is considered the most controversial and perhaps was added by a missionary (Dudink 2011: 301), not by Xu Guangqi, or the author of the text. It is true that the strategy of embracing Confucianism to better adapt to the need of spreading Christianity was headed exactly by Xu Guangqi (Mungello 2019: 16), who was familiar with many influential Catholic missionaries to China. This method is represented in *Pi wang* by the examples quoted in section 2 of this article, and by the adaptation of Chinese canonical texts to Christian precepts. This is exemplified in the closing line of the section of *Pi wang* devoted to the refutation of *samsāra*, where the author states that “[only] invocations of the Lord of Heaven ‘Do good and you will be rewarded’ and ‘Always act properly so that happiness will live after you’ should be recited [...]” (「作善降祥」，「積善餘慶」，此天主咒當持 [...]). Both sayings are still used in contemporary Chinese and are adaptations, respectively, from the *Shangshu* 尚書, or “Book of documents” (作善降之百祥，作不善降之百殃: “Do good and you will receive good fortune, do harm and you will get

<sup>13</sup> Intorcetta (1687: xiii); the alleged quotation was taken up in later texts, such as Brancati (1700: 275).

<sup>14</sup> Mungello (2001: 39-40). According to Meynard (2001: 22, fn. 10), the attribution by Intorcetta of this passage to Xu Guangqi was due to a wrong interpretation by the Portuguese missionary João Monteiro in his *Tianxue lüeyi* 天學略義 (“Outline of heavenly studies”).

<sup>15</sup> As pointed out in Tola (2020: 269), the passage is adapted from the *Liji* 禮記, *jitong* 祭統 section: “外則盡物，內則盡志” (“From outside all means are exhausted, inside, all the will is employed”).



misfortune”), while the second derives from *Zhouyi* 周易, or “Book of changes,” also known as *Yijing* 易經, hexagram *kun* 坤 (積善之家，必有餘慶: “in the families that accumulate good deeds, there will inevitably be benefits for posterity”). It is plausible, therefore, that if this last section of *Pi wang* was actually added by missionaries and not Xu Guangqi, the former might have been indirectly inspired by the authoritative heritage of the latter, particularly the practice of “supplementing Confucianism and refusing Buddhism,” as well as the adaptation of the first to the dogmas of the Christian religion.

Finally, I would like to put forward a hypothesis that needs further investigation. It is possible that when composing the structure, the author of *Pi wang* was inspired by a work by Matteo Ricci, the *Ji ren shi pian* 畸人十篇 (“Ten chapters of a bizarre man”). The latter is indeed divided into ten paradoxes, one section more than *Pi wang*, or two when considering the addition of the last one at a later phase. Even if the former is supposed to be a dialogue, the structure is closer to a structured reasoning for sustaining the ideas of Christianity (Song 2019: 58–61), similarly to the rhetorical organisation of *Pi wang*. Some of the contents of *Ji ren shi pian* also overlap with those of *Pi wang*, such as the discussion of the concept of *liu dao* 六道 (“six paths or realms of Buddhism”). For example, in chapter eight, Ricci rhetorically asks, “How can one dismiss the true theory of Paradise and Hell for the false theory of *saṃsāra*?” (豈可以輪回六道之虛說，輒廢天堂、地獄之實論乎?), echoing passages from the sixth section of *Pi wang*. Other than this, in *Ji ren shi pian* only six Chinese scholars in total are quoted (Song 2019, 61); among them, Xu Guangqi is mentioned in one dialogue, particularly in paradoxes three and four, even if the subject was not Buddhism. Therefore, it is plausible that Xu Guangqi read the text and was inspired by Matteo Ricci’s work for his *Pi wang*; further investigation might cast a brighter light on this aspect as well.

## 6. Conclusions

The attribution of *Pi wang* is a complicated issue, mixing historical, cultural, textual, and linguistic factors, all of which should be taken into account to better point out research perspectives and hopefully find a concrete solution. Even though it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion, based on the multifaceted factors presented and examined in this article, the attribution of *Pi wang* to Xu Guangqi cannot be considered wrong from a linguistic perspective, with the exception of its last section. On the other hand, if Xu Guangqi did not compose *Pi wang*, as indicated by other research mentioned, it was still intimately inspired by his tradition of “cultural cross-pollination” (Mungello 2019: 16) of Confucian and Christian elements, which influenced so many Christian missionaries, and maybe the real author of *Pi wang*. We should remember that in most cases works such as the one

described here were by definition the result of the cooperation between Western missionaries and Chinese converts. Defining their respective boundaries is not an easy task, also considering that Jesuits themselves at times needed to modify contents for obtaining the *imprimatur*. On the other hand, Xu Guangqi was a high-level official. While the attribution to him could be determined by his prestige, the contrary can also be considered—that is, *Pi wang* was perhaps not accredited to his brush due to problems in the terminology used which, as we all know, was particularly sensitive when it came to religious content. In any case, the hypotheses, sources, and lexicological questions presented in this article can better integrate the few relevant studies conducted and point to new research paths to be further explored.

In fact, the information discussed above indicates that one of the ways to reach an even clearer conclusion on the topic is to expand the research to other texts, particularly secondary sources published right after *Pi wang*, and most of all, to other linguistic peculiarities that can provide new insights. As evidenced in section 4 of this article, the lexicological features of the text can indeed better contribute to, and perhaps definitively disentangle, the attribution of *Pi wang*, together with the textual research of section 3. All this, combined with previous studies, possible future archival and textual discoveries, and the analysis of the personal connections between some of the actors mentioned, might finally bring a positive conclusion to this debate, casting a brighter light on cross-cultural interactions between Chinese converts and Western missionaries.

## References

- Bartoli, Daniello. 1663. *Dell'istoria della Compagnia di Gesu: La Cina; terza parte dell'Asia*. Roma: Nella Stamperia del Varese.
- Bayer, Gottlieb Siegfried. 1737. “Commercium Sinicum.” In: *Miscellanea Berolinensia ad incrementum scientiarum ex scriptis Societati Regiae Scientiarum*, vol. 5, edited by Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin), 185-192. Halæ Magdeburgicæ: Officina Libraria Rengeriana.
- Blue, Gregory. 2001. “Xu Guangqi in the West: Early Jesuit Sources and the Construction of an Identity.” In: *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China: The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562-1633)*, edited by Catherine Jami, Peter Engelfriet and Gregory Blue, 19-71. Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill.
- Brancati, Francesco. 1700. *De sinensium ritibus politicis acta*. Parisiis: apud Nicolaum Pepie.
- Bray, Francesca, and Georges Métailié. 2001. “Who Was the Author of the *Nongzheng Quanshu*?” In: *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China: The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562-1633)*, edited by Catherine Jami, Peter Engelfriet and Gregory Blue, 322-359. Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill.

- Catalogus codicum manuseriptorum Bibliothecæ regiae: tomus primus*. 1739. Paris: E typographia regia.
- Chu, Pingyi 祝平一. 2008. "Narrating a History for China's Medical Past: Christianity, Natural Philosophy and History in Wang Honghan's *Gujin yishi* 古今醫史 [History of Medicine Past and Present]." *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 28: 14–35.
- Deng, Kent Gang. 1993. *Development Versus Stagnation: Technological Continuity and Agricultural Progress in Pre-modern China*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Dudink, Ad. 2001a. "The Image of Xu Guangqi as Author of Christian Texts (A Bibliographical Appraisal)." In: *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China: The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562–1633)*, edited by Catherine Jami, Peter Engelfriet and Gregory Blue, 99–152. Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill.
- Dudink, Ad. 2001b. "Xu Guangqi's Career: An Annotated Chronology." In: *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China: The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562–1633)*, edited by Catherine Jami, Peter Engelfriet and Gregory Blue, 399–409. Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill.
- Dudink, Ad. 2011. "Xu Guangqi shi Pi wang de zuozhe ma? 徐光启是《辟妄》的作者吗?" [Is Xu Guangqi the author of *Pi wang*?]. In: *Xu Guangqi yu Jihe yuanben* 徐光启与《几何原本》 [Xu Guangqi and *Jihe yuanben*], edited by Xuhui qu wenhua ju 徐汇区文化局, 295–304. Shanghai: Shanghai jiaotong daxue chubanshe 上海交通大学出版社.
- Gernet, Jacques. 1979. "Sur les différentes versions du premier catéchisme en chinois de 1584." In: *Studia Sino-Mongolica: Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, edited by Wolfgang Bauer, 407–416. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
- Golvers, Noël. 1995. "The Latin Treatises of F. Verbiest, S.J., on European Astronomy in China: Some Linguistic Considerations." *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 44: 305–369.
- Golvers, Noël. 2017. *Letters of a Peking Jesuit: The Correspondence of Ferdinand Verbiest, SJ (1623–1688); Revised and Expanded*. Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Institute.
- Goodrich, Luther Carrington and Fang Chaoying, eds. 1976. *Dictionary of Ming Biography 1368–1644: Volume II*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Guo, Qitao. 2005. *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage: The Confucian Transformation of Popular Culture in Late Imperial Huizhou*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hsia, Ronnie Po-chia. 2010. *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hummel, Arthur William. 1943. *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.
- Intorcetta, Prospero. 1687. *Confucius sinarum philosophus, sive scientia sinensis latine exposita*. Paris: Apud Danielem Horthemels.
- Ke, Hui 柯卉. 2017. "Hanyu jidujiao wenxian zhong 'Satan' yiming de yanbian 漢語基督教文獻中'Satan'譯名的演變" [The evolution in the transcription of the name 'Satan' in Chinese Christian texts]. *Aomen ligong xuebao* 澳門理工學報 20/2: 67–76.

- Kircher, Athanasius. 1667. *Athanasii Kircheri e Soc. Jesu China monumentis, qua sacris quàm profanis, nec non variis naturæ & artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata, auspiciis Leopoldi primi, roman. imper. semper augusti munificentissimi mecænatis*. Amsterdam: apud Joannem Janssonium à Waesberge & Elizeum Weyerstraet.
- Li, Tiangang 李天綱, ed. 2007. *Ming mo tianzhujiao san zhushi wen jianzhu* 明末天主教三柱石文箋注 [Notes and commentaries on the writings of three pillars of Catholicism at the end of the Ming dynasty]. Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press 道風書社.
- Meynard, Thierry. 2001. “Chinese Buddhism and the Threat of Atheism in Seventeenth-Century Europe.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31: 3–23.
- Mungello, David Emil. 2001. *The Spirit and the Flesh in Shandong, 1650–1785*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mungello, David Emil. 2019. *The Silencing of Jesuit Figurist Joseph de Prémare in Eighteenth-Century China*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Noël, François. 1711. *Philosophia Sinica tribus tractatibus, primo cognitionem primi entis, secundo ceremonias erga defunctos, tertio ethicam, juxta Sinarum mentem complectens*. Prague: typis Universitatis Caroloferdinandæ, in Collegio Soc. Jesu ad S. Clementem, per Joachimum Joannem Kamenicky factorem.
- Noël, François and Caspar Castner. 1703. *Summarium novorum authenticorum testimoniorum tam Europæorum, quam Sinensium novissimè è China allatorum circa veritatem, et subsistentiam facti, cui innititur Decretum sa: me: Alexandri VII*. Rome.
- Song, Gang. 2019. *Giulio Aleni, Kouduo richao, and Christian-Confucian Dialogism in Late Ming Fujian*. Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute – Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tola, Gabriele. 2020. “Confutazione di tutte le assurdità del Buddha – *Pi shishi zhuwang* 闡釋氏諸妄.” In: *Xu Guangqi e gli studi celesti: Dialogo di un letterato cristiano dell’epoca Ming con la scienza occidentale*, edited by Elisa Giunipero, 235–270. Milano: Angelo Guerini e Associati.
- Wang, Huining 王慧宇. 2016. “*Tianzhu shilu* ge banben qingkuang ji chuanguo yuanliu qianxi 《天主實錄》各版本情況及創作源流淺析” [A preliminary analysis of the various editions, creation, origin, and development of *Tianzhu shilu*]. *Aomen ligong xuebao* 澳門理工學報 19/4: 81–90.
- Wen, Tingshi 文廷式. 1969. *Chun Changzi zhi yu* 純常子枝語 [Notes by Chun Changzi]. Taipei: Dahua yinshuguan 大華印書館.
- Weston, David. 2018. *The Bayer Collection: A Preliminary Catalogue of the Manuscripts and Books of Professor Theophilus Siegfried Bayer, Acquired and Augmented by the Reverend Dr Heinrich Walther Gerdes, Now Preserved in the Hunterian Library of the University of Glasgow*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow.
- Zürcher, Erik. 2001. “Xu Guangqi and Buddhism.” In: *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China: The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562–1633)*, edited by Catherine Jami, Peter Engelfriet and Gregory Blue, 155–169. Leiden– Boston – Köln: Brill.

---

Gabriele Tola is a researcher at the Italian Institute of Oriental Studies department of Sapienza University of Rome. He has been a JSPS postdoctoral fellow at the Graduate School of East Asian Cultures of Kansai University and a research associate in Chinese NLP at the Department of Computer Science of Sapienza University of Rome. He is Laureate of the Marthe Engelborghs-Bertels Prize for Sinology and P.I. of the Prin 2022 PNRR project "CHIN-DICTIONARY – Brollo's *Dictionarium sinico-latinum*: linguistic innovations, textual connections, and trans-cultural translation."

Gabriele can be contacted at: [gabriele.tola@uniroma1.it](mailto:gabriele.tola@uniroma1.it)



## Modern and contemporary history





## In the name of the Red Cross Society of China

### Women's activism and humanitarian aid during the war (1937-1945)

Federica Cicci

The participation of Chinese women in humanitarian aid from the War of Resistance to the Second World War is an issue that remains to be thoroughly investigated. What role did women play in humanitarian work during the turbulent years of the war? By analyzing the power relations and humanitarian activities in the Red Cross, the paper intertwines with issues concerning the meaning of gender and state in modern China, assessing women's role within the Chinese Red Cross, particularly nurses in designing aid programs, and how significant it was. One woman played a special role in the growth of military nursing assistance for Chinese troops: Zhou Meiyu. Specifically, the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps had a major task in supporting the training of military medical personnel and Zhou was particularly successful in establishing a valid medical expert in the new education programs. Women in the Red Cross not only tended to the wounded and comforted soldiers but also helped in the logistical coordination of relief work, raising support for the Chinese war effort through their propaganda and fundraising initiatives. The paper draws on different examples to illustrate how, breaking down gender boundaries, humanitarian war services in wartime were promoted, and how women's work and relationships with Western women served as a window on which gender shaped the meanings of humanitarianism, war and nation-building in modern China, while offering the opportunity to re-discuss the social values and traditional roles of women.

**Keywords:** Red Cross; RCSC; China; humanitarian aid; women; gender; war.

#### 1. Introduction

The War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945)<sup>1</sup> has been a subject of extensive literature, primarily focusing on military battles, revolutionary movements, victims, and victories. Yet, the crucial role that

---

<sup>1</sup> The war that impacted China during the period between 1937 and 1945 has been presented with numerous designations. On the Chinese mainland as well as in Taiwan, the armed hostilities of 1937-1945 are referred to as the *Kangri zhanzheng* 抗日战争 "War of Resistance to Japan," abbreviated as *Kangzhan* 抗战 "Resistance War." In Japan and the Western world, this

Chinese women played in offering humanitarian aid during this period remains largely neglected. Nonetheless, the Red Cross Society of China fervently advocated for women's involvement, recognizing their critical contributions in providing assistance throughout the war. From the early 1930s, indeed, one distinctiveness of the Red Cross was the active presence of women in relief efforts. For instance, He Xiangning 何香凝 (1878-1972), the widow of an early member of the Nationalist Party, Liao Zhongkai 廖仲愷 (1877-1925), and supporter of the anti-Japanese resistance, organized a unit led by women. With the help of the Red Cross in Shanghai, He established the National Calamity Women's Training Class that mobilized sixty workers who provided emergency assistance, helped establish emergency hospitals, and comforted wounded soldiers (Chi 2004: 270). He Xiangning was not the only one. The mobilization of both nationalist and communist women was decisive in the Chinese Army's victory over the Japanese Empire.

Despite the extensive body of literature available on the events of the war in China,<sup>2</sup> some questions have not been adequately examined by scholars: what role did women play in humanitarian work during the turbulent years of the war? How does the examination of the female relief activities within the Red Cross during this period contribute to enhancing our understanding of the various strategies that women and the organization employed to achieve significant goals through their humanitarian aid initiatives?

This paper builds upon recent studies that examine the experiences of women worldwide during World War II. Anna Krylova's study on how Soviet women during wartime embodied a gender identity that combined femininity and masculinity sheds light on the various ways Chinese women endeavored to participate in multiple public domains during wartime (Krylova 2010). Hence, the activism of women in the conflict strongly challenged the traditional paradigm that saw the war between the spheres of exclusively male competence. Their participation had a significant impact on the role of women in

---

conflict is frequently identified by the appellation of the Second Sino-Japanese War. On a broader scale, the conflict that spanned from 1937 to 1945 is frequently intertwined with the global turmoil of the Second World War (1937-1945). As applied by Diana Lary, Rana Mitter and many other historians, I will use this term in reference to the Resistance War against the Japanese aggression. See Lary (2015); Mitter (2004; 2014); Li (2010); Barnes (2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on wartime China and its events, see Ch'i (1982); Arbor (2008); Goodman (2000) Hung (1994); Lary (2001; 2010); MacKinnon (2008); Mitter (2013); Schoppa (2011); Van de Ven (2003).

society, challenging traditional gender roles and opening up new opportunities for women in education, employment, and public life.<sup>3</sup>

When considering the Red Cross in China during the war, there is a significant impact on the level of women's representation, and also a re-evaluation of the role of women in the war years thanks to the latest literature in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> Through political and social mobilization, Chinese women in the resistance movement created a multi-dimensional identity that allowed them to assume numerous roles during the war, departing from the conservative functions prescribed by Chiang Kai-shek's Nanjing government. In doing so, they adopted a subjective position and expanded the definition of femininity during the war period (Xia Rong 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Beyond their participation in the workforce and military, women also made a critical contribution to the war effort through their involvement in humanitarian aid. Hence, organizations like the Red Cross relied heavily on women to provide support to soldiers and civilians affected by the war. By bringing together the humanitarian relief work of women within the Red Cross from the War of Resistance against Japan to the Second World War, the paper broadens our knowledge related to the complex ways in which women and the organization sought to achieve significant goals through humanitarian aid as political and social rights, medical relief and the construction of a modern Chinese state. Particularly focusing on the nursing field, I analyse how nursing assistance born spontaneously at the beginning of the conflict helped to denounce the serious medical problems that the Chinese Army had to face, turning into real professional assistance during the long years of the war. Nurses, in turn, wielded great power in the establishment and direction of nursing, as in the case of Zhou Meiyu 周美玉 (1910-2001), an experienced patriotic nurse who advanced her career through the Red Cross, by instituting nursing education programs in the army. Zhou and her fellow trainee nurses taught about the principles of diet and sterilization, personal hygiene, and how to prepare operating rooms.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of women's role during wartime in other contexts, see Weatherford (1990) on the role of American women in the workforce during the war. For further references on this discussion, see Summers (2015); Hinton (2002) Thomas (1943); Pennington (2001); Summerfield (2013).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on women and wartime studies in China, see Han Hanan 韩贺南, Wang Xiangmei 王向梅, and Li Huibo 李慧波 (2015); Zhang (2015). For an oral account of women's experiences in the wartime city of Chongqing, see Li (2008). Norman Smith also examines the literary works of women writers in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation, revealing the intricate narrative of Chinese female writers and the cultural productions of the Japanese colonial regime. Both Smith and Li's studies illustrate how Chinese women expressed different facets of femininity in distinct regions during the War of Resistance, see Smith (2007).

<sup>5</sup> To analyze the Nanjing government's political agenda in order to shape a traditionalist image of women as the paradigmatic embodiment of the ideal female identity for Chinese women, see Xia Rong 夏蓉 (2010).

Women in the Red Cross not only tended to the wounded and comforted soldiers but also wrote letters for them and helped in the logistical coordination of relief work, raising support for the Chinese war effort through their propaganda and fundraising endeavors.

The paper examines the various prospects that were opened up for women through their involvement in the medical aspects of the wartime effort and in charitable fundraising campaigns, as facilitated by organizations such as the Red Cross. It also sheds light on the constraints that circumscribed the nature and scope of these possibilities. Specifically, nursing emerged as a means for women to participate in the public, national, and patriotic domains, by accentuating their perceived feminine qualities. They emerged as figures of synthesis between tradition and innovation: if on the one hand, they performed their work in military contexts among hundreds of men, on the other, they preserved the supposedly typically feminine traits of mothers and sisters, providing support and encouragement for all the people in need. These roles were viewed as ideally suited for women’s engagement in humanitarian efforts. The endorsement of such principles by female volunteers facilitated their involvement in activities that required compassion, empathy, and caregiving skills.

Using a variety of sources, including wartime magazines and newspapers, autobiographies, and biographies, archive history materials, and pictures of the time, the paper documents the autonomy and audacity of women like Zhou Meiyu, who put their medical expertise at the service of the nation and dedicate their efforts to the Chinese resistance cause. Through a critical analysis of these documents, the methodology reflects the multiple approaches women adopted in the organization in order to make their political rights in a framework where international connections were quickly increasing (Sluga 2013). My research is concerned with exploring the transnational connections that provided women with opportunities to participate in relief activities, specifically within the context of the Chinese Red Cross. A central aspect of my inquiry involves examining how these initiatives drew upon and reinforced the idea of feminine virtue, linking it with the nursing profession to create a powerful association between women, caregiving and fundraising campaigns. Through a detailed analysis of the strategies employed by both organizations and individuals operating within the specific national and local contexts of China, my aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the principal motivations and outcomes of the women within the Red Cross humanitarian efforts. This investigation holds significant potential for enhancing our comprehension of the complex and multifaceted interplay between gender and humanitarianism.

## 2. Nursing and caring for wounded: women's relief efforts at war

Despite considerable advancements in medical education and public health development during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937), the inadequacy of both the quantity and quality of trained medical personnel persisted. The Nanjing Central Military Medical School, for instance, had only a dozen female nurse training students on the eve of the conflict (Shan 1936). There were an estimated nine thousand doctors and five thousand nurses, many of whom were stuck in occupied areas with numerous schools and qualified hospitals.<sup>6</sup> Only five hundred doctors were available for the Red Cross medical relief initiative, and a mere fifty-four military hospitals were available, equipped with a limited number of beds. This posed a huge challenge to the Army Medical Service, which was tasked with providing healthcare to approximately five million soldiers (Zhang 2015: 51).

With the outbreak of the war in 1937, public discussions appearing in all the newspapers recognized that the hostilities between China and Japan had also special significance for women. *Funü shenghuo* 妇女生活 (“Women's life”), *Funü gongming* 妇女共鸣 (“Women's voices”) and *Zhanshi funü* 战时妇女 (“Wartime women”) invited them to join the war efforts, particularly in the sector of nursing and care of the wounded, where they acquired further scientific, social and cultural knowledge relating to this profession (*Zhanzheng Yu Funü* 1940: 12). Nursing not only served as a vehicle to make women more professional, but it was also the channel through which they could fulfill their aspirations and contribute to the history of China. The high number of nurses consolidated this field as an almost exclusively female sector, at the same time the war was an opportunity to affirm and reconsider some assumptions about gender associated with this profession.

Individually or in local and provincial groups, women organized small female teams headed to the front to serve and educate soldiers. They provided first aid to the war wounded and taught the rural population the meaning of the war against Japan. These groups were formed by women activists such as He Xiangning 何香凝 (1878-1972), as mentioned before, but also Xie Bingying 谢冰莹 (1902-2000) and Hu Lanqi 胡兰畦 (1901-1994), among others, who mobilized civilian resources and gained support from ordinary Chinese.<sup>7</sup> As Eva Dykes Spicer reveals, the Women's Army “had great success in directly

---

<sup>6</sup>For instance, preeminent medical establishments such as the Peking Union Medical School sustained operations in Beijing until the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941. Despite the presence of a substantial number of PUMC medical personnel in the occupied areas, only a paltry thirty-six members affiliated with the institution were situated in Nationalist China. However, some of these individuals played an instrumental role in the provision of medical relief during the wartime period.

<sup>7</sup>Xie Bingying and Hu Lanqi organized small female teams to serve soldiers at the front and educate Chinese peasants in the rear. They led respectively the Hunan Women's War Zone Service Corps (*Hunan funü zhandi fuwutuan* 湖南妇女战地服务团) and the Shanghai Women's War Zone Service Corps (*Shanghai laodong funü zhandi fuwutuan* 上海劳动妇女战地服务团). They

connecting the soldiers and the people” (Spicer 1938: 8). These women demonstrated effective leadership in coordinating the peasant workforce to transport wounded soldiers to the receiving stations and undertook the task of mobilizing local communities to provide necessary resources such as food, water, and intelligence to the army. Xie Bingying, for instance, composed an essay titled “A Petition from the Wounded Soldiers” wherein she called on able-bodied medical personnel to offer their services to the army and implored women to procure necessary medical supplies like cloth dressings, cotton, iodine, and emergency kits for the wounded. Through her mobilization efforts, Xie aimed to cultivate a shared sense of national sentiment. She underscored the significance of collective action by stating:

The act of aiding the soldiers is tantamount to aiding the nation. The eradication of our nation would leave no room for individual existence. To protect our nation is to protect ourselves. Let us unite, my compatriots! We must stand up to safeguard the Chinese nation, which has a 5,000-year-old history (Xie 1981: 282).

Through the press, educated women discussed their duties as national citizens in the war. In her essay “This is What Women Should Prepare for the War” (*Funü de zhanshi zhunbei renwu* 妇女的战士准备人物), Cheng Cui specified that university scholars and female students, in particular, had to appeal to curriculum committees to include courses on warfare. Furthermore, schools had to organize rescue teams consisting of college students and send them to the front. Educated women were expected to contribute to national salvation by conducting propaganda work among civilians and in the army (Zhang 2015, 54). Volunteer nurses provided more than just bedside care, writing, for example, letters to family members in place of soldiers. Even the press repeatedly reported the phenomenon of educated women writing letters for illiterate soldiers. In addition, girl scouts brought food to soldiers when battles took place in the city, transporting the wounded back, while female students were called upon to make bandages for military hospitals. Charlie Zhang, who worked as a doctor for the Qilu Medical School and also for the Central School of the Medical Relief Corps recounted the roles women played in providing medical supplies for wounded soldiers during the Battle of Baoding (Zhang 1938, 468-69). He revealed women’s peculiar skills in performing this nursing and care work. The success of volunteer nursing at the outbreak of the war reflected a rapid response by civilian society in the face

---

established a strong connection between the various women's groups and the army, mobilizing the support of the entire community. Their contribution proved to be indispensable in sustaining the army's wartime operations. See Xie Bingying 谢冰莹 (1985; 2001); Hu Lanqi 胡兰畦 (1987).

of the army's sacrifices and losses. Women's involvement in volunteer nursing during wartime was a form of collective action, which was made possible through the support and coordination of community organizations and government agencies. It also allowed them to contribute to the war effort while also challenging gender norms and stereotypes which considered them confined to the domestic sphere.

Despite the outstanding dedication of Chinese women in the nursing field, the medical care of the Chinese Army continued to suffer from inadequate medical care and scarce personnel reserves. The quantity and quality of their services remained meager and failed to meet the needs of the Army. The Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps (MRC) (*Zhongguo hong shizi hui jiuhu zong hui* 中国红十字会救护总会) was the most significant organization in sustaining military medical personnel preparation and in terms of medical assistance to Chinese troops (Watt 2004: 78). It was led by Dr. Lin Kesheng 林可勝 (1897-1969), a Singaporean medical doctor who coordinated the work of Chinese nurses and volunteer doctors (Zhang 2015: 65). MRC attracted the attention of many professional civilian specialists who perceived an opportunity to dedicate themselves to the Chinese resistance's cause through their medical expertise. Among them, women played the most important role in the face of Japanese war threats: they were hired from various areas to deal with numerous medical emergencies and were mainly sorted into Chinese garment stations, military hospitals and blood units. Nursing school graduates were involved in a nationally coordinated medical and rescue work program, but, in addition to government recruitment, the MRC attracted volunteers from middle and high schools. In addition, the Nationalist government's wartime conscription policy for medical personnel was a strategic measure aimed at optimizing the nation's healthcare resources to support the war effort. By mandating that medical and nursing graduates join either the army or civil medical service, the government sought to leverage their skills and expertise in the service of the nation. The policy granted a small percentage of exemptions to those who worked at their respective schools, however, the majority of graduates were deployed to the army's medical administration, the National Health Administration (NHA), or the Red Cross Relief Commission.<sup>8</sup> This allocation was determined based on the prevailing medical needs of the nation during the wartime period. For instance, the army's medical administration received the highest proportion of medical graduates, given the military's crucial role

---

<sup>8</sup>The government's maintenance of records pertaining to high school students who underwent paramilitary nursing training in Nanjing demonstrates an interest in ensuring a steady supply of medical personnel for conscription purposes. However, the outbreak of war and resultant population displacement created significant challenges to enforcing conscription measures, as many individuals fled the city. This highlights the complex and fluid nature of wartime mobilization efforts, which require ongoing adaptation and flexibility in response to changing circumstances. See Zhang (2015).

in defending the nation against external threats. The distribution of midwifery school graduates to the National Health Administration was reflective of the pressing need for maternal and child health services (Tong 1943: 680).

Nursing school graduates were involved in a nationally coordinated medical and relief work program. In addition to government recruitment, the young students voluntarily responded to the call to join the medical staff. Zhou Meiyu 周美玉 (1910-2001), one of the most influential Chinese nurses of the early twentieth century, observed that female nurse students were even more excited to participate than male students (Pfeiff 2018: 157). Zhou was not the only one to notice the spontaneous participation of the students. On the eve of the fall of Changsha, on October 29, 1938, Phil Greene, a professor of the Yale-China Association at the Hsiang-Ya Medical School, wrote:

The city is moving fast. Our nurse students panicked and attacked for a few hours. The graduate nurses worked hard and the students came back [...] We are moving all those who want to go (Greene 1977: 111-112).

Zhou Meiyu joined the Medical Relief Corps and dedicated her life to serving the country as a nurse. She was notable for her lifelong dedication to public health and military assistance. As for her choice to become involved in public welfare, she explained that she was encouraged by Yan Yangchu's speech on the role rural people should play in strengthening China.<sup>9</sup> Yan believed that China's progress depended primarily on the improvement of rural society. Zhou “was deeply moved by Yan's ideals” and recognized the significant value of using her nursing training to work in the service of society through the establishment of public health programs in rural China (Zhang and Luo 1993: 11). During her service, she travelled extensively in the war zones of Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guianxi, Sichuan, and Guizhou provinces, offering her expertise in preventive health care and nursing to the army medical services. She believed that by adopting adequate and preventive measures the Chinese Army would at least be protected from communicable diseases, a widespread problem among the troops at that time. Zhou, therefore, established a program in which nurses taught how to maintain hygiene and prepare food properly to prevent these infections. Throughout her extended tenure across multiple army divisions, she was astounded by the ineptitude and insufficiency displayed by the medical service and its personnel:

---

<sup>9</sup> Yan Yangchu 晏陽初 (1893-1990), also known as James Yan, was an educator and social activist famous for his programs on mass education and rural reconstruction work in China and other several nations. See Hayford (1990).



Patients were lying on the ground in the Qianjiang camp hospital in Guangxi. We were told that more than a hundred patients died daily from dysentery and malaria [...] The patients did not receive proper attention or proper cleaning, some of them were lying on the excrement [...] (Zhang and Luo: 54-59)

Against this problematic background, the War Medical Office launched a series of training programs. The Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps played a significant role in supporting the training of military medical staff (Watt 2004: 78). It was particularly effective in establishing valuable experienced medical personnel as teachers or administrators in the new training programs (Zhang and Luo 1993: 43). Furthermore, the Emergency Medical Service Training School (EMSTS) was established as a collaboration between the Ministries of Military Affairs and the Department of the Interior in 1938, in response to the pressing need for a medical team during wartime. The school aimed to provide advanced technical training to the current medical staff in the army and to offer rapid training to newly recruited workers, in order to enhance their capacity to provide care in the war zone and Zhou Meiyu was appointed director of the Nursing Division (Tong 1943: 672). In Tuyunguan, Guizhou Province, the EMSTS provided an intensive training program for nurses, consisting of a comprehensive curriculum of 194 hours of instruction. The curriculum included various subjects such as sanitation, medicine, war nursing, military training, surgery, and organization of the medical Army and the Red Cross. The objective of this accelerated training program was to equip nurses with the essential technical skills necessary for their role in wartime medical relief efforts (Zhang 2015: 70). Nursing students who received this additional preparation were provided with employment positions affiliated to the National Health Administration as supervisors and directors of nurses in hospitals or operatives in Red Cross nursing, care, and prevention units. The teaching programs of this School were known for their emphasis on practical rather than theoretical courses. Zhou Meiyu and other nurses provided education on several crucial topics, including principles of diet, disinfection, sterilization, and isolation techniques for the treatment of communicable diseases. Additionally, they instructed their students on how to prepare operating rooms and emphasized the significance of maintaining personal hygiene. Upon completion of these classes, students were sent to wards and clinic specialists to practice professionally (Zhang and Luo 1993: 70-74).

Zhou was known for her determination and strong commitment to nursing education, recognizing the significant value of using her education to serve Chinese society through the establishment of public health programs in rural China. She was convinced that it was not only an affiliated field of medicine; instead, she sought to promote it as an important and fundamental element of a modern nation-state. Much of her efforts were devoted to improving the conditions of wartime nursing. She believed that nursing should not be considered a minor profession only for the female

majority working in it and, through her service, she defined a new identity for nurses. Her experience demonstrated how a Chinese woman could also become a member of the coordinating committee of the nursing department, which was subsidized by the American Bureau for Medical Aid to China, establishing a valid medical expert in the new education programs. After the war, in 1946, Zhou travelled with the help of the British United Aid to China to Britain and the United States and worked among the Chinese migrants to donate to the Red Cross Society of China. In 1947, she returned to Shanghai and became the commandant at the Army Nursing School in Shanghai. She moved with the Nationalist Party to Taiwan in 1949, where she became the director of the National Military Nursing Academy (Pfeiff 2018: 158). Zhou’s commitment to nursing administration and education in the army shows the attempt to establish authentic military nursing care. Her contributions highlight the importance of transcending gender barriers by actively engaging in humanitarian efforts for the Chinese resistance, despite the numerous obstacles that arose due to prevalent social prejudices and pervasive poverty during the war.

### 3. A call to action: supporting China through membership and collective donations

As the hostilities progressed, women in the Chinese Red Cross had already developed a considerably well-organized network and activities. Red Cross fundraising campaigns combined with the increase of new members who joined the organization were successful elements. This can be seen from the total amount of donations collected for the rescue operations; they were collected among the national and international population, thanks also to the efficient propaganda of Chinese newspapers, which periodically published the names of donors. Even in the editorial field, the Red Cross tried to increase donations and members. A series of publications, focusing on the themes of charity, blood donations, and the principles of the Red Cross, were printed by the major publishing houses of the time (Wang, Jiang and Sun 2004: 39). From now on, agencies started to use the media and advertising to leverage donors to expand their fundraising capacity. Women, in this context, became a means of mobilizing sympathy, thanks to which it was possible to increase the generosity of donors.



Figure 1. Donations from a foreigner (Guowen Zhoubao 1937: 14/48, 1937. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>).



Figure 1. Donations from a foreigner (Guowen Zhoubao 1937: 14/48, 1937. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>).

Several fundraising projects were established in those years in order to meet the critical medical emergencies and the unprecedented refugee problem. It was the case of the China Defense League (*Zhongguo fuli hui* 中国福利会), for instance, particularly important because it was chaired by one of the most influential women of the time, Song Qingling 宋庆龄 (1893-1981), widow of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866-1925) and sister of Song Meiling 宋美龄 (1898-2003), wife of Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887-1975) (Epstein 1993, 437). The original Central Committee was Sino-British in composition, with Song Qingling as Chairman, Mrs. Hilda Selwyn-Clarke as Hon. Secretary, Mr. Norman France of Hong Kong

University as Hon. Treasurer, and Mr. John Leaning in charge of publicity. The two formulas which summarized the aims of the League were: “Aid to the areas of greatest need” and “Help China to help herself” (*Medical and Red Cross Relief*: 1942). It was established in Hong Kong in 1938 with the purpose of coordinating financial aid and helping refugees, orphans, and soldiers. The League's selection of fundraising projects aimed at soliciting funds from diverse sources such as Chinese communities overseas and within Hong Kong, was determined by this specific criterion. These projects included the Canadian-American Medical Unit under Dr. Norman Bethune; the Emergency Medical Training School of the Chinese Red Cross, under Dr. Robert Lim, which was recognized as the best Chinese effort in the field of medical relief and the most promising for the future; the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives, with the hope they offered of a really permanent solution of the refugee problem by turning refugees into producers for the war effort; a series of Children’s Homes and educational institutions. At various times the China Defense League also organized its own transport of relief supplies, organizing convoys of truck-ambulances donated from abroad, chartering airplanes for urgent deliveries, such as vaccines, and so forth. In its fortnightly newsletters, annual reports, and occasional special pamphlets, the publications section of the Central Committee not only strove to give an up-to-date picture of China’s relief needs but constantly stressed the meaning of China’s fight against the world’s cause of resistance to tyranny and aggression (*Medical and Red Cross Relief* 1942).

Due to the considerable challenges encountered by Chinese Army medical services, such as a shortage of medical personnel and supplies, unsanitary conditions, and the prevalence of epidemics among soldiers, cooperation with Western supporters played an indispensable role in the delivery of medical assistance to the front line. In a letter from Hong Kong on September 4, 1941, retrieved in the *Foreign Office Files for China*, Song Qingling expressed her pleasant thoughts about establishing a British relief branch in Hong Kong to Sir Geoffry Northcote. At that time, he was the Governor of Hong Kong and together with Song Meiling, they were the patrons of the National Red Cross Society of China. Song Qingling wrote:

[...] All of us who are in the field of relief work for the cause of the Chinese people have admired the way in which British relief has continued in spite of the new situation brought about by the war in Europe. But from the viewpoint of organization, I heartily welcome the idea of co-ordinating and co-solidating the present British committees for China relief, as so admirably suggested by yourself and Sir Archibald lark Kerr. When the British Relief Council in Hong Kong is organized, I feel sure

that there will be a decided improvement in relief administration, which will further promote the friendship between our two countries (Song Qingling 04/09/1941) <sup>10</sup>

Song Qingling's endorsement of British relief efforts and call for improved relief administration adds an important perspective to the discourse on relief work during the Second World War. Her recognition of the potential for improved bilateral relations between Britain and China as a result of coordinated relief efforts underscores the broader significance of humanitarian aid in promoting diplomatic relations and cross-cultural exchange. Given Song Qingling's prominent role in advancing women's rights and social justice in China, her views on relief work and international cooperation also reflected a broader perspective on the importance of addressing social and economic inequalities through coordinated action and cooperation among nations. As such, her archival source provides a valuable historical record not only of relief activities during the Second World War but also of the broader social and political context in which such work took place.

Again, the news reported in *The Shanghai Times* in 1939 provides valuable historical insight into the international cooperation that took place during the Second World War to support relief efforts in China:

Chungking (Chongqing), Oct.27.- The Chinese Overseas Affairs Commission has received information that 11 British and French men and women doctors are arriving shortly to join the Chinese Red Cross. The report states that the British party left England from Liverpool while the French party boarded a steamer for China at Marseilles. The Commission has notified the headquarters of the Chinese Red Cross, which is at present located in Kweiyang (Guiyang), of the arrival of the party (*The Shanghai Times* 28/10/1939).

The report highlights the importance of medical expertise and support in relief efforts during the Second World War. The arrival of British and French doctors to join the Chinese Red Cross underlined the importance of international cooperation in the provision of aid and support in relief activities, emphasizing the global impact of the war. It suggested a recognition of the need for specialized medical skills and knowledge to address the unique challenges posed by the war in China. It also spoke to the important role of the Chinese Overseas Affairs Commission in facilitating international cooperation and coordination of relief work. By notifying the headquarters of the Chinese Red Cross of the arrival of the British and French doctors, the Commission helped to ensure that aid was effectively distributed and coordinated to meet the needs of those affected by the war. It was significant to consider the

---

<sup>10</sup> See the letter from Song Qingling, Hong Kong, to Geoffry Northcote, Sept.4, 1941, "Red Cross Activities in China," 1941. Foreign Office Files for China, 1938-1948, FO/676/301. The National Archives, UK.

potential consequences of relying on foreign aid and support in situations such as this. Efforts were made to promote local capacity-building and empower communities to take charge of their own relief and recovery efforts, in line with the principles of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, it is worth noting that British women residing in Shanghai played a crucial role in the production of essential medical supplies such as wound dressings, bandages, garments, and quilts for the allied troops and war refugees. This contribution of British women to the war effort served as a testament to the transnational cooperation established throughout the war by women.



Figure 3. British Women at Work for the Red Cross (*The North-China Daily News*, October 6, 1939.

<https://www.cnbksy.com/>).

These pictures were taken on Wednesday at the British Women’s Association’s Headquarters where work was carried on by the Red Cross Section of the Hospital Aid Department from 9 am to 8 pm, the later session enabling business women to give their personal service. In the upper picture bandages are being measured out and cut. Below the women are seen using the special machines necessary to turn out the regulation roller bandages. In addition to the all-day-Wednesday work at Headquarters, the Red Cross Section has two parties working on Thursdays and Fridays at 1288 Bubbling Well Road, the residence of Mrs A.S. Henchman. Membership of these Western District working parties is now full, accommodation being limited. A further branching out is contemplated as necessity arises. (*The North-China Daily News*, 06/10/1939)

The upper picture shows individuals measuring and cutting bandages, while the lower picture depicts women using machines to create roller bandages that meet regulation standards. The caption provides a brief overview of the volunteer effort at the British Women's Association's Headquarters, indicating

that further expansion of the volunteer effort may be planned as needed. Indeed, the meticulous, accurate, and detailed work of women during times of war highlights their ability to actively participate and experience historical moments. Although this type of work may have echoed traditional gender roles, it was essential in providing the necessary support for continued survival. What is particularly noteworthy is the extent to which women were directly involved in the war effort; the recognition of the agency and autonomy of women in war challenged patriarchal narratives and uphold the importance of women's empowerment. As such, the documentation and recognition of their contributions to war efforts served as an important reminder of the need to broaden our understanding of the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the role that gender played in shaping historical narratives.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

When the war broke out, the Army Medical Service had to take care of about five million soldiers. In light of the challenging wartime conditions, the intervention of volunteers from humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross Society of China, was indispensable in ensuring the provision of aid to both soldiers and civilians alike. Notably, the involvement of women in humanitarian aid efforts such as nursing, caregiving, and fundraising campaigns during this period was instrumental in addressing the pressing needs of those affected by the war.

The period of the War of Resistance against Japan and the Second World War not only signed the main growth of global humanitarian initiatives but also witnessed important changes in gender relations, highlighting the slow increase of gender-sensitive policies in the Red Cross. The humanitarian work combined gendered dimensions on local, regional, national, and global scales. The cases shown in the paper are examples of how women's relief work, also inspired by the Western model of activism, served as a window through which gender shaped the meanings of emancipation, humanitarian aid, and nation-building in modern China while offering the opportunity to re-discuss the social values and traditional roles of women. It was not so much the ideological difference between the two regimes that exerted a great influence on women's war work, rather it was the cause of the resistance that drew them into relief activities. In accordance with Barnes' evaluation, the war obstructed the already-started careers of women, exemplified by the situation of unskilled voluntary nurses who joined the Red Cross to help their nation, without support from directors (Barnes 2012: 264). Restrictions imposed by traditions of Chinese society were reflected in the obstacles women encountered working as nurses or other supporting agents of the Red Cross. Following international

practices, the organization encouraged Chinese women’s participation and, some of them, as the story of Zhou Meiyu demonstrates, succeeded in obtaining high professional positions. However, their involvement in modern nursing remained low, although the history of the Chinese Red Cross depended on the contribution of women. Further comprehension of gender in the organization during wartime clarifies the multiple and complicated ways in which humanitarian aid contributed to reshaping social relations and gender representations on national, international, and transnational levels.

Women were pathbreakers in working alongside men in a military setting, as the paper highlights, but were also to some extent restricted by the traditional doctrine of femininity based on essentialist ideas about women’s caring roles. As such, these roles were viewed as ideally suited for women's engagement in humanitarian efforts. The endorsement of such principles by female volunteers facilitated their involvement in activities that required compassion, empathy, and caregiving skills. Moreover, the participation of women in humanitarian aid efforts was a reflection of their commitment to the cause and their ability to contribute to the war effort beyond traditional gender roles. However, this language of “motherhood” and “feminine care” only took them so far and was ultimately limited in the push for Chinese women’s gender equality, since it was deeply embedded in the notion that women have specific gendered attributes and responsibilities. Indeed, this was used as a double-edged sword, as it allowed for their participation as a reflection of their commitment to the cause while concurrently reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Whether their relative participation contributed to the emancipation process is an issue that still cannot be fully resolved. Humanitarian work provided women with a platform to challenge deeply ingrained gender norms and prejudices that impeded the progress of women's emancipation, resulting in several positive outcomes. However, despite their entry into the Red Cross and their active participation throughout the twentieth century, Chinese women remained subordinate to their male counterparts, adhering to the traditional Confucian gender roles and the prevailing male hierarchy of the time. Thus, stories of humanitarian organizations as depicted in the paper reflect how international policies and organizational structures of the time were by no means impartial, but rather relied heavily on gender and sexual distinctions. In an issue of *Shanghai Funü* 上海妇女 (Shanghai Women), Sun Li said that women's liberation would be achieved only after national liberation, and it was therefore essential to mobilize all the Chinese women not only for the common goal of winning the war but more importantly for the reconstruction of a modern nation-state (Sun 1938). The patriotic sentiment that arose with the beginning of the conflict mingled with women's demands from the various movements and associations instituted at that time. It became of greater importance than demands for emancipation and equal rights since national liberation was the common goal to be pursued. As a result,



claims on the part of women continued to be made and published in the newspapers, but always in second place to the national cause. Realizing that without achieving national salvation even women would never obtain those equal opportunities and emancipation, they put aside their interests to devote themselves completely to the cause of the resistance.

Despite the male-dominated culture during times of war, the women's lives stories narrated in the paper prove how they efficiently integrated into humanitarian efforts, going beyond traditional gender roles and challenging gender stereotypes and social norms that had traditionally restricted their participation in public life. Acknowledging the role of women in humanitarian aid during the wartime period is essential in gaining a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the critical role that gender plays in shaping historical narratives. The contribution they made certainly determined a social and cultural rebirth at the end of the conflict whose effects were multiplied up to the present day and can offer infinite opportunities for a rediscovery of any anthropological and sociological study.

## References

- “British Women at Work for the Red Cross.” *The North-China Daily News*, October 6, 1939. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>
- “Donations from a foreigner.” *Guowen Zhoubao* 14/48: 1937. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>
- “Medical and Red Cross Relief.” 1942. Foreign Office Files for China, 1938-1948, FO/676/456. The National Archives, UK.
- “Red Cross Activities in China.” 1941. Foreign Office Files for China, 1938-1948, FO/676/301. The National Archives, UK.
- “The head of the fundraising team.” *Guowen Zhoubao* 14/48: 1937. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>
- “Zhanzheng Yu Funü” 战争与妇女 [War and Women]. 1940. *Zhan Shi Funü* 战时妇女 4. Barnes, Nicole Elizabeth. 2018. *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937-1945*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ch'i, Hsi-sheng. 1982. *Nationalist China at War: Military Defeats and Political Collapse, 1937-1945*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press
- Chi Zihua 池子华. 2004. *Hong Shizi Yu Jindai Zhongguo* 红十字与近代中国 [Red Cross and Modern China]. Hefei 合肥: Anhui renmin chubanshe 安徽人民出版社.
- Epstein, Israel. 1993. *Woman in World History: Life and Times of Song Ching Ling (Mme. Sun Yatsen)*. Beijing: New World Press.
- Gatu, Dagfinn. 2008. *Village China at War: the Impact of Resistance to Japan, 1937-1945*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

- Goodman, David S.G. 2000. *Social and Political Change in Revolution China: The Taihang Base Area in the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937-1945*. New York, NY: Rowman and Little Field Publisher.
- Greene, Ruth Altman. 1977. *Hsiang-Ya Journal*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books.
- Guowen Zhoubao. 1937. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>
- Han Hanan 韩贺南, Wang Xiangmei 王向梅, and Li Huibo 李慧波. 2015. *中国妇女与抗日战争 [Chinese Women and the War of Resistance Against Japan]*. Beijing 北京: Tuanjie chubanshe 团结出版社.
- Hayford, Charles W. 1990. *To the People: James Yen and Village China*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Hinton, James. 2002. *Women, social leadership, and the Second World War: continuities of class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hu Lanqi 胡兰畦. 1987. *Hu Lanqi huiyilu 胡兰畦回忆录 [A Memoir by Hu Lanqi]*, Chengdu 成都: Sichuan renmin chubanshe 四川人民出版社.
- Hung, Chang-tai. 1994. *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Krylova, Anna. 2010. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Lary Diana. 2010. *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937-45*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lary, Diana and Edwards MacKinnon eds. 2001. *Scars of War: The Impact of Warfare on Modern China*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Lary, Diana. 2015. *China's Civil War: A Social History, 1945-1949*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Li, Danke. 2010. *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China*. Oakland, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Li, Yannan. 2016. “Red Cross Society in Imperial China, 1904–1912: A Historical Analysis.” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 27/5: 2274–2291.
- Liu, Michael Shiyung. 2014. “Epidemic Control and Wars in Republican China (1935-1955).” *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 37: 111–139. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24716521>.
- MacKinnon, Stephen. 2008. *Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mitter, Rana. 2004. *A bitter revolution: China's struggle with the modern world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mitter, Rana. 2013. *China's War with Japan 1937-1945*. London: Allen Lane.
- Pennington, Reina. 2001. *Wings, women, and war: Soviet airwomen in World War II combat*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Pfeiff, Alexandra. 2018. “Two Adoptions of the Red Cross: The Chinese Red Cross and the Red Swastika Society from 1904 to 1949.” Ph.D. diss., European University Institute.
- Schoppa, R Keith. 2011. *In a Sea of Bitterness: Refugees during the Sino-Japanese War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Shan Chenying 山陈颖. 1936. "Nanjing lujun junyi xuexiao gaikuang 南京陆军军医学校医院概况 [General situation of Nanjing Army Military Medical School Hospital]." *The Nursing Journal of China* 17/2.
- Sluga, Glenda. 2013. "Spectacular Feminism": The International History of Women, World Citizenship and Human Rights." In: *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives From the 1890s to the Present*, edited by Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis and Krassimira Daskalova, 44–58. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Norman. 2007. *Resisting Manchukuo: Chinese Women Writers and the Japanese Occupation*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Summers, Julie. 2015. *Home Fires: The Story of the Women's Institute in the Second World War*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Sun Li 孙犁. 1938. *Kangzhan jianguo yu funü jiefang 抗战建国与妇女解放 [Anti-Japanese War and Women's Liberation]*, *Shanghai Funü 上海妇女*.
- Thomas, Katherine. 1943. *Women in Nazi Germany*. London: V. Gollancz.
- Tong, Hollington K. 1943. *China Handbook, 1937-1943: A Comprehensive Survey of the Major Developments in China in Six Years of War*. Compiled by The Chinese Ministry of Information. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.
- Van de Ven, Hans. 2003. *War and Nationalism in China, 1925-1945*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Watt, John. 2004. "Breaking into Public Service: The Development of Nursing in Modern China, 1870-1949." *Nursing History Review* 1/12: 67–96.
- Wang Lizhong 王立忠, Jiang Yiman 江亦曼, and Sun Longchun 孙隆椿. 2004. *Zhongguo Hongshizihui Bainian 中国红十字会百年 [100-Year Chronicle of Red Cross Society of China]*. Vol. 1. Beijing 北京: Xinhua Chubanshe 新华出版社.
- Weatherford, Doris. 1990. *American Women and World War II*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wei, Bingling. "The Red Cross Society of China in the Beiyang Government Period (1912-1928): A Civil Society Organisation amidst Political Unrest." *Asia Pacific Journal of International Humanitarian Law* 2: 66–83.
- Xia Rong 夏蓉. 2010. *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui yu kangri zhanzheng 妇女指导委员会与抗日战争 [The Women Advisory Council and the War of Resistance]*, Beijing 北京: Renmin wenxue chubanshe 人民文学出版社.
- Xie Bingying 谢冰莹. 1981. *Kangzhan riji 抗战日记 [Anti-Japanese Journal]*, Taipei 台北: Dongda tushu gongzi 东大图书工资.
- Xie Bingying 谢冰莹. 1985. *Xie Bingying zuopin ji 谢冰莹作品集 [A Collected Volume by Xie Bingying]*, Changsha 长沙: Hunan renmin chubanshe 湖南人民出版社.
- Zhang, Charlie. 1938. "The Issue of the Wounded Soldiers." *Xin Minzu 新民族*, vol.3. 468-469.
- Zhang, Dewen. 2015. "The Making of National Women: Gender, Nationalism and Social Mobilization in China's Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, 1937-1945." PhD diss., Stony Brook University.

Zhang Pengyuan 张朋园 and Luo Jiurong 罗久荣. 1993. Zhou Meiyu xiansheng fangwen jilu 周美玉先生访问记录 [Reminiscences of Zhou Meiyu], Taipei 台北: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo 中央研究院近代史研究所.

---

Federica Cicci is lecturer in Chinese History and East Asian History at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and Roma Tre University. She earned her Ph.D. through the Joint Doctoral Program between the Department of Asian and North-African Studies at Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia (Italy) and the Chinese Institute at Universität Heidelberg (Germany). Her research focuses on the history of modern and contemporary China, with a particular interest in women’s history approached from transnational and transcultural perspectives.  
Federica can be reached at: [federica.cicci@unive.it](mailto:federica.cicci@unive.it)

## Commemorating the PRC's first artificial satellite

### The contested legacy of “The East is Red-1” in today's China

Tonio Savina

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of the first Chinese satellite—“The East is Red-1” [*Dongfang hong-1* 东方红一号 (DFH-1)]—an exhibition dedicated to it was held online on the website of the National Museum of China. Such an exhibition signals the on-going nationalist revival of the historical memory associated with the DFH-1 in today's China. However, having been built during a time that remains a kaleidoscope of divergent memories—that of the Cultural Revolution—the satellite's legacy remains contested too. Indeed, in the Party's official historiography, the satellite has been presented as a survivor from the “ten years of chaos,” mostly thanks to the commitment of the Chinese scientists and of the far-sighted leaders Zhou Enlai and Nie Rongzhen. Conversely, for some current “leftist” stances, the DFH-1 did not “survive” the Cultural Revolution—it was one of its greatest outcomes. Aiming to discuss such disputed memories, this essay will first outline a brief history of the DFH-1, analyzing how the activities of mass factions had a harmful impact on its construction. Then, the paper will focus on the ways in which the history of the DFH-1 has been framed by the Party's official historiography and contested by other unofficial “leftist” accounts—mostly untranslated and ignored by Western scholars—for example those that appeared on the “red websites” such as Utopia (*Wuyouzhixiang* 乌有之乡).

**Keywords:** China; Satellite; The East is Red-1; *Dongfang hong-1*; DFH-1; Cultural Revolution; Neo-Maoists; New-Left; Chinese Space Program.

### 1. Introduction

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of the first Chinese artificial satellite, The East is Red-1 (*Dongfang hong yi hao* 东方红一号—DFH-1). On that occasion, due to the circumstances of the pandemic, an exhibition dedicated to the satellite was held virtually on the website of the National Museum of China, recollecting the history of its construction and launch (*Renmin Wang* 2020). At the entrance of the virtual hall, welcoming the online visitors, a letter written by President Xi Jinping addressed the old Chinese aerospace scientists that took part in the satellite project: in the message, the General Secretary celebrated the spirit of hard work that infused the engineers, recalling how,

while he was in Liangjiahe, northern Shaanxi,<sup>1</sup> he was very excited to hear the news of the launch of the first satellite (Xi 2020). The exhibition then presented the preparatory work that led to the launch of the device, focusing on its technical features and key characteristics, and moved on to present the most recent Chinese space achievements, from the flight of the first astronaut Yang Liwei in 2003 to the accomplishments of the Moon program Chang'e.

Such an exhibition signals the ongoing nationalist revival of the historical memory associated with the Dongfang hong-1 in today's China, a phenomenon that has become particularly evident since 2016, when Xi Jinping chose April 24<sup>th</sup> as the date to celebrate the "Chinese Space Day" (*Zhongguo Hangtian ri* 中国航天日). This, indeed, became an occasion held every year to remember the flight of the first satellite, reaffirming that its launch was a turning point in the unique journey of the Chinese nation in outer space: nowadays, indeed, the memory of the DFH-1 has been strikingly revitalized, celebrating the country's long-standing commitment to conquering outer space since Maoist times (*Xinhua Wang* 2016).

In this perspective, the recovery of this memory has to be interpreted in relation to a more general, nationalistic revival of "red culture." When recalled in this context, The East is Red-1 is cheered as a symbol of the revolutionary spirit that China can claim as a distinctive feature of its historical path, taking it as another important pillar in the process of the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' pledged by President Xi (*Zhongguo minzu weida fuxing* 中国民族伟大复兴).

Although the recovery of the tradition associated with the first satellite reached its climax under the current administration, its revival is not an exclusive trend of Xi's "New Era" (*Xin shidai* 新时代). Indeed, as early as 1999, the memory of the first satellite had been already solicited: in that year, President Jiang Zemin, and the other members of the Politburo, held a meeting in the Great Hall of the People, honoring the scientists involved in the so-called "two bombs, one satellite" (*liangdan yixing* 两弹一星) project.<sup>2</sup> During the ceremony, several aerospace engineers that took part in the realization of the first satellite were eulogized, conferring on them medals for their merits in the scientific and technological development of the country (*Renmin Ribao* 1999). Also during Hu Jintao's presidency, the

---

<sup>1</sup> As is known, Xi Jinping spent the years from 1969 to 1975 in the poor village of Liangjiahe as an "educated youth" (Bandurski 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Although I chose to maintain the translation that is common in usage, it should be noted that, at least originally, the phrase *liang dan* 两弹 refers, not to two bombs (the nuclear and hydrogen ones), but to the atomic bomb (*hedan* 核弹) and the missile (*daodan* 导弹). Therefore, the entire expression should be properly translated as "a bomb, a missile, and a satellite" (Wang 2000).

memory of the DFH-1 was publicly re-evaluated with a celebration of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its launch through a series of symposia and ceremonies held at the National Space Science Center (*Guojia Kongjian Kexue Zhongxin* 国家空间科学中心) and at the China Academy of Space Technology (*Zhongguo Kongjian Jishu Yanjiuyuan* 中国空间技术研究院) (Yuan 2005). This is not surprising since in 2003 China was preparing for the imminent launch of its first astronaut: in that context, indeed, the commemoration of the voyage of the first satellite became a way of tickling the national pride of the population, stirred, shortly after, by the realization of the “flying dream” (*feitian meng* 飞天梦) of the Chinese nation (*Renmin Ribao* 2003; see also Savina 2023: 152-182).

Although recognized as one of the country’s greatest achievements, it is important to stress that the successful launch of the first Chinese satellite has always been treated with a certain degree of caution by the official historiography, mostly because its construction and launch happened during the turbulent period of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the interpretation of the history of the DFH-1 has been framed in such a way as not to alter the official verdict on this political movement reached on June 1981 in the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” (*Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi* 1983).

As is known, in this document, Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution was firmly condemned as responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the State, and the people since the founding of the People’s Republic. Therefore, in adhering to such a judgment, the Party’s official historiography has carefully avoided any evaluation of the DFH-1 that could be ascribed to an implicit positive reappraisal of that period. Consequently, the DFH-1 has been generally presented as a “survivor” in the turmoil of those years, mostly thanks to the commitment of the Chinese scientists, who, through an “arduous struggle” (*jianku fendou* 艰苦奋斗), succeeded in their launching plans despite the political degeneration of that time, the memory of which the Party has tried to erase (i.a. *Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1986; Sun and Hu 2009; see also Chen 1991).

Noteworthy, however, the *Resolution* was also very cagey when denouncing the late Maoist period, drawing back from a blanket discreditation of Mao Zedong.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese leadership has indeed unquestionably recognized the merits of the Great Helmsman as preponderant, continuing to show fealty to Mao’s legacy despite the reversal of his radical policies. In this sense, the references to Maoist

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to stress that the “Resolutions” made a clear distinction between Mao’s political line and Mao Zedong Thought (Mao Zedong *sixiang* 毛泽东思想). The latter was a doctrine separated from the political vision of Mao as a single leader. Therefore, Mao himself, as an individual, could make choices that were not in accordance with Mao Zedong Thought, as happened during the Cultural Revolution (Dirlik 2012).

imagery are now exploited not for their original ideological meaning, but as a political capital, used to preserve public support for the Party, mostly in a nationalist fashion (Dirlik 2012; Miranda 2013). Accordingly, the Chinese leadership made a concerted effort not to dispel the "red" legacy of the first satellite, recognizing its significance for the nation's further technological development and assigning to Mao Zedong the initial far-sighted decision to work on such a strategic technology.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless—as will be argued in the present paper—the satellite's legacy remains contested in today's China, given that it was build during a time that remains itself a kaleidoscope of divergent memories. As is known, indeed, in spite of the official attempt to condemn the Cultural Revolution and bury its memory, a large number of accounts has emerged that counter the official view (Bonnin 2007; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2006), sometimes looking back to that times in a nostalgic way: it has been especially during the last decades that some "leftist" stances challenged the narrative of the "ten years of chaos" (*shinian dongluan* 十年动乱), trying to rehabilitate the movement (i.a. Hu 2021; Han jiang chun meng 2009; Wu 2016; Zhang 2009; see also Miranda 2017b). This tendency has been highlighted by several Western scholars, who have analyzed the voices of those who demand a reassessment of the Cultural Revolution, demonstrating how this movement, although officially unaddressed and under-researched, remains the subject of an intensive debate, especially on the Internet (Berry, Thornton and Sun 2016; Heberer and Heberer 2016; Miranda 2017a; Miranda 2017b; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui 2016).

In contributing to the research field, the present paper focuses on a still little investigated case, that of the DFH-1, highlighting the existence of divergent narratives about it and showing that the revival of its historical memory is part of a broader attempt to reassess the history of the late Maoist period. Specifically, drawing on materials collected from the so-called "red websites,"<sup>5</sup> the present essay argues that the DFH-1 has been used as a means to overturn the negative official verdict on the Cultural Revolution, stressing the positive impact that this time had on the technological development of the country. Indeed, even though the Party's historiography has presented the DFH-1 as a

---

<sup>4</sup> Official historiography has traced the decision to start a satellite program back to the second session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and, specifically, to a speech given by Mao Zedong on May 17, 1958. On that occasion, the Great Helmsman, moved by the Soviets' launch of the Sputnik-3, allegedly stated: "We too have to work on artificial satellites!" (*Women ye yao gao renzao weixing* 我们也要搞人造卫星; see *Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1986; Li 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The term refers to a series of online forums and blogs known as refuges for those nostalgic for the Maoist times. Among them: *Utopia* (*Wuyouzhixiang wang* <<http://www.wyzzwk.com/>>), *Red China* (*Hongse Zhongguo* <<http://www.redchinacn.net/portal.php>>) and *MaoFlag* (*Mao Zedong Sixiang qizhi wang* <<http://www.maoflag.cc/>>).



technological artifact that endured the “ten years of chaos,” for some current “leftist” standpoints, The East is Red-1 did not simply “survive” that period: rather, it was one of its greatest outcomes.

As we will see, these stances have become particularly prominent during Xi Jinping’s mandate, when though without altering the official verdict on the Cultural Revolution, the President subtly made acceptable a more positive appraisal of the Maoist period (Miranda 2018), making these “leftist” positions not totally out of line with the current orthodoxy (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui 2016: 736). However, before discussing such disputed memories, the next paragraph will present a brief account of the history of The East is Red-1, analyzing the harmful impact of the activities of mass factions on its construction.

## 2. The turbulent path toward the launch of The East is Red-1

Chinese engineers began planning to develop an artificial satellite around the end of the Fifties.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as early as 1958, this project was one of their priorities, although it was very soon shelved, due to the severe financial constraints brought about by the economic crisis of the Great Leap Forward. It was only at the end of 1964 that the satellite program was resumed, when the physicist and Director of the Geophysical Institute under the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), Zhao Jiuzhang, submitted to the Party Secretary and Deputy Director of the CAS Zhang Qinfu a draft proposal to recommence it. The proposal was approved by the CAS Interplanetary Flights Committee (*Guoji Hangxing Weiyuanhui* 国际航行委员会), and then it was presented to the National Defense Science and Technology Commission (*Guojia Guofang Kexue Jishu Weiyuanhui* 国家国防科学技术委员会).<sup>7</sup> Despite some initial doubts, on April 29, 1965, the Commission gave its consent, sending the proposal to a Special Committee (*Zhongyang Zhuanwei* 中央专委) chaired by Premier Zhou Enlai,<sup>8</sup> who, conscious of its strategic value, approved the project, putting the CAS in charge of leading it and appointing Zhao Jiuzhang as the chief designer.

---

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the main sources of information for the events described in this paragraph are Gong (2006), Handberg and Li (2007), Harvey (2013), Kulacki and Jeffrey (2009), Li (2006) and Li (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Directly tied to the State Council, the National Defense Science and Technology Commission originates from a committee created in 1956, when Qian Xuesen requested to set up an organization to oversee the defense aerospace industry. The Commission is known by the acronym COSTND.

<sup>8</sup> The Special Committee had been founded in 1962 in order to manage the organization of the nuclear program (see Nie 2013).

In July, the CAS presented the Suggestions for a Work Program for the “Development of an Artificial Chinese Satellite” (*Guanyu Fazhan Woguo Renzao Weixing de Gongzuo Guihua Fang'an Jianyi* 关于发展我国人造卫星的工作规划方案建议): it was a plan for implementation that addressed the construction of a scientifically advanced satellite, capable of collecting data for the future realization of a larger network of meteorological, telecommunications and Earth observation satellites. Furthermore, to satisfy the political propaganda demands, it was also decided that the Chinese device should be heavier<sup>9</sup> and technologically more sophisticated than the first Soviet and US ones.

The project was identified with the code “651” and it was discussed from 20 October to 30 November 1965 during the eponymous “651” Conference held at the Beijing Friendship Hotel (*Beijing Youyi Binguan* 背景友谊宾馆). In those days it was decided that the satellite should be visible to the naked eye<sup>10</sup> and that its signal should be audible all over the world.<sup>11</sup> These goals were summarized in the 12-character slogan: “going up, grasping [the correct orbit], being audible and visible” (*shang de qu, zhua de zhu, ting de dao, kan de jian* 上得去, 抓得住, 听得到, 看得见). For the launch, it was decided to use a modified version of the rocket East Wind-4 (*Dongfeng si hao* 东风四号), renamed, for the occasion, Long March-1 (*Changzheng yi hao* 长征一号). 1970 was selected as the launch date.

But the Cultural Revolution would soon impact such plans. Indeed, in the great chaos that followed the uprising of the Red Guards, violence was unleashed to overthrow those persons in authority who were presumed to be taking the “capitalist road,” criticizing all the “reactionary bourgeois.” In such a context of personal vilification, Chinese scientists ended up being labeled as rightists, spies, traitors, or villains. They were accused as “white experts” (*bai zhuan* 白专) and attacked not only for their alleged lack of loyalty to the Party and the socialist cause, but also for their family background. Many of them were criticized for having gone to study in the “Imperialist West” or for having spent a period of training in countries now considered revisionist, such as the USSR (Zhao 2006: 53-57).

---

<sup>9</sup> The issue of the weight of the satellite was not a secondary one, since it was directly linked with the country's ballistic capabilities to carry a heavy nuclear payload. At the time of launch, the satellite weighed 173 kg, being heavier than both the Sputnik-1 (83.7 Kg) and the US Explorer-1 (8.2 kg) (Li 2006: 559-567).

<sup>10</sup> The satellite should be visible around the world, which would be beneficial to reinforcing the propaganda effect. For this reason, an observable spheroid was attached to the third stage of the rocket (Liu and Zeng 2015).

<sup>11</sup> The satellite had to transmit the anthem “The East is Red” through an electronic music generator (Li 2006: 565-575, Liu and Zeng 2015).

In the Chinese Academy of Science, an “investigative group” (*zhuan’an zu* 专案组) was formed to dig into the past of its members, detecting even the smallest details that could prove their counter-revolutionary nature (Cao 2013: 123-124). Although it is difficult to obtain data on the exact estimate of the scientist victims of the Cultural Revolution, Cao (2013: 124) claims that of the Academy’s 170 senior scientists, 131 suffered various forms of violence and humiliation, and 0.4% of the scientific staff lost their lives; as a result, many research activities were halted and various research laboratories dismantled. Nevertheless, according to the memories of a former researcher at the CAS Institute of Physics, Du Junfu (2010: 19), who took part in the movement, the Cultural Revolution within the Academy was less fierce, if compared to other work units, mostly thanks to the commitment of Zhou Enlai, who tried to mitigate its damaging effects.

Regarding the satellite program, for example, on September 1966, Zhou joined the so-called “Great Debate of Ten Thousand People” (*Wanren Bianlun Dahui* 万人辩论大会), stating how cutting-edge scientific experiments should have not been delayed and advocating a quick resumption of the research on satellite systems. Then, he and Marshal Nie Rongzhen urged a reorganization of the defense sector, aiming, among other objectives, at safeguarding the technological progress achieved so far. In March 1967, the two leaders presented a “Report Requesting Instructions on the Military Takeover and the Reorganization of Defense Research Institutions” (*Guanyu Junshi Jieguan he Tiaozheng Gaizu Guofang Keyan Jigou de Qingshi Baogao* 关于军事接管和调整改组国防科研机构的请示报告). Once approved (Mao 1967), the document put the entire satellite program under the control of the military of the Seventh Ministry of Machine Building (*Diqi jixie gongye bu* 第七机械工业部), thus hoping to protect it from the fury of the Red Guards.

Concurrently, the Chinese Academy of Space Technologies (*Kongjian Jishu Yanjiuyuan* 空间技术研究院) was established, appointing the aerospace engineer Qian Xuesen as its Director. Qian replaced Zhao Jiuzhang—denounced as a reactionary in 1966 and forced by the Red Guards to commit suicide in 1968—with the engineer Sun Jiadong, who was nominated as the new chief designer of the satellite. Under Sun, Zhao’s original plans were largely modified: where the 1965’s CAS proposal had insisted on the technological sophistication of the equipment, now, the cult of Mao Zedong and the revolutionary spirit were placed at the center of the program. Indeed, due to the severe lack of resources,<sup>12</sup> Zhao’s original design appeared too ambitious to be realized in the limited time made available to the

---

<sup>12</sup> The Academy lacked the material conditions to build the satellite and test it. It is often reported that technical tools were limited (Yang 2014).

engineers, who were asked to complete their work as soon as they could, thus beating Japan to become the fourth country to launch an artificial satellite. Hence, the project went through a simplification process, reducing its objectives and transforming the satellite into a mere “political” artifact (*zhengzhi weixing* 政治卫星): to remain unchanged were only the propagandistic purposes of being audible and visible.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the Seventh Ministry also became involved in the Cultural Revolution. In fact, within the institute, two opposing factions had come into being as early as 1966, even if it was only in 1967-1968 that the struggle between the two groups became particularly intense. The first one, the “9.15” (*jiu yi wu pai* 九—五派), headed by Wang Dekui, was formed by members of the bureaucratic apparatus—the “cadres for political work” (*zhenggong ganbu* 政工干部); the second one, the “9.16 faction” (*jiu yi liu pai* 九—六派), led by the engineer and son of People Liberation Army’s General Ye Ting, Ye Zhenguang, was composed of technical and scientific personnel (*jishu ganbu* 技术干部).<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to reflect on the political battle between the two factions and on its impact on the work of the Seven Ministry; here is sufficient to say that on January 23, 1967, the faction “9.16” seized power within the Ministry, removing Wang from his role. From that day on, frequent clashes between the two groups occurred, alarming Zhou Enlai to intervene to protect the Ministry. As the Head of the Committee for Military Management in the Third Academy Yang Guoyu recalls in his diary (Yang 2010), on April 26, 1967, Zhou declared that the institutes under the military should not be involved in the power struggles. On September 10, the Premier met with the leaders of the two factions, pressing them to stop fighting, but in vain. Only later in September, after a missile engine was tested successfully, did the two groups enjoy a brief moment of reconciliation during a parade organized to celebrate the event (Yang 2010: 43).

The spring of 1968 saw again an escalation of violence, as the notorious episode of the “Great Fight of Nanyuan<sup>15</sup>” (*Nanyuan da wudou* 南苑大武斗), that took place on June 8, testifies. On that day, the missile engineer Yao Tongbin was beaten to death: according to Yang Guoyu’s reconstruction, Yao was

---

<sup>13</sup> Notably, Sun’s proposal was opposed by those who had worked on the Zhao’s one; it was only due to Qian Xuesen’s support that in October 1967 the new plan was eventually approved.

<sup>14</sup> The two factions were respectively named after 15 e 16 September 1966, the dates of their formation. Both the groups were inspired by Mao Zedong Thought and they opposed Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi. However, the “9.15” faction contested the authority of Luo Ruiqing, Zhao Erlu, and Liu Bingyan, supporting the director of the Seventh Ministry Wang Bingzhang, while the “9.16” was lined up against Marshals He Long and Nie Rongzhen, criticizing also Wang Bingzhang (Li, Zhang and Hu 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Nanyuan is an area in southern Beijing, where a research and development base for aerospace industry was located.

killed by the members of the 9.15 faction, struck by a blunt object, as confirmed by the autopsy. The death of Yao shocked Zhou, leading him to enact a State protection of key scientific and technical personnel (Yang 2010: 52).

Later, in August 1968, 2,000 members of the Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team (Mao Zedong Sixiang Xuanchuandui 毛泽东思想宣传队)<sup>16</sup> entered the Seventh Ministry, initiating a series of critical and debate sessions. In a climate of growing tension, the scientists working on the satellite project found themselves having to bear a double pressure: on the one hand, they were afraid of being accused of not taking part in the revolutionary activities; on the other, they feared committing technical errors that might have led to a satellite launch failure, and, as a result, to even worse personal consequences. It is estimated that of the total of workers in the Seventh Ministry involved in the construction of the satellite, 9710 were sent to the military farms of Hubei, while 1538 were sent to the May Seventh Cadre School (Wu Qi Ganbu Xuexiao 五七干部学校) for political re-education;<sup>17</sup> Sun Jiadong himself was eventually forced to step down from his position (*kaobianzhan* 靠边站), while the engineer Qian Ji was accused of being a spy (Zhao 2006).

Nevertheless, despite the turbulent times during which it was built, on April 24, 1970, the DFH-1 was sent into orbit, making China the fifth country in the world to launch a domestically-manufactured satellite.

### 3. The evolution of the official narrative on the DFH-1

When it was announced by the State media, the news of the launch of The East is Red-1 was completely imbued with Maoist rhetoric, reflecting the galvanizing atmosphere that animated the Chinese population in those years. Indeed, that success was a political more than a scientific-technological achievement: in the litany of the “red” propaganda, it embodied China’s ability to realize the construction of a socialist country “under the leadership of Chairman Mao and the vice-Chairman Lin Biao” (*Renmin Ribao* 1970: 1). Two days after the launch, the *People’s Daily* reported the news in the following tones:

---

<sup>16</sup> The Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams were introduced in 1968 and they were composed primarily of workers and soldiers. Their task was to demobilize the Red Guards, restoring social order (Perry 2019).

<sup>17</sup> The May Seventh Cadre Schools were established in 1968 in accordance to Chairman Mao Zedong’s *7th May Directive* (1966). They were located in the countryside, often in very backward areas.

[The launch of the DFH-1] is a good beginning for the development of the Chinese space technologies, it is a great triumph of Mao Zedong Thought, it is a great victory for the proletarian revolutionary line, it is a further important result of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Renmin Ribao* 1970: 1).

Nevertheless, this representation centered on the eulogy of the Maoist campaign was destined to change dramatically in the following decades. During the Deng era, when the first comprehensive volume on the PRC's space program was published (*Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1986), it presented a completely different version of the story, re-written in line with the condemnation of the Cultural Revolution as stated in the 1981 "Resolution." The book established that the excesses of the "ten years of chaos" had been the main cause of the delay in the country's aerospace development:

In 1966, just as Chinese aerospace projects were being implemented, a Great Cultural Revolution broke out, bringing severe suffering to the Party, the country, and the people. The aerospace industry was no exception, suffering setbacks and damage. [...] Every structure within the Seventh Ministry suffered the impact and was paralyzed or semi-paralyzed; cadres at all levels were commonly subjected to [sessions of] struggle and criticism, numerous scientific and technical workers were repressed and attacked, the masses were divided, the production of scientific research was in chaos (*Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1986: 57).

Marshal Lin Biao and the Gang of Four were accused of being the ones mainly responsible for the deadlock condition. Their "leftist deviation"—the book argued—had indeed caused such serious damage that even the Prime Minister Zhou Enlai—who had worked to safeguard the space industry by placing it under military control—was not able to restore order. According to this assessment, although the military control exercised over the Seventh Ministry and its work units played a positive role in bringing more stability, a situation of general disorder continued to reign throughout the country from 1967 onwards. This disorder was blamed on "criminal" activity carried out by the counter-revolutionary clique of Jiang Qing and Lin Biao (*Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1986: 57-58).

This situation was reflected also in the Ministry, which remained in a state of chaos for a long time. The excesses of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing were evident in the circulation of slogans such as "reaching [the advanced countries] in three years, overcoming them in two" (*san nian gan, liang nian chao* 三年干, 两年超): it was precisely on the basis of this formula that, in August 1970, a space program "completely disconnected from reality" (*wanquan tuoli shiji* 完全脱离实际) was established, aiming to launch fourteen space vehicles in just five years. But in the era of "reforms and opening up" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放)—the book concluded—the failures that followed the illogical policies of the Gang of Four seemed to have been finally overcome: the 3<sup>rd</sup> plenum of the XI Central Committee of the CCP

would mark the beginning of a new phase of prodigious space development, destined to draw the attention of the world (*Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu* 1986: 61).

This narrative, rooted in the condemnation of the Cultural Revolution and of the Gang of Four and projected on the space accomplishments of the near and distant future, continued to be widespread during the following years, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, when the DFH-1 began to be elevated to a national symbol, a starting point in the space rise that China was at that time starting to enjoy. Emptied of its original Maoist ideological connotation, the satellite could now assume a new meaning, becoming an allegory of the nationalist path toward the conquest of outer space. In this sense, it was used by the official propaganda as a tool for enhancing the patriotic spirit of the nation and reinforcing the image of the Party as the ultimate mastermind behind the Chinese space accomplishment.

In this context, the central government allowed the publication of essays and the production of documentaries that recovered the memory of the satellite and of the famous scientists that were involved in its realization (i.a. Li 2009, Wang 2003, Wu 2011), while discouraging a serious discussion and research on the tragic events that occurred in those years: in this cultural production, the DFH-1 was presented as a technological artifact “saved” from the fury of the Red Guards thanks to the Chinese far-sighted leaders Zhou Enlai and Nie Rongzhen and to the PRC’s engineers’ strenuous commitment. Following this interpretation, any references to the acts of violence were merely used to confirm the official denouncement of the Cultural Revolution. In 2008, for example, a well-known author of reportage literature, Hu Ping, published an essay remarking how the launch of the first satellite was reached only at the expense of humiliation and death of numerous scientists: among them, the engineer Sun Jiadong had to step aside, Zhao Jiuzhang and Yao Tongbin lost their lives unjustly, others who participated in the early stages of the satellite project, such as Qian Ji, could hear the news of the launch only from the “cowsheds” (*niupeng* 牛棚).<sup>18</sup> Therefore—Hu gloomily concludes—“the saddest darkness hides in the shadow of that beautiful flamboyant tree” (最悲伤的黑暗，就藏在那美丽凤凰木的阴影里) (Hu 2008: 41). Evidently, however, this account does not contest the official orthodoxy; rather, it implicitly confirms that if the Cultural Revolution had not happened, Chinese space achievements would be even greater. In this sense, the references to the sufferings of the scientists are paradigmatic of the turbulence of the entire nation, and it eventually serves for reinforcing the orthodox narrative on those events.

---

<sup>18</sup> The so-called cowsheds were improvised jails set up by the Red Guards to hold people who were considered class enemies.

This nationalist interpretative framework is still valid today, in Xi Jinping's era, when, as we have already seen, the enthusiastic revival of the historical memory associated with the *Dongfang hong-1* reached its peak, drawing on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its launch. Nevertheless, it is important to note, that the 2020's celebration became also the time during which some "leftists" interpretations of the history of the DFH-1 have clearly emerged, posing a counter-narrative to the position of seeing it as a mere technological "survivor" of the Cultural Revolution.

#### 4. Leftists' interpretations of the launch of the satellite and the Neo-Maoists' view of the DFH-1

Since the legacy of the Cultural Revolution is still contested (Berry, Thornton and Sun 2016; Bonnin 2007; Miranda 2017; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2006; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui 2016), its impact on the development of the DFH-1 also remains disputed. In recent years, some Chinese scholars have challenged the official narrative of the "ten years of chaos" as an excessively reductive label in explaining the impact that the Cultural Revolution had on the development of the Chinese satellite program. In a paper published in the English-language journal *Endeavor*, Li Chengzhi, a professor at the Aeronautical and Aerospace University of Beijing (*Beijing Hangkong Hangtian Daxue* 北京航空航天大学), with his colleagues Zhang Dehui and Hu Danian, have partially overturned the official verdict on the movement (Li, Zhang and Hu 2017 and Lin 2013; see also Chen 2012 and Heberer and Heberer 2016: 225-229). While not negating the negative impacts that the Cultural Revolution had on the Chinese space programs, they reevaluated its positive effects: at that time, they argue, China successfully developed its first generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles and its rockets Long March-1, Long March-2, and Fengbao-1, also carrying out a series of satellite launches. For Li, Zhang, and Hu, the space projects initiated during the Cultural Revolution contributed significantly to today's economic and technological development. Therefore, Chinese satellite development during the notorious "ten years of chaos" should be considered an indispensable part of the entire history of the Chinese space program, considering it crucial in connecting the achievements of the Mao era with that of the following period of reforms and opening up.<sup>19</sup>

Noteworthy, such a positive reassessment of the Chinese space development during the Cultural Revolution has been part of a more general reappraisal of Maoist science carried out by several Western and Chinese scholars, mostly known for their militancy as New Left thinkers and activists (i.a. Brock

---

<sup>19</sup> Note that Li reevaluates also the role of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, criticizing the historical falsifications that portrayed them as responsible for the Chinese missile delay (Li, Zhang and Hu 2017).



2013; Gao 2008; Han 2008; Schmalzer 2006, Schmalzer 2007; Volti 2013)<sup>20</sup>. These authors have tried to overturn the official accounts of the Cultural Revolution as constituting a total calamity for the scientific field, focusing on the development that popular science known during that period, and on its contributions to enhancing the living condition of the Chinese population. Limiting the present analysis to the development of the sole satellite technology, it is important to stress how some of these intellectuals have considered the DFH-1 a positive outcome of the Cultural Revolution's, albeit with different nuances: in his volume "The Battle for China's Past" (2008: 144), Professor Gao Mobo (University of Adelaide) lists the DFH-1 among the main Chinese scientific and technological achievements of that period. With a slightly different emphasis, Professor Han Dongping (Warren Wilson College) judges the first Chinese satellite as an important indicator of the advanced technical level that the nation had reached at that time, yet without a positive short-time impact on people's livelihood (2008: 109).

Although the attempt to reassess the positive impact of the Cultural Revolution on the development of the Chinese satellite sector could be seen as an indication of the scientifically respectable intention of re-establishing the historical truth about the Chinese space developments, such an attempt also results in a revisionist attitude, aimed at exploiting the satellite achievements of that time with the aim of completely overturning the official negative judgment on the Cultural Revolution, erasing its most controversial aspects and totally rehabilitating it. This operation is mostly being conducted by the so-called Maopai 毛派, a term that can be translated as "neo-Maoists," admirers of Mao or nostalgic for Mao—a rather heterogeneous group, ranging from the urban and rural proletariat, to cadres, veterans, and retired officials of the CCP, to scholars and journalists enthusiastic for the Maoist era.

Neo-Maoists have been particularly vocal on "red websites," a series of Internet forums, blogs, and social-networking spaces known as refuges for those nostalgic for the Maoist times (Blanchette 2019, Miranda 2017, Miranda 2018).

Numerous articles praising the space successes achieved during those years with the aim of reversing the official verdict on the movement appeared on the red portal *Utopia* (*Wuyou zhixiang 乌有之乡*)<sup>21</sup> as early as 2016, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution: in one essay (Guo 2016), it is argued that the Cultural Revolution made it possible to take giant steps in the

---

<sup>20</sup> Further *ad hoc* studies are needed to investigate the differences between Western and Chinese scholars in this reappraisal, taking into account the global impact of Maoism and various forms of left-wing activism by Western academicians.

<sup>21</sup> The site can be found at the following address <http://www.wywxwk.com/>.

technological and scientific fields, especially in the defense sector, allowing China to reach the technological level of the most advanced countries. Among the cutting-edge technologies developed at that time, the author records the first Chinese artificial satellite, praising also the foundation of industrial bases located in the province of Sichuan, Shaanxi, Guizhou, Hubei, and Henan as crucial for the future of the Chinese aerospace sector.

According to Neo-Maoists, it is—needless to say—the Great Helmsman who should be thanked for these technological achievements: the decision to build the first satellite is indisputably attributed to him, who laid the foundations for the future glory of the Chinese space industry (Song 2020). For the *Maopai*, indeed, Mao's strategic thinking has to be read as the sole source of scientific progress, in contrast to Deng's approach: discrediting the post-Maoist era, the Neo-Maoists deny the legacy of the reforms and opening-up period, looking at the New Course as a time during which the old anti-bourgeois ideals were abandoned in order to restore the "white terror" and to rebuild the capitalist class. In opposition to the scientific projects carried out in the era of reform, the Maoist satellite program is described as "democratic" (*minzhu* 民主), being carried out at a time during which everyone had the possibility to freely advance his ideas (Shenhai Wuweiyu 2008). Conversely, during Deng's era, the right to speak has been guaranteed only to the "hegemons of science" (*xuebamen* 学霸们)—a derogatory term used to refer to the representatives of an alleged "elitism" in scientific research. In this sense, Chinese space innovation during the Maoist period has been judged as relatively more significant than that of the later periods, since at that time, China had neither experience nor a model to learn from—a total falsification of history, since the Soviet had already provided China with their expertise (Handberg and Li 2007: 57-59).

The apex of this trend that draws on the DFH-1 success to discredit the era of reforms was reached in 2020, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of the first Chinese satellite. At that time, it was argued that the success of the 1970s should be celebrated not only by the patriots who are aware of the importance that launch had for China's later technological achievements, but also by those who "slander" (*dihui* 诋毁) the thirty years preceding Deng's reforms: indeed, looking at the first satellite, everyone should admit that without that starting point, talking about subsequent aerospace missions would just be "sheer nonsense" (*wuji zhi tan* 无稽之谈; Zhang 2020). That is to say, without the Maoist period, China's rise and the nation's great renewal would not have been possible.

It is also interesting to note that, in eulogizing Mao and rehabilitating the Cultural Revolution, Neo-Maoists have been particularly eloquent in warning against the stigmatization of the rebels, mostly represented, by official accounts, as persecutors (Peng 2013). Indeed, even though the 1981

*Resolution* carefully avoided a straightforward verdict on the rebel faction, Maoists bloggers lamented what they perceived as an implicit condemnation of this group, insisting that the rebels were in fact victims of the “bureaucrats” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui 2016). Particularly stressed, for example, are the responsibilities of the conservative faction of the Seventh Ministry—the 9.15—vis-à-vis the rebel one—the 9.16—in relation to the death of the engineer Yao Tongbin. In the Neo-Maoists’ view, the official narrative has simply chosen to distinguish between good and bad, black and white, assigning to the rebels the role of scapegoats, considered as the guilty party, hence simplifying and distorting the complexity of those events. Today, they lament, the responsibility for the murder of Yao has been placed on the rebels, omitting the fact that the engineer had himself sympathy for this faction. According to the ultranationalist website “Home of Yan-Huang” (*Yan Huang zhi Jia 炎黄之家*)<sup>22</sup> (Wangyou 2016), Yao was in fact killed by the conservatives, as also confirmed by several witnesses (Yang 2010). This demonstrates, in the Neo-Maoists’ opinion, how the most extreme violence has to be ascribed to the conservative group: in confirming such assessment, an alleged conversation between Zhou Enlai and the representatives of the 9.15 and 9.16 factions is often reported, stressing how the Prime Minister had asked the 9.15 to cease their activities against the 9.16, which continued to suffer severe humiliation and discrimination from the opposing side (Ying shitou 2010).

In view of the above, it seems clear how the Neo-Maoists are carrying out an operation of historical revisionism, which calls into question the official Party line. In their analysis, indeed, the successful launch of the DFH-1 is used as an expedient to argue against the total negation of the Cultural Revolution as expressed in the orthodox discourse.

It is important to note, however, that the rise of these maverick statements took advantage of some subtle changes that occurred in the official interpretation of the Maoist period after Xi Jinping came to power. As is known, since 2013, the newly appointed Secretary advanced a new perspective on PRC’s history that can be embodied in the concept of the “two undeniabes” (*liangge buneng fouding 两个不能否定*). According to this formula, «the historical period after the economic reforms must not be used to deny the historical period before the economic reforms, and the historical period before the economic reforms must not be used to deny the historical period after the economic reforms» (Xi 2013). Apparently, this statement seems to be a stance against the above-mentioned leftist trends that tried to negate Deng’s legacy, confirming the value of the reform and opening up phase. However, by carefully deconstructing Xi’s formula, it became clear how it intrinsically relies on a more positive

---

<sup>22</sup> The site can be found at the following address <http://womenjia.org/>.

appraisal of the last Maoist period, at least if compared to previous official assessments, which had recognized an implicit supremacy of the post-1978 period over the last Maoists decades.<sup>23</sup> In Xi's opinion, indeed, Mao's and Deng's legacies must be regarded as complementary—thus rejecting the idea of dividing the PRC's history into two opposing periods, one of tragedies and the other one of glorious economic and scientific development (Zhao 2016).

In this regard, it is also noteworthy that the "Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century," approved in 2021 by the sixth plenary session of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP, contains only a short passage on Mao's errors and on the Cultural Revolution. Though condemning the movement, the document avoids any harsh criticisms of the Great Helmsman, and the passage on the "ten years of chaos" appears brief and formulaic if compared to the lengthy analysis contained in the 1981 Resolution (*Zhonggong Zhongyang guanyu Dang de bainian fendou zhongda chengjiu he lishi jingyan de jueyi* 2021; see also Shiroyama 2022).

The Chinese leader, therefore, seems to court the above "leftists" stances, demonstrating that their arguments are not totally out of line with the current orthodoxy, yet without providing them with open support, aware that backing them up could pose a risk to the ideological bonding of the nation. That is why, it is possible to say that Xi's attitude still remains unquestionably consistent with the spirit of the 1981 Resolution, studiously unaltering the official verdict on the Cultural Revolution, but also making an instrumental use of the "red capital" in order to reinforce the patriotic spirit of the nation and reinforce its political legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, during the Xi Jinping era, the work of some 'leftist' commentators became more widespread. They are trying to rehabilitate the later Maoist period, and while their position is not directly supported by the central leadership, it nonetheless seems not to be entirely suppressed within the orthodox version of historical events. In this sense, the case study of the DFH-1, as examined in this paper, demonstrates how, if on the one hand the leftists are exploiting the first satellite to call for a total re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution, the official nationalist revival of the memory of the first satellite Chinese also seems to contribute well to "dilute" the history of the movement.

---

<sup>23</sup> Official historiography has always recognized the "reform and opening up" period as crucial for China's further development and for its rise in the international arena. This assessment implies a supremacy of this period over the previous decades, tarnished by Mao's faults, as established in the 1981 "Resolutions" (Miranda 2018; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui 2016).

<sup>24</sup> As is known, Xi has a "red" ancestry, as the son of the veteran of the Long March Xi Zhongrun.

## References

- Bandurski, David. 2018. "Researching China's Sacred Leader." *China Media Project*, June 27. <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/06/27/the-social-science-of-sacredleadership/>
- Barmé, Geremie. 2012. "Red Allure and the Crimson Blindfold." *China Perspectives* 2: 29-40.
- Berry, Chris, Patricia M. Thornton, and Peidong Sun. 2016. "Introduction: The Cultural Revolution: Memories and Legacies 50 Years On." *The China Quarterly* 227: 604-12.
- Blanchette, Jude. 2019. *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bonnin, Michel. 2007. "The Threatened History and Collective Memory of the Cultural Revolution's Lost Generation." *China Perspectives* 4: 52-64.
- Brock, Darryl E. 2013. "The People's Landscape: Mr. Science and the Mass Line." In: *Mr. Science and Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, Science and Technology in Modern China*, edited by Chunjuan Nancy Wei, Darryl E. Brock, 41-117. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cao, Cong. 2013. "Science Imperiled. Intellectuals and the Cultural Revolution." In: *Mr. Science and Chairman's Mao Cultural Revolution. Science and Technology in Modern China*, edited by Chunjuan Nancy Wei, Darryl E. Brock, 119-142. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Chen, Yanping. 1991. "China Space Policy. A Historical Review." *Space Policy* 37: 116-128.
- Chen, Xiaomei. 2012. "The Road to Revival: A 'Red' Classic or a 'Black' Revisionist Epic in Praise of a Postsocialist China." In: *China and New Left Visions. Political and Cultural Interventions*, edited by Ban Wang, Jie Lu, 183-203. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Dangdai Zhongguo Congshu Bianjibu 当代中国丛书编辑部 [Contemporary China Editorial Group]. 1986. *Dangdai Zhongguo de Hangtian Shiye 当代中国的航天事业* [The Contemporary Chinese Space Industry]. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe.
- Dirlik, Arif. 2012. "Mao Zedong in contemporary Chinese official discourse and history." *China Perspectives* 2: 17-27.
- Du, Junfu 杜钧福. 2010. "Zhongguo Kexueyuan zai wenge qijian de tizhi biandong" 中国科学院在文革期间的体制变动 [The Institutional Changes in the Chinese Academy of Sciences during the Cultural Revolution]. *Jiyi 记忆* 43: 19-24.
- Gao, Mobo. 2008. *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gong, Xiaohua 巩小华. 2006. *Zhongguo Hangtian Juece Neimu 中国航天决策内幕* [Behind the Curtain of China's Aerospace Decision Making]. Beijing: Zhongguo Wenshi Chubanshe.
- Guo, Jianbo 郭建波. 2016. "Touxi Wenge. Wenge fazhan de licheng ji qi weida chengjiu he jingyan jiaoxun. Jinian Wenhua da geming fadong wushi zhounian" 透析文革 文革发展的历程及其伟大成就和经验教训 [Analysis of the Cultural Revolution. The process of the development of the Cultural Revolution and its great achievements and lessons]. *Wuyouzhixiang Wang 乌有之乡网*, March 31. [www.wywxwk.com/Article/shidai/2016/03/360737.html](http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/shidai/2016/03/360737.html).

- Han, Dongping. 2008. *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Han jiang chun meng 寒江春梦 [Winter River Spring Dream] [pseud.]. 2009. "Renmin Wang: 'Wenge' you xuduo jiji zuoyong, youxiao fan fubai shi qiyi" 人民网: "文革"有许多积极作用,有效反腐败是其一 [People's Daily Online: The 'Cultural Revolution' Had Many Positive Effects. Effective Anti-corruption is One of Them]. *Wuyouzhixiang* 乌有之乡网, August 18, <http://m.wywxwk.com/content.php?classid=27&id=94022>.
- Handberg, Roger, and Zhen Li. 2007. *Chinese Space Policy. A Study in Domestic and International Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Harvey, Brian. 2013. *China in space. The Great Leap Forward*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Heberer, Thomas and Feng Mei Heberer. 2016. "Fifty Years On: The 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' In the Age of the Internet—Still Haunting China." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 15/2: 209-236.
- Hu, Ping 胡平. 2008. "Meili fenghuangmu de yinying li- Woguo Di yi ke renzao wexing shangtian beihou de gushi" 美丽凤凰木的阴影里 - 我国第一颗人造卫星上天背后的故事 [In the Shadow of the Beautiful Phoenix Tree - The Story behind my Country's First Artificial Satellite]. *Tong Zhou Gong Jin* 同舟共进 2: 38-41.
- Hu, Xinmin 胡新民. 2021. "Xue Dang shi! Na 27nian zenme jiu cheng le 'yiqiong erbai'?" 学党史! 那27年怎么就成了“一穷二白”? [Learn the History of the Party! Then How is It that 27 Years Become 'Poor and Blank?']. *Mao Hong wang*, internet ed., <http://www.maoflag.cc/portal.php?mod=view&aid=12576>.
- Kulacki, Gregory, and Jeffrey G. Lewis. 2009. *A Place for One's Mat. China's Space Program. 1956-2003*. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- Lam, Willy. 2012. "The Maoist Revival and the Conservative Turn in Chinese Politics." *China Perspectives* 2: 5-15.
- Li, Chengzhi 李成智. 2006. *Zhongguo Hangtian Jishu Fazhan Shi Gao* 中国航天技术发展史稿 [An Historical Draft on the Development of Chinese Aerospace]. Jinan: Shandong Jiaoyu Chubanshe.
- Li, Chengzhi, Zhang Dehui and Hu Danian. 2017. "Making breakthroughs in the turbulent decade. China's space technology during the Cultural Revolution." *Endeavour* 41/3: 102-115.
- Li, Mingsheng 李鸣生. 2009. *Zouchu Diquacun. Zhongguo Diyi Ke Renzao Weixing Shangtian Ji* 走出地球村—中国第一颗人造卫星上天记 [Out of the Global Village—Records on the Flight of China's First Artificial Satellite]. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe.
- Lin, Bolin 林伯野. 2013. "Guanyu Wenhua da geming de yi feng xin. Zenyang zhengque renshi di yi ci wuchan jieji Wenhua da geming 关于文化大革命的一封信 ——怎样正确认识第一次无产阶级文化大革命 [A Letter About the Cultural Revolution. How to Correctly Understand the First Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution]. *Hongse Zhongguo* 红色中国, internet ed., <http://redchinacn.net/portal.php?mod=view&aid=14697>.

- Liu, Lin 刘霖 and Liu Zaifeng 刘载锋. 2015. “Zhengzhi xuanchuan dui hangtian huodong de yingxiang—yi ‘Dongfang hong yi hao’ weixing weilie.” 政治宣传对航天活动的影响 ——以“东方红一号”卫星为例 [The Influence of Political Propaganda on Space Activities: a Case Study of Dongfang hong-I]. *Guofang Keji* 国防科技 36/6: 108-111.
- Mao, Zedong 毛泽东. 1966. “Gei Lin Biao tongzhi de xin. Gei Junwei Zonghouqinbu ‘Guanyu Jinyibu gaohao budui nongfuye shengchan de baogao’ de pishi” 给林彪同志的信 给军委总后勤部‘关于进一步搞好部队农副业生产的报告’的批示 [Letter to Comrade Lin Biao. Notes on the Report of further Improving the Army’s Agricultural Work by the General Logistic Department of the Central Military Commission]. In: *Mao Zedong Wan Sui. Neibu Xuexi. Bude Waichuan* 毛泽东万岁 内部学习 不得外传 [Long live to Mao Zedong. For Internal Study. Do not Divulge]. S.l., s.n.: 259-260.
- Mao, Zedong 毛泽东. 1967. “Dui Nie Rongzhen guanyu junshi jieguan he tiaozheng gaizu guofang keyan jigou qingshi baogao de piyu” 对聂荣臻关于军事接管和调整改组国防科研机构请示报告的批语 [Comments on Nie Rongzhen’s Report Requesting Instructions on the Military Takeover and the Reorganization of Defense Research Institutions]. In: *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao* 建国以来毛泽东文稿 [Mao Zedong’s manuscripts since the founding of the PRC], edited by Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi 中共中央文献研究室. Vol 12, 270-271. Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe.
- Miranda, Marina. 2013. “Dal trionfo della ‘cultura rossa’ alla destituzione di Bo Xilai: le molte ombre alla vigilia del XVIII Congresso.” In: *La Cina dopo il 2012 - Dal centenario della prima repubblica al XVIII Congresso del Partito comunista*, edited by Marina Miranda, 81-103. Roma: L’Asino d’Oro.
- Miranda, Marina. 2017a. “Commemorare oggi Mao e la Rivoluzione culturale: l’interpretazione ufficiale del maoismo e le posizioni di ‘destra’ e di ‘sinistra.’” In: *La Cina quarant’anni dopo Mao - Scelte, sviluppi e orientamenti della politica di Xi Jinping*, edited by Marina Miranda, 23-43. Roma: Carocci.
- Miranda, Marina. 2017b. “Sulla Rivoluzione culturale cinquant’anni dopo: la polarizzazione del dibattito.” In: *Associazione Italiana di Studi Cinesi. Atti del XVI Convegno 2017*, edited by Elisa Giunipero, Chiara Piccinini, 118-124. Venezia: CaFoscarina.
- Miranda, Marina. 2018. “The Legacy of the Maoist Period in President Xi Jinping’s Appraisal: An Assessment between Politics and Historiography.” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 91/ 1-4: 233-248.
- Nie, Wenting 聂文婷. 2013. “Zhongyang zhuanmen weiyunhui yu Zhongguo diyi ke yuanzidan chengong shibao” 中央专门委员会与中国第一颗原子弹成功试爆 [The Central Special Committee and the Successful Test of China’s First Atomic Bomb]. *Dangdai Zhongguo Shi Yanjiu* 当代中国史研究 20/1: 53-60.
- Peng, Jieqing 彭洁清. 2013. “Liang dan yuanxun Yao Tongbin Wenge bei Zaofanpai Yong Gang Gun Zasi” 两弹元勋姚桐斌文革被造反派用钢棍砸死 [The person of great merit for the ‘Two-Bomb’ Yao Tongbin smashed to death by the Rebels with a Steel Rod during the Cultural Revolution]. *Renmin Wang* 人民网, internet ed.

- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2019. "Work Team." In: *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, 325–330. Acton: ANU Press, Verso Books.
- Renmin Ribao* 人民日报 (*People's Daily*). 1970. "Woguo diyi ke renzao diqiu weixing fashe chengong" 我国第一颗人造地球卫星发射成功 [China First Artificial Earth Satellite Successfully Launched]. April 28: 1.
- Renmin Ribao* 人民日报 (*People's Daily*). 1999. "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan Zhongyang Junwei jue ding biao zhang wei yan zhi 'liang dan yi xing' zuo chu tuchu gongxian de ke ji zhuan jia bing shou yu 'liang dan yi xing gongxun jiang zhang' 中共中央 国务院 中央军委决定 表彰为研制“两弹一星”作出突出贡献的科技专家并授予“两弹一星功勋奖章” [The Central Committee of the CCP, the State Council, the Central Military Commission Decided to Honor and Confer Medals the Old Scientists who Gave an Outstanding Contribution to the Research and Development of the 'Two Bombs, One Satellite' ]. 19 September, 1.
- Renmin Ribao* 人民日报 (*People's Daily*). 2003. "Feitian mengxiang jin chao chengzhen" [This Morning the Flying Dream Came True]. October 16: 1.
- Renmin Wang* 人民网 (*People's Daily Online*). 2020. "50 sui shengri kuaile! 'Yongyuan de Dongfang Hong' yun zhanlan qimu) 50 岁生日快乐 “永远的东方红” 云展览启幕 [Happy 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday! 'The East will Be Red for the Eternity' Virtual Exhibition Opens]. April 24.  
<http://culture.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0424/c1013-31686790.html>.
- Savina, Tonio. 2023. *Tra storia e narrazione. Il programma spaziale della Repubblica popolare cinese*. Padova: Libreriauniversitaria.it.
- Schmalzer, Sigrid. 2006. "Labor Created Humanity: Cultural Revolution Science on Its Own Terms." In: *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, edited by Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder, 185-210. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Schmalzer, Sigrid. 2007. "On the Appropriate Use of Rose-Colored Glasses: Reflections on Science in Socialist China." *Isis* 98/3: 571-83.
- Shenhai Wuweiyu 深海无尾鱼 (Fish of the Deep Sea without Caudal Fin) [pseud.]. 2008. "Mao Shidai he Fang Shidai, Shui cai shi 'Kexue chuntian?'" 毛时代和放时代，谁才是‘科学春天’? [Maoist Era or 'Opening up and Reform Era': Which is the real 'Spring of Science'?). *Wuyouzhixiang Wang* 乌有之乡网, April 30. <http://m.wywxwk.com/content.php?classid=21&id=33787>
- Shiroyama, Francis. 2022. "Transformation of Historical Awareness under the Xi Jinping Administration. Regarding Negative History, Political Style, and Foreign Policy." *The Japan Forum on International Relations* [https://www.jfir.or.jp/en/studygroup\\_article/3842/](https://www.jfir.or.jp/en/studygroup_article/3842/)
- Solomone, Stacey. 2013. "Space for the People. China's Aerospace Industry and the Cultural Revolution." In: *Mr. Science and Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, Science and Technology in Modern China*, edited by Chunjuan Nancy Wei and Darryl E. Brock, 233–250. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.



- Song, Zebin 宋泽滨. 2020. “Mao Zedong yu ‘Dongfang hong yi hao’ weixing” 毛泽东与“东方红一号”卫星 [Mao Zedong and ‘The East is Red-1’ satellite]. *Wuyouzhixiang Wang* 乌有之乡网, April 24. <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/lishi/2020/04/417316.html>
- Sun, Jiadong 孙家栋, and Hu Xueqin 胡雪琴. 2009. “‘Wenge’ ye dangbuzhu de ‘Dongfang hong y i hao’” 文革也挡不住的“东方红一号” [The East is Red-1 which cannot be Stopped even by the Cultural Revolution]. *Zhongguo Jingji Zhoukan* 38: 42-43.
- Volti, Rudi. 2013. “Worker Innovation: Did Maoist Promotion Contribute to China’s Present Technological and Economic Success?.” In: *Mr. Science and Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Science and Technology in Modern China*, edited by Chunjuan Nancy Wei and Darryl E. Brock, 333-346. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wang, Lin 王林(director). 2004. “Dongfang hong weixing chuanqi” 东方红卫星传奇 [The Tale of The East is Red-1 satellite]. Beijing: Zhongguo Guoji Dianshi Zonggongsi.
- Wang, Yusheng 王渝生. 2000. “‘Liang dan yi xing’ zhi de shi shenme” ‘两弹一星’指的是什么? What Indicate ‘liang dan yi xing’?. *Jianzhu Gongren* 建筑工人 2: 60.
- Wangyou 网友 (Fellow netizen) [pseud]. 2016. “Fan Wengezhe nüesha ‘zaofanpai toutou’ Li Jiulian” 反文革者虐杀“造反派头头”李九莲 [Anti-Cultural Revolutionists Slaughtered the “Rebel Leader” Li Jiulian]. *Yan Huang zhi Jia* 炎黄之家, October 9 <http://womenjia.org/z/201609/460.html>
- Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Susanne and Cui Jinke. 2016. “Whodunnit? Memory and Politics before the 50th Anniversary of the Cultural Revolution.” *The China Quarterly* 227: 734–751.
- Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Susanne. 2006. “In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History.” *The China Quarterly* 188: 1070-1091.
- Wu, Jiyan. 吴吉寅. “Wei qingchu xiuzhengzhuyi er douzheng. Zai Mao Zedong shishi 40 zhounian jinian dahui shang de fayan” 为清除修正主义而斗争——在毛泽东逝世 40 周年纪念大会上的发言 [Struggle to Eliminate Revisionism. Speech at the 40th Anniversary of Mao Zedong’s Death]. *Wuyouzhixiang Wang*, April 10 <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/lishi/2016/04/361306.html>
- Wu, Lilin 武利林. 2011. *Jushi Zhumu: Zhongguo Di yi Ke Renzao Diqiu Weixing Fashe Chenggong* 举世瞩目: 中国第一颗人造地球卫星发射成功 World’s Attention: China’s First Artificial Earth Satellite Successfully Launched]. Changchun: Jilin Chubanshijuan.
- Xi, Jinping 习近平. 2013. “Haobu dongyao jianchi he fazhan Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi—Zai shijian zhong buduan yousuo faxian yousuo chuangzao yousuo qianjin” 毫不动摇坚持和发展中国特色社会主义 在实践中不断有所发现创造有所前进 [Unwaveringly Uphold and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Some New Discoveries, Some New Innovations, and Some Advances in the Course of Practice]. *Renmin Ribao*, internet ed., January 6.
- Xi, Jinping 习近平. 2020. “Xi Jinping gei canyu ‘Dongfang hong yi hao’ renwu de lao kexuejia huixin” 习近平给参与“东方红一号”任务的老科学家回信 [Reply from President Xi Jinping to the Old Scientists of the Mission The East is Red-1]. *Xinhua Wang*, April 23. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-04/24/c\\_1125897940.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-04/24/c_1125897940.htm)

- Xinhua wang 新华网. 2016. "4yue 24 ri bei sheli 'Zhongguo hangtian ri'" 4月24日被设立中国航天日 [Chinese Space Day Established on 24 April], internet ed., 21 March.
- Yang, Guoyu 杨国宇. 2010. "Qijibu wenge junguan riji (jie xuan)" 七级部文革军官日记 (节选) [Diary of an Officer at the Seventh Department during the Cultural Revolution. Excerpts]. *Jiyi 记忆* 3: 38-59.
- Yang, Zhaode 杨照德. 2014. "Zhongguo diyi ke renzao weixing dansheng neimu" 中国第一颗人造卫星诞生内幕 [Behind the Birth of China's First Artificial Satellite]. *Jungong Dang'an 军工档案* 9: 86-9.
- Ying shitou 硬石头 (Hard stone) [pseud.]. 2010. "Wenge suixiang yu fansi—zhiyi, bu yao yiwei taiping wushi le 文革随想与反思--之一, 不要以为太平无事了 [Random Thoughts and Reflections on the Cultural Revolution—One, Do not think that the World is at Peace]. *Wuyouzhixiang Wang 乌有之乡网*, 31 October <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/zatan/2010/10/184478.html>
- Yuan, Jiajun 袁家军. 2005. "Qingzhu 'Dongfang hong' yi hao weixing chenggong fashe sanshiwu zhounian jicheng 'liangdan yixing' jingshen zai shu kongjian shiye xin fenbei. Zhongguo kongjian jishu yanjiuyuan yuanzhang Yuan Jiajun zai 'Dongfang hong' yi hao weixing danshengdi jinian bei jiemu yishi shang de jianghua" 庆祝"东方红"一号卫星成功发射三十五周年 继承"两弹一星"精神再树空间事业新丰碑——中国空间技术研究院院长袁家军在"东方红"一号卫星诞生地纪念碑揭幕仪式上的讲话 [Celebrating the 35th Anniversary of the Successful Launch of 'The East is Red-1' Satellite, Inheriting the Spirit of 'Two Bombs and One Satellite' and Building a New Milestone in the Space Industry—The Speech of the President of the China Academy of Space Technology Yuan Jiajun at the Ceremony for the Unveiling of the Stele at the Birthplace of the DFH-1 Satellite]. *Hangtian Gongye Guanli 航天工业管理* 5: 4-6.
- Zhang, Hongliang 张宏良. 2009. "Zhongguo: fenghuang niepan de jueqi qianye" 中国——凤凰涅槃的崛起前夜 [China: The eve of the rise of the Phoenix Nirvana]. *Fuxing Wang*, 9 November. <https://www.mzfxw.com/e/action/ShowInfo.php?classid=12&id=127297>
- Zhang, Zhikun 张志坤. 2020. "'Dongfang hong yi hao' hai zai fukan renjian" "东方红一号" 还在俯瞰人间 [The East is Red-1 is still looking at the world from above]. *Wuyouzhixiang Wang 乌有之乡网*, 25 April. <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/shidai/2020/04/417336.html>
- Zhao, Suisheng. 2016. "The Ideological Campaign in Xi's China Rebuilding Regime Legitimacy." *Asian Survey* 56/6: 1168-1193.
- Zhao, Yang 赵洋. 2006. *Dongfang Hong Yi Hao Weixing Kexue Jishu yu Shehui Yinsu de Hudong 东方红一号卫星科学技术与社会因素的互动* [The Interaction between Science and Technology and Social Factors in The East is Red-1 Satellite], Ph.D. Thesis. Beijing: Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences.
- Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Dang de Bainian Fendou Zhongda Chengjiu he Lishi Jingyan de Jueyi 中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议 [Resolution of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party's Struggles over the Past Century]. 2021. *Gov.cn*

[http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content\\_5651269.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content_5651269.htm)

Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi 中共中央文献研究室 [Documentation Research Center of the CCP Central Committee] (ed.). 1983. “*Guanyu Jianguo Yilai Dang de Ruogan Lishi Wenti de Jueyi*” *Zhushiben* «关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议» 注释本 [An Annotated Text of the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China”]. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe.

---

Tonio Savina, Ph.D. in Civilization of Asia and Africa at the University of Rome “Sapienza,” is currently a Post-doc Fellow at the University of Siena. In 2023 he was selected as a MOFA Taiwan Fellow for a visiting research period at Academia Sinica, Taipei, and in 2022 he received a Post-doc Research Grant in History from the European Space Agency (ESA). He has carried out research at the main libraries and universities in the PRC and in Taiwan, where he was a visiting Ph.D. student at the National Chengchi University (Taipei). His research interests include the history of Chinese space exploration, identity narratives, techno-nationalism, and space diplomacy. He is a member of the Italian Association for Chinese Studies (AISC) and of the European Society for the History of Science (ESHS).

Tonio can be reached at: [tonio\\_1993@live.it](mailto:tonio_1993@live.it)



# Chinese media facing Chinese and world culture



## The new era of Sino-American coproduction “Chinese national culture” in “White snake” (2019) and “Over the Moon” (2020)

Martina Caschera

Mythologically-themed animations are ideal texts to discern many issues related to notions such as cultural and social identity, collective memory and nationalism. In the case of coproductions, a locus where different national interests ideally cooperate, the investigation of these aspects allows not only to confirm how myths perpetuate their crucial role in modern societies through intertextuality, but also to elucidate how their usage changes according to communication targets and purposes. In the present essay, I address the new era of Sino-American coproduction from the perspective of Chinese mythology and discourse on mythological animation. Two case studies, *White Snake* (Baishe yuanqi 白蛇: 缘起, Light Chaser and Warner Bros, 2019) and *Over the Moon* (Feibenqu yueqiu 飞奔去月球, Pearl Studio/Netflix/Glen Kean Productions, 2020), have been chosen to elucidate one specific aspect of this complex phenomenon, i.e. how, despite the “homogenizing effect” of globalization (Dégh 1994: 23), cultural and national orientations emerge from different textual choices. After providing necessary literary-historical (Zhou 2020; Du 2019; Kokas 2017; Chen 2016; Yang and Zhen 2015), discursive (Wang 2024; Zhao and Zheng 2023; Tang and Gong 2021; Wu and Wang 2020; Dong 2020) and institutional (Brzeski 2017, 2018; Frater 2015) backgrounds, the textual analysis demonstrates that the Sino-American US-lead coproduction (OtM) follows Hollywood traditions and established coproduction trajectories, while the PRC-lead one (WS) responds more closely to national official discourse on guochan 国产 (national cultural production). The analysis and comparison are carried out in the framework of Folklore and Popular culture studies (Leskosky 1989, 2020; Koven 2013; Bird 2006) and apply content and visual/multimodal tools (Whyke 2024; Kriss 2016).

**Keywords:** Animation; Sino-American coproduction; mythology; popular culture studies; Chinese Animation; Chinese national culture.

### 1. Introduction

Folklore and Popular Culture Studies have been “spotting” myths and legends in modern texts to investigate how they transmit and *embody* folklore for many decades (Koven 2003: 190).

Since, “at the level of communal consciousness and collective memory [...] myth turns out to be a fundamental and unique means of storing and using aggregate social experience, a guarantee for social identity” (Baklanov et al., 2018: 44), mythologically-themed animations are ideal texts to discern many issues related to notions such as cultural and social identity, collective memory and nationalism. Especially in the case of coproductions, a locus where different national interests ideally cooperate, the investigation of these aspects allows not only to confirm how myths perpetuate their crucial role in modern societies through intertextuality, but also to elucidate how their usage changes according to communication targets and purposes. In this respect, we should consider that “popular culture forms succeed because they act like folklore,” because of their “resonance” and “appeal to an audience's existing set of story conventions” (Bird 2006: 346).

In the present essay, I will address the new era of Sino-American coproduction from the perspective of Chinese mythology and discourse on mythological animation. Two case studies have been chosen to elucidate one specific aspect of this complex phenomenon, i.e. how, despite the “homogenizing effect” of globalization (Dégh 1994: 23), cultural and national orientations emerge from different textual choices, or, conversely put, how it is possible to retrace the institutional background of a Sino-American movie according to textual choices.

“White Snake” (*Baishhe yuanqi* 白蛇: 缘起, Light Chaser and Warner Bros, 2019) and “Over the Moon” (*Feibenqu yueqiu* 飞奔去月球, Pearl Studio/Netflix/Glen Kean Productions, 2020), hereafter mentioned as *WS* and *OtM* share core features, both being inspired by or incorporating Chinese traditional narratives, i.e. popular myths and legends, and being feature-length and wholly CGI films.<sup>1</sup> I maintain that the Sino-American coproduction that is US-lead (*OtM*) follows Hollywood traditions and established coproduction trajectories, while the PRC-lead one (*WS*) tends to respond more closely to national official discourse on *guochan* 国产 (national cultural production).

In the first part of the essay, I adopt a literary-historical approach to sum up the history of Chinese animation with a focus on the transnational origins of Chinese animation,<sup>2</sup> and on the main phases and features of Sino-American coproduction. Major trends and keywords of contemporary discourse on the role of myth in Chinese national animation are hereby presented to outline the field in which the Chinese component of Sino-American collaboration operates.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Computer animation, or CGI animation, is a process used for generating animated images. [...] Computer generated imagery (CGI) encompasses both static scenes and dynamic images” (Jiang 2016: 37).

<sup>2</sup> For detailed information regarding the transnational origins of Chinese animation, see Du (2019). In this section, I intertwine the information provided by her study with other sources.



In the second part, the institutional perspective provides key information to understand the following analysis and comparison carried out in the framework of Folklore and Popular culture studies. At a textual level, I apply content and visual/multimodal<sup>3</sup> tools for analyzing the plot structure, intertextual relationships and the way each text deals with a common set of elements that have been previously coded, such as the setting, the characters' gender, their main physical features, and other visual/multimodal features such as tactility<sup>4</sup> and 2D animation inserts. A general focus on “Chinese elements” is proposed due to their central role in official discourse on national animation.

## 2. Transnational flows and Myth-driven success

### 2.1 Transnational...flows

The Wan brothers (*Wan xiongdi* 万兄弟), founders of “national animation,” did not hesitate to admit the influence of Fleisher and Disney on their work. The first Asian feature-length film, “Princess Iron Fan” (*Tieshan gongzhu* 铁扇公主, 1941), draws from Disney’s “Snow White” (1937) both from a technical and a character perspective. As for the former, they employed rotoscoping animation, the same way Disney did for his *Snow White*. As for the latter, the Wan brothers chose an episode of “Journey to the West” (*Xiyouji* 西游记, XVI century) that they could build around the character of a mean princess, i.e. Bull Demon King’s wife. Wan Laiming 万籁鸣 (1907-1997), the most famous of the brothers, openly compared the two animations, projecting their relationship into both a national(istic) and a transnational scenario:

I was thinking that if Americans can demonstrate their ethnic or national style in *Snow White* and the *Seven Dwarfs*, certainly, we can develop our own ethnic features through *The Princess of the Iron Fan* (Wan in Zhou 2020: 19).

Although being generally received as a piece of “resistance art,” the movie was treated as “being symbolic of the victory of Greater East Asian cinema over Hollywood” (Du 2019: 48) in 1942 Japan.

---

<sup>3</sup> A “mode” is a semiotic resource. Analyzing multimodal features means taking into account different modes (such as visual and audio resources) and their combination.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Marks maintains that “tactility is created by the viewer’s ability to sense touch – not by actually touching the film, but rather through the film’s ability to appeal to sense” (Kriss 2016). According to Kriss, filmic tactility “affords the viewer greater access to a ‘felt’, rather than simply an ‘ocular’ experience of cinema. The close-up enables the viewer to feel cinema; to penetrate the film’s skin, in order to experience its tactility and its full affect” (2016).

Osamu Tezuka, the “God of manga,” reportedly understood and appreciated the political nuance of the movie, and confessed its deep influence on his work (Du 2019: 58).

After a period of well-funded (mainly propagandistic) production in Japanese-controlled Manchuria from the late 1930s-mid 1940s, artists and animators of the newly born People’s Republic gave rise to the so-called “golden era” of national animation, which ended by the late 1980s.<sup>5</sup> During the early years of PRC, the Soviet Union was the main aesthetic reference for animated production (besides Hollywood), while in the second half of the 1950s cultural actors succeeded in finding a “national style” that made animated movies more internationally recognizable.<sup>6</sup>

Sino-American coproductions virtually started in the 1980s, when a new mediascape urged many young artists to work at foreign animation houses in Southern China. According to Yang and Zhang, in the “first phase” co-production meant providing “labor, venues, equipment and other paid services for the US.”<sup>7</sup> From a wider standpoint, it also meant appropriating marketing models and subsuming styles from Hollywood.

In 2004, new Regulations on the Administration of Chinese-Foreign Cooperative Film Production (*Zhongwai hezuo shezhi dianyingpian guanli guiding* 中外合作摄制电影片管理规定) were introduced. Afterwards, Hollywood’s interest in the Chinese cinema market grew, giving way to a “Chinese stories” (*Zhongguo gushi* 中国故事) phase. A “strategy of Chinese elements” (*Zhongguo yuansu zhanlüe* 中国元素策略) was applied on joint investment projects (Chen 2016:176),<sup>8</sup> although many of them were criticized for allegedly employing an Orientalist point of view that simply “placed Western stories in the Chinese context,” or/and “presented the ignorant and backward ancient eastern country (*yumei, luohoude dongfang guguo* 愚昧、落后的东方古国) from a Western perspective” (Yang and Zhang 2017: 66).

---

<sup>5</sup> It is also possible to distinguish a first golden era, related to the production of the late 1950s- early 1960s, from a second golden era, which spans from early to late 1980s.

<sup>6</sup> For an archeological retrieval of the “national style discourse”, see Macdonald (2015).

<sup>7</sup> This three-phases categorization is drawn from Yang and Zhang (2017). See Kokas (2017) for an in-depth analysis of Sino-American co-operation in the film industry.

<sup>8</sup> According to Chen, the Chinese elements strategy means inserting into US movies the following elements: Chinese (not only, but especially Chinese movies stars’ faces, cultural elements (“Chinese symbols, landscapes, clothes, and kung fu”) and the national image of China (*Zhongguo de guojia xingxiang* 中国的国家形象). The last aspect deals with the representation of China as the “savior of the world” (*shijie zhu* 救世主) or, at least, as a powerful ally in many Hollywood movies (Chen Y. 2016: 176-177).

In 2015, the “Cooperation 3.0” phase started.<sup>9</sup> Due to the increasingly central role of the PRC in the global political scenario, a deeper integration in the US-market of many Chinese realities, such as Wanda Group 万达集团 and Huayi Brothers 华谊兄弟, and the raise of the imported film quota in light of further Sino-American agreements (Yang and Zhang 2017: 67), have been accompanied by other, contradictory drives. In 2017, Kokas argued that “Hollywood dream factory and the Chinese Dream work together, while mired in a state of perpetual negotiation” (Kokas 2017: 20). Sino-American animated coproduction synecdochically represents this larger phenomenon. Successful features such as “Kung Fu Panda 3” (DreamWorks and Oriental DreamWorks, 2016), “Abominable” (DreamWorks 2019) and the two case studies hereby selected, could conceal complex textual dynamics that long to be disentangled by analytical scrutiny.

## 2.2. Mythological tradition and trajectories

Between 2015 and 2016, the 3D animation *Xiyoujizhi Dasheng guilai* 西游记之大圣归来, known globally as “Monkey King: Hero is back,” achieved unprecedented box office results and brought Chinese animation to a so-called *xin shidai* 新时代 (new era) of national and international success (He 2021; Li 2021). When *Nezha* 哪吒 crushed every record in 2019, it became clear that animation had to be interpreted as a critical asset for national production.<sup>10</sup>

These being notable, isolated episodes, revealed that the problem of Chinese animation “going out” (*zouchuqu zhanlüe* 走出去) (Yi 2019; Lin 2021) was more structural than expected, with “the performance and quality of Chinese animations [...] being considered of mild or unsatisfactory level if compared with Japanese or American production” (Pellitteri, cit. in Feng, 2021). Since the globally successful movies both adapt mythological characters/themes, mythological animation has been put at the core of the official discourse pertaining national and international production to solve this and other “bottlenecks” (Wang 2024).

---

<sup>9</sup> For a general view on Sino-American (and Sino-European) cooperation in the film market by 2015, see also Richeri (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Animation and comics have been considered as a key cultural industry as early as in 2009, i.e. during the implementation of the 11th five-year projection for social and economic development (2006-2010). That year the Ministry of Culture began overseeing their development and the government provided “technological innovation funds, preferential income, and value-added tax policies to small- and medium-sized enterprises” in the field (Lent 2017: 371-372). However, the support did not prove effective—as far as both national and international audiences are concerned—until the 2010s.

According to Tang and Gong, by adapting myths, animations reflect “Chinese’s original understanding of the world” (2021: 417). This conviction, based on “the romantic idea of an access to primitive, original Chinese thinking” through myths, is still widespread (McNeal 2012: 686). Many scholars confirm this view by entitling mythological animations to be the “driving force” of national animation (Shen and Lin, 2024; Wang 2024; Zhao and Zheng 2023; Tang 2021; Wu and Wang 2020).

Even though the presence of mythology is an element of continuity in the history of Chinese animation (Wang writes about a “mythological animation lineage,” 2024), its recent manifestation is discursively related to the formation of Chinese modern identity. The core idea is that film-makers should “creatively integrate the ‘essence of Chinese culture’ within the movies” (Tang and Gong, 2021: 424), “to promote a sustainable development of the Chinese School so as to reinvent the form of cultural identity in film-making” (Tang and Gong, 2021: 427). How the Chinese “essence” is constructed represents a key discerning issue. As noted by Wang and Whyke (2023: 64), it is mostly conceived as “an entity that needs to be confined to certain attributes in order to genuinely encapsulate ‘itself.’” An “evocative use of traditional imagery” (Wang and Whyke 2023: 68), which include traditionally-bound color schemes and “symbolic symbols” (Wang 2024), is suggested as a means of integrating this “essence” in the movies. Another option is working on traditional characters, by “adding new roles” (Tang and Gong 2021: 423). The success of “Monkey King” (2015) and *Ne Zha* (2019) can be explained by their portraying “ordinary individual instead of a perfect hero [...], who could be suffering, struggling and hesitating in his daily life” (Tang and Gong 2021: 424-425).

The usage of Chinese myths in coproductions engenders an intratextual coexistence of national and international drives.

Zhou Tiedong, former director of the China Film Group, maintained that, “besides martial arts, animation is (our) only commercial opportunity” (Yi 2019). Some Chinese analysts have been promoting animation for it offers “natural advantages for an intercultural communication”, since it helps hiding cultural identities and avoiding the “cultural discount” (Yi 2019).<sup>11</sup> However, the great majority of commentators build on very different premises. In contemporary discourse on Chinese animation, culture is conceived as something instrumental (a “tool”), therefore, it is vital to integrate national tradition in current, technologically and interculturally savvy production.

A few, selected aspects of foreign animation should be entitled of a guiding role: Wu and Wang mention “American animation pragmatism” and “utilitarianism” (2020: 288), while Japanese

---

<sup>11</sup> When a product considered (highly) valuable in one country becomes lowly valuable in a target market because it is not understood, a “cultural discount” happens. The value is lost in the cultural translation. See Lee (2006).

animators' experience in "rationally using national cultural styles", their respect of their folk culture, is underlined in Tang and Gong (2021: 426). The employment of Hollywood-derived techniques, initially welcomed, opened a path that eventually brought to a fixation on aesthetics at the expenses of other "foreign" aspects now deemed as more crucial, such as the formation of IP characters (Wang 2024; Shen and Lin 2024).

In this context of national recognition and ideological competition, such terms as "transculturality" and "transnationalism" are deemed ambiguous, thus these phenomena, together with "cultural transfer," should be prevented (Wu and Wang 2020: 287).

### 3. "Over the Moon" and "The White Snake"

#### 3.1 "Over the moon:" a "reforming" myth

##### 3.1.1. Institutional perspective

OtM was produced by Pearl studio and Netflix, with the cooperation of Sony Pictures, Dreamworks and NBCUniversal.

In 2018, CMC Capital Partners (CMC), previously known as China Media Capital,<sup>12</sup> took full ownership of Oriental DreamWorks (*Dongfang gongchang* 东方梦工厂) and relaunched it as "100% Chinese-owned" (Amidi 2018). Oriental DreamWorks, founded in 2012, thus became Pearl Studio, a successful venture that produced, as its first release, the animated movie *Everest*, also known as *Abominable* (*Xueren qi yuan* 雪人奇缘) in 2019. Li Ruigang 黎瑞刚, CMC's chair, declared: "With full ownership, CMC expands its commitment to build Pearl Studio into one of the world's leading creators of high-quality animated content for every screen and platform" (Brzeski 2018).

Netflix is a subscription streaming service, which became a production company after 2007 and continues to expand transnationally and transmedially. Netflix started working with DreamWorks Animation in 2013, when they co-produced an animated series for kids: "Turbo: F.A.S.T. (Fast Action Stunt Team)"—based on Dreamworks' film "Turbo" (Lieberman 2013).

For this Sino-American co-production, Peilin Chou (chief creative officer at Pearl studio and producer at Netflix) selected many renowned figures for the most prominent creative positions. First

---

<sup>12</sup>CMC (China Media Capital), now called CMC partners, is one of the most active private investment institution, which is interested mainly in the fields of culture and entertainment. Among the most renowned and influential companies iQiyi (Aiqiyi 爱奇艺), Bili bili 哔哩哔哩, Mango TV (Mangguo 芒果 TV), Ele.me (E le me 饿了么).

of all, Glen Keane, former director of “Frozen” (2013) and “Big Hero 6” (2014).<sup>13</sup> Due to her “deep roots in China”, Janet Yang, the movie’s executive producer and current president of the Film Academy, had invested in the movie as part of her project of bringing Chinese themes to Hollywood.<sup>14</sup> Notably, the whole cast is of East-Asian descent.<sup>15</sup>

As far as matters of its dissemination/reception are concerned, OtM is animated in English. Netflix’s involvement in the project ensured a more pervasive dissemination and an easier accessibility for viewers all over the world. The movie was nominated for the Academy awards and Golden globe awards in 2021.

### 3.1.2. The plot

The story, set in a small and beautiful Chinese fantasy town, revolves around a girl named Feifei, who loses her mother at a young age and tries to cope with the loss. Her mother used to tell her the story of Chang’e, thus she grows fond of the Moon goddess and of the idea of becoming an astronaut. A few years later, her dad introduces his new lover and her son Chin to Feifei, who vehemently opposes the relationship. When her dad arranges a Mid-Autumn festival dinner for the enlarged family, Feifei expresses her disappointment in the outsiders’ presence. Therefore, she decides to ask for the help of her beloved Chang’e and starts building a “rocket to the moon.” She succeeds in reaching the Lunaria, Chang’e’s reign, Feifei finds out that her stepbrother sneaked into the rocket and that Chang’e was not how she had expected. The goddess is vain and self-centered. However, after a series of adventures, Feifei accomplishes two tasks: first, she manages to accept the new asset of her family; secondly, she convinces Chang’e to “let go” of Houyi, whose memory had turned her into an obsessed woman. At this point, Feifei and Chin can go back home and start a new phase of their lives as brother and sister.

The analysis of plot structure inspired by Leskosky’s *Reforming fantasy* (1989), allows to identify three macro-segments: an “initial negative behavior” (Feifei’s opposition to her “new” family and her father’s reaction), a “fantasy sequence” (over the moon), and a “reformed behavior” (Feifei back home,

---

<sup>13</sup> OtM was the first animated movie he made without his friend animator and writer Mel Shaw, who had been a long-time partner of Kean’s.

<sup>14</sup> She is reportedly developing “projects with Asian themes.” See her official webstise: <https://janetyang.com/>

<sup>15</sup> Philippa Soo, the voice of goddess Chang’e, is of half-Chinese descent, while Cathy Ang was born to Chinese-Filipino parents. The most famous actors involved (Sandra Oh, Ken Jeong and Margaret Cho) are of Korean descent. Notably, the moon goddess is celebrated during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which belongs to the traditions of many East-Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan.

“reformed”) (Leskosky (1989: 53). This “morphology” and other features,<sup>16</sup> allow *OtM* to be considered as a Reforming fantasy cartoon, a subgenre which demonstrates enduring consistency and presence in Hollywood animated cinema throughout the decades (Leskosky (1989: 64).

Another important aspect of this movie’s diegesis is linear time: despite the initial “time jump,” the events are narrated diachronically.

### 3.1.3. Intertextuality

*OtM*<sup>17</sup> is a contemporary original story that offers an updated interpretation of the legend of the moon goddess Chang’e 嫦娥, one of the “four most important myths” in China.<sup>18</sup> Chang’e was the wife of Archer Yi (Houyi 后羿), a demigod who saved the world by shooting and destroying nine suns. Raising all at the same time, the suns were turning the world into a desert, barren land. His intervention led the Queen mother of the West (*Xiwangmu* 西王母) to bestow the immortality potion upon him. However, it was Chang’e the one who drank it, ending up living on the moon and becoming its goddess. Two explanations have been given for this conclusion: either she wanted to prevent her husband’s apprentice to exploit it for evil purposes, thus performing the role of a loving wife, or she was just being curious and selfish, thus acting as an evil woman. Since retracing the genealogy of the myth through literary intertextuality is beyond the scope of this essay, it will suffice to mention the *Huainanzi* 淮南子<sup>19</sup> as the most ancient version of the text, and Lu Xun’s satirical rendition, published in his late collection *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编 (Old tales retold, 1936), as the most influential in modern times. As for its cinematic adaptations, two recent works can help understand the pervasiveness of Chang’e’s presence in the East Asian imaginary: Hong Kong movie *Chang’e* (1954) and the Sino-Singaporean tv series “Moon fairy” (*Benyue* 奔月, 2003).

---

<sup>16</sup> Leskosky lists the following features of the *Reforming fantasy*, all present in *OtM*: “the protagonist is physically or mentally immature”; “fantasy setting iconographically linked to the protagonist’s [negative] behavior;” “music plays an integral part in the fantasy milieu in sound cartoons;” “the fantasy menace is always either human or anthropomorphic never simply an object or animal” (1989: 56-57).

<sup>17</sup> The Chinese title of *OtM*, i.e. *Feibenqu yueqiu* 飞奔去月球 (flying to the moon/Fei goes to the moon), plays with the Chinese name of the legend, i.e. *Chang’e benyue* 嫦娥奔月, Chang’e flies to the moon.

<sup>18</sup> The other three being the interrelated “Gonggong hits the mountain” (*Gonggong chushan* 共工触山), “Nüwa amends the sky (Nüwa butian 女娲补天),” and Houyi shoots the suns (Houyi sheri 后羿射日).

<sup>19</sup> The myth of Houyi is reported in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanghai jing* 山海经), while only in Eastern Han notes on in the *Huainanzi*, Houyi and Chang’e are discursively connected as husband and wife. (Sun and Chen 2009: 27).

Being the first animated feature on Chang’e, *OtM* successfully embeds the story’s alternative versions by offering a synthesis through the character of a modernized Chang’e, presented as Feifei’s antagonist, her “menace” in the fantasy sequence.



*Fig. 1.* Fei Fei with her bunny pet, Bungee, set off to the Moon (copyright: Creative commons).

Feifei is a caring and passionate teenager. Her name is a reference to the myth (“fei” means “fly,” as Chang’e literally flies to the moon), and her attachment to the past and traditions reflects a stereotypical Chinese attitude. She is stubborn and scientifically smart: one of the best students in her class to the point that she even succeeds in building a spaceship to reach the moon.

Chang’e embodies the ambivalent nature of femininity as represented in traditional literature and mythology. When the viewer finds out the reasons of her evil actions, it is harder to frame her as an enemy: simply put, she misses her husband, Houyi, and manages to meet him again by exploiting Feifei’s arrival. Two choices conceptually relate the goddess to the *xin shidai*: firstly, a reference to the Chinese space mission to the moon, which was named after her;<sup>20</sup> secondly, idol culture, which, while permeating the whole character’s aesthetics, is especially resonant on her first appearance, when she is portrayed as a fashionable singer in front of a huge crowd of minions.

---

<sup>20</sup> The Chinese Lunar Exploration Program (Zhongguo tanyue gongcheng 中国探月工程) was launched in 2007 and is still ongoing. In January 2019, Chang’e 4 touched down on the far side of the Moon.



The other main character, Feifei's stepbrother, Chin, embraces the role of mediator between past and present lives, Self and Other. Chin is a funny, cheerful boy who helps Feifei both on a practical level, with the many difficulties faced in Lunaria, and emotionally/psychologically, with the processing of her grief. Many other characters are less important, but well-constructed, such as Feifei's aunts, who are instrumental in telling the two versions of the story to the unaware viewer, or Gobi, the friendly monster Feifei meets on Lunaria, who is a phantasmic version of Chin himself.

#### 3.1.4. Visual and multimodal elements

OtM is set in an imaginary Chinese town, where the houses are built in traditional-style architecture, and a small river runs through its streets. A high pagoda on the adjacent hill perfects the traditional style of the landscape. The familiar and cozy urban atmosphere is juxtaposed to the thrill of a nearby construction site, where a high-speed magnetic train is being built. The site symbolizes the new, technological and even futuristic China. Lunaria, the other major setting, displays a psychedelic, mobile-game aesthetics, packed as it is with small creatures that are part of the scenery itself. Many "Chinese elements" are integrated in both the city and Lunaria landscapes, as visual bits carrying emotional weight (e.g. "festivity food" and the two guardian lions). The Chinese language is also present, in the visual as well as in the audio modality.

From an animation-as-narration standpoint, the story displays cohesion and coherence. The change of settings is rare and the few transitions from one time/place to another occur smoothly. The major narrative/visual partition occurs when the characters leave the earth.

Close-ups and tactility are fully exploited in the first part, to increase the emotional power of these scenes, e.g., when Feifei is portrayed with her mother or her family, and in the last section, for stressing the solution of the conflicts during the family re-union. Notably, many close-ups are devoted to food, to exploit the multiple comminglings of family and food culture.

The use of 2D animation builds an additional narrative layer, when employed, for instance, to tell the story of Chang'e and Feifei's planning and building the rocket. It also contributes to modulating the tone and enhance polyphony.

The audio modality is crucial in this movie, which has been defined as "musical animation", following the classic Disney-Pixar (i.e. Hollywood) model. In this regard, two songs are worth mentioning: the first one is sang by Feifei the moment she climbs up the hill, reaching the pagoda and voicing out her intention to build a "rocket to the moon". This particular scene resonates with at least two other classic Disney-Pixar scene, when Belle ("Beauty and the Beast") vocalizes her desire of adventure and when Elsa (*Frozen*), having "let go" her responsibilities to the kingdom. Equally

noteworthy is the song “Yours Forever,” performed by Phillipa Soo and Comrad Ricamora both in English and Chinese, thus *translating* the Sino-American cooperation into music form.

### 3.2. “The White Snake:” metanoia revised

#### 3.2.1. Institutional perspective

Light Chaser Animation (*Zhuiguang donghua 追光动画*) was founded in 2013 to “create world-class animated films with a Chinese cultural touch.”<sup>21</sup> Before 2019, it had already produced “Little Door Gods” (*Xiaomen shen 小门神*, 2016), “Toys and Pets” (*Atang qiyu 阿唐奇遇*, 2017) and “Cats and Peachtopia” (*Mao yu Taohua yuan 猫与桃花源*, 2018).<sup>22</sup>

Warner Bros. has a long history of filmic cooperation with China, since it had opened a regional office in Shanghai as early as in the 1930s. In 2015, they launched Flagship Entertainment, a partnership with China Media Capital,<sup>23</sup> and in 2017 opened a “full-fledged joint venture studio in Beijing” (Brzeski 2017). On this occasion, Warner Bro.’s CEO Kevin Tsujihara declared that “in the spirit of true cultural exchange,” they were “eager to learn from our partners and share great Chinese stories with audiences around the world” (Brzeski 2017)<sup>24</sup>.

WS was the first co-production for Light Chaser and one of the first releases after Warner Bros.<sup>25</sup> deepened their involvement locally. Therefore, it represented a crucial step for both Light Chaser’s internationalization and Warner Bros’ “animated” venture in China, and surely carried the weight of addressing international audiences.

However, when getting to the credit sections of the film, we learn that Warner Bro’s actual involvement was not extended to crucial creative roles, all played by Chinese creatives. For instance, the directors are Amp Wong 黄家康, who had worked for other Light Chaser titles (“Little Door Gods,”

---

<sup>21</sup> See their official website [http://www.zhuiguang.com/?page\\_id=22&lang=en](http://www.zhuiguang.com/?page_id=22&lang=en)

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the English titles of two out of three movies, which were all distributed in the US, lose many of their cultural references. A Tang adventure becomes Toys and Pets (probably echoing the globally famous Pixar movie Toy story). The reference to Tao Yuanming’s 陶渊明 Peach blossom spring (Taohuayuan 桃花源), an important literary work of the Six Dynasties, is completely lost in translation.

<sup>23</sup> China Media Capital owned the 51% of the share, Warner Bros the 49% (Frater 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Xi Jinping expressed the necessity of “telling Chinese stories well” (jianghao Zhongguo gushi 讲好中国故事) at the launch of New Silk Road project in 2013. See Szcudlik (2018).

<sup>25</sup> Beijing Joy Pictures co., ltd, is an “entertainment company that focuses on film Acquisition marketing, distribution and content development” is also credited in the production on IMDb. For additional info see their official website [https://cinando.com/en/Company/beijing\\_joy\\_pictures\\_co\\_ltd\\_105301/Detail](https://cinando.com/en/Company/beijing_joy_pictures_co_ltd_105301/Detail)

“Tea Pets,” “Cats and Peachtopia”), and Zhao Ji 赵霁, with no previous noteworthy experiences, while the almost unknown Damao 大毛 was selected for screenwriting. Perhaps, Amp Wong carried the weight of transnationalizing the movie, since he had already took part in successful Hollywood animation series (e.g. “Astro Boy”, “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles”).

As for dissemination/reception, WS is animated in Mandarin Chinese. It was intended to be displayed in movie theatres, both nationally and internationally. It was award-nominated at the 29th Annecy International Animation Film Festival, and won the award for “outstanding feature-length productions” and for its musical score at the 19<sup>th</sup> Golden Dragon Award Original Animation & Comic Competition (*jinlong jiang* 金龙奖) in 2019.

### 3.2.2. Plot structure

In the opening scene, Blanca (*Xiao Bai*, in Chinese, lit. Little Bai), a good-hearted snake-demon, and her sister Verta (*Qingshe* 青蛇, in Chinese, lit. Blue-green snake) are shown meditating and then bathing in a beautiful garden. Blanca faints during a terrifying vision and then, woken up by Verta, complains about not being able to reach immortality, even though she “practiced” meditation (*xiulian* 修炼) for 500 years. Verta hands a jade hairpin over her sister, giving way to a flashback that informs the main narrative section.

The “core” story is set during the downfall of the Tang dynasty, in the whereabouts of what would become the city of Hangzhou. Bai is a skillful demon who works for a Shifu 师傅 (master), a more powerful female snake-demon who is fighting against a Daoist guoshi 国师 (grandmaster), who has the official authorities on his side and is killing snakes to plunder their vital energy and become immortal.

While Blanca is on a mission to kill the Grandmaster, she loses her memories and wakes up in a small village of snake-catchers. The person who has found her is Xu Xuan, a sweet pharmacist who offers to accompany her to the fox-demon magic shop, where she can retrieve her memories. During a boat trip, Blanca reveals her true (snake) shape, but he doesn’t care. Shortly after, Verta joins them with the mission of bringing Blanca back to her kins, just to discover that her sister loves the man. The couple physical bond is followed by the comeback of Blanca’s memories and Blanca’s decision to end their relationship. While Xuan chooses to become a low-level demon to be with Blanca, she has to confront the Grandmaster, first, and Shifu’s greater ambitions, later. Xuan, who rushes to her aid, is killed, but she manages to save his soul before fainting.

At the end of the movie, the audience is brought back to the “present,” when Blanca can finally remember her lover and decides to reincarnate in Song time China (960-1279 AD).

The analysis of the plot shows a tripartite structure (a short introduction to entice the viewer, the main storyline, and an open conclusion). Notably, this organization of the plot is circular: the introduction opens a flashback, which is constituted by the main storyline, while the open conclusion is located in the present (500 years after the events of the main storyline).

The plot can be analyzed more fruitfully in the light of the character’s arc, following Leskosky’s comparison between Hollywood and Japanese animation (2021). Leskosky (2020: 81) proposes using the notion of “metanoia,” which means “a change of mind” in ancient Greek, to define a typical moral conversion of an evil character. Metanoia sets the two traditions apart, since, in Japanese animation, “it is not unusual to see even demons and devils reversing their moral compass and operating on the side of the good” and it happens “more seriously, and with greater import for the overall narrative” vis-à-vis Hollywood animation (Leskosky 2020: 85).

In WS, the tension between the main characters informs the narrative drive and derives from the fact that in WS love means denying pre-ordained notions of identity (and morality). In the “heart” of the movie, Blanca, despite her memory loss, somehow feels she is not human: scared of being rejected, she tries to warn Xu, just to hear these words repeatedly: “Ni bu shi eren 你不是恶人 (you are not evil).” Similarly, when Verta reminds Blanca that Xu is a man, she responds that he “is different (ke ta butong 可他不同)”. In the last sections, Xu proves Blanca right by becoming a demon. Xu’s sacrifice was not in vain: to save him, Blanca sacrifices herself by giving up meditation to meet Xu’s reincarnation in Hangzhou.

WS is thus built as a metanoia, being Blanca an evil character (snake-demon) who chooses romantic love over her species and her own sake.

### 3.2.3. Intertextuality

*Baishhe zhuan* (The Story of the White snake) is one of the four most popular love stories in Chinese folk culture (*sida minjian aiqing chuanshuo* 四大民间爱情传说).<sup>26</sup> As with the great majority of popular

---

<sup>26</sup> The other three being “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl” (Niulang zhinü 牛郎织女), “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai” (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯与祝英台), and Meng Jiangnu weeps the Great Wall (Meng Jiang nü ku Changcheng 孟姜女哭长城).

"matters," it has a long and intertextually complex history,<sup>27</sup> which will be reduced here to include only the most influential texts and those most closely related to the animated movie discussed in this contribution.

The earliest known written version of the legend was published in 1624 by Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 (1574-1646) in his "Stories to Caution the World" (*Jingshe tongyan* 警世通言) with the title "Madam White is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Tower" (Bainiang yongzhen Leifeng ta 白娘子永镇雷峰塔). Even though stories of a shape-shifting female snake-demon had already been recorded by that time, Feng Menglong presented an original depiction of the white snake as a "sincere and straightforward" character (Liu 2021), who did not (want to) kill the male lead, loving him instead (Feng *et al.* 2005: 499). This oeuvre represented an important step in the white snake's discursive transformation from snake-demon (*she* 蛇, *yaoguai* 妖怪) to Madam (*niang* 娘). Feng's Madam White is a woman with a strong sense of independence and self-respect, who is able to fight for her love and freedom, even though she is doomed to fail because, at the end of the day, she is still a demon in a Ming dynasty literary text.<sup>28</sup>

The themes of predestined love and the birth of the couple's child can be found in a parallel, "theatrical thread"<sup>29</sup> (Varriano 2014: 821-822), modernized by Tian Han 田汉 (1898-1968) in the XX century.<sup>30</sup> The theatrical versions perfect the literary trope Madam Bai 白娘 in opposition to Snake Bai 白蛇: she is a good and devoted wife to Xu Xuan 许宣 who, instigated by the Buddhist Monk, tricks her into revealing her true nature only to be scared to death by Baishe's demonic countenance. She saves him, gives birth to his child but still ends up being trapped under the Leifeng pagoda (*Leifeng ta* 雷峰塔)<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For a comprehensive view on the story and its global adaptation see Liang (2021).

<sup>28</sup> In Feng Menglong's version, Madam Bai ends up being exorcised by a Buddhist monk and imprisoned under a pagoda. Feng could not depart from the standard *huaben* 话本 (vernacular short story) narrative: "the demon stories normally tell how a young man encounters an animal spirit or a ghost in the guise of a young girl, makes love to her, discovers his danger, and calls an exorcist to subjugate her" (Wu 2001: 597-598).

<sup>29</sup> The Qing theatrical versions (i.e. the *juben* 剧本) are generally linked to a manuscript by the playwright Fang Chengpei 方成培 (1713–1808) titled *The Leifeng Pagoda*. Based on previous *juben*, Fang's work shows a series of new elements that would become canonical in the re-telling of the story, such as the meeting at the bridge, also found at the end of WS as a explicit intertextual reference (Liu 2021).

<sup>30</sup> According to Idema, this work is particularly influential because many modern texts this theatrical adaptation of from the late 1940s and early 1950s as their basis (2012: xxiv-xxv).

<sup>31</sup> Madam Bai's imprisonment is followed by a narratological bifurcation: in the "traditional" interpretation their son, Xu Mengjiao 许梦蛟, saves her; while in the "modern" interpretation (i.e. Tian Han's), she is saved by her friend, the Green snake (Idema 2012: xxv).

Among the many cinematic adaptations, *WS* represents the first Chinese feature-length animation, after the release of the Japanese cel animation in 1958. While the Japanese text adds a new, happier ending to the “theatrical thread”, *WS* creates new possibilities by building on the origins (*yuanqi* 缘起) of the love story (Wang 2018). This adaptation is conceived as a “prequel” that explains why Bai and Xian became pre-destined soulmates (*qianshi yuanfen* 前世姻缘), i.e. by fighting evil forces together.



Fig. 2. *WS*, Official poster. Notably, the two protagonists are portrayed while looking at each other (copyright: Creative commons)

*WS* focuses on the three main positive characters: one male (Xu Xuan), and two, more powerful, females (Blanca and Verta).

Xu Xuan’s personality and features show major intertextual changes. Yuan, who draws from the lexicon related to ACG culture,<sup>32</sup> describes him as follows: Xu “became a lively teenager” (*huopo shaonian* 活泼少年) who lives freely in the mountains; kind-hearted, brave but also naughty and cute (*tiaopi keai* 调皮可爱)” (2019). Xu is not portrayed as a weak scholar, but as a lively, brave, naughty and “cute,”

---

<sup>32</sup> ACG stands for Anime, Comics and Games. ACG culture comprises the production/dissemination/reception of these products. For a short introduction to the phenomenon see Bell (2016).

teenager, shows a tuning on the tastes of contemporary society, from an aesthetic and a discursive standpoint.<sup>33</sup>

Blanca is rendered as a positive character, her naiveté conveyed by the aesthetics of “cuteness” (big head and eyes, small nose), while also echoing classical representations of female beauties’ elegance. Compared to other contemporary visual renditions, such as in the Korean and Chinese *webtoons*, she represents a mediation between a child with exaggerated features and a mature and sexy woman.<sup>34</sup> Blanca’s looks are more delicate and sweet than Verta’s, and her contention more demure. Verta is in fact depicted as a sexier, more ambiguous character through graphic choices that span from facial features (smaller, horizontally-cut eyes, thinner and raised eyebrows) to movements (her body language is very similar to a snake’s). However, naming her Little Qing helps the viewer empathizing with the character.

As is the case with many other Chinese versions of the story, this movie does not relinquish the sexual allure of its female characters and includes one (censored) nude scene and a (censored) sex scene.

#### 3.2.4. Visual and multimodal elements

Because the movie is set in ancient times, hairdoes, clothes, buildings and tools are rendered in conformity with the relevant archeological and philological information of the era. A frame showing a long shot of the Leifeng pagoda is repeatedly used, to visually sustain the connection with the hypotexts. Calligraphy, especially in the form of seal script, and *shanshui* (山水) panoramas slid into as well, as clear references to traditional arts. While the original stories are equally rooted in Buddhist religion and Daoist folklore, *WS* displays a greater number of references to Daoist symbolism/symbology, since *daojiao* (道教, Daoist religion) is linked to *mofa* (魔法, sorcery).<sup>35</sup> This

---

<sup>33</sup> For a dissertation on the impact of “cuteness” on transnational aesthetics, see Pellitteri (2018). For the affects of cuteness, see Dale *et al.* (2017).

<sup>34</sup> A “cute” rendition of the white snake as Lady White can be found in the Korean webtoon (web cartoon) by Joo Ho Min and Cheng Hui (2017). Here, the demon is a Japanese inspired childlike character, half human, half snake. The webtoon was redrawn by Mr. Tomato 番茄君 and published as a Chinese webcomic (Yiwen zhi Bingtang hulu) on Dongman manhua 咚漫漫画 in 2019. As pointed out by Liang, although the hairstyle of this Chinese “reincarnation” of Bai niang is “still somewhat reminiscent of the Japanese-inspired Korean webtoon, she has been transformed from a cute girl with disproportionately large head to a charming woman” (2021: 246).

<sup>35</sup> I refer to Yijing’s 已经 exagrams, yin/yang symbols, and such notions as vital energy and cultivation, which are crucial narratological elements. For a definition and a short historical account of Daoist religion see Pregadio (2020). Buddhist iconography is present too, e.g. in part five they hide in a Buddhist temple, crowded with statues from the Buddhist pantheon.

reveals a lesser interest in religion, and a greater interest in exploiting the renewed passion for popular daoist aesthetics displayed in contemporary (and especially ACG) culture.

From an animation-as-narration standpoint, despite the narrative coherence of the main theme, the passage between the parts and the changes of settings are not smooth, as there are black intersections, most probably due to a lack of skills. This scattered mode influences the viewers' perception of continuity.

As for other visual elements, there are two cel animation inserts: the first one (animated lanterns and shadow play effects) enhances the visual appeal of the fox-demon magic shop by drawing on traditional material culture; the second (2D animated characters in the final credit frames) creates a comical effect. Additionally, in the first scenes the use of CGI ink-painting allows to visually recreate an additional narrative layer to portray Blanca's unstable consciousness by employing technically enhanced traditional tools.

Tactility is low and close-ups are avoided. Notably, there are two close-ups of Blanca at the beginning and in the end of the movie, which aim at establishing and consolidating the emotional bonding with the viewer. As for other multimodal elements, the only song performed by intradiegetic characters<sup>36</sup> is aimed at highlighting the growth of Xu and Bai's connection and framing it as love. However, the soundtrack is integrated with the sequence in a way that creates a sense of detachment: we hear their voices, but they are not in sync with the animation.

#### 4. Comparison

OtM and WS are CGI animations that adapt mythological material. Both the texts display the interpolation of Chinese cultural symbols that (should) work metonymically and result in an exaltation of ancient and modern China.

OtM updates the myth by setting it in a globally attractive scenario (Lunaria) that chooses East-Asian idol culture over traditional aesthetics. Modern China is celebrated by the character of Feifei, whose personality encompasses the dreams (and obstacles) of the *xin shidai*, and by accurately selected visual elements, according to a more refined version of the “Chinese elements strategy.”

But the myth is included following a well-established type of plot, the Reforming fantasy cartoon. Thus, the movie is not so much a hypertext of Chinese mythological material as it is a Hollywood movie that *fantasizes* about Chinese mythology. OtM global audience most probably does not know about the

---

<sup>36</sup> The song's title is “No need to ask” (Hexuwen 何须问).



legend, hence the necessity of “containing” it, as a section of a standard morphology: by framing it in a contemporary context, the movie shows that past legends, if read correctly, can work in the present by contributing to the formation of strong characters.

WS clearly poses itself in another (East-Asian) tradition, more familiar to Sinophone audience, it appeals to the audience’s existing set of medially and culturally specific conventions.

WS should be located within the whole history of national animated cinema, which exhibits a strong tradition of myth and/or legend based texts. The choice of selecting a traditional (love) story and its ancient past setting as the main reference, the “scattered” animation and its arranging of comical, tragic, and sexually-charged scenes into a same sequence, clearly respond to and pattern after Chinese folk literature and traditional narrative.

Furthermore, circular time, meditation and reincarnation, as well as the porous relationship between demons, animals and humans are linked to East Asian tradition especially through the notion of Dharma, which “binds human beings to each other and to the universe” (Shani and Navnita 2022: 844). The others “include not only living human beings, but also ancestors, gods, plants, animals, earth, sky, and so on. The concept is wide enough to include all realms” (Shani and Navnita 2022: 844).<sup>37</sup> These elements do not emerge in OtM, where the “magic realm” is confined over... the moon, past should be left behind and people will not come back, coherently with a Judeo-Christian idea of time.

Both the movies modernize mythological characters but while Chang’e is only instrumental for the protagonist’s growth, Blanca is at the narrative core. Besides, with WS, filmmakers “update” the characters and create the basis for an IP project: this “prequel” conforms to guochan standards.

As for its relationship with foreign models, WS offers a version of Japanese metanoia based on the theatrical/performative tradition of the legend. The movie preserves metanoia fundamentally “serious” nature, in contrast with “Hollywood films [that] play their comedy as their primary function and main attraction for the audience” (Leskoski 2020: 88). However, the revolutionary trajectory of the character’s arc is mitigated by aesthetic qualities that metonymically refer to Blanca’s (and Chinese) moral stance: she is portrayed and narrated as a “good” demon since the beginning (as it is in the heart of the audience). Her “moral” conversion is, actually, an awakening to love.

While exhibiting the recent technical improvements of “national animation”, WS doesn’t follow the rules of mainstream international animation, in terms of musical inserts or intertextual references, and the use of other animation techniques to mimic shadow play and ink-painting is obviously

---

<sup>37</sup> The inclusion of the “oriental romantic color” (*Dongfang langman seci* 东方浪漫色彩) given by this coexistence is explicitly suggested by Chinese critics (Wang 2024: 183).

culturally charged. Conversely, OtM displays more narrative fluidity and an expert use of international animation features such as 2D inserts and tactility to modulate the tone and involve the viewer. Besides, it refers to Hollywood formats/traditions through more frequent and consistently integrated “musical scenes.”

## 5. Conclusions

The analyses and the comparison showed that Sino-America animated coproductions can reveal diverse, even contradictory, discursive intra- and intertextual dynamics.

WS clearly responds to national(ist) call to action to reinvigorate national animated cinema by adjusting characters on the modern era *within* tradition, looking for the “essence” mentioned by Chinese national discourse on mythological animation, thus rebuilding folklore. It does so by working intertextually, at the expenses of global attractive power, since it mainly talks to Sinophone and the Sinosphere, not to “the West”.

Conversely, OtM brings tradition into modernity while fantasizing about it. It poses itself as a transnational animation that speaks to a Hollywood-accustomed audience. Its mission is illustrating Chinese culture, telling a “Chinese story” through myth-picking, mostly aiming to connect modern China to the world by containing its fantasy, following the general path marked by the history of Sino-America coproduction.

These contradictory textual drives, explained by the institutional context of production, reveal more about how myth and legend still represent a powerful meaning-making process that shapes national narratives.

## References

- Amidi, Amid. 2018. “Oriental Dreamworks Relaunches as 100% Chinese-Owned Pearl Studio.” *Cartoonbrew*, Feb 2 <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/business/oriental-dreamworks-relaunches-100-chinese-owned-pearl-studio-156372.html>
- Baklanov, Igor S., Olga Baklanova, Alexey M. Erokhin, Natalia N. Ponarina and Goarik A. Akopyan (2018). “Myth as a Means of Ordering and Organizing Social Reality.” *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 7/2: 41-47.
- Bell, Edward. 2016. “The rise of ACGN culture.” *WARC*, June 22 <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/opinion/the-rise-of-acgn-culture/en-gb/2301>

- Bird, S. Elizabeth. 2006. "Cultural Studies as Confluence: The Convergence of Folklore and Media Studies." In: *Pop-ular Culture Theory and Methodology*, edited by Harold E. Hinds, 344-356. Madison, WI: Bowling University of Wisconsin Press.
- Brzeski, Patrick. 2017. "Warner Bros. Launches New Beijing Office." *The Hollywood Reporter*. March, 22 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/warner-bros-launches-new-beijing-office-987874/>
- Brzeski, Patrick. 2018. "China's CMC Takes Full Ownership of NBC Universal's Oriental DreamWorks." *The Hollywood Reporter*, February, 1 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/chinas-cmc-capital-partners-takes-full-ownership-nbcuniversals-oriental-dreamworks-1081186/>
- Chen Ying 沈莹. 2016. "Xin shiqi Haolaiwu dianying ye de zhongguo celüe 新时期好莱坞电影业的中国策略 [Chinese strategy for Hollywood cinema in the New Era]." *Shijie dianying* 世界电影 3: 173-9.
- Dale, Joshua Paul, Goggin Joyce, Leyda Julia, McIntyre Anthony P., and Negra Diane, eds. 2017. *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dégh, Linda. 1994. *American Folklore and the Mass Media*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Dong, Xiaoli. 2020. "National Culture - The Soul of Chinese Animation." In: *Transactions on Edutainment XVI*, edited by Zhigeng Pan *et al.*, 223-230. Berlin - Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Du, Daisy Yan. 2019. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s-1970s*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Frater, Patrick. 2015. "China Media Capital, Warner Bros. Seal Flagship Production Pact." *Variety*, Sep 20 <https://variety.com/2015/film/asia/china-media-capital-warner-bros-seal-flagship-production-pact-1201597886/>
- Feng, Jiayun. 2021, "The history of Chinese animation, from groundbreaking 'Havoc in Heaven' to crappy-looking 'Kung Fu Mulan.'" *SupChina*, June 2 <https://supchina.com/2021/06/02/the-history-of-chinese-animation-from-groundbreaking-havoc-in-heaven-to-crappy-looking-kung-fu-mulan/>
- Feng Menglong (auth), Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (trans.). 2005. "Madam White is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Tower." In: *Stories to Caution the World, a Ming Dynasty collection*, vol. 2, edited by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 474-505. Seattle, WA - London: University of Washington Press.
- He Xiaofan 何小凡. 2021. "Dui guochan donghua dianyingjuben chuangzuoode bijiao fenxi yanjiu— yi "Dashengguilai" "Xiaomenshen" wei li 对国产动画电影剧本创作的比较分析研究——以《大圣归来》《小门神》为例 [Comparative analysis of Chinese national animation scripts – *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Little Door Gods* as case studies]." *Mudan* 牡丹/*Peony* 16: 134-136.

- Idema, Wilt. 2012. “Old Tales for New Times: Some Comments on the Cultural Translation of China's Four Great Folktales in the Twentieth Century 二十世纪中国四大民间故事的文化翻译.” *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 17/1: 25-46
- Jiang Tan. 2016. *Aspects of Animation: Steps to Learn Animated Cartoons*. New Delhi: Serials Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Kageyama, Yuri. 2006. “Cuteness, a Hot-Selling Commodity in Japan.” *WashingtonPost.com*, June 14. Available online:  
[Washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/14/ar2006061401122\\_pf.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2006/06/14/ar2006061401122_pf.html)
- Kokas, Aynne. 2017. *Hollywood. Made in China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Koven, Mikel J. 2003. “Folklore Studies and Popular Film and Television: A Necessary Critical Survey.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 116/460: 176-195.
- Kriss, Karen. 2016. “Tactility and the Changing Close-Up.” *Animation studies* 11, Dec 28  
<https://journal.animationstudies.org/karen-kriss-tactility-and-the-changing-close-up/>
- Lee, Francis L. F. 2006. “Cultural Discount and Cross-Culture Predictability: Examining the Box Office Performance of American Movies in Hong Kong.” *Journal of Media Economics* 19/4: 259-278
- Lefèvre, Pascal. 2010. “Researching comics on a global scale.” In: *Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale (series Global Manga Studies 1)*, edited by Jacqueline Berndt (8 ed.), 85-95. International Manga Research Center, Kyoto Seika University.
- Lent, John and Xu, Ying. 2017. *Comics art in China*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. Ebook edition.
- Leskosky, Richard J. 1989. “The Reforming Fantasy: Recurrent Theme and Structure in American Studio Cartoons.” *The Velvet Light Trap* 24: 53-66.
- Leskosky, Richard J. 2020. “Metanoia in Anime: Rehabilitating Demons, Turning Foes into Allies.” In: *Animating the Spirited: Journeys and Transformations*, edited by Tze-yue G. Hu, Masao Yokota and Gyongyi Horvath, 81-96. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Li Zimai 李子麦. 2021. “Cong ‘Dasheng guilai’ dao ‘Jiang Ziya’ – Lun dangdai Zhongguodianting yingru 从《大圣归来》到《姜子牙》——论当代中国动画电影应如何讲好中国故事 [From *Monkey King: Hero is Back* to *Jiang Ziya* – How contemporary Chinese animated movies should tell Chinese stories.” *Mingri Fengshang* 明日风尚 14: 149-151.
- Liang Luo. 2021. *The Global White Snake*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lieberman David. 2013. “DreamWorks Animation to Produce First Netflix Original Series for Kids.” *Deadline*, Feb 12.  
<https://deadline.com/2013/02/dreamworks-animation-netflix-turbo-kids-original-series-428372/>
- Lin Gengfeng 林更风. 2021. “Lun donghua dianying ‘Dashengguilai’ zhongde yuansu 论动画电影《大圣归来》中的中国元素 [On the Chinese elements in the animated movie “*Monkey King: Hero is back*”].” *Zuojia tiandi* 作家天地 8: 9-10.

- Liu Jiexi 刘捷希. 2021. "Yaoting yu renxing, nieqing yu zhiqinh: baishe gushide yuanqi he yanbian 妖性与人性, 孽情与至情: 白蛇故事的缘起和演变 [Demons and Humans, evil and true love: origin and evolution of the White Snake story]." *The Paper*  
[https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_14099105](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_14099105)
- Macdonald, Sean. 2015. "Meishu pian as national style." In: *Animation in China. History, Aesthetics, Media*, edited by Sean Macdonald, 78–104. London: Routledge.
- McNeal, Robin. 2012. "Constructing Myth in Modern China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71/3: 679–704
- Pellitteri, Marco. 2018. "Kawaii Aesthetics from Japan to Europe: Theory of the Japanese "Cute" and Transcultural Adoption of Its Styles in Italian and French Comics Production and Commodified Culture Goods." *Arts* 7/24: 1–21.
- Pregadio, Fabrizio. 2020. "Religious Daoism." In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Retrieval at:  
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/daoism-religion/>>.
- Richeri, Giuseppe. 2016. "Global film market, regional problems." *Global Media and China* 1/4: 312–330.
- Shani, Giorgio, and Navnita Chadha Behera. 2022. "Provincialising International Relations through a Reading of Dharma." *Review of international studies* 48/5: 837–856.
- Shen Lin 申林, Li Jinman 李金蔓. 2024. "Zhongguo shenhua ticaidonghua dianying fazhan yu yanbian yanjiu 中国神话题材动画电影发展与演变研究" [Research on the development and change of animated movies based on Chinese mythology]. *Keji chuanbo 科技传播* 16/05: 73–76.
- Sun Wenqi 孙文起 and Chen Hong 陈洪. 2009. "Chang'e benyue gushi tanyuan 嫦娥奔月故事探源 [Research on the Story of Chang'e flying to the Moon]." *Xuzhou Normal University academic journal 徐州师范大学学报* 35/6: 25–29.
- Szczudlik, Justyna. 2018. "'Tell China's Stories Well': Implications for the Western Narrative." *PISM Policy Paper* 9/169. Retrieval at:  
[https://pism.pl/publications/Tell\\_Chinas\\_Stories\\_Well\\_Implications\\_for\\_the\\_Western\\_Narrative](https://pism.pl/publications/Tell_Chinas_Stories_Well_Implications_for_the_Western_Narrative)
- Tang Hai, Gong Xiaobin. 2021. "A Study of the Inherited Relations between Classical Mythology and the Making of Chinese Animation Films." *Advances in Applied Sociology* 11: 415–429.
- Varriano, Valeria. 2014. "La muta del serpente bianco." In: *Il liuto e i libri. Studi in onore di Mario Sabattini*, edited by Magda Abbiati and Federico Greselin, 879–895. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
- Wang Xiaoxu 王晓旭. 2018. Qianzhe Baisheyuanqide moshenghua shushi zhanlüe 浅析《白蛇缘起》的“陌生化”叙事策略 [The defamiliarizing narrative strategy of the 2018 White snake]." *Chuanboli yajiu 传播力研究* 2/36: 68.
- Wang Aiqing, Whyke Thomas William. 2024. "China from Ancient Zhiguai Tales to Contemporary Animation: A Study of Visual Rhetoric in 'Yao-Chinese Folktales' (2023)." *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal* 19/1: 58–75.

- Wang Xiaohui 王潇慧. 2024. “Jiyu zhongguo shushi fanshide shenhua donghua puxigoujian tanjiu 基于中国叙事范式的神话动画谱系构建探究” [Research on the Genealogy Construction of Mythological Animation Based on Chinese Narrative Paradigm]. *Jilin sheng jiaoyuxueyuan xuebao* 吉林省教育学院学报 40/03:182-186.
- Wang Zheyu, Zhou Chenhui. 2022. 中国动画电影海外市场及文化竞争力分析——以《白蛇：缘起》《白蛇 2：青蛇劫起》《新神榜：哪吒重生》为例 [Analysis of the Overseas Market and Cultural Competitiveness of Chinese Animation Films. Taking “White Snake: Origins,” “White Snake 2: Green Snake Robbery,” and “New God List: Nezha Rebirth” as Examples]. *Contemporary Animation* 3: 21-27.
- Whyke Thomas William, Brown Melissa Shani, Mugica Joaquin Lopez. 2021. “Contemporizing the national style in Chinese animation: The case of Nezha (2019).” *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal* 16/3: 157-174.
- Wu Sixue, Wang Wenting. 2020. “A Study on the reconstruction of cultural confidence in Chinese animation.” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research: Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Culture, Education and Economic Development of Modern Society (ECCSE 2020)* 416: 287-290.
- Wu, Yenna. 2001. “Vernacular stories”. In: *Columbia History of Chinese literature*, edited by Victor H. Mair, 595-619. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Xie Xuanjun 谢选骏 1986. *Shenhua yu minzu jingshen: jige wenhua quan de bijiao* 神话与民族精神 几个文化圈比较 [Myth and national essence: A comparison of several cultural groups]. Jinan: Shandong wenyi (cit. in McNeal 2012).
- Yang Liu 杨柳 and Zhang Zhen 张珍. 2017. “Zhongmei hezuo lunwen. Guanyu Zhongmei hezuo zhipoan 3.0 shidai jiangshu zhongguo gushide celüe lunwen 中美合作论文.关于中美合作制片 3.0 时代讲述中国故事的策略论文 [The Suggested Chinese-story-telling Strategies for Upgraded Sino-American Co-production].” *Dangdai dianying* 1: 66-69.
- Yi Ying 易颖. 2019. “Bentuhua tical yu guojihua xushi — ‘Baishe: Yuanqi’ dui zhong meihe paipian de qishi 本土化题材与国际化叙事—《白蛇：缘起》对中美合拍片的启示 [Localized themes and internationalized narratives: “White Snake: the Origins” as an inspiration for Sino-American co-productions].” *Sheng bing shijie* 声屏世界 4: 32-34.
- Zhao Yiming and Zheng Dongfang. 2023. “Traditional Chinese Mythology in Animation Art.” *Highlights in Art and Design* 3/3:61-63.
- Zhou Wenhui. 2020. *Chinese Independent Animation: Renegotiating Identity in Modern China*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Martina Caschera is Assistant Professor of Chinese Literature (University of Bergamo). She received her Ph.D. in Oriental and Southern Asia Studies from the University of Naples *L'Orientale* with a dissertation on the Republican pictorial *Shidai Manhua* (“Modern Sketch”). Her main research areas are Sinophone media studies with a focus on transmedia/transtextual phenomena. Among her latest publication: “Chinese Caricatures of European Fascism. The aggressive Other and the Colonized self” in *Caricatures en Extrême-Orient* (Paris: Hémisphères – Maisonneuve & Larose: 2024) and the monograph *Il fumetto cinese. Introduzione ai manhua e ai lianhuanhua* (“Chinese comics. An Introduction to *manhua* and *lianhuanhua*”) (Latina: Tunué: 2023).

Martina can be contacted at: [martina.caschera@unibg.it](mailto:martina.caschera@unibg.it)





## The revival of China time-honoured brands

### Following the paw prints of the “White Rabbit” (*Dabaitu* 大白兔)

Giovanna Puppini

This article fills an existing gap by examining the ongoing revival of China time-honoured brands (*laozihao*). It first offers a critical overview of the recent changes that happened in the perception of Chinese brands outside China and their current development inside China, by relating them to the country’s wider strategies of soft power and national branding. After providing an updated account of the governmental regulation concerning the revival of *laozihao*, the article focuses on the brand White Rabbit (*Dabaitu*) as a case study. Based on the theoretical framing that brands are cultural texts, it identifies the different historical phases of WR development and provides a critical analysis of the branding and promotional strategies that allowed it to thrive over the past few decades, in line with the official priority of shifting to “Created in China” and the increasing demand for *guochao*.

**Keywords:** Chinese brands, *laozihao*, White Rabbit, *Dabaitu*, nation branding, *guochao*, nostalgia, retro branding, revival.

#### 1. White Rabbit Creamy Candy: you never forget your first one

In China’s national bestseller *Brothers* by Yu Hua, a passage about two child protagonists—Song Gang and Baldly Li—reads as follows:

[t]he boys cried out in surprise. This was the first time they had tasted soft candy—chewy, cream-flavored candy. The wrapper had a picture of a big white bunny, and the name was White Rabbit ... The two kids placed the milk candy in their mouths, slowly licking, chewing, and swallowing their saliva, which was now sweetened with candy and tasted like cream. (Hua 2009: 50)

As the narrative unfolds, this intimate, hedonistic shared experience—and consumption—of the brand White Rabbit (*Dabaitu* 大白兔, WR)<sup>1</sup> turns out to be crucial: in that precise moment, the two children

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth pointing out that the literal English translation of *Dabaitu* is actually “Big White Rabbit;” nonetheless, it was never used as the official international brand name.

officially become brothers, despite being born to different parents, having opposite characters as well as distinct lives ahead of them in a fast-changing China. Moreover, as the story continues, later on that night,

... the children lay in bed cradling their White Rabbit wrappers, sniffing the remaining traces of creamy sweetness and thinking about how they would encounter more White Rabbits in their dreams (Hua 2009: 51).

The novel *Brothers* sets off in China before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976, CR), at a time when conspicuous consumption was uncommon—to use a euphemism—and only a few national brands and rationed products were available. During the ravages of the so-called “ten years of chaos,” advertising and branding were associated with Western capitalism and considered evil, thus they gradually became rare (Puppini 2020). Nonetheless, some branded products—such as *Xionghao* 熊猫 (Panda) radios and *Feige* 飞鸽 (Flying Pigeon) bicycles—managed to survive and even became sought after goods (Fan 2006). The same destiny befell White Rabbit Creamy Candy (*Dabaitu naitang* 大白兔奶糖, WRCC), which, since its origin in 1959, has become a household name, as it accompanied the growth and brought alive the childhood memories of Chinese generations born in the post-1960s decades.

After more than half a century, in 2019, the same WR that Song Gang and Baldly Li met in their dreams made a grand reappearance on giant candy packages, vintage milk bottles and tin boxes, as well as rabbit- and candy-shaped soft pillows, crowding the shop windows of Shanghai First Foodhall in Nanjing Donglu, the busiest shopping street in the city. To celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its WR brand, the Shanghai-based state company Guan Sheng Yuan Food Group (*Guan Sheng Yuan shipin youxian gongsi* 冠生园食品有限公司, GSYFG) launched its Cartoon Rabbit Tin Boxes, which were available in different colours and candy flavours. The window displays caught the eyes of the floating crowds of passers-by: they sometimes happened to be family members of three different generations of Chinese, who were probably sharing their brand-related stories and memories (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Shanghai First Foodhall window displaying WR products (Nanjing Donglu, Shanghai, June 2019). Photo by the author.

The aforementioned brand extension is just one example of the different marketing tactics recently employed by GSYFG to revitalise its former mono-product brand strategy, and to attract a new segment of consumers amid the ever-fierce market competition of contemporary China. Considering that, all around the world, even the most iconic brands, sooner or later, struggle with their own decline, a set of questions naturally arises: what is the brand history of WR? How was its development influenced by the political, economic and sociocultural context? What branding and promotional strategies enabled WR to survive over the past few decades and become the protagonist of a revival in recent years?

This article intends to follow the journey of the brand WR, from its origins to the present day, as an illustrative example of the prominent role occupied by Chinese brands in the national cultural landscape. To date, only a few English-language academic contributions have investigated China's efforts to build its own national brands, often with a focus on their global ambitions (Fan 2006; Wu, Borgerson and Schroeder 2013), rather than their development at home (Li 2008; Jin, Shao, Griffin and Ross 2018). A new stream of English-language literature is flourishing around the recent revival of the so-called "China time-honoured brands" (*Zhonghua laozihao* 中华老字号, CTHBs or THBs), which mainly consists of contributions from a management and marketing perspective (Forêt and Mazzalovo 2014; Balmer and Chen 2015; Wu and Lin 2018), with just a few exceptions taking into account the cultural dimension of the phenomenon (Schroeder, Borgerson and Wu 2015; Dubois 2021).

In addressing this gap, this article aims to provide some comprehensive, original and updated insights into what is happening in China's brand world by adopting WR as a case study. It first offers a critical overview of the recent changes that happened in the perception of Chinese national brands *outside* China, followed by an investigation of their current development *inside* China, and explains the crucial link between soft power, national branding and the rise of national brands. It then focuses on the ongoing process of revival of CTHBs and provides an updated account of the relevant governmental

regulation. Based on the theoretical framing that brands are cultural texts, the article then proceeds with a critical history and analysis of WR and some of its promotional strategies: the aim is to provide an in-depth reading that takes into account the cultural, historical and sociopolitical dimensions of its brand essence, which have played a crucial role in the different phases of birth, growth and revival.

## 2. Copycats or piranhas? The paradox surrounding Chinese brands' perception outside China

The first time Chinese brands managed to gain significant international recognition was related to the “going-out strategy,” a policy which was launched by the Chinese government in the 1990s to encourage domestic companies to go global and become international. With China gaining access to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on 11 December 2001, this priority became even more urgent: between 1992–2000, the State Council identified 120 state-owned industry groups to support their overseas expansion. These companies could count on a wide variety of financial subsidies, from domestic tax breaks to low-interest funding from banks (Shambaugh 2013).

Such generous support from the Chinese government has to be understood as a conscious effort to erase the old stereotype of the label “Made in China”—which traditionally stigmatised the country as the factory of the world, producing cheap and low-quality goods—and an acknowledgement that it kept undermining China’s national image, in general, and domestic brands, more specifically (Fan 2016).

As a matter of fact, before the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the perception of Chinese national brands outside China was characterised by an underlying paradox. On the one hand, China’s brandscape was seen as inhabited by mere copycats, as can be evinced in the following passage by the expert in country branding, Simon Anholt:

I have in front of me a bronze and black torch battery which looks exactly like a Duracell, but on closer inspection [it] is called “Guanglihua.” Where the Duracell battery says “EXTRA HEAVY DUTY,” this one says “EXERY NEAVY DUTY” (an easy enough mistake to make when you’re trying to copy words in an unfamiliar alphabet); and most amusingly, the useful little chemical strip which, on the Duracell, tells you whether the battery has any charge left in [it], is simply printed as a flat image onto the side of the Guanglihua battery, and serves no purpose whatsoever. (Anholt 2005: 32)

This view perpetuates the old “Made in China” stereotype and its link to the act of counterfeiting that violates the economic order of the free market, thus resulting in being detrimental to the country’s national image.

On the other hand, but interestingly in the same year, the evolution of Chinese brands was described in drastically different tones by Tom Doctoroff, the former CEO of J. Walter Thompson Asia Pacific:

[t]oday, they [Chinese national brands] are an increasingly high-power threat, one that multinational competitors ignore at their peril... [t]actically ruthless, they are a school of piranhas smelling blood in the water and instinctively detecting weakness in the primordial soup that is China's brand universe. They will chew the flesh off of MNC players trying to survive off quick, shallow liaisons with (increasingly savvy) consumers. Less than a decade ago, local "trademarks" were laughably inferior, fodder for self-denigrating (yet nationalistic) Chinese patriots. Yet, as we pass the midpoint of the twenty-first century's first decade, Shenzhen-based TLC is (painfully) digesting its recent Thompson television acquisition and Lenovo has—in one breathless, bold stroke—purchased IBM's PC division... No one is snickering now. (Doctoroff 2005: 161)

The powerful metaphor of threatening "piranhas" refers to the practice of mergers and acquisitions (M&As), through which Chinese companies acquire foreign companies and brands as a form of overseas direct investment (ODI). A representative example is Lenovo's purchase of IBM's PC division for \$1.75 billion in 2004 (Fan 2006).

Still in 2005, the American businesswoman Shelly Lazarus—former Chairman and CEO of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide—publicly stated that: "Lenovo and Haier are not brands and so far China has no brands in any real sense"; she then reiterated and clarified: "I never said that Haier and Lenovo are not brands. They are brands. They are brands with huge potential. They are just not yet as fully developed as brands can be" (Yong 2005). Yet, this pessimistic view was soon to change.

The Beijing 2008 Olympics constituted an unmissable opportunity for China to promote both its country brand and its national brands. Consequently, a number of publicity campaigns were broadcast internationally, in order to promote the country's evolution into a country synonymous with "Created in China," capable of developing its own cultural creative industries, as well as IPR-eligible brands (Keane 2007).

In 2009, the Ministry of Commerce (henceforth MOC) and four Chambers of Commerce sponsored the publicity ad "Made in China, Made with the World,"<sup>2</sup> which also ran on Cable News Network (CNN). It portrayed a variety of products whose labels were "Made in China," but also included the names of other countries, with which China collaborated: the aim was to establish China's profile as a reliable business partner rather than a mere manufacturer (Barr 2012). In 2011, before former President Hu Jintao's state visit to the United States, the Chinese government launched an external publicity

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmbTseEJpWI>

campaign entitled “Experience China.” The ad “People,”<sup>3</sup> which was aired in New York’s Times Square, depicted a number of Chinese personalities excelling in different fields, and highlighted the contribution of the country on a global level (Li 2020).

These examples of national branding, intended as the “the quintessential modern exemplar of soft power” (Anholt 2005: 13), are inextricably intertwined with the promotion of national product brands, which are crucial vectors of a country’s culture, image and reputation. The Chinese authorities were—and still are—well aware that the growth of national brands would play a crucial role in boosting the country’s soft power, both inward- and outward-looking (Barr 2011). Not surprisingly, in 2011, large corporations such as Haier (*Hai'er* 海尔), Wuliangye (*Wuliangye* 五粮液) and Gree (*Geli* 格力) also advertised their products in Times Square: this news was reported with great fanfare back home, as it satisfied the national fantasy of Chinese companies and brands conquering the world (Li 2020).

Despite the traditional Western scepticism about the power of Chinese brands, the latest editions of the most renowned global rankings are witnessing a significant increase in their number. For example, in 2010, the renowned *BrandZ Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands* (which was originally drafted by Millward Brown) included only 5 Chinese brands, whilst the 2024 edition featured 11.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, starting in 2011, the world’s leading marketing data, insight and consultancy company Kantar has been issuing its *Most Valuable Chinese Brands*;<sup>5</sup> in 2019, 2020, and 2021 it has also been publishing its *BrandZ Chinese Global Brand Builders*.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Interbrand—another leading global brand consultancy—has been issuing its *Best China Brands*, so far in 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023.<sup>7</sup> All these are important signs that China’s evolving brandscape is becoming increasingly powerful and, thus, worth monitoring.

### 3. Sometimes they come back: the revival of China time-honoured brands

Long gone are the days when China was thought of as being devoid of its own domestic brands. For hardcore sceptics, a simple walk around the most touristic areas in China’s metropolises, such as Nanluguxiang in Beijing and Tianzifang in Shanghai, will be revealing. The former unbranded shops with kitsch souvenirs have been replaced by the official stores of CTHBs; in addition to WR, one can

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tubAilANUJU>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kantar.com/campaigns/brandz/global>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kantar.com/campaigns/brandz/china>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kantar.com/campaigns/brandz/special-reports>

<sup>7</sup> <https://interbrand.com/newsroom/interbrand-releases-best-china-brands-2023/>

find brands such as *Tongshenghe* 同升和 (cloth shoes), *Daoxiangcun* 稻香村 (bakeries), *Xiefuchun* 谢馥春 (cosmetics) and *Huili* 回力 (also known as Warrior, sneakers), to name but a few. One of Huili's in-store adverts audaciously appropriated the once denigratory "Made in China" label and, by juxtaposing it with the image of a cool young Chinese girl, gave it positive connotations (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Huili shop display (Tianzifang, Shanghai, June 2019). Photo by the author.

The aim of similar promotional materials is to tackle the negative country-of-origin effect and establish a good reputation for China-made brands and products, by stimulating domestic consumption in a sort of revival of the wave of nationalist consumption that gained momentum in the 1920s and '30s (Gerth 2003). Needless to say, the reappearance of the aforementioned CTHBs did not happen overnight and, most importantly, was not spontaneous—it was, rather, the result of a policy decision.

Despite China having a very long history of brands (Ma 2007; Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010), it was only after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 that the MOC began to rank the best national brands, but this practice was suspended around 1966 due to the start of the CR (Forêt and Mazzalovo 2014). After China's economic reforms in 1979 and throughout the 1990s, the domestic market was dominated by state-owned trademarks, which lost ground to foreign brands: the latter, for decades, symbolised high-quality products and a middle-class lifestyle that Chinese people aspired to, whilst domestic goods were left with the lower end of the market (Dong and Tian 2010). According to the results of some reviews conducted in the early 1990s, the old national businesses and brands were in crisis, mainly due to their lack of competitiveness and innovation compared to multinational enterprises (Dubois 2021).

In the early 2000s, whilst the world was still confused over competing views and speculation on China’s next brand move, a lively national debate on how to develop domestic brands was raging across the country. Alongside the official discourse on creating and promoting new Chinese brands, the government also endorsed another project: its “Plan for the Revival of THBs” (*zhenxing laozihao gongcheng* 振兴老字号工程), which aimed to save the country’s historical brands and commercial traditions.

It was in 2006 that the MOC issued the first guidelines on the award of *Zhonghua laozihao* status. The “Notice Implementing ‘The Plan for the Revival of THBs’” established the eligibility criteria for awarding the label, provided the details of the application process, and set the goal to establish 1,000 CTHBs within three years. It specified that the *laozihao* status could be awarded to selected businesses that:

1. own or have the intellectual rights of the trademark;
2. were founded in 1956 or before;
3. sell products or employ skills that are unique and have been handed down over time;
4. carry on the tradition of China’s excellent business culture;
5. possess a distinctive Chinese and local flavour, as well as specific historical and cultural values;
6. enjoy a wide and good reputation;
7. are held by mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao or Taiwan capital stock, and are capable of long-term growth (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006a).

In October of that year, the “Notice of the MOC and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage on Strengthening the Protection of THBs’ Cultural Heritage” was issued to guarantee the sustainable and healthy development of CTHBs and the cultural heritage they embody (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006b). In November, the MOC released the first list of companies and brands that were awarded *laozihao* status – totalling 430 (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006c). One year later, it issued its official CTHBs logo (see Fig. 3), which could be used by qualifying businesses on their packaging, instructions and advertising for their products, as well as a certificate and a plaque (Mofcom.gov.cn 2007).



Figure 3. The official *Zhonghua laozihao* logo (Mofcom.gov.cn 2007)



In 2008, the MOC and 14 other departments jointly released their “Opinions on Protecting and Promoting the Development of THBs,” which extolled local authorities to include the promotion of *laozihao* in city planning (i.e., through dedicated commercial streets, like the ones mentioned above), protect their intellectual property (IP) and help them solve any financial credit issues (Mofcom.gov.cn 2008). In 2010 the MOC released its second list of companies and brands that were awarded *laozihao* status—totalling 345 (Mofcom.gov.cn 2010). A year later, it issued its “Notice on the Effective Implementation of the Protection and Promotion of CTHBs,” which listed the benefits of the Plan, such as: the building of corporate integrity systems, expansion of the domestic market, improvements to operations management etc. It also urged more control by setting up a hotline for complaints regarding IP infringements and encouraged the use of information management systems via a dedicated online platform (Mofcom.gov.cn 2011). In 2017, the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Innovative Development of THBs”—which were jointly issued by the MOC and 16 other departments—urged businesses to adapt to changing consumer demand and catch up with the opportunities provided by the so-called “Internet+” space (i.e. through e-commerce), as well as improve their market competitiveness (Mofcom.gov.cn 2017).

In 2022, the MOC and 8 other ministries and administrations jointly issued their “Opinions on How to Promote the Innovative Development of THBs,” which urged further enhancing the protection of *laozihao* and stimulating cross-border integration, as well as widening the online presence of CTHBs (i.e. through a digital museum). For the first time, explicit reference was made to the internationalisation process of CTHBs (Mofcom.gov.cn 2022).

By protecting old businesses, and helping to retain the best ones, the Plan appears to be “a process that also rewrote the narrative of China’s commercial history” (Dubois 2021: 49). The Plan also urges CTHBs to catch up with the innovation and competitiveness that are required to meet the increasing demand for *guochao* 国潮,<sup>8</sup> in line with other initiatives related to domestic brands in general. First and foremost, the official call made in 2014 by Xi Jinping to “push from Made in China to Created in China, from China speed to China quality, from Chinese products to Chinese brands,” which led to the creation of an annual China Brand Day shopping event celebrated on 10 May (CCTV.com 2020).

---

<sup>8</sup> The term *guochao*, literally “national tide” but usually translated as “China chic,” mainly refers to brands and consumer goods that exploit Chinese cultural elements and nationalism as key selling points.

#### 4. Case study: White Rabbit

The theoretical standpoint of this contribution is that culture is a vital resource for brands (Schroeder 2009; Eckhardt 2015). From a Cultural Studies perspective, “brands can be read as cultural texts which are culturally produced and consumed, and as symbolic articulators of production and consumption ... [b]rands are socially constructed texts which mediate meanings between and amongst consumers and producers” (O’Reilly 2005: 582). Moreover, a brand “garners an identity through its name, its association with cultural meaning, its dissemination through mass manufacturing and advertising campaigns, and other strategies designed to give it what can be called ‘cultural relevance’” (Bedbury and Fenichell 2002: 25). Like all other brands, WR has a fundamental essence that goes beyond its physicality and its relation to the products it identifies with, and it is activated by the promises and hopes that ensue from its purchase.

WR was purposively selected for a case study because it is an iconic CTHB and its brand history and development are representative of the changes that have happened in China’s brandscape in the last 60 years. Moreover, WR implemented most of the suggestions made by the governmental guidance illustrated in the previous section.

The second part of the article reconstructs WR’s brand history by breaking down the journey of WRCC into different developmental phases, in chronological order: birth, growth and revival. In each phase, the main branding and promotional strategies are examined against the political, economic and sociocultural context. The analysis draws upon cultural theory and semiotics, and aims to provide a critical reading of the brand and its different forms of “textuality,” such as logo, adverts, slogans, packaging etc.

##### 4.1. From Mickey Mouse to the sitting White Rabbit (1943–1978)

According to the official brand history provided in the GSYFC website, in 1943 the president of the now defunct Shanghai-based ABC Confectionery (*Aipixi tangguochan* 爱皮西糖果厂) decided to produce a Chinese version of British fudge. The result was the precursor of WRCC, which was called “ABC Mickey Mouse Roll,” as the packaging featured Walt Disney’s famous cartoon character. The sweet taste of the candy, combined with its low price, if compared to imported ones, guaranteed sales success (Gsygroup.com n.d.).

In 1956, following the nationalisation of private companies, ABC Confectionery became state-owned, and its original English-sounding name was substituted with the socialist-friendly *Aimin tangguochan* 爱民糖果厂 (literally: “the confectionery that loves the people;” Bo 1994). This example

of renaming is representative of a widespread trend in post-1949 and pre-1979 China: as advertising and branding were considered ideologically polluted by Western capitalism, some companies opted for more revolutionary names in order to better align with the political priorities of the time (Puppin 2014). Being an unequivocal symbol of American culture, Mickey Mouse was associated with “the adoration of things foreign” (*chongyang meiwai* 崇洋媚外),<sup>9</sup> thus it could no longer be used.

In 1959, a new brand name, logo and packaging appeared, and this is how WRCC was born. Its production was linked to the celebrations for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the People’s Republic: this milestone event marked the product’s first political and cultural connotations and endowed it with the status of *guomin naitang* 国民奶糖 (“national creamy candy;” Guo Li 2019, Gsygroup.com n.d.).

The brand logo consisted of a sitting rabbit with blue contours: it was portrayed side-on and looking to the left, with two stylised artist palettes (one black, one red) in the background. The name in English appeared above the rabbit (in red) and below it (in black), the latter followed by its version in Chinese characters. At the top, a geometrical shape contained the character *xi* 喜 (“happy event”, normally referring to weddings) repeated three times. Apart from this element, which later disappeared, the candy wrapping has remained the same to this day; the candy—white, cylindrical and with an edible rice wrapping paper—has also remained unchanged (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. An actual wrapper of WRCC. Photo by the author.

<sup>9</sup> This expression became popular towards the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), particularly during the Self-Strengthening Movement—a movement of radical reforms which spread in the second half of the 19th century in order to introduce Western methods and technology to China. *Chongyang meiwai* is still used today to scorn those Chinese who are overly interested in the West and often instigates cultural nationalism and antiforeign feelings.

The first slogan used to promote the product was *Qili Dabaitu naitang dengyu yibei niunai* 七粒大白兔奶糖等于一杯牛奶 (“Seven WRCCs equal a glass of milk”), which positioned the candies not only as sweet, but also as nutritious. This characteristic meant the product was in high demand: in the 1960s and ’70s, milk was rationed in China’s planned socialist economy, and people had to queue to buy WRCC as the quantity they could buy was limited (China.com.cn 2009). In those years, the candy was mostly given as wedding gift (newly married couples used to place a couple of them in their wedding sweets bags) and was also typically given to children during the Chinese New Year holiday. The experience of eating WRCC was so rare that it was not eaten immediately but, rather, kept in pockets (People.com.cn 2020).

For those Chinese generations who had their childhood in those decades, eating WRCC today can trigger feelings of nostalgia. The popular saying *Yiban shi yinwei kouwei, yiban shi yinwei jiyi* 一半是因为口味，一半是因为记忆 (“Half for taste, half for memory”) expresses how Chinese consumers developed both cognitive associations related to the candy’s sweetness, as well as emotional feelings such as childhood brand nostalgia. The latter is defined as “a positively valenced emotional attachment to a brand because of the brand’s association with fond memories of the individual’s non-recent lived past” (Shields and Johnson 2013: 4).

It is in this historical phase that WRCC took on thicker political connotations and was even referred to as a tool for “sugar diplomacy:” back in 1972, China’s then-Premier Zhou Enlai presented a bag of candy as a gift to visiting US President Richard Nixon. Later on, the candy was also given to Soviet leaders, Krusciov and Brežnev, thus gaining the status of a national gift, and it began to be exported abroad: these events proved to be a boost to national pride. In 1976, when previously state-owned companies were going through restructuring, the *Aimin* company was annexed to GSYFG, which was founded in 1915. The daily production of candy increased fourfold, from 1 to 4 tons (China.com.cn 2009).

According to the categorisation employed by Jones (2016), the aforementioned company itineraries, as well as historical and political events, fed into the iconisation of WRCC, a process in which the positive attributes of the candy became certified by the Chinese authorities and were intertwined with a variety of discourses related to the emergence of China as an economic and political power.

#### 4.2. IP wars and the milk scandal (1979-2011)

In 1979, the year of China's reform and opening up, WRCC received the first of a long list of prestigious national awards, such as the silver prize for a quality product and, in 1992, the label of well-known trademark (Peng 2021).

In 1986, the logo changed to that of a hopping rabbit, designed in a cartoon-style, with a mushroom in the background, which—with minor changes—is still in use today (Fig. 5). The candy wrapping remained unchanged.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 5. The latest version of the WR registered trademark (<https://sbj.cnipa.gov.cn/sbj/index.html>)

A print advert of the time used the unique selling proposition (USP) of nutritious value for the product, stating: *Naiwei nongyu, yingyang fengfu* 奶味浓郁 营养丰富 (“Fragrant milk flavour, rich in nutrition”). It depicted different types of packaging for the product and, in the background, a mother and her little girl holding a piece of candy (Fig. 6).

---

<sup>10</sup> The style of the new logo resembles the illustrations of a famous children's serial picture book titled *Cai Mogu* 采蘑菇 (“Gathering Mushrooms”), which was printed in 1978 and tells the story of four rabbits and a big mushroom.



Figure 6. Advert for WRCC in the 1980s ([https://www.sohu.com/a/156438002\\_119756](https://www.sohu.com/a/156438002_119756))

In 1985, production stopped due to an issue with the registration of the brand. In 1983, an entrepreneur from Guangzhou stole and registered the Mickey Mouse Roll brand, and then sold it to the Disney Company. This event was labelled a breach of IP and passed into history as a lesson paid for in blood. This prompted GSYFG to register its different brands and even the rice-paper wrapping. The brand was also registered abroad (Bo 1994). This is an important milestone event that illustrates China’s willingness and determination to protect its own IP rights, and acted as a model example that other domestic companies could and should learn from.

Originally, the WR brand was associated only with one product—WRCC. It was in 2002 that WR evolved from a mono-brand architecture to a dominant-secondary brand architecture: by adding two new candies—Plum Candy and Peanut Nougat—it extended its product range and introduced new choices to consumers (Gsygroup.com n.d.).

In November 2004, GSYFG made a winning bid in a CCTV prime-time advertising auction, which is considered to be China’s barometer of the country’s economy. In early 2005, a series of WRCC ads were placed in golden slots of *Xinwen lianbo* 新闻联播, *Jiaodian fangtan* 焦点访谈, and also of the historical drama TV series *Han Wu dadi* 汉武大帝. The latter became so popular in China that sales of WRCC subsequently plummeted (CCTV.com 2005).

A popular WR slogan in the 1990s was *Dabaitu naitang lili hao kouwei* 大白兔奶糖粒粒好口味 (“WRCC, each one tastes great”), as recited by the closing slogan of a TV ad of the time. Using 3D

animation technology, the ad showed some WRCC rabbits and a mushroom—the same as the new official logo—dancing together to a theme song clearly targeting children.<sup>11</sup>

In 2004, the WRCC product range became national products that didn't need inspection and were given the award of China Top Brand. When the Plan for the Revival of THBs was launched in 2006, GSYFG was listed in the first batch of *laozihao* (Mofcom.gov.cn 2006c).

Despite all this recognition, a big problem was waiting round the corner. In 2008, WRCC was directly involved in the 2008 Chinese milk scandal: a variety of dairy products were found to be tainted with melamine, which led many children to develop kidney stones. Exports stopped and, soon afterwards, sales were also suspended in China; they only resumed in 2009. This event is representative of a phase of stigmatisation: ironically, the same association with milk that was first used in the WRCC iconisation phase became the driving force behind its stigmatisation phase, making the product and the brand itself hover between a symbol of safety and one of danger (Jones 2016).

A few months after the scandal, GSYFG invited the famous actress Vicky Zhao (Zhao Wei 赵薇) to feature in its advertising campaigns: the aim was to help rebuild the WR brand image and reputation through the use of reliable testimonials, with the slogan *Kuaile fenxiang Dabaitu* 快乐分享大白兔 (“Let's happily share WR”), which became very popular (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Ad featuring Vicky Zhao (<https://www.photophoto.cn/sucai/02285873.html>)

After the melamine scandal, the WR journey proceeded smoothly with further rounds of recognition, among which was the awarding of the *laozihao* label in 2010 (Mofcom.gov.cn 2010). This official recognition can be interpreted as an additional form of certification, according to which the Chinese

<sup>11</sup> [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDIzNDYxMDA0NA==.html?spm=a2h0c.8166622.PhoneSokuUgc\\_6.dtitle](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDIzNDYxMDA0NA==.html?spm=a2h0c.8166622.PhoneSokuUgc_6.dtitle)

authorities acknowledge the candy’s quality and its status as a symbol of the country’s economic progress (Jones 2016).

#### 4.3. Retro branding, product line extension, cross-border marketing and a new segment of consumers (2012–2019)

In the increasing market competition of contemporary China, the survival of CTHBs depends on their ability to rejuvenate and adapt to the new environment, if they don’t want to succumb. The biggest challenge they must face is their ageing process: some products have lost their appeal to the older generation of loyal consumers, and they lack recognition among young consumers born after the 1990s.

The first step taken by WR to rejuvenate itself and become a trendy brand among the younger generation was product line extension, a strategy that introduces a new product within an existing category to satisfy new market segments. This is how, in November 2012, the Giant White Rabbit was born: this 16cm-long and 8cm-wide candy contained 200g of the classic WRCC and was immediately a sales hit. On that occasion, two new styles of packaging were launched: vintage tin boxes and milk bottles. Both of them made a clear reference to the original packaging of WR, and, thus, can be interpreted as representatives of “retro branding,” which is defined as “the revival or relaunch of a product or service brand from a prior historical period, which is usually but not always updated to contemporary standards of performance, functioning or taste” (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003: 20).

Interestingly, in 2013, two political events contributed to the renewal of the political connotations of WR: current President Xi Jinping paid a visit to the new factory of GSYFG, and, during his visit to Mongolia, he distributed the candy to local officials and children (Roxburgh 2018). In this way, the official status of WR as the national candy of the 1960s and ’70s was reinvigorated with additional, updated political connotations.

Following the government call for CTHBs to engage more with digital trends, WR invested massively in its social media presence: according to Mr Shen Jinfeng, WR Marketing Manager, the brand holds the ambition to become a web celebrity. Beyond its official WeChat account and Weibo account (which has 96,000 followers), it has two flagship stores: one on Taobao.com (98,988 followers) and one on JD.com (996,000 followers).<sup>12</sup>

In 2014, WR co-produced the idol drama *Hongse qing ganlan* 红色青橄榄, which tells the story of some senior high-school students and their campus life. The theme song, entitled *Ni shi wo de tang* 你

---

<sup>12</sup> As per 15 November 2022.



是我的糖 (“You are my candy”), was tailor-made to boost WRCC with a new appeal to the younger generation. The official MV alternates scenes depicting the singer—Kym (*Jin Sha* 金莎)—holding a Giant WR candy and dancing with a big WR puppet, with scenes of the two main protagonists from the drama.<sup>13</sup>

Cross-border marketing is another strategy employed by WR. In 2015, during Double Eleven or Singles Day—the biggest online shopping festival in China—WR collaborated with the French fashion brand *agnès b.* to launch a limited collection of gift boxes. The latter were available in two colours (light blue–milk flavour, and pink–red bean flavour) and featured the stylised contours of a rabbit and a little star (a classic element of the *agnès b.* brand). Their design, if compared to the former WR tin boxes, appears modern, minimalist and chic. These characteristics are reflected in print adverts, which had the slogan: *Shishang shi yizhong weidao b.happy* 时尚是一种味道 *b.happy* (“Fashion is a kind of flavour *b.happy*,” Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Print advert for the limited collection of tin boxes (<https://socialbeta.com/article/104808>)

Nonetheless, this first international collaboration soon attracted some criticism from Chinese Weibo users. Why? Because the price of WRCC increased ninefold. As revealed by consumers, nowadays the sweet taste of the candy is no longer a priority: instead, it is the desire for exclusivity that drives young Chinese buyers to spend more in order to secure a limited edition either to give as a gift or to “satisfy one’s ‘little girl’ heart” (Yi 2016).

In 2018, WR’s brand architecture evolved to include co-branding with Maxam (*Meijijiang* 美加净), another Shanghai-based CTHB established in 1962 and considered to be China’s No. 1 cosmetics brand. The new WRCC Lip Balm came in a candy-shaped box, and the first batch of 920 products sold out online

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.iqiyi.com/w\\_19rsd6dnzh.html](https://www.iqiyi.com/w_19rsd6dnzh.html)

in half a minute. An additional 10,000 sets sold out in three hours the next day, when sales opened (Marcus and Wong 2022). The fact that both companies are originally from Shanghai amplified the idea of authenticity and resonated well with local consumers.

In early 2019, to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of WRCC, a touring exhibition was scheduled to travel around China’s big cities. The first stop, which was signposted by a 7-metre-tall WR statue, was CapitaMall LuOne, in Shanghai. Visitors could find the updated range of WR derivative products, and enjoy an improved, immersive consumer experience thanks to a series of interactive activities, such as claw machines, augmented reality games and graffiti. For the occasion, a WR Milk Tea pop-up store (in collaboration with the Chinese brand Happy Lemon, *Kuaile ningmeng* 快乐柠檬) also opened: despite the price of a cup of milk tea skyrocketing from 20 *yuan* to 150 *yuan*, the product became so popular that people queued for up to five hours to get one and then post their experience on social media (Guo 2019). Apparently, this latest craze offered a golden opportunity to scalpers (who queued and then resold their cups for as much as 500 *yuan*!), but also to residents who, in the context of the US-China trade war, confessed that the reason behind their purchase was not the taste, but the possibility to help Chinese domestic brands (Ren 2019). Moreover, the choice of revamping the brand through a touring exhibition can be interpreted as an evolved form of “nationalist commodity spectacles” (Gerth 2003: 281), which in early modern China consisted of shows, exhibitions and adverts that aimed to promote a new kind of nationalist consumer culture. Needless to say, the context has changed, but some strategies adopted for the resemiotisation of WR are far from new—and nationalism has been proven to sell in China.

In 2019, WR collaborated with the Chinese brand Scent Library (*Qiwei tushuguan* 气味图书馆) to launch the Happy Childhood Fragrance Series, which included the following WRCC-inspired products: Eau de Toilette, Shower Gel, Body Lotion, Hand Cream and Car Freshener. With the slogan *Lai dian haiziqi* 来点孩子气 (“Let’s go childish”) this collaboration targeted Generation Z, those born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and re-vitalised their emotional association with WRCC through sensory branding. It was a success beyond expectations: within ten minutes, the series sold close to 150,000 units on Tmall, China’s e-commerce giant, which promoted the new products as part of its annual *guochao* plan (Jing Daily 2021; Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Online launch of the series *Lai dian haiziqi*

(<https://fashion.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/17/WS5d083e26a3108375f8f2b0fe.html>)

It is precisely around the sense of smell that lies the creative idea of the four ads of the audiovisual campaign, which was strategically launched prior to Children’s Day (1 June): each ad stars a big WR puppet and either a young female or male Chinese, who behaves in an overtly childish and playful way, while he/she is being drawn by the smell of the products. The style of the ads is fresh, cool and funny.<sup>14</sup>

The co-branding journey of WR continued, this time with the Ningbo-based young clothing brand Ledin (*Leding* 乐町): the Winter Collection 2019 employed the colours of the famous art-deco-inspired wrapper of WRCC and transposed them onto warm, soft fabrics.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of 2019, a brand new advertising campaign was launched: entitled *Kuaile, chaoxu xiangxiang* 快乐, 超乎想象 (“Happiness, beyond imagination”), it targeted Gen-Z by collaborating with the famous Chinese illustrator, TN (*Te Nong* 特浓). The ads portray a young girl who—just like a Chinese version of Alice in Wonderland—enters an imaginary world inhabited by some cute, cartoon-like WRCC figures. Thanks to the unique artistic style of TN, who uses Chinese elements, the ads capture the viewer in an immersive, dream-like experience filled with sweetness, both visually and aurally.

<sup>14</sup> <https://v.qq.com/x/page/u0878jk6dnz.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.suntchi.com/en/projects/128.html>



Figure 10. Print advert for the “Happiness, beyond imagination” campaign

(<https://www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZNDE00DUyNjA=.html>)

## 5. Conclusion

This article fills in an existing gap by contributing to a better, more in-depth understanding of China’s ever-changing brandscape by adopting WR as a case study. It first situates and explains the priority of developing strong Chinese brands as part of the country’s strategies of soft power and national branding, in line with the government call to evolve from “Made in China to Created in China.” It then focuses on the Plan for the revival of CTHBs by providing an updated account of the relevant governmental regulation. Following, this article carries out a critical analysis of the brand history of WR and, by examining a variety of promotional texts as well as the most recent marketing strategies, it explains how it managed to survive throughout the decades and became a web celebrity in today’s China. During the Maoist years, WRCC was considered a luxury product, it was consumed slowly and only on specific, festive occasions; it was also strictly linked both to the journey of GSYFG and to China’s political events. Today, its success in sales reflects the interest of young consumers in purchasing a China-made product that indulges in a variety of brand extension experiments, such as cross-border collaborations and co-branding, and evokes feelings of nostalgia through retro branding campaigns.

The success of WR was also supported by the dedicated government regulations illustrated in this article and the ongoing wave of *guochao*: its Chineseness becomes a reason to be proud and fuels a

revitalised nationalist consumer behaviour in an environment where domestic brands are gradually becoming Chinese consumers' top choice (Wang and Kidron 2020). Even in more recent years, WR has still been a big hit: in the summer of 2021, it opened its first flagship store in Shanghai. In 2022, it collaborated with the American fashion house Coach and featured in its new collection. Nonetheless, WR runs the risk of becoming just a fad, as customers' enthusiasm and passion might fade away. Will WR still feature in the dreams of Chinese generations for many years to come—just like that happened to Song Gang and Baldly Li? Only time will tell.

The success of WR also relies on the crucial role played by the Chinese diaspora, on the one hand, and by non-Chinese consumers, on the other. For example, in 2019 the US ice cream maker Wanderlust Creamery launched a WRCC ice cream that became a hit in Los Angeles over the Lunar New Year. Etsy, the global online marketplace for handmade, vintage and unique items, now sells a wide range of WR-inspired products, such as earrings, stickers, t-shirts etc. Although these aspects have not been addressed in this article, it would be fruitful for future research to investigate the role that WR is playing in creating a global market for Chinese brands for both Chinese and non-Chinese consumers overseas.

## References

- Anholt, Simon. 2005. *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World*. Oxford: Elsevier (revised edition).
- Balmer, John M. T. and Weifeng Chen. 2015. "Corporate Heritage Brands in China: Consumer Engagement with China's Most Celebrated Corporate Heritage Brand – Tong Ren Tang: 同仁堂." *Journal of Brand Management* 22/3: 194-210, doi: 10.1057/bm.2015.14.
- Barr, Michael. 2011. *Who's Afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power*. London: Zed Books.
- Barr, Michael. 2012. "Nation Branding as Nation Building: China's Image Campaign." *East Asia* 29: 81-94, doi: 10.1007/s12140-011-9159-7.
- Bedbury, Scott and Stephen Fenichell. 2002. *A New Brand World: Eight Principles for Achieving Brand Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York, NY: Viking Press.
- Bo Xiaobo 薄小波. 1994. "'Dabaitu' juexing ji" "大白兔"觉醒记 [The Awakening Diary of WR]. *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 [Wenhui Daily] 172, 16/12/1994.
- Brown, Stephen, Kozinets, Robert V. and John F. Sherry. 2003. "Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning." *Journal of Marketing* 67/3: 19-33, doi: 10.1509/jmkg.67.3.19.18657.
- CCTV.com. 2005. "Dabaitu: xiangpiao quanguo, zai chuang huihuang" 大白兔: 香飘全国, 再创辉煌 [WR: The Fragrance Sweeps the Country, Still Creating Splendour], 16/03/2005 <http://www.cctv.com/advertisement/20050316/101995.shtml> Accessed October 15, 2023.

- CCTV.com. 2020. “Zhongguo pinpai, Xi Jinping ‘san ge zhuanbian’ zhongyao zhishi zhiming fangxiang” 中国品牌日，习近平“三个转变”重要指示指明方向 [China Brands Day, The Crucial Instructions and Directions of Xi Jinping’s “Three Transformations”], 10/05/2020  
<http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/05/10/ARTIin7U0ly2B0jNFCFKP3RK200510.shtml>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- China.com.cn. 2009. “Dabaitu: kuse niandai yansheng de tian ziwei” 大白兔 苦涩年代诞生的甜滋味 [WR: The Sweet Flavour Born in Bitter Years], 11/08/2009  
[http://www.china.com.cn/photo/txt/2009-08/11/content\\_18313863.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/photo/txt/2009-08/11/content_18313863.htm)  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Doctoroff, Tom. 2005. *Billions: Selling to the New Chinese Consumer*. New York, NY: St Martin’s Griffin.
- Dong, Lily and Kelly Tian. 2010. *Consumer-Citizens of China: The Role of Foreign Brands in the Imagined Future China*. London: Routledge.
- Dubois, Thomas David. 2021. “China’s Old Brands: Commercial Heritage and Creative nostalgia.” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18: 45-59, doi: 10.1017/S1479591420000455.
- Eckhardt, Giana M. 2015 “Commentary: The Cultural Approach to Branding.” In: *Brands: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Jonathan E. Schroeder, 107-116. London: Routledge.
- Eckhardt, Giana M. and Anders Bengtsson. 2010. “A Brief History of Branding in China.” *Journal of Macromarketing* 30/3: 210-221, doi: 10.1177/0276146709352219.
- Fan, Yan. 2006. “The Globalisation of Chinese Brands.” *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 24/4: 365-379, doi: 10.1108/02634500610672107.
- Fan, Yan. 2016. *Faked in China: Nation Branding, Counterfeit Culture, and Globalization*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Forêt, Philippe and Gérald Mazzalovo. 2014. “The Long March of the Chinese Luxury Industry towards Globalization: Questioning the Relevance of the ‘China Time-honored Brand’ Label.” *Luxury* 1/1: 133-154, doi: 10.2752/205118174X14066464962599.
- Gerth, Karl. 2003. *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Modern State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gsygroup.com. n.d. “Dabaitu de lishi” 大白兔的历史 [The History of the White Rabbit], <http://www.gsygroup.com/plus/list.php?tid=24> Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Guo Suyan 郭苏妍. 2019. “Dabaitu xinpin pingshang resou, zhejia laozihao fasheng le naxie bianhua?” 大白兔新品频上热搜，这家老字号发生了哪些变化? [The New WR Products Are Top Searches, What Changes Happened to this CTHB?]. *Qiye guanchajia 企业观察家* [Enterprise Observer] 10: 106-107.
- Hua, Yu. 2009. *Brothers*. Translated by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas. London: Picador (orig.: Volume 1: 2005. 兄弟 [Xiongdi]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe; Volume 2: 2006. 兄弟 [Xiongdi]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe).

- Jin Ting, Shao Wei, Deborah Griffin and Mitchell Ross. 2018. "How Young Chinese Consumers View Chinese Brands." *Young Consumers* 19/1: 55-69, doi: 10.1108/YC-09-2017-00740.
- Jing Daily. 2021. "Why Guochao Is So Important to China's Cultural Consumers." 16/12/2021  
<https://jingdaily.com/posts/why-guochao-is-so-important-to-chinas-cultural-consumers>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Jones, Rodney H. 2016. "Suicide Candy: Tracing the Discourse Itineraries of Food Risk." In: *Communicating Risk*, edited by Jonathan Chrichton, Christopher N. Candlin and Arthur S. Firkins, 340-359. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Keane, Michael. 2007. *Created in China: The Great New Leap Forward*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Li, Hongmei. 2008. "Branding Chinese Products: Between Nationalism and Transnationalism." *International Journal of Communication* 2: 1125-1163.
- Li, Hongmei. 2020. "China's Nation and Product Branding in New York's Times Square in the Post-Beijing Olympics Era." *JOMEC Journal* 15: 1-16, doi: 10.18573/jomec.200. Available at: <https://jomec.cardiffuniversitypress.org/articles/10.18573/jomec.200>
- Ma Dongqi 马东岐, Kang Weiming 康为民. 2007. *Zhonghua shangbiao yu wenhua* 中华商标与文化 [Chinese Trademarks and Culture]. Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe.
- Marcus, Lilit and Maggie H. Wong. 2022. "How Shanghai's White Rabbit Candy Became a Globally Beloved Brand", 16/03/22  
<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/white-rabbit-candy-china-intl-hnk/index.html>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2006a. "Shangwubu guanyu shishi "kuanxing laozihao gongcheng: de tongzhi" 商务部关于实施“振兴老字号工程”的通知 [Notice of the Ministry of Commerce on Implementing "The Plan for the Revival of THBs"]], 14/04/2006  
[https://www.mofcom.gov.cn/zcfb/zgdwjmywg/art/2006/art\\_dabe5bc2aed34670a39ad393d38eccbd.html](https://www.mofcom.gov.cn/zcfb/zgdwjmywg/art/2006/art_dabe5bc2aed34670a39ad393d38eccbd.html)  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2006b. "Shangwubu, Guojia wenwuju guanyu jiaqiang laozihao wenhao yichan baohu gongzuo de tongzhi" 商务部、国家文物局关于加强老字号文化遗产保护工作的通知 [Notice of the MOC and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage on Strengthening the Protection of THBs' Cultural Heritage], 26/10/2006  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/fgsjk/200610/20061002649286.shtml>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2006c. Shangwubu guanyu rending diyi pi 'Zhonghua laozihao' de tongzhi" 商务部关于认定第一批“中华老字号”的通知 [Notice of the MOC on the Identification of the First Batch of "CTHBs"]], 16/11/2006  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/h/redht/200611/20061103752041.html>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.

- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2007. “Shangwubu guanyu yinfa “Zhonghua laozihao” biao shi shiyong guiding” de tongzhi” 商务部关于印发“中华老字号”标识使用规定”的通知 [Notice of the MOC on the Publishing of the “Provisions on the Use of the ‘CTHB’ Logo”], 23/04/2007  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/h/redht/200704/20070404599410.shtml>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2008. “Shangwubu deng 14 bumen guanyu yinfa ‘Guanyu baohu he cujin laozihao fazhan de ruogan yijian’ de tongzhi” 商务部等 14 部门关于印发“关于保护和促进老字号发展的若干意见”的通知 [Notice of the MOC and 14 Departments on the Publishing of the “Opinions on Protecting and Promoting the Development of THBs”], 10/04/2008  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/h/redht/200804/20080405471081.html>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2010. “Di’er pi baohu yu cujin de Zhonghua laozihao minglu (lingshou, shipin lei) gongshi”\_第二批保护与促进的中华老字号名录（零售、食品类）公示 [Announcing the Second Batch of Protected and Promoted CTHBs (Retail and Food Categories)], 20/07/2010  
<https://zhzh.mofcom.gov.cn/news/getNews/3540> Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2011. “Shangwubu guanyu jinyibu zuohao Zhonghua laozihao baohu yu cujin gongzuo de tongzhi” 商务部关于进一步做好中华老字号保护与促进工作的通知 [Notice of the MOC on the Effective Implementation of the Protection and Promotion of CTHBs], 10/08/2011  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/b/g/201108/20110807688840.html>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2017. “Shangwubu deng 16 bumen guanyu cujin laozihao gaige chuangxin fazhang de zhidao yijian” 商务部等 16 部门关于促进老字号改革创新发展的指导意见 [Guiding Opinions of the MOC and 16 Departments on Promoting the Reform and Innovative Development of THBs] 03/02/2017  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/b/d/201702/20170202509727.shtml>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Mofcom.gov.cn. 2022. “Shangwubu deng 8 bumen guanyu cujin laozihao chuangxin fazhang de yijian” 商务部等 8 部门关于促进老字号创新发展的意见 [Opinions of the MOC and 8 Departments on How to Promote the Innovation Development of THBs], 18/03/2022  
<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zcfb/zcgnmy/202203/20220303286657.shtml>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- O’Reilly, Daragh. 2005. “Cultural Brands/Branding Cultures.” *Journal of Marketing Management* 21/5: 573-588, doi: 10.1362/0267257054307336.
- Peng Fangyan 彭芳燕. 2021. “Tianmi fuhao jingdian ziwei: Dabaitu pinpai xingxiang yu sheji gushi” 甜蜜符号 经典滋味—大白兔品牌形象与设计故事 [Sweet Symbol, Original Flavour: The Story of the WR Brand Image and Design]. *Zhongguo shangbiao* 中华商标 [China Trademark] 6: 15-17.



- People.com.cn. 2020. “‘Dabaitu’ wanghong, huang ge zitai reng tianmi” 大白兔”网红, 换个姿态仍甜蜜 [White Rabbit Web Celebrity, New Attitude But Still Sweet], 17/07/2020  
<http://yn.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0717/c372455-34163600.html> Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Puppini, Giovanna. 2014. “Advertising and China: How Does a Love/hate Relationship Work?” In: *The Changing Landscape of China’s Consumerism*, edited by Alison Hulme, 177-195. Oxford: Chandos/Elsevier.
- Puppini, Giovanna. 2020. “Forty Years of the Return of Advertising in China (1979–2019): A Critical Overview.” *JOMEC Journal* 15: 1-19, doi: 10.18573/jomec201. Available at:  
<https://jomec.cardiffuniversitypress.org/articles/10.18573/jomec.201>
- Ren, Daniel. 2019. “White Rabbit Milk Tea Sells at 2,000 Per Cent Premium as Chinese Consumers Show Support for Local Brands Amid Trade War,” 11/06/2019.  
<https://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/3013894/white-rabbit-milk-tea-sells-2000-cent-premium-chinese-consumers> Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Roxburgh, Helen. 2018. “How China’s Iconic White Rabbit Sweets Went From a Shanghai Favourite to Being Known the World Over.” 28/04/2018, *South China Morning Post*  
<https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/food-drink/article/2143404/how-chinas-iconic-white-rabbit-sweets-went-shanghai-favourite> Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Shambaugh, David. 2013. *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schroeder, Jonathan E. 2009. “The Cultural Codes of Branding.” *Marketing Theory* 9/1: 123-126, doi: 10.1177/1470593108100067.
- Schroeder, Jonathan, Janet Borgerson and Zhiyan Wu. 2015. “A Brand Culture Approach to Chinese Cultural Heritage Brands.” *Journal of Brand Management* 22/3: 261-279, doi: 10.1057/bm.2015.12.
- Shields, Alison B. and Jennifer W. Johnson. 2013. “Childhood Brand Nostalgia: A New Conceptualization and Scale Development.” *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 15/4: 359-369, doi: 10.1002/cb.1578.
- Yi Ming 佚名. 2016. “Dabaitu naitang huan Fashi baozhuang shenjia baozhang 9 bei yijin 265 yuan” 大白兔奶糖换法式包装 身价暴涨 9 倍一斤 265 元 [WRCC Takes on French Packaging: Price Soars Ninefold, 265 Yuan One Jin], 16/03/2016  
<http://finance.china.com.cn/consume/special/315wq2016/20160316/3629631.shtml>  
Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Yong Tang. 2005. “I Never Said that Haier and Lenovo Are Not Brands,” 28/02/2005,  
[http://en.people.cn/200502/27/eng20050227\\_174878.html](http://en.people.cn/200502/27/eng20050227_174878.html) Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Wang Yuchuan and Ella Kidron. 2020. “In-Depth Report: JD Big Data Show Higher Earning Chinese Buy Domestic Brands,” 11/10/2020, <https://jdcorporateblog.com/in-depth-report-jd-big-data-show-higher-earning-chinese-buy-domestic-brands/> Accessed October 15, 2023.
- Wu Jing and Jiao Lin. 2018. “Research on Promoting the Rejuvenation of China Time-honored Brands: Taking Xiamen’s Time-honored Brands as an Example.” *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research* 71: 592-602, doi: 10.2991/emle-18.2018.112.

Wu Zhiyan, Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder. 2013. *From Chinese Brand Culture to Global Brands: Insights from Aesthetics, History and Fashion*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

---

Giovanna Puppini is Associate Professor in Chinese Studies, Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Genoa (2020–today). She previously worked as a Lecturer in International Advertising and Promotional Cultures (China), School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester (2014–2020). Her research expertise includes Chinese advertising (commercial and public service) and the creative industries, media and popular culture, country branding and soft power, on which she has written extensively. In 2019, she was nominated Associate Researcher at the National Centre for Cultural Innovation Research at Fudan University (Shanghai). She assumed the role of Principal Investigator for the project ‘CreAD: UK-China Partnership on Creative Advertising’, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (February 2019–February 2020). In 2024 she was Visiting Professor and Course Leader for "Advertising and Branding in Contemporary China: Critical Explorations" at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich.

Giovanna can be contacted at: [giovanna.puppini@unige.it](mailto:giovanna.puppini@unige.it)

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

## 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;

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

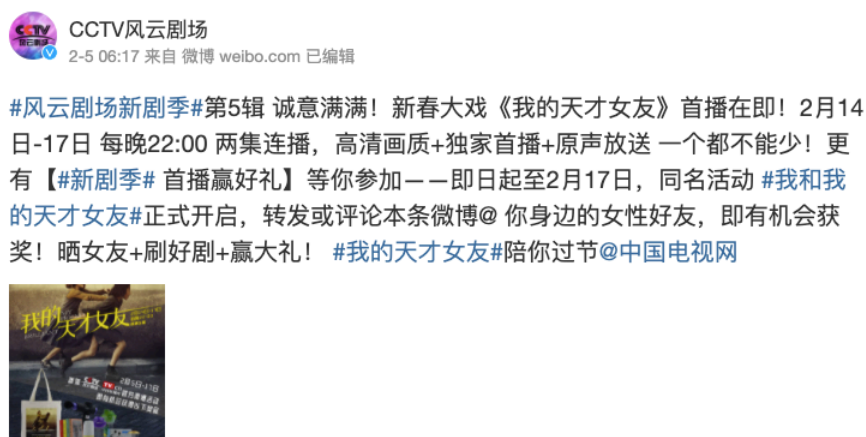


Figure 1. CCTV *Fengyun juchang*'s post on Weibo 微博 announcing the broadcast of “My Brilliant Friend.”

### 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



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).<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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

---

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

<sup>3</sup> <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—*xiaohai* 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).



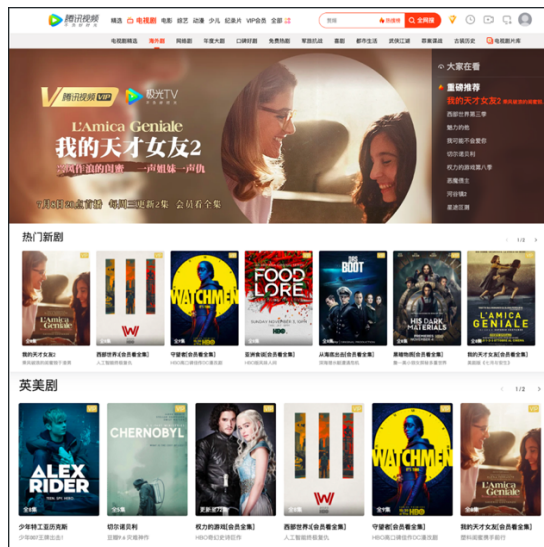


Figure 3. Screenshot of the Tencent library.



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 75<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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,

<sup>4</sup> 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.

## References

- Albano, Maria. 2022. “Will the real Elena Ferrante please sit down?” *The Critic*, March 6, 2022. <https://thecritic.co.uk/will-the-real-elena-ferrante-please-sit-down/>.
- Amazon.cn. n.d. *Nabulesi si bu qu* 那不勒斯四部曲 [“Naples tetralogy”]

- [https://www.amazon.cn/dp/B07HSWT241/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?\\_\\_mk\\_zh\\_CN=亚马逊网站&keywords=我的天才女友&qid=1663072696&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.cn/dp/B07HSWT241/ref=sr_1_1?__mk_zh_CN=亚马逊网站&keywords=我的天才女友&qid=1663072696&sr=8-1).
- Avalle, Arianna. 2021. "The Ultimate Ferrante Experience: Convergence Culture, Literary Tourism, and the Quest for Authenticity." *Italian Culture* 39/1: 19-32.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01614622.2021.1938841>.
- Bell, Zoe. 2020. "Exploring Elena Ferrante's Italy: A Literary Tour of Naples." *Passion Passport*, October 27, 2020. <https://passionpassport.com/elena-ferrante-tour-naples/>.
- Bona, Stefano. 2014. "Italian film-makers in China and changing cultural perceptions: Comparing Chung Kuo—China (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1972) and La stella che non c'è/The Missing Star (Gianni Amelio, 2006)." *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 2/1: 41-58.  
[https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms.2.1.41\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms.2.1.41_1).
- Brezzi, Alessandra (ed.). 2008. *La letteratura italiana in Cina*. Roma: Tiellemmedia Editore.
- Chen Danqing 陈丹青. 2021. *Dang wenxue chengwei yingshi* "当文学成为影视" ["When literature becomes films and television"]. *Muxin meishuguan* 木心美术馆 [Mu Xin Art Museum] October 4, 2021. [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AyiRrynRahooEMfNG\\_bXWA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AyiRrynRahooEMfNG_bXWA).
- Chen Xue 尘雪. 2020. *Tamen shengzhang zai wujin de Nabulesi* "她们生长在无尽的那不勒斯" ["They grew up in endless Naples"]. *Kan shijie* 看世界 [World view] 18: 45-48.
- Chen, Ying. 2019. "La traduzione e la ricezione della quadrilogia *L'amica geniale* in Cina." *Incontro con Elena Ferrante*, edited by Donatella La Monaca and Domenica Perrone, 145-150. Palermo: Palermo University Press.
- Cheng, Martha. 2020. "Elena Ferrante's 'My Brilliant Friend' Is Like a Trip to Naples. Only Better." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/elena-ferrantes-my-brilliant-friend-is-like-a-trip-to-naples-only-better-11601031308>.
- CIFTIS. 2022. "China's foreign cultural trade exceeded \$200 billion for the first time in 2021, with movies, TV plays and online literature attracting numerous foreign fans." *China International Fair for Trade in Services*, July 26, 2022. <https://www.ciftis.org/article/13363513607319552.html>.
- de Rogatis, Tiziana. 2016. "Elena Ferrante e il Made in Italy. La costruzione di un immaginario femminile e napoletano." *Made in Italy e cultura*, edited by Daniele Balicco, 288-317. Palermo: Palumbo.
- de Rogatis, Tiziana. 2018. *Elena Ferrante. Parole chiave*. Roma: Edizioni e/o.
- Durzi, Giacomo. 2017. *Ferrante Fever*. <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/12/Ferrante-Fever-5fa69288-9b3a-4788-90fd-4d3839412122.html>.
- Ferrara, Enrica Maria. 2019. "Elena Ferrante: a vanishing author and the question of posthuman identity." *The Conversation*, July 1, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/elena-ferrante-a-vanishing-author-and-the-question-of-posthuman-identity-118138>.
- Franceschi, Valeria. 2021. "China as an International Travel Destination A Corpus-based Analysis of Online Travel Blogs." *Iperstoria* 18: 86-107.  
<https://doi.org/10.13136/2281-4582/2021.i18.1038>.

Fremantle. 2020. “My Brilliant Friend launches in China.” *Fremantle*, October 5, 2020.

<https://fremantle.com/my-brilliant-friend-launches-in-china/>.

Gilardi, Filippo, Celia Lam, K. Cohen Tan, Andrew White, Shuxin Cheng and Yifan Zhao. 2018. “International TV series distribution on Chinese digital platforms: Marketing strategies and audience engagement.” *Global Media and China* 3/3: 213-30.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436418806406>.

IIC Pechino. n.d. “From Venice to China—Following the Silk Road.”

[https://iicpechino.esteri.it/it/gli\\_eventi/calendario/from-venice-to-china-following/](https://iicpechino.esteri.it/it/gli_eventi/calendario/from-venice-to-china-following/).

IIC Shanghai. n.d. “Traduzioni in cinese di libri italiani. Libri che hanno ottenuto un contributo alla traduzione dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.”

[https://iicshanghai.esteri.it/iic\\_shanghai/it/opportunita/premi\\_e\\_concorsi/premi\\_e\\_contributi\\_alla\\_traduzione/traduzione-cinese-di-libri-italiani.html](https://iicshanghai.esteri.it/iic_shanghai/it/opportunita/premi_e_concorsi/premi_e_contributi_alla_traduzione/traduzione-cinese-di-libri-italiani.html).

IIC Shanghai. 2021. “Mostra fotografica ‘L’amica geniale. When Literature Appears on Screen’ al Mu Xin Art Museum.” IIC Shanghai, October 15, 2021.

[https://iicshanghai.esteri.it/iic\\_shanghai/it/gli\\_eventi/calendario/2021/10/mostra-fotografica-l-amica-geniale.html](https://iicshanghai.esteri.it/iic_shanghai/it/gli_eventi/calendario/2021/10/mostra-fotografica-l-amica-geniale.html).

Kang Kai 康慨. 2019. “意大利头号隐身作家埃莱娜·费兰特出版小说新作.” *Yidali touhao yinshen zuojia Ailaina-Feilante chuban xiaoshuo xinzuo* [Italy’s number one invisible writer Elena Ferrante publishes a new novel]. *中华读书报* [China Reading Weekly], November 20, 2019.

Kang Kai 康慨. 2020. “《明镜》周刊选出过去十年十部小说代表作.” “*Mingjing*” *zhoukan xuanchu guoqu shi nian shi bu xiaoshuo daibiaozuo* [“Der Spiegel” magazine selects ten representative novels of the past ten years]. *中华读书报 Zhonghua dushu bao* [China Reading Weekly], January 15, 2020.

Kantner, Cathleen and Maximilian Overbeck. 2020. “Exploring Soft Concepts with Hard Corpus-Analytic Methods.” *Reflektierte algorithmische Textanalyse: Interdisziplinäre(s) Arbeiten in der CRETA-Werkstatt*, edited by Nils Reiter, Axel Pichler and Jonas Kuhn, 169-190. Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110693973-008>.

Kilgarriff, Adam, Vít Baisa, Jan Bušta, Miloš Jakubíček, Vojtěch Kovář, Jan Michelfeit, Pavel Rychlý and Vít Suchomel. 2014. “The Sketch Engine: ten years on.” *Lexicography* 1: 7-36.

Kutter, Amelie and Cathleen Kantner. 2012. “Corpus-Based Content Analysis A Method for Investigating News Coverage on War and Intervention.” *International Relations Online Working Paper*, 2012/01, February 2012, Stuttgart: Stuttgart University.

<https://www.uni-stuttgart.de/soz/ib/forschung/IRWorkingPapers/>.

Leotta, Alfio. 2020. “Naples for urban voy(ag)eurs: Tourism and the representation of space in *Gomorra* and *My Brilliant Friend*.” *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 8/2: 205-219.

[https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms\\_00017\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms_00017_1).

- Maranhão, Andreia Pagani. 2020. “Giallo & Subversive: The Neapolitan Novels and the Onset of “Ferrante Fever” in Brazil.” *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* 15/3: 107-127.  
<https://doi.org/10.1590/2176-457343450>.
- MIBAC. 2016. Statuto del Forum Culturale Italia-Cina.  
[https://storico.beniculturali.it/mibac/multimedia/MiBAC/documents/1511439839065\\_STATUTO\\_REP\\_15\\_del\\_20\\_luglio\\_2016-imported-66974.pdf](https://storico.beniculturali.it/mibac/multimedia/MiBAC/documents/1511439839065_STATUTO_REP_15_del_20_luglio_2016-imported-66974.pdf).
- Newitalianbooks. 2022. <https://www.newitalianbooks.it/grants-and-prizes-for-translations-by-the-italian-foreign-ministry-2022/>.
- Niola, Gabriele. 2019. “La vita dei film italiani all'estero non è quella che immaginiamo.” *Badtaste.it*, January 19, 2019. <https://www.badtaste.it/cinema/articoli/la-vita-dei-film-italiani-allestero-non-e-quella-che-immaginiamo/>.
- Pan Qiwei 潘琪伟 and Shi Xingyue 史星月. 2020. “费兰特笔下的女性身份认同和女性友谊.” *Feilante bixia de nüxing shenfen rentong he nüxing youyi* [Female identity and female friendship in Ferrante's writing]. *青年文学家 Qingnian wenxuejia* [Youth Literator] 20: 92-93.
- Qian Weiyu. 2022. “HBO's ‘My Brilliant Friend’ to Be Restaged in 1930s Shanghai.” *RADII*, April 7, 2022. <https://radii.co/article/my-brilliant-friend-chinese-adaptation>.
- Rahman, Hariaty. 2020. Email exchange with the present author.
- Rai. 2019. “Firmato MoU con China Media Group.”  
<https://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/assets/template/us-articolo.html?ssiPath=/articoli/2019/03/Firmato-MoU-con-China-Media-Group--8c088f24-51f0-4449-be76-d2b06843824f-ssi.html>.
- Rubtcova, Mariia, Oleg Pavenkov, Vladimir Pavenkov and Elena Vasilieva. 2015. “Representations of Trust to Public Service in Russian Newspapers during Election Time: Corpus-based Content Analysis in Public Administration Sociology.” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6/4: 436-444. doi: [10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n4s1p436](https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n4s1p436).
- Ruperto, Asia. 2020. “La via del cinema tra l'Italia e la Cina.” *Istituto Confucio* 38/3: 14-21.
- Scaglioni, Massimo. 2020. “Made in Italy. La circolazione internazionale dell'audiovisivo e il ruolo dell'Italia fra cinema e ‘serialità premium.’” *Cinergie—Il cinema e le altre arti* 18: 17-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/11169>.
- Shangwu bu deng 27 bumen guanyu tujin duiwai wenhua maoyi gao zhiliang fazhan de yijian 商务部等 27 部门关于推进对外文化贸易高质量发展的意见 [Opinions of 27 departments including the Ministry of Commerce on promoting the high-quality development of foreign cultural trade]  
[http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-07/30/content\\_5703621.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-07/30/content_5703621.htm)
- Shi Chenlu 施晨露. 2019a. “那不勒斯四部曲”火了，又冒出“那不勒斯三部曲”？读者没个火眼金睛真不行。” “*Nabulesi si bu qu*” huole, you mao chu “*Nabulesi sanbu qu*”? *Duzhe mei ge huoyanjinjing zhen bu xing* [The “Neapolitan Tetralogy” was a hit, and now there's the “Neapolitan Trilogy”? It's

really hard for readers if they don't have a keen eye]. 上观 *Shang guan* [Shanghai Observer], January 17, 2019.

<https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=127755>.

Shi Chenlu 施晨露. 2019b. “两套‘那不勒斯系列’到底怎么回事” *Liang tao “Nabulesi xilie” daodi zenme hui shi* [What's going on with the two “Neapolitan series”] 解放日报 *Jiefang ribao* [Liberation Daily], January 18, 2019.

SISU 2021. “我校西方语言文化学院意大利语专业陈英教授荣获‘意大利之星骑士勋章.’” *Wo xiao Xifang yuyan wenhua xueyuan Yidaliyu zhuan ye Chen Ying jiaoshou ronghuo “Yidali zhi xing qishi xunzhang”* [Professor Chen Ying, who specialises in Italian at the School of Western Languages and Cultures of our University, has been awarded the title of “Cavaliere dell’Ordine della Stella d’Italia”] <http://www.sisu.edu.cn/info/1033/4956.htm>.

Sun Lu 孙璐. 2021. “‘埃莱娜·费兰特是谁’如何成为当代国际文坛的超级谜题.” *Ailaina-Feilante shi shei" ruhe chengwei dangdai guoji wentan de chaoji miti* [How who is Elena Ferrante became a super mystery in the contemporary literary circles]. 文汇报 *Wenhui bao* [Wenhui News], March 31, 2021. <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2021/03-31/9444436.shtml>.

Tarat, Sarunya, Nawarat Siritararatn and Woravut Jaroongkhongdach. 2021. “A methodological integration of corpus analysis and content analysis.” *Proceedings of the International Conference: DRAL4 2021*, 117-130. School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi. <https://sola.pr.kmutt.ac.th/dral2021/index.php/proceedings-2/>

Turchetta, Gianni. 2020. “Napoli planetaria: il rione-mondo di Elena Ferrante.” *mediAzioni* 28: A11-A29. <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Varriano, Valeria. 2019. “Totò stappa una risata ai compagni cinesi: il successo di Guardie e Ladri oltre la grande muraglia.” *Io sono un uomo di mondo...* *Incroci di linguaggi e culture nell’arte comica di Totò*, edited by Paolo Sommaiolo, 138-155. Napoli: Tullio Pironti.

Voci, Paola and Hui Luo. 2018. “Screening China’s soft power: screen cultures and discourses of power.” *Screening China’s Soft Power*, edited by Paola Voci and Hui Luo, 1-18. Oxford – New York, NY: Routledge.

Wang Hongling 王红玲. “浅析埃莱娜·费兰特的‘那不勒斯四部曲’中女性成长主题.” *Qianxi Ailaina-Feilante de “Nabulesi si bu qu” zhong nüxing chengzhang zhuti* [A brief analysis of the theme of female growth in Elena Ferrante’s “Neapolitan Tetralogy”]. 作家天地 *Zuojia tiandi* [Authors’ heaven and earth] 14: 5-6.

Wang, Orange. 2022. “China may increase cultural imports as part of 28-point plan to boost its soft power overseas.” *South China Morning Post*, July 26, 2022.

<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3186654/china-may-increase-cultural-imports-part-28-point-plan-boost>.

Wei Yi 魏怡. 2019. “意大利女性作家掠影：那些奇异的花.” *Yidali nüxing zuojia lüeying: na xie qiyi de hua* [A glimpse of Italian female writers: those strange flowers]. 文艺报 *Wenyi bao* [Literature and art journal], March 11, 2019.



- Xu Chang 许畅. 2018. “穷尽女人间友谊对一个人最极致的塑造.” *Qiongjin nüren jian youyi dui yi ge ren zui jizhi de suzao* [Exhausting the ultimate way that friendship between women can shape a person]. *文汇报 Wenhui bao* [Wenhui News], July 27, 2018.
- Xu Chang 许畅. 2019. “难抵‘热搜’诱惑，书名‘撞脸’伤了谁.” *Nan di “resou” youhuo, shu ming “zhuanglian” shang le shei* [It’s hard to resist the temptation of 'hot search', the "exact copy" of the book title hurt who]. *文汇报 Wenhui bao* [Wenhui News], April 1, 2019.
- Yan Han 闫晗. 2019. “我的天才女友：女孩的友谊与成长.” *Wo de tiancai nüyou: nühai de youyi he chengzhang* [My Brilliant Friend: girls’ friendship and growth]. *时代邮刊 Shidai youkan* [Times Post] 4: 66.
- Zhang Jie. 2022. “China’s cultural trade reaching new heights.” *China Daily*, August 2, 2022.  
<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202208/02/WS62e8c92aa310fd2b29e6fcdf.html>.
- Zhang Ping 张萍. 2019. “她时代共享女性成长红利.” *Ta shidai gongxiang nüxing chengzhang hongli* [Her era shares the dividends of women's growth]. *浙江日报 Zhejiang ribao* [Zhejiang Daily], January 9, 2019.
- Zhang Xiaoran. 2019. “From Western TV sets to Chinese online streaming services: English-language TV series in mainland China.” *Participations - Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 16, 2: 220-42.
- Zhen Xiang 甄翔. 2018. “HBO 首推非英语剧集.” *HBO shou tui fei yingyu juji* [HBO launches first non-English series]. *环球时报 Huangqiu shibao* [Global Times], November 11, 2018.
- Zhou Huihong 周慧虹. 2019. “书名‘撞脸’缘于阅读浮躁.” *Shu ming “zhuanglian” yuan yu yuedu fuzao* [The “exact copy” of book titles is due to reading impatience]. *中国新闻出版广电报 Zhongguo xinwen chubun guangdian bao* [China press publication radio film and television journal], April 8, 2019.
- Zuccheri, Serena. 2019. “Pratiche di sottotitolazione non professionale in Cina. Il gruppo Shenying e la traduzione del turpiloquio nella prima stagione di Gomorra-La serie.” *Annali Di Ca’ Foscari. Serie Orientale* 55/473-508.
- zmiao. 2020. “那不勒斯四部曲”之女友的较量.” “*Nabulesi si bu qu*” zhi nüyou de jiaoliang [Girlfriends’ rivalry in the “Neapolitan Tetralogy2]. *21世纪经济报道 21shiji jingji baodao* [The 21st Century Business Herald], April 13, 2020.

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](mailto:nataliafrancesca.riva@unicatt.it)

# Chinese contemporary art



## Graffiti in Shanghai and Chengdu

### Looking for Chinese writing, symbols and calligraphy along the streets

Marta R. Bisceglia and Martina Merenda

After a brief introduction to the origins and development of graffiti in China, this paper first examines the graffiti scene in Shanghai through two prominent figures. On one hand, the analysis focuses on 1. the OOPS crew—Shanghai’s most renowned and influential graffiti crew, composed of both Chinese and Western members. The crew merges the Western graffiti art movement with Chinese artistic and cultural traditions, incorporating Chinese characters, calligraphy, and ancient symbols into their work. On the other hand, within this same international context, the paper considers; 2. Dezio, a French graffiti writer highly regarded in Shanghai, who integrates Chinese characters and employs a Chinese tag in his creations. These two actors exemplify the cultural cosmopolitanism and intercultural dynamics that make Shanghai fertile ground for creative expressions born from cross-cultural ‘contamination.’ To further explore the diffusion of graffiti art in China, this paper also investigates the graffiti scene in Chengdu. The analysis focuses on two case studies: 1. GAS, one of Chengdu’s most prominent graffiti writers, who expresses his identity and artistic intent through his Chinese tag (*qi* 氣). His works are centered on Chinese script, frequently utilizing traditional characters and drawing inspiration from Chinese calligraphy to create a distinctive, locally oriented graffiti style; 2. Fan Sack, who began his career as a graffiti writer in Chengdu and now resides and works in Paris. Transitioning from graffiti writing to figurative paintings inspired by Buddhist themes, Fan Sack has developed a more representational artistic language, spreading his work throughout Europe.

**Keywords:** Chinese graffiti, Shanghai graffiti, Chengdu graffiti, Chinese contemporary art.

### 1. Introduction

Graffiti writing is a social, cultural and artistic movement spread across the globe. Starting in the US in the 1970s, this phenomenon is a spontaneous expression of a heterogeneous group of people belonging to the hip-hop<sup>1</sup> culture. As a complex and structured form of visual expression in constant evolution,

---

<sup>1</sup> Hip-hop (*xīhā* 嘻哈) is a cultural movement that emerged during the late 1970s in the Afro-American and Latino communities of the NYC Bronx ghettos. The four main elements of the hip-hop culture are ‘speech,’ ‘music,’ ‘sign’ and ‘movement.’ the

graffiti writing represents an act of interpreting and evolving letters—giving birth to a proper tag, or signature<sup>2</sup>—using spray paint or markers in public spaces (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

After an initial phase in which the dominant element was represented by letters, contemporary graffiti culture has moved towards wider horizons: the post-graffiti movement. Post-graffiti is based on stylistic trends that have their roots in the culture of graffiti writing and street art, flourishing in multiple disciplines such as painting, sculpture, graphics, design, illustration, fashion, photography, architecture, video art and calligraphy. While graffiti writing was born and developed in the US to impose its model on a planetary scale, the post-graffiti movement has risen and spread in a global world, insofar as it lives through the Internet (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 20).



Figure 1. Graffiti (throw-up, bubble style, puppet, tag), September 2014, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. © Marta R. Bisceglia

In China, ‘graffiti art’ (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) appeared in the 1990s, but it was only in the early 21st century that it became a noticeable artistic phenomenon visible in the main Chinese cities (Valjakka 2011: 73). The late advent of the graffiti movement in China—already contaminated by new experiments related to post-graffiti—led to the blossoming of a hybrid form of graffiti art. This kind of

---

MCing (*shuochang* 说唱), also known as rap music, introduced by Afro-Americans (MC stands for Master of Ceremony); Djing (*dadie* 打碟), introduced by Jamaicans; graffiti writing (*tuya shuxie* 涂鸦书写); and breakdancing (*diban wu* 地板舞 o *pili wu* 霹雳舞), introduced by Puerto Ricans (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022 211).

<sup>2</sup> A tag (*qianming tuya* 签名涂鸦) is the pseudonym of the writer, a stylized signature of the ‘nickname’ of the graffiti artist (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 214).

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the birth and development of the phenomenon of graffiti writing see Mininno (2021).

art not only echoes the fundamentals of American graffiti, but also blends with street art in a broader sense (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 20). According to Adriana Iezzi:

Graffiti art was introduced in China by contemporary artist Zhang Dali in 1995 and by some other writers living and working in Hong Kong in the early and mid-1990s. Starting in Hong Kong, and then in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, graffiti began to spread all over China, especially in minor cities, such as Wuhan, Shenzhen and Chengdu. Then, in the mid-2000s, also thanks to the wide spread of the underground culture, it extended its field of action to all major Chinese cities and became popular especially in Beijing and Shanghai (Iezzi 2019, 396-397).

In mainland China, “contemporary graffiti has its own characteristics” (Valjakka 2015: 263), which differ from the rest of the world:

1. Control and censorship: graffiti are not considered a form of vandalism, a criminal act or a manifestation of class struggle, as they are in Euro-American cities. Chinese graffiti are usually defined as ‘half legal, half illegal’ (Bidisha 2014), and there are certain areas called ‘semi-legal walls’ where it is possible to do graffiti.
2. Commercial purposes: in China, it is very common for writers to collaborate with local or foreign commercial brands so as to promote their advertising campaigns, or to paint for the opening of stores, tattoo and graphic design studios, etc. “The attitude towards commissioned and paid graffiti is usually more positive among Chinese writers, as opposed to claims of some Euro-American writers that only illegally created graffiti is true graffiti” (Valjakka 2011: 82).
3. Importance of web and social media: Chinese writers use web and social media to discover new graffiti models and to publish their works.
4. Writers’ artistic background: most Chinese writers have an artistic background (Valjakka 2011: 80) linked to the traditions of their family or academic studies, which they experiment with and develop on the streets to open up job opportunities.
5. Chinese graffiti style: although, since the start, “Chinese graffiti has been based on Euro-American graffiti,” a search for ‘Chineseness’ and an attempt to develop a specific ‘Chinese style’ is evident in many local creators (Valjakka 2011: 84). Many crews use and redraft Chinese characters and traditional cultural elements (i.e., calligraphy, painting motifs, Buddhist figures, Taoist principles, etc., Fig. 2) in their graffiti, in order to create a ‘Chinese graffiti style’ (*Zhongguo tese de tuyu yishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术) (Iezzi 2019: 398).



Figure 2. EricTin (Kwanyin Clan), Shengong yijiang 神工意匠 (Ars divina), June 2010, spray paint on wall, Peking. Courtesy of the artist.

After examining the birth, the development and the peculiar characteristics of the Chinese graffiti art movement, this paper will focus on four representative artists belonging to different contexts and nationalities, coming out in Shanghai and Chengdu. Through the analysis of some selected artwork, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate the Chinese writing, symbols and calligraphy appearing on the streets of Shanghai and Chengdu, providing an overview of the graffiti scene in contemporary China.

## 2. The Shanghai graffiti scene

Shanghai is the most populous urban area in China and the most populous city proper in the entire world. Considered the economic capital of the country, Shanghai is a city of contradictions, where East and West, past and future coexist harmoniously. The cosmopolitan nature of Shanghai began to take shape in the mid-19th century, with treaties that granted foreigners the possibility of settling and operating in China. The Chinese and Western culture began to merge inextricably, forming a unique *mélange* that still persists. The eclecticism of Shanghai's urban landscape is also reflected in the mixture of tradition and modernity, as well as in the extravagant stylistic fusion between West and East (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 125-127).<sup>4</sup>

Like the city itself, Shanghai's graffiti are also eclectic, cosmopolitan and intercultural in nature. According to Minna Valjakka:

While urban art images came to Shanghai only around 2005-2007 – later than they did to Beijing – the Shanghai scene has been more international since the very beginning. The oldest of the known Shanghai crews is the Paint Every Night (PEN) crew, founded in 2005 by SAIL and Mr. Lan, both

---

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see also Greenspan (2014).



from Changsha, Hunan province. SAIL and Mr. Lan still occasionally put up their works, which represent their own unique styles, on the streets of Shanghai (Valjakka 2016: 363).

The most important place for graffiti in Shanghai was on the Moganshan Road (*Moganshan lu* 莫干山路, Fig. 3), not far from the M50 art district, along the Suzhou creek, between the Putuo and Jingan districts. The history of this wall—the city’s most colorful and incredible *hall of fame*<sup>5</sup>—spans from 2006 (the year of the birth of graffiti in Shanghai) to 2018 (the year of its removal) and is fundamental in order to understand the history of graffiti in Shanghai. According to Kenrick Davis:

The area proved to be the perfect location for graffiti: a post-industrial dead zone on the border of three separate districts – Zhabei, Jing’an and Putuo – that was rarely frequented by police. Even better, one side of the street was lined by a huge, bare concrete wall, built to fence off some wasteland awaiting development (Davis 2019).

In its heyday, the wall on the Moganshan Road attracted tourists and international artists, and some major brands, like JD.com, Nike, and even the video game League of Legends (Davis 2019), filmed photo shoots or music videos here. The Moganshan Road allowed locals to be exposed to the art of graffiti and it was a safe haven for novice graffiti writers. On this wall it was possible to admire works by resident artists (Chinese and foreigners, i.e., the OOPS crew) as well as visiting foreign artists (i.e., Dezio). The presence of so many foreign artists in the Shanghai graffiti scene reflects its intercultural and transnational nature: foreign writers make use of Chinese elements and Chinese writers use Western fundamentals in their works (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 133). In 2018, the wall was demolished to build the 1,000 Trees complex, a futuristic, flora-covered building by the Heatherwick Studio set to open in 2020. Kenrick Davis continues: “Its destruction and an increasingly rigid atmosphere in Shanghai are resulting in a declining street art scene, with artists struggling to find places to paint” (Davis 2019).

---

<sup>5</sup> Hall of fame (*tuya qiang* 涂鸦墙) refers to a space where painting is allowed (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 211).



Figure 3. Graffiti (wildstyle, tag), September 2014, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road.

© Marta R. Bisceglia

### 3. The OOPS crew: between tradition and interculturality

The OOPS crew is the most famous and influential crew in the city. It combines the Western graffiti art movement with the Chinese artistic and cultural tradition, using characters, calligraphy and ancient Chinese symbols, and represents the transcultural and transnational trends in Shanghai (Valjakka 2016: 363). The crew was founded on a blog in 2007 by Jin Ye (Hu(r)ri, Read or Hali), Reign (or Lame), Snow and Tin.G. The birth of the OOPS crew on a blog demonstrates the importance of the Internet for Chinese writers, as the four members did not meet directly on the street. Actually, the crew has hosted other members over the years, including two European artists: Moon, Aekone (a.k.a. Aek, from Yangzhou), Redim, Kite (from Guangxi); and Diase (Italian writer) and Storm (French writer). This highlights how there are many foreign writers operating in China who actively collaborate with Chinese crews and writers, contaminating both themselves and each other. The OOPS crew was and still is the most respected crew in Shanghai because it embodies the cosmopolitan and transcultural trend of the city in which it was born, blending the Euro-American graffiti writing tradition with many aspects of Chinese culture (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 138-139). According to Minna Valjakka:

The crew cultivates varying perceptions and self-identities in their work, but they are as a whole known for their elaborate pieces combining alphabets, Chinese writing and characters. Currently, many of the local members are occupied by their everyday work and seldom have time to paint (Valjakka 2016: 363).

In terms of style, the OOPS crew's pieces refer to the Euro-American tradition, using, specifically, wildstyle<sup>6</sup> with 3D effects, often enriched by a background or figurative elements from the Chinese painting tradition (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 139-140).

Among the numerous works of the OOPS crew, *Shanghai jianqiang* 上海坚强 (*Shanghai be strong*, fig. 4) is one of the best examples of 'contamination' between the Western graffiti art movement and the Chinese artistic and cultural tradition. This graffiti was painted on the Moganshan Road in memory of the victims of the fire that destroyed a building on the Jiaozhou Road (Shanghai) in 2010. The main theme of the piece consists of the words *Shanghai* 上海 and *jianqiang* 坚强 ('fortify, be strong'), which are represented through two different styles of *charactering* with the intention of emulating the brush stroke through different thicknesses. The first two characters 上海 (Shanghai) were painted by Huri in running script (*xingshu* 行书). The other two characters *jianqiang* 坚强 ('fortify, be strong') were painted by Storm (French writer) in regular script (*kaishu* 楷书). Because of their uniform thickness, maybe painted using a pasting brush or a paint roller, the *jianqiang* 坚强 characters might also call to mind the great seal script (*dazhuanshu* 大篆书).<sup>7</sup> Both parts have a thin black outline that grants a tridimensional effect. This artwork is characterized by the presence of some Chinese traditional elements: an incense pot and four yellow chrysanthemums. The incense pot is a symbol of the funeral wake ritual, while the yellow chrysanthemum forms part of the 'four nobles' (bamboo, orchid, plum tree and chrysanthemum), which, in traditional Chinese painting, represent the four seasons and the four ages of Man; among these, the chrysanthemum is the symbol of autumn. In the artwork there are also, some Western visual elements: a scroll banner, a peace dove and a black funeral ribbon. At the bottom, there are also eight tags: Huri (under the characters 上海), Storm (under the characters 坚强), Ting, Snow, Ake, Reign, Redim and OOPS (in the center; Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 140-142).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Wildstyle (*kuangye fengge* 狂野风格) is a complex construction of letters or characters that are distorted and interlocked, and sometimes embellished with three-dimensional effects, tribal arrows and puppets. This intricate form of graffiti is considered one of the hardest styles to master, and pieces done in wildstyle are often completely undecipherable to non-writers (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022 214-215).

<sup>7</sup> 'Running script' (*xingshu* 行书), 'regular script' (*kaishu* 楷书) and 'seal script' (*zhuanshu* 篆书) are three of the five styles of traditional Chinese calligraphy; the other two are: 'cursive script' (*caoshu* 草书) and 'clerical script' (*lishu* 隶书). For more details about Chinese calligraphy see Li (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Under the white background of the piece there are some Chinese characters: *Xin ya jituan - Shanghai xinya dabao youxian gongsi - heixin chufang* 新亚集团 - 上海新亚大包有限公司 - 黑心厨房 (New Asia Group - Shanghai Xinya Large Packaging Co., Ltd. - Black Heart Kitchen). The choice of the surface is casual, as it is just a wall of Moganshan Road's hall of fame.



Figure 4. Oops crew (Huri, Storm, Tin.G, Snow, Aek, Reign, Redim), Shanghai jianqiang 上海坚强 (Shanghai be strong), November 2010, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. © Imaginechina Limited/Alamy Stock Photo/IPA.

According to Minna Valjakka:

The transcultural and transnational impacts are not limited to the OOPS Crew. Numerous foreign creators have either visited Shanghai or lived there for a while, shaping the scene. Short-term residents usually remain members of their original crews in their home cities and paint mainly as individuals when in Shanghai (Valjakka 2016: 363-364).

#### 4. Dezio, the French writer who uses Chinese characters

Dezio, a French writer highly respected in Shanghai, started painting in 1994 in a little town in France called Le Mans when he was only fifteen years old. He continued ceaselessly to paint walls and in 2006 he moved to China, where the graffiti scene was basically just starting out. His first 'international' crew was the CLW crew (acronym for 'China's Least Wanted,' 'Coloring Local Walls' or 'Can't Let'm Win'), founded with Jin Ye, Nine, Fluke and Storm. The crew also had other members in many different cities of the country like Nanjing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing and Honk Kong. The main aim of the crew was to combine writers from all over China and the world, who shared the same passion and vision of graffiti, under one 'big family.' Now Dezio lives and works in Shanghai, where he co-founded

Urban Art United (UAU), an urban art agency based in Shanghai since 2017 that connects people with art in China.<sup>9</sup> According to Minna Valjakka:

He has had a recognizable impact on the development of contemporary graffiti in the city. His works have exhibited playful yet skillful engagement with contemporary graffiti for around two decades. Dezio is known not only for his accomplished alphabets but also for his elaborate Chinese writing, which he uses even for his own name (*Duxi'ao* 度西奥) (Valjakka 2016: 364).



Figure 5. Dezio, *Duxi'ao* 度西奥 (Chinese name tag), spray paint on wall, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artists.

Before following the post-graffiti trend and becoming a well-rounded artist, Dezio often used Chinese characters in his works and signed with his Chinese tag (*Duxi'ao* 度西奥).

*Duxi'ao* 度西奥 (Fig. 5) is one of several examples of his Chinese name tag pieces. This artwork was painted in a bubble style with 3D effects, embellished with two lightning bolts and a puppet<sup>10</sup> on a blue background. The character *xi* 西 (West, Western) in the center of the piece is shaped like a yellow sullen face. It is interesting to note how the puppet *xi* 西 meaning 'West, Western' is interlocked between two red colored Chinese characters that are not puppets.

In a recent interview,<sup>11</sup> Dezio said that he and Xeme (a Hong Kong based graffiti artist) were the first artists in China to paint Chinese characters in their pieces. The artwork in collaboration with Xeme (Fig. 6)<sup>12</sup> comprises two big tags, *Duxi'ao* 度西奥 (Dezio's Chinese name tag) on the left and *Yuehang* 月

<sup>9</sup> Dezio, Instagram messages to author Marta R. Bisceglia, May 6, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Puppet (*tu'an* 图案) is usually a figurative element that complements graffiti. It may be a human figure, a monster with animal features, a comic or cartoon character (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 213).

<sup>11</sup> Dezio, Instagram message to author Marta R. Bisceglia, November 10, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> This is the same wall where Oops crew made the artwork *Shanghai Jianqiang*. See footnote no. 8.

航 (maybe Xeme's Chinese tag) on the right on a black background. The Dezio tag was written in a still fairly legible wildstyle, while Xeme's characters are hardly comparable to traditional graffiti styles or traditional calligraphic scripts (perhaps only with regular script for its readability). Both artists chose for their characters a silver color fill-in with shades of white within the corners or curvatures of the character strokes to give the piece greater brightness and shininess. Finally, the two pieces are surrounded by many tags and writings.



Figure 6. Dezio and Xeme, Duxi'ao 度西奥 & Yuehang 月航, 2008, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. Courtesy of the artist.

In the same interview, Dezio said that Chinese local artists believed it was impossible to write with Chinese characters, and yet, despite being French, Dezio proved them wrong. He explained how any character or letter can be divided into strokes and each stroke can be reworked in a personal style. Then, that “personalized stroke” can be combined with others to make a piece. In fact, every time he travels in Asia, Dezio always tries to paint in the local language, even if he doesn't know how to write it, reproducing this “strokes re-combination” concept. This highlights a very intercultural way of doing graffiti which allows a true dialogue with diversity, giving new life to walls in which the only protagonist is Art.

With Dezio, the use of Chinese characters is not limited to his tag but also to a series of works with Chinese characters, each time with a different intent. An example is the artwork *chai* 拆 (Fig. 7). He completed this work in 2008 as a reaction to the city's rapid dismantling and a protest against the demolition of historic, old buildings. De facto, the character *chai* 拆 means ‘to demolish a building and

relocate the inhabitants' and is basically used to mark an old building that had been scheduled for demolition. It is usually painted in red on house walls. In the *chai* 拆 piece, Dezio portrays his protest against the demolition of old buildings by personifying the *chai* 拆 character: on the left, the radical hand 扌 becomes a hand holding a hammer and 'hitting' the radical jin 斤 (on the right side), depicted as an old Chinese house in the process of demolition. The personified *chai* 拆 is painted with a white fill-in and a black outline and is bombed with lots of original Chinese *chai* 拆 characters, marked in red and circled.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 7. Dezio, Chai 拆 (To Demolish), 2008, spray paint on wall, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist.

The OOPS crew and Dezio perfectly embody the cosmopolitan and intercultural nature of the city of Shanghai, whose artistic and cultural 'contamination' (between local and foreign artists, with the indistinct use of Chinese characters and Latin letters, etc.) make the city a fertile ground for creation.

---

<sup>13</sup> Several artists have engaged with this character in the 1990s, i.e. Wang Jinsong with the project *Chai, demolish one-hundred signs of demolition* (1999): [Wang Jinsong. One Hundred Signs of Demolition \(Chai\). 1999 | MoMA](#)

## 5. The Chengdu graffiti scene

The city of Chengdu is the capital of the Sichuan province, a region located in the southwestern part of China. Chengdu is known as the ‘Land of Plenty’ or the ‘Celestial Country’ (*tianfu zhi guo* 天府之国), a pseudonym attributed to the territory due to its mild climate and generous harvests. Although the city is characterized by strong economic development and increasingly marked modernization, it still preserves typical examples of traditional architecture, local food and culture, maintaining its historical Chinese atmosphere (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 153). The art of graffiti spread into the city in the early 2000s, faster than the centres of Beijing and Shanghai, where control by the authorities was greater. For this very reason, Chengdu is the ideal land for artistic growth. The city has three main characteristic sites where graffiti may be admired:

1. *Fuqing Lu* 府青路 (‘Fuqing Road’). In this street, measuring almost two hundred meters in length, splendid graffiti appear on red brick walls. In addition to the traditional dragons with bright red and yellow colours, there are representations of Chengdu’s cars, buildings and bridges, murals that deal with the contemporary themes of industry and progress, and others dedicated to reflections on city life (Luo and Gao 2018).
2. *Dongda Lu* 东大路 (‘Dongda Road’). This is a building site measuring about four hundred meters, which has become a particularly attractive destination among young graffiti writers. Some of the most represented themes are various traditional Chinese elements such as giant pandas and cranes, or abstract concepts and indefinite lines which give life to a vivid and colourful area.
3. *U37 Chuangyi cangku* U37 创意仓库 (‘U37 Creative Warehouse’). This site lies in the Jinjiang district, a small area in the heart of Chengdu, hidden among residential skyscrapers. Today, it represents a meeting place for different kinds of artists, from writers to musicians.

## 6. The oriental “spirit” in the art of GAS

Gas is the most representative writer on the Chengdu graffiti scene. He is:

1. one of the precursors of graffiti writing in Chengdu;
2. one of the first writers in China to use Chinese characters in his works; and
3. an ongoing ‘king’<sup>14</sup> for young writers operating in the city.

---

<sup>14</sup> ‘King’ (*wangzhe* 王者) refers to a kind of guide for other graffiti artists. Generally, he is the most skilled and respected among all writers (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 212).



Gas' real Chinese name is Chen Zhipeng 陈志鹏. He was born in 1989 in Chongzhou, a small town near Chengdu. He joined the hip-hop culture when he was twelve years old, through magazines and websites. When he was fifteen, he started painting on walls, and at the age of nineteen he entered the 'Chengdu Vocational Art Academy' (Environmental Art Design). At an early age he was named Shui Gui 水鬼 (Water Ghost), but the tag he has decided to use is GAS, which the artist reproduces in both Latin letters and Chinese characters (*qi* 氣). His Chinese tag Qi 氣 is a translation of the word 'Gas' and relates to the Chinese cultural concept of 'vital energy,' 'vital force,' 'material energy,' or simply 'energy.' "Qi 氣 is everywhere, even while you and I are talking right now," he has been quoted as saying (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 160).

In the traditional Chinese concept, *qi* is recognized as *da qi* 大氣 ('great energy' or 'energy of the macrocosm') and *xi qi* 吸氣 ('breath').<sup>15</sup> Originally, the *da qi* would have descended, giving birth to the earth; so the rain is understood as the '*qi* of the earth,' which, becoming rarefied, would have risen, giving birth to the heaven. The human being, who is between heaven and earth, has both manifestations of *da qi*: the heavier one forms the body, the lighter one forms the heart (Pasqualotto 2007: 108-110). The idea of *qi* is also connected to another fundamental traditional Chinese concept, that of *xing* 行 ('phase, process'). The concept of the *wu xing* 五行 ('five elements,' more precisely defined as 'the five processes') describes nature as the set of the five elements that compose it (fire, water, metal, wood and earth) and as a consequence of the relationships that occur between them. Referring to these two fundamental concepts of Chinese culture (*qi* and *xing*), the artist highlights, in the choice of his very name, how his will is to instil oriental 'breath' in his art (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 161).

Gas mostly uses his Chinese tag Qi 氣 as the main piece for his works. The character is produced in various shapes, techniques, colours and styles. In the piece Gas created in the Jinniu District of Lin Xiang Zi (Fig. 8), for example, the large character Qi 氣 (Gas) is written in non-simplified form, in a Wild and 3D graffiti style. The piece has a thick white outline. Every stroke has various layers of colours, from dark to light blue, from dark to light purple, from dark to light brown, and from dark to light green. The character has two backgrounds: the first is a grey 'bubble-cloud,' the second is a black wall. This character seems to reproduce a calligraphic seal of contemporary times: like a traditional seal, it is the sign of the artist, and it is characterized by angular strokes. On the right side of the piece, the tag

---

<sup>15</sup> For more information about this concept, see Ledderose (1986).

GAS is reproduced in Latin letters, as well as the tag KB (Kong Boys), a crew from Hong Kong with whom GAS often collaborates. On the left side, there are the two Chinese characters, *Hao Qiao* 好巧, which represent the tag ‘How Chill,’ an artistic-collaborative duo between Gas and SEVE (or SEVEN), a writer of the ABS crew from Beijing.



Figure 8. GAS, Qi 氣 (Gas), 2019, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, Jinniu District, Lin Xiang Zi. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to the character *qi* 氣, Gas often uses other Chinese characters for his works, like *Yu* 雨 (‘Rain,’ Fig. 9) or *Feng* 風 (‘Wind,’ Fig. 10). In the work *Feng* 風, the character is displayed with a thick dark purple outline. The sloping shades of colours—from dark orange to straw yellow—give the character three-dimensionality. Around the character there are several writings and tags: top left there are the Chinese characters *hao qiao* 好巧, top right there is the date of execution of the work (2016), and bottom left there is the title of the work 風, written in non-simplified Chinese character. In the middle of the work, there is the tag ‘KB crew’ (Kong Boys). Finally, bottom right there is the tag of the artist written in Latin letters: ‘GAS.’



Figure 9. GAS, Yu 雨 ('Rain'), 2016, spray paint on wall, U37 Creative Warehouse, Chengdu. Courtesy of the artists.



Figure 10. GAS, Feng 風 ('Wind'), 2016, spray paint on wall, U37 Creative Warehouse, Chengdu. Courtesy of the artists.

GAS often creates works in collaboration with other artists, mostly for commercial purposes. In 2009, Gas struck up a friendship with Seven (or Seve), giving birth to an artistic-commercial duo named Hao

Qiao 好巧 ('How Chill'). Many of the collaborations between Gas and Seve are not necessarily for commercial purposes, but simply establish the artistic union between the two writers. An example of this collaboration is the graffiti 'HOW CHILL' created in 2016 (Fig. 11). The piece is divided into two distinct parts: the left part was made by Gas, who reproduced the two Chinese characters 成都; the right part was created by Seven and is separated from Gas' part by an S-shaped chain. Seven depicts the two Latin letters 'LA' (Los Angeles) in 3D style, 'contrasting' with the piece by Gas, who instead uses Chinese characters. In the background are various puppets representing some figures of the Chicano community, an ethnic group of Mexican origin that lives in the United States. Finally, there is an inscription in English that reads: 'If I had an end in my heart, I would prefer that I should never arrive' (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 162-165).



Figure 11. Gas and Seven, graffiti signed How Chill, 2019, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, Kuixinglou.  
Courtesy of the artists.

Gas sends a message of hope and future wishes for graffiti art and for the city of Chengdu and states:

The true essence of writing and street art in general is to paint so that the public can have fun and admire what you do. Photographing graffiti and posting them online is nice, but that's not the point. I don't make graffiti to collect images; the primary goal for me is to show them on the street. I want to paint on big streets, I want to find big streets to spread my art, big corners, remarkable places. I want to bring my art to the street. I hope Chengdu grows to embrace street art in all its forms. This is what I hope for the future (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 166).

Gas' art fits perfectly with that vein of 'Chinese style graffiti' which is expressed using Chinese characters and/or references to Chinese cultural elements. In Gas' works, a search for 'Chineseness' and an attempt to develop a specific 'Chinese style is strongly palpable.

### 7. Fan Sack: from graffiti writing to Buddhist-inspired painting

An artist from Chengdu, also active in Paris since 2008, Pang Fan 庞凡—better known as Fan Sack—began his activity as a writer in 2003, at the age of fifteen. At the start of his career, Fan Sack started 'bombing' the streets of Chengdu with his tag and experimented with various forms of writing, from simple tagging-up to the creation of more complex pieces. Fan Sack is a famous artist of international repute; he has his own studio and often shows his works in exhibitions and galleries. Nevertheless, he often comes back to Chengdu to participate in events and festivals, especially involving young people, to contribute to the promotion of the hip-hop culture and spread the graffiti movement in China. For example, on November 2-3, 2019, Fan Sack participated in the Simple Urban Plus Festival, a music and art festival dedicated to young people which took place at the Chengdu Tianfu Furong Garden. For the occasion, Fan Sack produced an artwork composed of four characters (*fu lu shou xi* 福祿壽禧, Fig. 12), which form a popular auspicious phrase: 'Good fortune, long life and happiness.' Each character is placed on a single panel; the four panels are next to one another, and the four characters are read from right to left as usual in traditional Chinese calligraphy. In this work, Fan Sack was probably inspired by the big signs written from right to left in Chinese calligraphy on temples or public buildings. The artwork is made exactly like a calligraphy:

1. its format recalls the "big character calligraphy" (*dazi shufa* 大字书法) of classical tradition;
2. the artist seeks to reproduce brush strokes on paper using a paint roller and a brush;
3. the calligraphic script seems to reproduce regular script (*kaishu* 楷书), and the links between certain strokes of the characters recall running script (*xingshu* 行书).

In contrast to traditional calligraphy, which is always monochrome (black ink on white paper), in this work each character is painted a different colour and has a colourful kaleidoscopic circle in the background that gives tridimensionality and power to each character (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 166-170).



Figure 12. Fan Sack, Fu lu shou xi 福祿壽禧 ('Good fortune, long life, and happiness'), 2019, acrylic on panel, Chengdu, work created during the Simple Urban Plus Festival. Courtesy of the artist.

Throughout his career, Fan Sack has explored different forms of art, such as graffiti writing, street art and painting, creating artworks permeated with Buddhist influences. The artist's predilection is to make his creations outdoors, on the street, even though Fan Sack may be identified more as a street artist than a simple 'graffiti artist.' An example of his work as a street artist is *Wushen zhi shu* 無神之樹 ('The tree of atheism,' Fig. 13), created in 2015 in the 12th district of Paris. Fan Sack depicts different figures and images in which Chinese and Western traditional elements are blended:

1. a monkey at the base is immersed in a blue sea and covers its magenta red eyes with a bright green leaf, so that he walks without seeing. In traditional Chinese culture, the monkey is a symbol of intelligence and cunningness; in the Tibetan tradition, where it is considered a bodhisattva, the monkey is a being who seeks inspiration by helping other sentient beings;
  2. a scholar, a symbol of science and knowledge, acts as an astronaut and guides the monkey;
  3. above them is the Lord of Heaven, a symbol of religion and of the creative power of dao;
  4. the Lord of Heaven is dominated by the figure of Picasso, the symbol of art;
  5. finally, in the upper part, Fan Sack depicts a brain crowned by a vibrant light, a symbol of wisdom.
- The three images (the Lord of Heaven, Picasso and the Brain) represent the indissoluble link between the three disciplines of religion, art and science, which are all part of 'one big tree.' The entire piece features an intense blue background dotted with stars, symbolising open space and the universe.

This work is an iconographic experimentation reflecting the strong relationship between art, science and religion (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 172). As Fan Sack explained:

For me, art, science and religion are one and the same. As human beings, we want to know who we are, where we come from, why we are here and what the relationship between nature and the universe is. Although art, science and religion are three very different disciplines and each of them has a different application in the world, for me they all have a single point of origin. It is like imagining a tree: it all starts from the same trunk, with firm roots. From this large trunk, then, the three disciplines are born and become three different branches. My works speak of this (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 173).



Figure 13. Fan Sack, Wushen zhi shu 無神之樹 ('The tree of atheism'), Enter the Oeil series, 2015, spray paint and acrylic on wall, Paris, 12th district. Courtesy of the artist.

This work is part of a series entitled 'Enter the Oeil,' characterized by the presence of the image of the monkey, the colour blue and the triadic idea of union between science, art and religion. A work belonging to this series, in acrylic on canvas, was exhibited in an important exhibition entitled 'Dalí fait le mur' held from September 11, 2014, to March 15, 2015, at the Espace Montmartre in Paris. This exhibition, which creates a strong parallelism between street art and the surreal world of the master Salvador Dalí, takes its cue from street art and goes straight to the beating heart of surrealism,

following that common thread shared by both styles (Hauer 2014). It was following this exhibition that Fan Sack coined the concept of *graffuturisme*, a unique form of graffiti art that looks to the future. Fan Sack is a complex and multifaceted artist. He is perhaps one of the few—among the many Chinese colleagues who started out like him—to have embarked on a fruitful career in continuous evolution and on an international scale.

## 8. Conclusion

Since it is being described an artistic phenomenon that embraces the sphere of hyper-contemporaneity using hybrid, multimedia and ephemeral languages in constant evolution and yet still entirely unexplored, it will be necessary to use a specific methodology to approach graffiti in China. As the literature on the subject is poor and vague, the study has included field research, interviews with the artists and sources on websites, blogs and social media. Given these assumptions, it is very important to ‘photograph’ a frame that it will be not necessarily exemplifying, but could be an essential starting point for the study of this phenomenon. This analysis of four representative artists from Shanghai and Chengdu clearly shows different ways of re-elaborating tradition and a local-oriented attitude from a global perspective. All of them, in their artistic careers, have used or still use Chinese characters, cultural elements and calligraphy in distinct ways, methods and contexts. The artworks analyzed highlight four distinct yet ‘linked’ artistic trends:

1. the cosmopolitan OOPS crew blends Chinese tradition with Western graffiti fundamentals, perfectly in line with the eclectic nature of Shanghai;
2. the French writer Dezio redefines his personal style by combining Chinese characters with the Euro-American tradition in order to create a mutual artistic dialogue;
3. the Chinese writer Gas makes use of Western graffiti techniques and styles without ever losing sight of his ‘Chineseness,’ always using Chinese characters and creating an original, local-oriented graffiti trend;
4. finally, the Chinese-born, Paris-based artist Fan Sack spreads a new figurative artistic language (see his ‘graffuturisme’) also in Europe, while always remaining connected with his origins.

These four artistic trends analysed demonstrate how graffiti in China has a traditional but at the same time innovative nature: their diffusion and ‘fusion’ within the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai and their artistic-figurative drive with Chinese characteristics in the city of Chengdu, outline an art in continuous evolution and movement, capable of overcoming eastern borders but also of insinuating Chinese characteristics overseas.



## References

- Anssi Arte. 2015. *Forms of Rockin': Graffiti Letters and Popular Culture*. Årsta: Dokument Press.
- Barrass, Gordon S. 2002. *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*. London: The British Museum Press.
- Bidisha. 2014. "China Flash: ABS Crew: Graffiti Artists on Legal, Semi-legal and Illegal Street Art." Bidisha-online blogspot, October 1: [Bidisha\\_online: China Flash: ABS Crew: graffiti artists on legal, semi-legal and illegal street art](http://bidisha-online.blogspot.com) (bidisha-online.blogspot.com).
- Bisceglia, Marta R., Adriana Iezzi and Martina Merenda. 2022. In: *I graffiti in Cina*, edited by Iezzi Adriana, 230. Bologna: 1088press: [I graffiti in Cina enhanced digital edition • 1088press](http://www.1088press.com).
- Davis, Kenrick. 2019. "Shanghai's Fading Graffiti Scene Writes One Final Chapter." Sixthtone, December 4: [Shanghai's Fading Graffiti Scene Writes One Final Chapter](http://sixthtone.com) (sixthtone.com).
- Greenspan, Anna. 2014. *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gandelonas, Mario. 2011. *Shanghai Reflections. Architettate, Urbanism, and the Search for an Alternative Modernity*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Hauer, Caroline. 2014. "Expo: Dali fait le mur à l'Espace Montmartre – 22 artistes de street art revisitent l'univers de Salvador Dalí – Jusqu'au 15 mars 2015." *Paris La Douce*, September 19: [Expo : Dali fait le mur à l'Espace Montmartre - 22 artistes de street art revisitent l'univers de Salvador Dali - Jusqu'au 15 mars 2015 - Paris la douce, magazine parisien, culture, sorties, art de vivre](http://parisladouce.com).
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2019. "The Kwanyin Clan: Modern Literati Graffiti Writers. An Aesthetic and Text Analysis of Their Main Artworks." *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale* 55/395-448.
- Ledderose, Lothar. 1986. Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function." *Orientalia* 17/10: 35-50.
- Li, Wendan. 2009. *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Luo Yu 罗昱 and Gao Hongxia 高红霞 . 2018. Tuya, ren Chengdu de poju lao hong zhuanqiang bian cheng yishu qiang 涂鸦，让成都的破旧老红砖墙变成艺术墙 ["Graffiti: transforming Chengdu's old dilapidated red brick walls into murals"]. *People's Network Sichuan Channel*, May 30: [涂鸦，讓成都的破舊老紅磚牆變成藝術牆 - 每日頭條](http://www.kknews.cc) (kknews.cc).
- Mininno, Alessandro. 2021. Graffiti writing in Italy 1989-2021. Translated by Ben BazalgetteStaples. Venezia: Bruno [orig.: 2008. *Graffiti Writing. Origini, significati, tecniche e protagonisti in Italia*. Milano: Mondadori Electa].
- Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio. 2007. *Figure di pensiero: Opere e simboli nelle culture d'oriente*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Sanada, Ryo and Suridh Hassan. 2010. *Graffiti Asia*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Valjakka, Minna. 2011. "Graffiti in China – Chinese Graffiti?" *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 29/1: 61-91.
- Valjakka, Minna. 2015. "Negotiating Spatial Politics: Site-responsive Urban Art Images in Mainland China." *China Information* 29/2: 253-281.
- Valjakka, Minna. 2016. "Claiming Spaces for Urban Art in Beijing and Shanghai". In: *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Ross Jeffrey Ian, 357-371. Abingdon & New York, NY: Routledge.

Walde, Claudia. 2011. *Street Fonts: Graffiti Alphabets from around the World*. London: Thames & Hudson.

---

Marta R. Bisceglia is a Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Interpretation and Translation (DIT) of the University of Bologna. For several years, she has been engaged in the study of graffiti in Asia. In February 2021, she joined the WRITE Project through the research fellowship *WRITE: New Forms of Calligraphy in Contemporary China. The Case of Graffiti Art*. Her research focuses on the relationship between calligraphy and graffiti writing in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. She continued this line of inquiry as a PhD student in the same field. Since November 2024, she has been collaborating with the WRITE Project through the research fellowship *Calligraphy and Graffiti in Contemporary China: A Focus on Socio-Political and Economic Aspects*.

Marta can be contacted at: [martarosa.bisceglia@unibo.it](mailto:martarosa.bisceglia@unibo.it)

Martina Merenda is a sinologist, translator and professional dubber. In her research activity she focused on the Chengdu graffiti scene. She is currently a Research Fellow at the Department of Interpretation and Translation (DIT) at the University of Bologna and has been a member of the WRITE Project since 2021. In February 2021, she joined the WRITE Project through a research fellowship, investigating the relationship between contemporary Chinese calligraphy and performing arts. She continued this research as a PhD student in the same field. Since November 2024, she has been collaborating with the WRITE Project through a research fellowship titled “*New Forms of Calligraphy in China: A Focus on Decorative and Applied Arts*”.

Martina can be contacted at: [martina.merenda@unibo.it](mailto:martina.merenda@unibo.it)

## New forms of calligraphy in contemporary China

*Adriana Iezzi and Marco Meccarelli*

Calligraphy is a central tenet of Chinese civilization. The whole history of China is strictly linked to the history of its writing and calligraphy. In contemporary times Calligraphy has undergone a radical change and it has evolved into new forms in all fields of visual and performing arts. This paper aims at analyzing how all these forms emerged in: 1) “fine and contemporary arts”, where it became, for example, a naïf painting made of pictographic shapes of characters, an abstract combination of dots and lines, a “light-calli-photograph,” or an artistic video based on digital strokes.; 2) decorative and applied arts, where the characters lost their connection with the linguistic meaning to become decorative elements used for commercial purposes or to design modern architectures; 3) performing arts, where the rhythm, dynamism and harmonic movement of calligraphy became a choreographic gesture of a contemporary ballet or a piece of classical music; and 4) graffiti art, where the presence of calligraphy along the streets evolved from Maoist propaganda posters into graffiti pieces made of wild-style characters or cursive tags. Proposing a media-based categorization and a new taxonomy of the contemporary calligraphic production, this article aims at demonstrating how these new forms powerfully resonate with China’s rich and enduring cultural tradition and at the same time mirror the sweeping cultural and economic changes that have taken place in China during the last decades.

**Keywords:** Calligraphy, Chinese calligraphy, contemporary Chinese art, contemporary Chinese calligraphy, calligraphy and performing arts, calligraphy and decorative arts, calligraphy and applied arts, calligraphy and graffiti art.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Calligraphy is a central tenet of Chinese civilization (Li 2009; Ledderose 1986). The history of China is intricately linked to the history of its writing and calligraphy (Ouyang and Fong 2008), and the emergence of new elements in the powerful and extremely coherent tradition of the calligraphic practice has always been an indicator of ongoing cultural changes (Scholmbs 1998; Harrist and Fong 1999; Kraus 1991). Art curator, historian, and critic Gao Minglu wrote: “The appearance of the characters is the appearance of culture. The critique of the characters is the critique of the culture, the reorganization of the characters is the reorganization of the cultures” (Gao 1998: 195).

Throughout history, writing has inevitably evolved into a mighty means of power and control; both its form and content are constantly modified to achieve these ends. Chinese culture is perhaps most receptive to writing as a form of self-expression, artistic code, and propaganda instrument simultaneously having an uninterrupted, three-thousand-year history of writing. In this regard, although many Chinese dialects exist, Chinese writing has inevitably evolved into a mighty means of unity and a common form of communication. Even if people cannot verbally communicate in different provinces, they can understand each other in writing. As a result, the art of calligraphy occupied a prominent place as the supreme form of visual art not only in its aesthetics but also in society (Ledderose 1986, Kraus 1991, Barrass 2002, Yen 2005, Wu 2008). In the last forty years, the uneven growth of the new commercial economy and the evolving politics of the Communist Party have “re-opened” China to the rest of the world and to a freer confrontation with its tradition. Since the 1990s, the opening-up policy of China, the advent of globalization, and increasing cross-cultural communication have strengthened the need to preserve the country’s artistic legacy, creating a virtual bridge between civilizations. Several Chinese artists re-imagined the calligraphic sign as a creative form of expression after the writing characters were erased. In this context, the art of calligraphy exploded into a plethora of different forms in all fields of visual and performing arts, reflecting the increasing cultural diversification of the Chinese society and its “fragmented and discontinuous nature” (Chen 2011: 59).

The first aim of this article is to propose a macro-categorization of these different forms, using a media-based classification into four categories, that are:

---

<sup>1</sup> Every part of the article has been discussed and finalized together and cannot be considered as a composition of separately written parts. Only for academic purposes, we consider here that: Adriana Iezzi is the author of paragraphs 1 – 4; Marco Meccarelli is the author of paragraph 2.4. The introduction was written by the two authors.

1. “Fine and contemporary arts” (or simply “contemporary visual arts”): this is only a tentative label to include new forms of calligraphy (from the 80s until now) in the domain of the so called “fine arts”<sup>2</sup> (which means painting-like calligraphy, few characters calligraphy, abstract calligraphy, printmaking, seal carving, and sculpture) and “contemporary arts” (which means assemblage, collage, mixed-media, conceptual art, installation, photography, digital art, videoart, and land-art).<sup>3</sup>
2. Performing arts: new forms of performance art, contemporary dance, and music influenced by calligraphic aesthetics and practice.
3. Applied and decorative arts: i) artistic cross-fertilization of modern calligraphy with typical Chinese products such as ceramics; ii) use of calligraphy as a source of inspiration for graphic, industrial, and fashion design products and iii) for architecture.
4. Graffiti art: different forms of writings (Latin alphabet and Chinese characters) and styles (graffiti styles and calligraphic styles) in Chinese graffiti works.

In this article, we will focus in particular on the first category because is where we have collected the most data so far, but we will also briefly describe the other categories as well. For each category, we will give representative examples and define subcategories and trends in order to propose a new taxonomy and representation/classification of the artistic production. Drawing on a preliminary historical reconstruction of the phenomenon of “Chinese Modern Calligraphy” (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中国现代书法), art criticism (also in the Sinophone sphere) and direct contact with the artists, the selection of the artworks follows six main criteria: innovation (at least one innovative element with respect to traditional calligraphy must be represented, in relation to content, support, tools/materials, concept, etc.), calligraphic vocation (calligraphic component/s must be predominant), impact (high impact/resonance in public audience/critical reviews), variety among the media-areas, chronology (sampling the timeline of the whole phenomenon from 1985 until today), and representativeness (artworks made by representative artists and representative of a current/trend). The theoretical concepts at the basis of this article are those of “intermedia” (Higgins 2001: 49-54) and “hybrid art forms” (Levinson 1984): in the selected artworks, calligraphy is only a component of intermedia works characterized by hybridization.

---

<sup>2</sup> For the definition of “fine arts,” see the Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/fine-art> (22.03.2024).

<sup>3</sup> This is a provisional list of “contemporary arts” found and analysed so far, but are susceptible to adjustments and additions.

## 2. New forms of calligraphy in “Fine and contemporary arts”

### 2.1. First examples: manipulation of characters, space decomposition, and “pictorial” approach to calligraphy

The first examples of new forms of Chinese calligraphy in contemporary visual arts were displayed during the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy” (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa shouzhan* 中国现代书法首展), held in October 1985 at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing.

Seventy-two artworks were showcased and all 26 artists involved were members of the “Chinese Modern Painting and Calligraphy Association” (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa xuehui* 中国书法家学会) which was founded in July 1985 to organize this pivotal event. The most important calligraphers who took part in the exhibition were Huang Miaozi 黄苗子 (1913-2012), Zhang Ding 张仃 (1917-2010), and Li Luogong 李骆公 (1917-1992), who belong to the old generation of Chinese calligraphy masters, together with Gu Gan 古干 (1942-2020), Wang Xuezhong 王学仲 (1925-2013), Ma Chengxiang 马承祥 (b. 1937), Dai Shanqing 戴山青 (1944-2004) who were the promoters of the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Their works were neither calligraphies nor paintings (Liu 2000: 33), but they were something that participated both in calligraphy practice and painting conceptions.<sup>5</sup> Heavily influenced by contemporary Japanese calligraphy,<sup>6</sup> in particular by the “Few characters” (*shaozishu* 少字数) current and the “School of ink appearance” (*moxiang pai* 墨象派),<sup>7</sup> they focused their attention on the manipulation of (few) characters, the original/pictorial use of ink and the decomposition of the traditional space.

Two main examples of this type of works, displayed for the first time at the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy”, are *Shan cui* 山摧 (“The Mountains Are Breaking Up,” 1985, Fig. 1) by Gu Gan and *Li Bai shi* 李白诗 (“Li Bai’s Poem,” 1985, Fig. 2) by Su Yuanzhang 苏元章 (1924-2002). The *Mountains Are Breaking Up* (Fig. 1) is the most representative picture of this exhibition.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the exhibition planning process and the different phases of the exhibition, see Pu and Guo (2005: 19-24).

<sup>5</sup> The artworks displayed in the exhibition are gathered in the exhibition catalogue (Wang 1986).

<sup>6</sup> The influence of the Japanese avant-garde calligraphy on the Modernists was pointed out by several Chinese scholars such as Qu Lifeng (Qu 2008), Yang Yingshi (Yang 2004: 227), and Liu Canming (Liu 2000: 26-32).

<sup>7</sup> The “Few Characters” current, whose leader is Teshima Yūkei (1901-1987), is characterized by the use of few characters (or even only one character) in the calligraphic works, while the “School of Ink Appearance” focuses on the experimentation in the use of ink effects and in the spatial arrangement of the composition. For more details, see Chen (1999: 306).



Figure 1. Gu Gan, *Shan cui* 山摧 (“The Mountains Are Breaking Up”), 1985, ink on paper, 93.5 x 87.5 cm, London, British Museum. © British Museum

In this work, which drew inspiration from a poem by Li Bai 李白 (701 – 762), the artist wrote two huge characters *shan* 山 “mountain” and *cui* 摧 “destruction, overturning” in order to create a visual metaphor: the character *shan* 山 “mountain” is overturned by the force of the other main character *cui* 摧 “destruction” to symbolize the emergence of a new era for calligraphy (Barrass 2022: 184). The two characters are part of two lines of a poem by Li Bai entitled “The Hard Road to Sichuan” (*Shudao nan* 蜀道难)<sup>8</sup>, which Gu Gan wrote very freely around the huge character *shan* 山 “mountain.” The two lines are:

*Di beng shan cui zhuangshi si,*

地崩山摧壯士死 [地崩山摧壯士死],

*ranhou tian ti shi zhanxiang gou lian.*

然後天梯石棧相鉤連 [然後天梯石棧相鉤連]。

The ground collapsed and the mountain crumbled - warrior heroes died,  
and only then this road in the sky was linked with a plank road.

<sup>8</sup> To read the whole poem in Chinese, see: [https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv\\_d59ec5d6c91c.aspx](https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_d59ec5d6c91c.aspx) (22.03.2024).

Gu Gan's huge characters reinforce the message of the two lines by Li Bai that from great upheaval new and good things would emerge (Barrass 2002: 55). For Gu Gan, calligraphy is symbolically rejecting old ideas to give birth to new ones. However, according to Chinese classical aesthetics principles, the use of Li Bai's poem (*shi* 诗) written in calligraphic style (*shu* 书) and the manipulation of the two characters to create a visual representation (*hua* 画) also suggest the reference to the Chinese indissoluble artistic triad of “poetry, calligraphy and painting” (*shi shu hua* 诗书画).<sup>9</sup>

Another important example in that sense is the work by Su Yuanzhang entitled “Li Bai's poem” (Fig. 2).

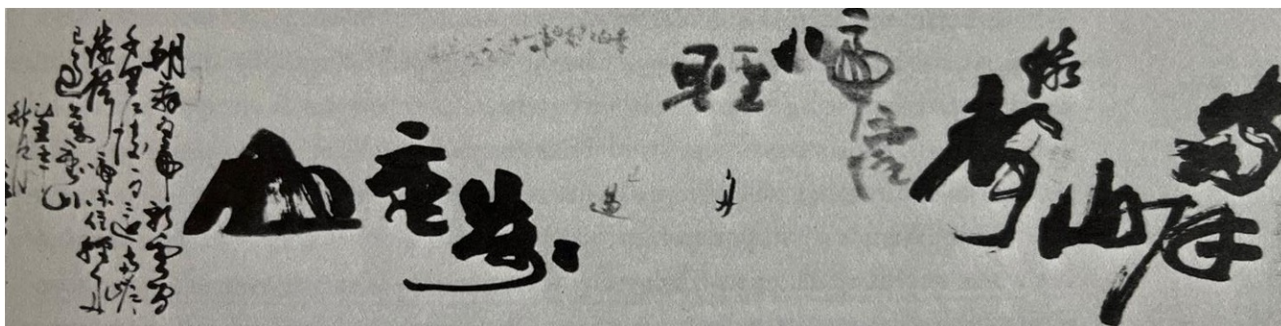


Figure 2. Su Yuanzhang, *Li Bai shi* 李白诗 (“Li Bai's Poem”), 1985, ink on paper.

In this work, the artist uses calligraphic forms and characters disposition to mimic the forms of the landscape painting described in the last two lines of a poem by Li Bai entitled *Zaofa baidi cheng* 早发白帝成 (“Through the Yangtze Gorge”):<sup>10</sup>

*Liang'an yuansheng ti buzhu*  
两岸猿声啼不住 [两岸猿声啼不住],  
*qingzhou yiguo wanchongshan*  
轻舟已过万重山 [轻舟已过万重山]。  
While monkeys vainly hail me from both banks,

---

<sup>9</sup> From the eighth century onward, in China these three art forms have been known as the “three perfections” (*san jue* 三绝), and they have been intimately connected in the minds of the ‘Chinese literati’ (*wen ren* 文人), representing the basis of traditional Chinese culture (Sullivan 1974).

<sup>10</sup> To read the whole poem in Chinese, see: [https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv\\_0f81015a040c.aspx](https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_0f81015a040c.aspx) (22.03.2024). In Zhang 1998, also the title of Su Yuanzhang's work is “Through the Yangtze Gorge.”



My boat has already sped ten thousand mountains away. (Zhang 1998, 15)<sup>11</sup>

The first eight characters for the river banks, the monkeys and their calling are aligned on the right to suggest the presence of a bank of the river further and further away in the background; the three characters “ten thousand mountains” (*wan chong shan* 萬重山) stand firm and upright in the foreground, as if on the near bank; and the other three characters *zhou yi guo* 舟已過 (“my boat has already sped”) are written much smaller and placed between the two river banks like boats flowing quickly on the Yangtze River. “Thus, the image, essentially pictorial in structure, is organically united with that of the poem” (Zhang 1998: 15).

The “pictorial” approach to calligraphy is an important element in these first experimentations (Liu 1999). This means not only a pictorial use of the space, as we have seen in the last two examples, but also the use of pictorial techniques, in particular the insertion of colors (but also the use of flecked ink to obtain stratified effects), and a “pictographic” approach to calligraphy, which means the rework of characters based on their pictographic forms.

For example, in the work by Gu Gan entitled “Deer crying” *Luming* 鹿鸣 (1990, Fig. 3), the artist wrote several times the two characters of the title *lu* 鹿 “deer” and *ming* 鸣 “cry,” using their pictographic forms and adding colors to the pictures in order to recreate the din of a herd of wailing deer.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Translation by Zhang Yiguo and Harry Miller.

<sup>12</sup> The style is reminiscent of Joan Miró, and in fact Gu Gan was deeply influenced by this artist together with Kandinsky and Klee (Barrass 2002: 186). The increasingly thinner brush strokes used by Gu Gan, the use of a line that seeks to hoard and manifest the beauty of form in all its splendor, the adoption of a “childish” language, the isolation of single element/character repeated and arranged in deliberate composition are all references to these Western avant-gardists. The contact and the assimilation of Western avant-garde, in particular of abstract art, together with contemporary Japanese calligraphy (see above), has been one of the main factors of the development of Chinese contemporary calligraphy (Liu 2010: 26-32; Wang 2005: 6; Yang 2004: 227; Qu 2008: 108).



Figure 3. Gu Gan, *Luming* 鹿鸣 (“Deer crying”), 1990, ink and color on paper, 93 x 98 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

From the beginning, the emergence of these innovations/experimentations (manipulation of characters, space decomposition, and “pictorial” approach to calligraphy) is strictly linked to the emergence of the so called “modernist movement” (*xiandai pai* 现代派) (Barrass 2002: 162-193), founded during the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy” and still very active. Even if modernist calligraphers break with the strict rules of Chinese classical aesthetic, focusing on stylistic exploration, they never completely reject the use of the “Four treasures of the study” (*wenfangsibao* 文房四宝: paper, writing brush, ink stick, and ink stone) and remain deeply rooted in the signified system of Chinese writing. Among them, we can recognize 3 different orientations (although the artists often participate in all three):

1. focus on the pictorial elaboration of the pictographic forms of the characters: through the creative deformation of the characters the artists try to suggest and evoke their meanings; the precursors of this orientation are the calligraphy masters Zhang Zhengyu 张正宇 (1904-1976) and Li Luogong, who experimented a lot with seal scripts; one of the leading figures is Huang Miaozi; important exponents are Ma Chengxiang, Dai Shanqing, Wang Xuezhong, Xie Yun 谢云 (1929-2021), Deng Yuanchang 邓元昌 (b. 1939), Wang Naizhuang 王乃壮 (b. 1929) and Peng Shiqiang 彭世强 (b. 1944), who took part in the “First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy,” as well as artists such as Huang Yao 黄尧 (1917-1987),<sup>13</sup> Wang Yong 王镛 (b. 1948), and Wang Tianmin 王天民 (b. 1944);

---

<sup>13</sup> For more details on this artist, see the official site of the “Huang Yao Foundation”: [www.huangyao.org/](http://www.huangyao.org/) (22.03.2024).

2. tension towards a real fusion of painting and calligraphy, carried out through the insertion of figurative elements within unconventional calligraphies (i.e. in Guo Zixu 郭子绪 1940-2018), using colors (i.e. in Gu Gan) and/or painting arrangements and ink techniques (i.e. in Wang Xuezhong, Huang Yao, Wen Bei 文备 b. 1953, etc.); for this nucleus, we can speak of a real “pictorial calligraphy;” the leading figure of this orientation is Gu Gan;
3. focus on a new spatial arrangement of the elements that compose the structure of the calligraphy; the leading figures of this orientation are Wang Dongling 王冬龄 (b. 1945) and Bai Di 白砥 (b. 1965); other important exponents are Tong Yang-tze 董阳孜 (b. 1942), Zhu Naizheng 朱乃正 (1935-2013), Xing Shizhen 邢士珍 (1936-2019), Ma Xiao 马啸 (b. 1962), Zhang Aiguo 张爱国 (b. 1967), Liu Canming 刘灿铭 (b. 1963), Yan Binghui 阎秉会 (b. 1956), Lin Xincheng 林信成 (b. 1952), Wang Gongyi 王公懿 (b. 1946), etc.

## 2.2. Toward the “abstract” line

Most of the artists of the last orientation also create artworks where calligraphic lines are no longer linked to the semantic signs of the Chinese writing: they don't write Chinese characters and/or they don't have in mind Chinese characters so their works can be defined in some way “abstract” (Fig. 4).<sup>14</sup> Instead of being simultaneously a “verbal art” and an “abstract art” (Zhang 1998, 24), the “art of writing characters” (*xiezi yishu* 写字艺术) and the “art of writing lines” (*xiantiao yishu* 线条艺术) (Liu 2010: 28), like traditional calligraphy, in their works calligraphy becomes simply an “abstract art of writing lines” (Iezzi 2013a: 168-169).

Besides them, there are also other artists, who are not “modernist” calligraphers, for example Pu Lieping 濮列平 (b. 1959), Wei Ligang 魏立刚 (b. 1964, fig. 4), Shao Yan 邵岩 (b. 1960), Luo Qi 洛齐 (b. 1960), Fung Ming-chip 冯明秋 (b. 1951), Qiu Zhenzhong 邱振中 (b. 1947) and Chen Guangwu 陈光武 (b. 1967), who greatly deform Chinese characters until they are (nearly) unrecognizable so that their works seem abstract, even if their starting point is, however, Chinese writing (Iezzi 2013b: 54-75).

---

<sup>14</sup> For an explanation of the concept of “abstract” in Chinese art and the difference with Euro-American conception, see Iezzi (2013b).

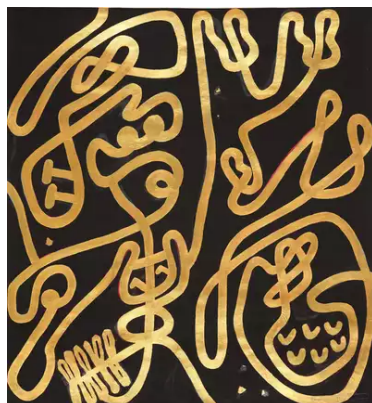


Figure 4. Wei Ligang, *Zhuang zhou meng die* 庄周梦蝶 (“Zhuang Zhou Dreaming a Butterfly”), 2014, ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 96 × 88.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

There are finally other artists, such as Qin Feng 秦风 (b. 1961) and Zhang Dawo 张大我 (1943-2023), who use abstract calligraphic lines as their stylistic signature (*ibid.*, 76-84). The works by Zhang Dawo have gradually lost their connection with Chinese writing and are now entirely inspired by nature (Fig. 5; Xia 2015), while Qin Feng’s art can be defined as “calligraphic abstract expressionism” because he uses calligraphic lines (not words) to give vent to the turmoil of his soul (Malhotra 2003).



Figure 5. Zhang Dawo, “The Star of the City, a Rock and Roll Singer,” 2011, ink on paper, 162 x 94cm. Courtesy of the artist.

### 2.3. New supports/materials and tools

From the end of the 80s, Chinese calligraphers also started to experiment with the use of new supports and materials to replace the traditional ink on *xuan* paper.<sup>15</sup> One of the most notable experimenters in this regard is Wang Dongling. He started with newspaper journals at the end of the eighties (Fig. 6), creating stratified collages, and then he continued with magazine sheets, photographs, acrylic sheets, propylene panels (Fig. 7), polyester/polypropylene films, glass panels, gelatin silver prints, bamboo sticks (Fig. 9), silk robes and even iPad digital support (Fig. 8). Regarding materials, he frequently uses acrylics instead of ink (a common practice among modern calligraphers), and in his latest work, he replaces the brush with an ipencil as calligraphic tool.<sup>16</sup>

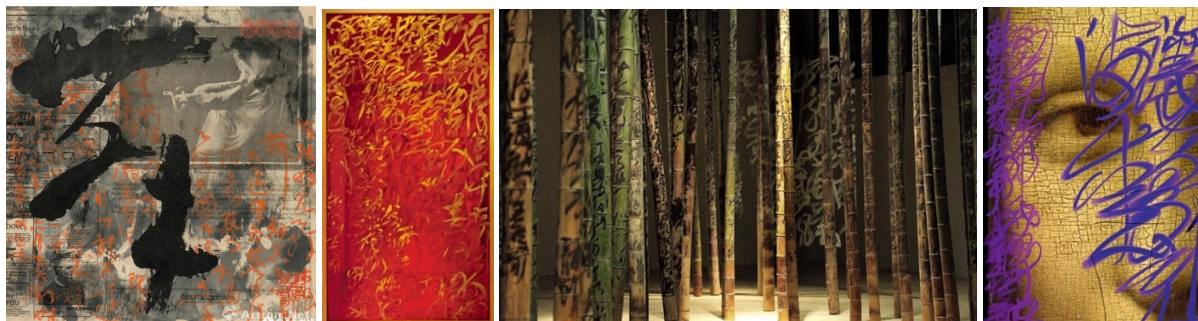


Figure 6. Wang Dongling, *Wu 舞* (“Dancing”), 1989, ink and color on newspaper, 55,6 x 54,3 cm. (Fig. 6-9: courtesy of the artist).

Figure 7. Wang Dongling, *Su Shi “Chibi huai gu” 苏轼《赤壁怀古》* (“Meditations on the Ancient Battleground of Chibi by Su Shi”), 2017, acrylics on propylene panel, 220 x 120 cm.

Figure 8. Wang Dongling, *Zhujing 竹径* (“The Bamboo Path”), 2017, ink on bamboo sticks, installation, OCAT, Shenzhen.

Figure 9. Wang Dongling, *Rang shijie chongman ai 让世界充满爱* (“Filling the World with Love”), 2021, iPad work, 2388px×1668px.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about the use of unconventional materials by Chinese experimental artists from the 1980s, see Cacchione and Wu (2019), Cacchione and Lin (2021). The authors of these books coined the term “Material Art” to describe works that place “matter” itself as the primary vehicle of investigation and expression, offering the first serious exploration of ground-breaking material explorations in Chinese contemporary art.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the art of Wang Dongling, see among the others Wang (2007), Xu (2011), Hearn (2013: 139-145), and Gao (2021).

Like Wang Dongling, several artists use new tools to reshape calligraphy, for example, Pu Lieping 濮列平 (b.1959) that recently wrote a poem by Liu Ji using a corn broom (Fig. 10), or Shao Yan who usually uses a syringe with a small ink tank, inventing a new technique called “ink shooting” *shemo* 射墨,<sup>17</sup> Chen Weinong 陈伟农 (b. 1962) that in 2021 used a vileda mop, Wang Tiande 王天德 (b. 1960) that usually burns the characters with cigarettes or incense sticks on his multilayered paintings, Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969) that in his “Lightwriting Series” (*Guangxie shufa*, 光写书法, 2005-2010) uses a torch to write in the dark air or again Wang Dongling who in 2021 used for the first time an augmented reality headset with related touch controllers to create a 3D virtual calligraphy (Fig. 11).

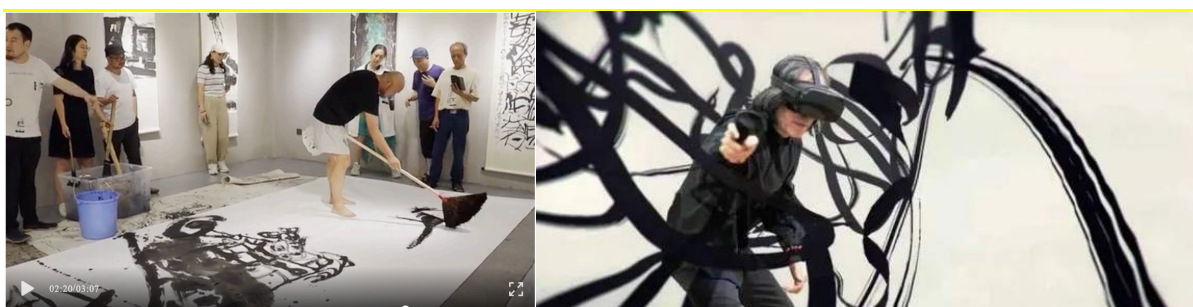


Figure 10. Pu Lieping, *Wu yue shijiu ri dayu* 五月十九日大雨 (“Heavy Rain on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> lunar month”), 07.07.2021, performance with corn broom, brush, ink and color on paper, Huzhou (Zhejiang). Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11. Wang Dongling, *Xiaoyao you - VR shuxie* 《逍遥游》——VR 书写 (“Enjoyment in untroubled ease”), calligraphy with augmented reality headset, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Other important artists who experimented with new supports and materials are also Luo Qi that sometimes uses canvas, plastic sheets, dresses, and even human faces and bodies to write his calligraphies or creates calligraphic collages and assemblages;<sup>18</sup> Gu Gan who sometimes uses canvas, wood, human bodies, and dresses as calligraphic supports; Qin Feng who experiments with cardboard cutouts; Chen Guangwu who in 2008-2009 wrote the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” on 2700 wooden blocks; Gu Wenda 谷文达 (b. 1955) who used human hair in his “United Nations” (*Lianhe guo* 联合国, 1993-2004), tea paper in his “Tea Alchemy” (2002) and neon in his “Neon calligraphies” (*Nihongdeng shufa*

---

<sup>17</sup> For more details on the artist and his “ink shooting,” see Ma (2013).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of the art of Luo Qi, see Iezzi (2019a).

xilie 霓虹灯书法系列, 2004-2007, Fig. 12)<sup>19</sup>; Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡国强 (b. 1957) who in some of his works reproduces the brushstroke using gunpowder; and Feng Mengbo 冯梦波 (b. 1966) who always uses digital supports, for example adapting Chinese calligraphy strokes to a video-game programming language in his “Not too late” (*Bu tai wan* 不太晚, 2010, Fig. 13).



Figure 12. Gu Wenda, “Cultural Transference – Sotheby’s (*Su si bi si* 素思碧寺), A Neon Calligraphy Series,” 2006, mixed media, installation, neon lights on a plexiglas panel, 500 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13. Feng Mengbo 冯梦波 “Not too late” (*Bu tai wan* 不太晚), 2010, video frame. Courtesy of the artist.

#### 2.4. Deconstruction of Chinese writing and new “conceptual” languages

It has been shown throughout history that the artistic value of calligraphy can sometimes outweigh the content, as seen in the cursive style or some eccentric masterpieces (Hsiung 1984, Schlombs 1998). When the artistic value of writing outweighs the literary content, calligraphy can be said to emphasise the transformation of the brushstroke from a signifier of literary meaning to a signifier of visual meaning. Throughout history, literary meaning and visual meaning have been inseparable but now the negotiating process actively challenges the very notion of literary meaning. As art historian Wu Hung rightly points out, “all traditional calligraphers conducted this transformation in one way or another, but none of them tried to completely divorce form from content. A radical departure from this ancient tradition only occurred in contemporary Chinese art” (Wu 1999: 38). Many contemporary artists began creating pseudo-characters and fake texts during the early and mid-1980s, such as Gu Wenda, Wu

<sup>19</sup> Other artists who uses neon characters are Shi Yong 施勇 (b. 1963) in the work entitled “Three Hundred Characters” (*Sanbai ge zi* 三百个字) exhibited for the first time at the Liverpool Biennial 2018 (<https://artlyst.com/features/liverpool-biennial-2018-here-are-twelve-reasons-to-visit-this-event/>, 22.03.2024), and Jessie Yingying Gong 龚颖颖 (b. 1990) in her series entitled “New Semiotics” (2017-ongoing) (<https://jessieyingyinggong.com/new-semiotics/>, 22.03.2024).

Shanzhuan 吴山专 (b. 1960), Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955), and others, who not only consciously separated content and form but attempted to eliminate the content, leaving form as the sole signifier of meaning. Gu Wenda (Gao M. 2006: 127-135) and Xu Bing (Fraser and Li 2020), deeply attached to traditional aesthetics, but sceptical of any doctrine or content, were drawn to an eccentric form of anti-writing. They used ancient traditions to express themselves effectively by subverting ordinary writing codes, inverting graphs, and fabricating fake characters. Gu Wenda with his *Pseudo-Characters Series* (*Xugou wenzi xilie* 虚构文字系列, 1984-1986, Fig. 14) was the first contemporary Chinese artist to seriously create and exhibit pseudo-calligraphy. For Gu, the unreadable texts are used to evoke the limitations of human knowledge (Leung, Kaplan, Gu *et al.* 1999: 87-99), however the malformed, crossed, or miswritten writing signs signify the futility of human pursuit and the meaninglessness of the written code.



Figure 14. Gu Wenda, “The Mythos of Lost Dynasties - Form C: Pseudo-Seal Scripture in Calligraphic Copybook #c-1” (det.), one of the 50 woks that constitute the series, 1984-86, ink on xuan paper, 96.52 x 66.04 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In 1986, Wu Shanzhuan created the “Red Humor Series” (*Hongse youmo* 红色幽默), which mixed writings of the Cultural Revolution with advertising, everyday language, classical Chinese poetry, and the title of Leonardo’s “The Last Supper.” The writings were arranged around a large text on the floor that reads *wushuo badao* 无说八道, which translates to “don’t say nonsense.” Wu Shanzhuan aims not to represent, but to deconstruct, because he wants to give a critical perception of the surrounding reality.

In 1987 Xu Bing began a huge installation entitled “The Book from the Sky” (*Tianshu* 天书, Fig. 15), in the style of fine editions from the Song and Ming dynasties, but filled with meaningless glyphs



designed to resemble more than 4000 thousand traditional Chinese characters. It is a tragic celebration of universal absurdity and a powerful denial of Chinese history, culture, literature, and language.



Figure 15. Xu Bing, “Book from the Sky” (*Tian shu* 天书), 1987-91 (installed at the North Dakota Museum of Art, 1992), installation with hand-printed books, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.  
© Xu Bing Studio.

After the 1989 events in Tian An Men Square, Chinese artists used the calligraphic sign as a means of expressing their pain; between 1990-95 Qiu Zhijie performed “Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a thousand times” (*Chongfu shuxie yi qian bian ‘Lantingxu’* 重复书写一千遍兰亭序, 1990-1995). Writing and repeating Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303-361)’s Preface for the purpose of perfecting the art of inscribing, the black ink begins to merge, and at the same time, the brush marks mix in a strange entanglement first making the characters anti-writing before they are completely erased. Every day since 1995, in his ongoing conceptual performance “Writing Diary With Water” (*Shui xie riji* 水写日记), Song Dong 宋冬 (b. 1966) has used water to write Chinese characters with his finger or brush on the ground, on ice, on the walls, and then on a rock. However, the ink was water, and after the performance, the text vanished instantly (Lin 2023). The transparent, formless, and ephemeral properties of water offer possibilities for artistic reflections on presence, absence, action, trace, and transience. One of China’s best-known performance and Conceptual artists, Zhang Huan 张洵 (b. 1965), in his project “Family Tree” (*Jiapu* 家谱, 2001, Fig. 16), mapped words, names, and stories from his cultural heritage onto his face (Hearn 2013: 66-70). Nine photographs document the gradual obscuring of Zhang’s face with inked characters until it is completely black. Many Chinese characters have roots in pictographs, but Zhang Huan’s work also references the ancient Chinese art of physiognomy, which predicts the future based on facial features. Rather than elucidate Zhang’s character and destiny, these traditional

fortune-telling devices ultimately veil his identity under a dense layer of culturally conditioned references.



Figure 16. Zhang Huan, “Family Tree” (*Jiapu* 家谱), 2001, chromogenic prints of the artist's performance, 53.3 x 41.9 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Courtesy of the artist.

Every artist of anti-writing created a mystical atmosphere, commonly compared with Buddhism and Taoism traditions, and their particularly strange and eccentric version of Chinese calligraphy. Taoists and Buddhists were very sceptical about the way conceptual ideas were transmitted by concrete language. Instead of the normal way of transmitting ideas, they used paradoxical dialogues (*Zhuangzi* 莊子 and some Chan Buddhist *gong'an* 公案)<sup>20</sup> or paintings as a means of documentation, infused with ritual and worship. Chinese contemporary artists usually found the most appropriate material for myth-making in ancient seal-script or ancient calligraphic styles, types of archaic writing that are so old and difficult to read that they have become a mystery in themselves.

Although a variety of meanings and manifestations can be attributed to anti-writing, Chinese contemporary artists rejected legible characters in order to transform Chinese contradictions. The disconnection between Chinese characters' meanings and their signs reflects the identity crisis currently underway. The result is the cancellation of the written sign and the beginning of a new level of meaning where contemporary artists can begin.

---

<sup>20</sup> For an explanation of Chinese paradoxical dialogues, see Wang (2003).

Using human hair and cryptic calligraphy, Gu Wenda began his global “United Nations Project” (*Lianheguo xiangmu* 联合国项目) in 1993. Through this project, he conveyed the meaning of “transculturalism” (Bessire 2003: 12). The installation symbolizes the diversity of races coming together and merging into one “brave new racial identity”<sup>21</sup> made of human hair from people of different races.

Starting in 1994, Xu Bing developed what he called “New English Calligraphy/Square Word Calligraphy” (*Yingwen fangkuaizi shufa* 英文方块字书法, Fig. 17), a synthesis of Chinese and Western writing methods. The calligraphic system designed by Xu Bing adapts the English alphabet to the calligraphic forms of Chinese writing. In order to bridge the two cultures, he deconstructed but then re-configured English words into forms that mimic the square structure of Chinese characters.

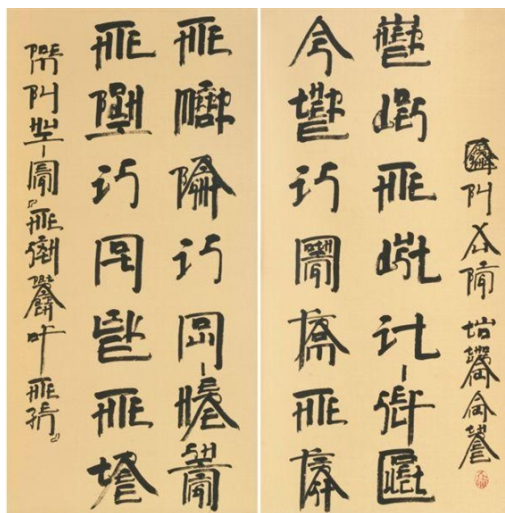


Figure 17. Xu Bing, "Square Word Calligraphy: Longfellow Quote", 2016, ink on xuan paper, 177x192cm.

© Xu Bing Studio.

Pu Lieping theorized in 2002 the *Hanzi yishu* 汉字艺术 (“Art of Chinese Characters;” Pu 2007). It involves combining meanings, sounds, forms, or even single (or part of) Chinese characters to create works that apply to any artistic medium (painting, sculpture, installation, architecture, design, theatre, dance, etc.).

Since 2003, Xu Bing has been working on his “Book from the Ground” (*Dishu* 地书). This book is unique in its use of symbols, derived from international signs combined with emoticons from electronic media. Xu Bing elaborates on a unique code and chooses a distinct style. Using contemporary

<sup>21</sup> See “Artist bio - Wenda Gu’s bio” in WendaGu.com.

pictograms and meta-linguistic characters, he gives new meaning to signs already in use. Pictograms, scripts, and calligraphy are summarized in a single work. It is now possible to understand the arts of the brush beyond national boundaries, regardless of education level (or almost). With the increasing integration of computers and the Internet into daily life, the lexicon of digital symbols has grown as well. The symbolic language of “Book from the Ground” has further evolved, expanded, and complicated. While his “Book from the Sky,” “written” 30 years earlier, is incomprehensible, his “Book from the Ground” is accessible to all. The book expresses Xu Bing's vision of a universal language (Xu 2020).

In 2005 Qiu Zhijie invented the so-called “light-calligraphy-photography” (Gao S. 2007: 11) which updates the traditional calligraphic practice using the torch (like a brush) and colour photography (like ink and paper). Qiu Zhijie, therefore, intends to preserve both the past and the present, with the written character returning to gain meaning.

According to the artists analyzed thus far, characters and calligraphy continue to be the basis for contemporary Chinese artistic exploration. While writing and calligraphy focused on the deconstruction of the writing system and language in the 1980s and 1990s, they have also emerged as central subjects of research in a largely uncharted area of knowledge. “New” characters transcend all national and cultural boundaries and are no longer malformed, crossed, faked, incomprehensible, or poorly written. A “new language” of characters and their calligraphic versions is worldly understood by everyone, through any artistic medium.

### 3. New forms of calligraphy in performing arts: performance art, contemporary dance, and music

The link between performing arts and calligraphy has always been crucial for calligraphic aesthetics. As a lyrical experience, during the phase of execution calligraphy concentrates on the dynamics of momentum and harmony with the universal rhythmic flowing (Ledderose 1986, Kao 1991: 74-83), as it happens in all the performing arts, and especially in performance art, dance, and music. Similarities between calligraphy and performance art are:

1. the focus on the artist's action;
2. the importance of interaction with the public audience;
3. the “processual” and “spontaneist” manner;
4. the concept of “experience”;
5. the close relationship with other art forms (poetry, painting, dance, and music) (Bonito Oliva 2007, Zhang 2006).

Because of all these similarities, lots of contemporary artists are trying to interconnect these two forms of art. They can be divided into two categories:

1. contemporary performers who use calligraphy as a source of inspiration for their happenings/performances (i.e. Zhang Huan, in his *Family Tree* 2001, Fig. 16, or Song Dong and Wu Wei 吴味, b. 1963, in many of their series);<sup>22</sup>
2. contemporary calligraphers who try to transform calligraphic modes into a performative action:
  - i) some of them, such as Zhang Qiang 张强 (b. 1962), make calligraphic performances their first expressive form (Fig. 18);<sup>23</sup>
  - ii) others, such as Pu Lieping (Fig. 10), Shao Yan and Wang Dongling, only sometimes use these two forms together, especially during the inaugural events of their exhibitions.



Figure 18. Zhang Qiang, “Traceology Report – Model A/C”, 2003, performance, opening ceremony of the exhibition “2003: Art of Ink in Xi’an Committee”, Xi’an, China. Courtesy of the artist.

<sup>22</sup> For Song Dong, these series are: “Writing Diary with Water” *Shuixie riji* 水写日记 (1995 – ongoing), “Stamping the Water” *Yinshui* 印水 (1996), “Recording a Millennium in Water” *Shui xie qian nian* 水写千年 (1999/2000), “Writing Time with Water” *Shui xie shijian yi ge duo xiaoshi* 水写时间一个多小时 (1995 – ongoing), and “Fill in the Sea” (2012). For Wu Wei, these series are: *Maobi fumo* 毛笔抚摩 (“Touches of the brush,” 2002-2007), *Maobi buzhen* 毛笔布阵 (“Brush array,” 2002-2003) and *Maobi jiaoyu* 毛笔交遇 (“Encounter with the brush,” 2002-2003). Zhang Huan used calligraphy in another famous performance entitled “1/2” (1998). Also other artists used calligraphy in their performances, such as Gu Wenda in “Speechless #1---2” *Wu yan #1---2* 无言#1---2 (1984-1986), and Qiu Zhijie in “Ten Tang Poems” *Tangshi shi shou* 唐诗十首 (2000-2001).

<sup>23</sup> Zhang Qiang was the first to do it in 1995 when he firstly conceived his “Traceology Report” (1996-2006). “Traceology” is a method he always uses in his calligraphic performances with an active collaboration of a female counterpart. The artworks created during these performances sometimes become monumental site-specific installations of huge panels entirely covered by calligraphic lines. Also today he continues to explore this modus operandi.

As Qiu Zhijie points out: “The calligrapher is like a dancer, dancing with the brush while the traces of the ink record his movement.”<sup>24</sup> The connection between calligraphy and dance is very deep and has its roots in the history of the art of calligraphy. Calligraphy is “the dance of the wrist/ink” and its aesthetics is directly linked to the conception of the “physical execution” of harmonic movements (Kao 1991: 74-83). In the contemporary age, and in particular from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when contemporary dance became popular in China, several contemporary dance companies have tried to “translate” this close relationship with evocative choreographies that fuse these two art forms into one. Starting from the idea of “dancing ink” by the Chinese calligrapher Wang Fangyu 王方宇 (1913-1997) (Wang 1984, 1993), the first “calligraphy dance performance” was held in 1983 at the Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium in New York. From that moment on, lots of Chinese contemporary dance companies have created ballets inspired to calligraphy. Among them, the most important are: the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (“Cursive: A Trilogy,” 2001-2005, Fig. 19, and “Water Stains on the Wall”, 2010),<sup>25</sup> and the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (“Upon Calligraphy/Beyond Calligraphy,” 2005-ongoing).



*Figure 19.* Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, “Cursive: A Trilogy”, 2005. Choreographer: Lin Hwai-min; dancer: Chou Chang-ning; calligraphy in the background by Tong Yang-tze; photo by Liu Chen-hsiang. Courtesy of the dance company.

---

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Qiu Zhijie by Walter Romeo: see the video “Qiu Zhijie at work”, Youtube, 31.05.2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dtdbt4e68LM> (22.03.2024).

<sup>25</sup> For more details about the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, see its official website: <https://www.cloudgate.org.tw/en/cg> (22.03.2024).

Chinese calligraphy is “a musical art” (Billeter 1990: 89). In contemporary age, the strict correlation between music and calligraphic principles (Billeter 1990: 89-107) has influenced the artistic activities of both calligraphers and musicians in three different ways:

1. when they work together in “musicalligraphy performances” (i.e. during the opening ceremony of the exhibition “Luo Qi: Writing Music” held in Bologna in 2019 when the calligrapher Luo Qi wrote a 20 meters long calligraphy inspired by the notes of a musical quartet by the *Collegium Musicum Almae Matris*, Fig. 20<sup>26</sup>);<sup>27</sup>
2. when musicians inspire the shaping of their music gestures to calligraphic brushes (i.e. in a Chou Wen-chung classical piece entitled “Cursive” inspired by cursive style, 1964);<sup>28</sup>
3. when calligraphers conform their artistic conception to music principles (i.e. in Silvio Ferragina’s *Musicaligraphy Project*, a new system to convert calligraphic strokes into musical notes, 2013-ongoing, Fig. 21).<sup>29</sup>



Figure 20. Luo Qi and the Collegium Musicum Almae Matris, musicalligraphy performance, Exhibition “Luo Qi: Writing Music,” opening ceremony, 25.03.2019, Bologna University Library. Courtesy of the artists.

<sup>26</sup> For more details about this performance and the related exhibition, see Iezzi (2020b).

<sup>27</sup> The first to do that was Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生 (b. 1957) in 1997 with his musicalligraphy performance entitled *Xiao sheng, liu shui, shuxie* 箫声·流水·书写 (Flute Melodies, Flowing Water, Writing Calligraphy) (Zhu 2000, 255). Ceng Laide, Pu Lieping and Silvio Ferragina are also artists often engaged in musicalligraphy performances.

<sup>28</sup> To listen to the song, visit: [https://chouwenchung.org/de/composition/cursive/\(22.03.2024\)](https://chouwenchung.org/de/composition/cursive/(22.03.2024)). In his late compositions (from 1990 to 2003), the Sino-American composer Chou Wen-chung created a system that allowed him to translate his calligraphy into music (Everett 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Other important examples in that sense are the series “The Music Script” (*Yinyue zi* 音乐字) by Fung Ming-Chip (2015) and “The music of Ink – Silent Melodies” (*Moyue: wusheng zhi ge* 墨乐：无声之歌) by Luo Qi (2018). For more details, see respectively Fung (2015) and Iezzi (2020a).

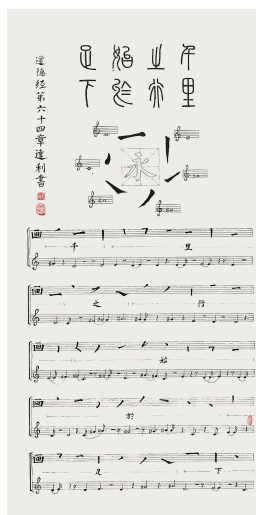


Figure 21. Silvio Ferragina, *Qianli zhi xing kaiyu zu xia* 千里之行始於足下 (A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step), 2013, ink on paper, 70 x 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

There are also performances in which calligraphy, music, and dance work together to create a multimodal and extremely captivating experience, like for example in Pu Lieping's performance *Kewang shengming* 渴望生命 ("Desire of Life," 2010) at the Tap Seac Gallery in Macao or in Wang Dongling's performance *Mowuxihu - shufa yu wudao de duihua* 墨舞西湖——书法与舞蹈的对话 ("Ink Dance at the West Lake—A Dialogue between Calligraphy and Dance," 2011) at the Zhejiang Art Museum in Hangzhou.

#### 4. New forms of calligraphy in decorative art (ceramics), applied arts (graphic, industrial and fashion design) and architecture

The use of the Chinese writing in artistic craftsmanship for the upper classes was a constant in the history of China. As to decorative arts, the most representative examples are ceramics. In their "marks" calligraphy was always present. In contemporary ceramics production, calligraphy is still an important decorative element, but it has been reworked, i.e. becoming a cobalt blue "wild style" script on a porcelain plate (2010, Fig. 22), or it has fragmented and parceled out, i.e. in the Li Xiaofeng's "Made in China" dress (2009). Ceramics has also become the support for modern calligraphers, like in the tableware called "Les poèmes du Mandarin" for Hermès by Fung Ming-chip (2009).<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> For more details, see: [https://fuqiumeng.com/news/40-news-fung-ming-chip-les-poemes/\(22.03.2024\)](https://fuqiumeng.com/news/40-news-fung-ming-chip-les-poemes/(22.03.2024)).





Figure 22. Kwanyin Clan, *Heqi* 和气 (Peace), 2010, porcelain plate painted in cobalt blue with a marker.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Calligraphy applied to graphic design transformed calligraphic strokes into desired design elements and enhanced and improved graphic design to an international level (Guo 2015). The application of calligraphy in graphic design is embodied not only by font design (Liao 2009; Vermeeren 2020: 189-218) but also by logo design, packaging design, poster design, and book design (Guo 2016). The most famous example of the use of calligraphy in graphic design is the logo of the Paralympic Games, designed by Paul Liu, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, who applied traditional calligraphic art elements and transformed the Chinese character *zhi* 之 (“go”) into a human shape in motion (Fig. 23). Other important applied arts, directly connected to the new capitalist and global society, which emerged in China in the last two decades, are industrial and fashion designs (Tsui 2010). In industrial design, calligraphic lines evolve into decorative elements, for example inspiring the design of elegant and smooth armchairs (see the Minaxdo “Yuanyuan armchair,” Fig. 24).<sup>31</sup> Also in fashion design, calligraphy plays an important role:

1. as a source of inspiration for both Chinese and foreign stylists (i.e. Christian Dior 1951, Coco Chanel 1956, Vivienne Tam 2013, Chloe Sung 2016, and Grace Chen 2021-2022);
2. because of several collaborations between “modern calligraphers” and famous fashion houses/stylists (i.e. King of Koowloon and William Tang Tat Chi in 1997, Luo Qi and EFEN in 2008-

---

<sup>31</sup> For more details, visit the official website of Minaxdo: <http://en.minaxdo.com/product/> (22.03.2024). Other important examples are: the “Calligraphy Flatware” designed by Kate Chung (<https://luminaire.com/products/calligraphy-flatware-kate-chung-counterpoint-design-resources>, 22.03.2024), the “LG Chinese calligraphy tablet” by Daniel Yoon, and the “Seiko Clock” by Alan Chan (1998).

2009, Xu Bing and Calvin Klein 2011, and Tong Yang-tze in her multi-year initiative “From Ink to Apparel” 2016-2018);<sup>32</sup>

3. in the use of dresses as a new support for innovative calligraphies (i.e. in some works by Zhang Qiang, Fig. 18, Wang Tiande, Shi Yu 时昱 and Wang Xinyuan 王新元).



Figure 23. Beijing 2008 Paralympics logo by Paul Liu. Courtesy of the International Olympic Committee.

Figure 24. The “Yuanyuan Armchair – Ease” (*Yuantuan yi - yi 缘圆椅——逸*) by Minaxdo, rosewood, 60 x 70 x 80 cm.

Calligraphic lines are a source of inspiration also for lots of contemporary architects. Important examples of calligraphy-inspired architectures are the Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou (2004-2007) by Wang Shu 王澍 (b. 1963), the winner of the 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize;<sup>33</sup> the ‘Yi garden’ by Zhu Pei 朱锠 (b. 1962) at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Biennale in Venice (2010); the ‘Blossom Gate’ in Xiangyang by the Studio Penda (2012-2013); and the SKY SOHO in Shanghai by Zaha Hadid (2010-2014).

## 5. New forms of calligraphy in graffiti art

Calligraphy in China is everywhere, especially along the streets, for example in the calligraphic “signboards” located on every government, institutional and religious buildings (Yen 2005: 17-25), and

---

<sup>32</sup>For more details, see: <https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6> (22.03.2024).

<sup>33</sup>For more details on this opera, see Webb (2015).

in the scrawled advertisements on walls by the migrant workers.<sup>34</sup> During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), there is a peak in the use of “big characters posters” (*dazibao* 大字报) that invaded the streets with their ideological writings (Kraus 1991: 96-108). In the 90s calligraphy started to appear also on public walls as the first form of “graffiti art” (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) (Wu 2000; Valjakka 2011), becoming popular in all major Chinese cities in the mid-2000s (Hassan and Sanada 2011), especially in Beijing and Shanghai (Valjakka 2016).<sup>35</sup> In this particular art that comes from the USA, the use of writing is fundamental and in China, its development has been extremely peculiar and cultural-oriented. Looking at the artistic production of the main Chinese crews, it is possible to recognize two main trends (Iezzi 2020c):

1. one that encourages a process of “internationalization” of Chinese graffiti, promoting the use of the Latin alphabet, English language, Western figurative elements and engaging frequent collaborations with foreign brands (i.e. ABS crew);
2. one opposed trend that encourages a process of “sinicization” of graffiti art, promoting the use of Chinese characters and calligraphy, in order to create a “Chinese graffiti style” (*Zhongguo tese de tuyayishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术) (i.e. Kwanyin Clan, Fig. 25<sup>36</sup>).

In this last trend, calligraphy is used in two ways:

1. to shape writing pieces in Chinese characters, the so-called “Charactering pieces” (fig. 25 in the center);
2. to write calligraphic inscriptions or tags using a spray can instead of ink brush (fig. 25 top right and bottom left).

---

<sup>34</sup> For more details and the significance of these scrawled advertisements, see Parke (2018: 261-284). She defined this phenomenon as a “public calligraphy performance.”

<sup>35</sup> For a detail analysis of the diffusion of graffiti art in particular in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, see Bisceglia, Merenda and Iezzi (2024).

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed analysis of this work and of the artistic production of the Kwanyin Clan, see Iezzi (2019b).



Figure 25. Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan), *Shirupuo zhu* 势如破竹 (With Irresistible Force), February 4-6, 2008, 6 x 6 m, spray painting on panel, Nike 706 Gallery, 798 Art District, Beijing. Courtesy of the artists. In the center of the work, the artists wrote the four characters “势如破竹” in wildstyle, at the top right a poem entitled “The Red River” (*Man jiang hong* 满江红, 1132) and at the bottom left the name of their crew (*Guanyin* “观音”) and theirs tags (“EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan”). Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to the numerous crews/writers who do that,<sup>37</sup> some Euro-American writers work in China using Chinese writing and reference to calligraphy in their works (i.e. Dezio from France in Shanghai and ZATO in Beijing); they try to interact with the local community assimilating the local language and culture.

## 6. Conclusion

The overview presented in this article demonstrates the capability of Chinese calligraphy to fit into visual art forms and into the movements of performing arts in contemporary times. From abstract

---

<sup>37</sup>In addition to the Kwanyin Clan in Beijing, other important crews/writers who use Chinese characters and calligraphy in their works are the Beijing Penzi, EXAS and ZEIT in Beijing, GAS in Chengdu, the OOPS crew in Shanghai, Touchy in Shenzhen, Xeme and Sinic in Hong Kong, Mora in Guangzhou, and Moon in Quanzhou.

calligraphies to graffiti pieces, new forms of calligraphy have emerged. They responded to, subverted, or reinterpreted traditional idioms to define a modern artistic identity that exists comfortably within the global art world while remaining indelibly Chinese. In particular, during the Chinese avantgardes movements of the 1980s to 1990s (known as the New Wave), there was a notable broadening of perspective on contemporary Chinese art. This was achieved through the integration of calligraphy into contemporary experimentation. This integration facilitated a more direct and profound engagement of calligraphy with other forms of painting and performance arts, resulting in stylistic and thematic influences. Consequently, calligraphy evolved into a highly relevant expressive code, widely embraced and utilized by artists. In recent times, artists have endeavored to normalize the use of ink as a means to foster reconciliation between international contemporary art and 'traditional art.' At the same time, being inherently visual, Chinese characters open themselves to all kinds of graphic and artistic manipulation, expanding their use also to decorative and applied arts towards marketing-oriented products and even to graffiti art. All these new forms of calligraphy powerfully resonate with China's rich and enduring cultural tradition. At the same time, they arise from the sweeping social, political, and economic changes that have taken place in China during the last decades. These new forms demonstrate how the art of calligraphy is still very much alive and present in the artistic reflection of Chinese contemporary artists.

## References

- Barrass, Gordon. 2002. *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China*. London: British Museum Press.
- Cacchione, Orianna, and Wu, Hung (eds). 2019. *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cacchione, Arianna, and Lin Weicheng (eds). 2021. *The Allure of Matter. Materiality Across Chinese Art*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Chen, Anying. 2011. "Literati Painting: Reflections Across Discontinuities." In: *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China. Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Huber J. and Chuan Z., 59-70. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Bessire, Mark H.C. (ed). 2003. *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Billeter, Jean-François. 1990. *The Chinese Art of Writing*. New York, NY: Skira/Rizzoli.
- Bisceglia, Marta R., Adriana Iezzi and Martina Merenda. 2024. *Graffiti in Cina*. Edited by Adriana Iezzi. Bologna: 1088press.
- Bonito Oliva, Achille. 2007. *L'Arte oltre il duemila*. Milano: Sansoni.

- Chen, Zhenlian 陈振濂. 1999. *Xiandai Riben shufa dadian* 现代日本书法大典 [“Dictionary of Japanese modern calligraphy”]. Zhengzhou: Henan meishu chubanshe.
- Harrist, Robert Jr., and Fong, Wen. C. (eds). 1999. *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection*. Princeton, NJ: The Art Museum, Princeton University.
- Everett, Yoyoy Uno. 2007. “Calligraphy and Musical Gestures in the Late Works of Chou Wen-chung symphonies.” *Contemporary Music Review* 5-6: 569-584.
- Fraser, Sarah E., and Li, Yu-Chieh. 2020. *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*. Singapore: Springer.
- Fung, Ming-Chip 冯明秋 (ed). 2015. *Feng Mingqiu: Shufa zhenjing* 馮明秋: 書法真經 [“Fung Ming Chip: Shu-Fa Sutra”]. Guangzhou: China Art Press.
- Gao, Minglu. 1998. “From Elite to small men. The many faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China.” In: *Inside Out. New Chinese Art*, edited by Gao Minglu, 149-166. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gao, Minglu et al. (eds). 2006. *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, Hong Kong: Timezone8.
- Gao, Shiming 高世名 (ed). 2021. *Cong tou kaishi: Wang Dongling shufa yishu 60 nian* 从头开始: 王冬龄书法艺术 60 年 [“From Inception – Wang Dongling 60 Years of Calligraphy”]. Shanghai: Shanghai chubanshe.
- Gao, Shiming. 2007. “A Momentary Pause in Anomalous and Everyday Lives: Comments on the Work of Qiu Zhijie”. In: *The Shape of Time. The Calli-photo-grapy by Qiu Zhijie*, edited by Mao Christophe W., 6-20. New York, NY: Chambers Fine Arts.
- Guo, Yaojie. 2015. “Study on the Application of Traditional Calligraphic Art in Graphic Design.” *International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (ICADCE 2015)*, conference proceedings, 287-289. Amsterdam: Atlantis Press.
- Guo, Yaojie. 2016. “The Promotion of Chinese Traditional Culture on the Development of Graphic Design.” *2nd International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Intercultural Communication (ICELAIC 2015)*, conference proceedings, 461-463. Amsterdam: Atlantis Press.
- Hassan, Suridh and Ryo Sanada. 2011. *Graffiti Asia*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Hearn, Maxwell K. (ed). 2013. *Ink Art. Past as Present in Contemporary China*. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Higgins, Dick. 2001. “Intermedia.” *Leonardo* 34/1: 49-54.
- Hsing, Ping-Ming. 1984. *Zhang Xu et la calligraphie cursive folle*. Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises.
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2013a. “Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy between Tradition and Innovation.” *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 3: 158-179.
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2013b. “Calligrafia d'avanguardia e arte astratta nella Cina contemporanea. L' 'arte astratta calligrafica' di Pu Lieping, Wei Ligang, Chen Guangwu, Shao Yan, Luo Qi e Fung Ming Chip e l' 'espressionismo astratto calligrafico' di Qin Feng e Zhang Dawo.” *Quaderni Asiatici* 101: 43-92.

- Iezzi, Adriana. 2019a. *Yi ge shufazhuyizhe Luo Qi* 一个书法主义者 洛齐 [“A Practitioner of Calligraphyism: Luo Qi”]. Nanchang: Jiangxi meishu chubanshe.
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2019b. “The Kwanyin Clan: Modern Literati Graffiti Writers. An Aesthetic and Text Analysis of Their Main Artworks.” *Annali di Ca’ Foscari. Serie orientale* 55: 395-448.
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2020a. *Moyue - Milan* 墨乐——米兰 [“The Music of Ink - Milan”]. Nanchang: Jiangxi meishu chubanshe.
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2020b. *Luo Qi Xieyue - Boluoniya* 洛齐写乐——博洛尼亚 [“Luo Qi "Writing Music, Bologna”]. Nanchang: Jiangxi meishu chubanshe.
- Iezzi, Adriana. 2020c. ““Sinicization” Against “Westernization.” In: Beijing Contemporary Graffiti? A Comparison between the Kwan-Yin Clan and the ABS Crew”. In: *Italian Association for Chinese Studies. Selected papers* 3: 92-106. Venezia: Cafoscarina.
- Kao, Yu-Kung. 1991. “Chinese Lyric Aesthetics.” In: *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting*, edited by Murck A., and Fong W.C., 47-90. New York, NY and Princeton, NJ: The Metropolitan Museum of Art – Princeton University Press.
- Kraus, Richard C. 1991. *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Art of Calligraphy*. Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Ledderose, Lothar. 1986. “Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function.” *Orientalism* 16/10: 35-50.
- Levinson, Jerrold. 1984. “Hybrid Art Forms.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18/4: 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3332623>
- Leung, Simon, Janet A. Kaplan, Wenda Gu, Bing Xu, and Jonathan Hay. 1999. “Pseudo-Languages: A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay”. *Art Journal* 58/3: 87-99.
- Li, Wendan. 2009. *Chinese Writing and Calligraphy*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Liao, Jielián 廖潔連. 2009. *Yijiusijiu nian hou Zhongguo ziti shejiren* 一九四九年後中國字體設計人 [“Chinese Font Designers after 1949”]. Hong Kong: MCCM Creation.
- Lin, Nancy P. 2023. “Song Dong’s Performative Futility: Action, Impact, and Efficacy.” *Contemporary Chinese Performance Art, Art Journal* 82/1: 34-57.
- Liu, Canming 刘灿铭. 2010. *Zhongguo xiandai shufa shi* 中国现代书法史 [“The History of Modern Chinese Calligraphy”]. Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe.
- Liu, Zijian. 1999. “Painting: A Point of View for Modern Calligraphy”. In: *Bashu Parade: '99 Chengdu Retrospective of Chinese Modern Calligraphy at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Yang Yingshi. Chengdu: Sichuan International Cultural Exchange Center. Catalog available at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/bashu-parade-99-chengdu-retrospective-of-chinese-modern-calligraphy-at-the-end-of-the-20th-century-9920>
- Ma, Qinzong 马钦忠 (ed). 2013. *Yishujia tuxiangzhi Shao Yan* 艺术家·图像志·邵岩 [“Artist Iconography -- Shao Yan”]. Shanghai: Xuelin.
- Malhotra, Priya. 2003. “Power from Turmoil.” *Asian Art News*, November-December: 64-67.

- Parke, Elizabeth. 2018. "Out of Service. Migrant Workers and Public Space in Beijing." In: *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China*, edited by Valjakka Minna and Wang Meiqin, 261-284. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Pu, Lieping 濮列平. 2007. *Tansuo hanzi de pingmian kongjian yu secai zhi jian de guanxi* 探索汉字的平面空间与色彩之间的关系 ["Explore the relationship between color and space in Chinese characters"], October 10. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4ed0d8b401000dcx.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4ed0d8b401000dcx.html).
- Pu, Lieping 濮列平 and Guo Yanping 郭燕平. 2005. *Zhongguo xiandai shufa dao hanzi yishu jianshi* 中国现代书法到汉字艺术简史 ["From Chinese Modern Calligraphy to the Art of Chinese Characters. A Brief History"]. Chengdu: Sichuan Fine Arts Press.
- Qu, Lifeng 屈立丰. 2008. "Chonggu 20 nianjimo Zhongguo Xiandai shufa huodong" 重估 20 世纪末中国现代书法运动 ["A Reevaluation of Modern Chinese Calligraphy in the Late 20th Century"]. *Yibin daxue xuebao* 5: 108-109.
- Schlombs, Adele. 1998. *Huai-su and the Beginnings of Wild Cursive Script in Chinese Calligraphy*. Stuttgart: F. Steiner.
- Sullivan, Michael. 1974. *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy*. New York, NY: George Braziller.
- Tsui, Christine. 2010. *China Fashion: Conversations with Designers*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Valjakka, Minna. 2011. "Graffiti in China – Chinese Graffiti?" *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 29/1: 61-91.
- Valjakka, Minna. 2016. "Claiming Spaces for Urban Art in Beijing and Shanghai". In: *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Ross Jeffrey Ian, 357-371. Abingdon – New York, NY: Routledge.
- Vermeeren, Laura. 2020. "Inquisitive Ink. A study of contemporary practice of calligraphy in China." PhD diss., University of Amsterdam.
- Wang, Dongling 王冬龄. 2005. "Xiangshou xiandai shufa de zhihui" 享受现代书法的智慧 ["Enjoy the Wisdom of Modern Calligraphy"]. *Yishu Dangdai (Art China)* 4/3: 6-11.
- Wang, Dongling 王冬龄. 2007. *Wang Dongling shufa yishu* 王冬龄书法艺术 [2Wang Dongling's Works"]. Beijing: Rongbaozhai chubanshe.
- Wang, Fangyu. 1984. *Dancing Ink -- Pictorial Calligraphy and Calligraphic Painting*. Hong Kong: Wang Fangyu.
- Wang, Fangyu. 1993. *Dancing Ink II -- Pictorial Calligraphy and Calligraphic Painting*. Hong Kong: Techpearl Printing.
- Wang, Xuezhong 王学仲 (ed). 1986. *Xiandai shuhua xuehui shufa shoujie zuopin xuan* 现代书画学会书法首届作品选 ["A Selection of Works of the Chinese Modern Painting and Calligraphy Association"]. Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press.
- Wang, Youru. 2003. *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism*. London – New York, NY: Routledge/Curzon.



- Webb, Michael. 2015. "China Art Academy in Hangzhou by Amateur Architecture Studio." *The Architecture Review*, November 23. Accessed November 13, 2022. <https://www.architectural-review.com/today/china-art-academy-in-hangzhou-by-amateur-architecture-studio>
- Wu, Hung. 1999. *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Chicago, IL: Smart Museum of Art.
- Wu, Hung. 2000. "Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a city." *Public Culture* 3: 749-768.
- Wu, Hung. 2008. *A Case of Being "Contemporary": Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Xia, Kejun 夏可君. 2015. "Foreword". In: *Dawo Art In 30 Years. Zhang Dawo solo exhibition, 2-3*. Hong Kong: 3812 Contemporary Art Projects.
- Xu, Bing. 2020. *Xu Bing: Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground*. Woodbridge: Acc Art Books.
- Xu, Jiang 许江. 2011. *Shufadao: Wang Dongling shufa yishu 书法道：王冬龄书法艺术* ["The Way of Calligraphy: Wang Dongling's Work"]. Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe.
- Yang, Yingshi 杨应时. 2004. "Shufa zuowei ziyuan: Zhongguo dangdai yishu de xinfangxiang 书法作为资源：中国当代艺术的新方向 ["Calligraphy as a Resource: A New Orientation of Chinese Modern Art"]. In: *Zhongguo 'Xiandai shufa' lunwen xuan 中国“现代书法”论文选* ["Florilegium of Theses on Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy"], edited by Wang Dongling 王冬龄, 227-230. Beijing: Zhongguo meishu chubanshe.
- Yen, Yueping. 2005. *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary China*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Zhang, Qiang 张强. 2006. *Congjixue - Yishu de wenhua chuanyue 踪迹学—艺术的文化穿越* ["Traceology: the cultural crossing of art"]. Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe jituan.
- Zhang, Yiguo. 1998. *Brushed Voices: Calligraphy in Contemporary China*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Zhu, Qingsheng 朱青生. 2000. *Meiyou ren shi yishujia, ye meiyou ren bushi yishujia 没有人是艺术家，也没有人不是艺术家* ["No one is an artist, and no one is not an artist"]. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan.

Adriana Iezzi is Full Professor of Chinese Language and Culture at the Department of Interpreting and Translation of the University of Bologna. She is the Principal Investigator of the European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant Project entitled “WRITE – New Forms of Calligraphy in China: A Contemporary Culture Mirror” (GA. n. 949645, <https://writecalligraphyproject.eu/>). Her research activity focuses on Chinese contemporary calligraphy, with particular attention to the analysis of the main artistic expressions that deviate from traditional forms and practices.

Adriana can be contacted at: [adriana.iezzi2@unibo.it](mailto:adriana.iezzi2@unibo.it)

Marco Meccarelli is Adjunct Professor at the Universities of Catania and Macerata. He obtained a Postgraduate Diploma in 2005 from the School of Specialization in Oriental Archaeology at La Sapienza University of Rome, where he also completed his PhD in 2010 in the History and Civilization of Oriental Asia. He obtained a research grant at the University of Catania. His research interests encompass Chinese art and international relations. He is the co-author of the first Italian monograph on the history of Chinese photography (*Storia della fotografia in Cina. Le opere di artisti cinesi e occidentali*. Aprilia<. Novalogos, 2011), and the author of the monograph *Le antiche vie della Cina. Un'indagine archeologica e artistica* (Imola: Manfredi, 2020) focusing on ancient Chinese roads.

Marco can be contacted at: [meccarelli@gmail.com](mailto:meccarelli@gmail.com)