Rethinking the Distance, Reframing the Exotic: Italian Tales of Shanghai through the Republican and Early Maoist Eras

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In the twentieth century the experience that Italians could have of China was mainly mediated by words: for the most part, China existed in Italian minds thanks to travel literature and newspaper reports. The two were strictly linked: most travelogues were originally written for the daily or weekly press, and only later were some of them edited as books. A number of these works were illustrated, and in any case photojournalism—as news reels—offered visual information to the public; however, generally speaking, in Italy the image of China was mainly constructed by travel literature. Indeed, travel literature, with all its mannerisms and tropes, constituted an important component of Italian orientalism, whose place in Italian cultural history has recently become a topic of scholarly interest. From this perspective, the study of Italian viewpoints and cultural constructions of China in the Italian travelogues is particularly significant. Before the Second World War, as well as during the Cold War, China often served as a screen to project domestic hopes and fears. Up to 1943 it was a place of interest for the Italian colonial enterprise, thanks to the Tianjin Concession, and, given the international competition and rivalry among Western powers in the area, it constituted a significant arena where the national identity could be constructed in the collective imagery. Later, after 1949, China still represented a realm where the challenges constituted by modernization, industrialization, and mass society could be explored...
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safely. So, Italy’s intellectual engagement with China highlights the many contradictions of the Italian representations of West and East.

After the Boxers’ uprising in 1900, Italian journalists, reporters, and writers produced a rather consistent body of literature dedicated to China, describing its culture, society, and politics. In the midst of the over one hundred books dedicated to China published in Italy from the early twentieth century to the start of the Second World War, travelogues written by Italian journalists numbered 20, more or less. Later, from 1949 to the death of Mao, in 1976, over 20 travelogues were published, one-tenth of the literature dedicated to China in those decades; but also many books of political and economic or social analysis originated from the author’s travels. China was written about by famous journalists and writers, such as Luigi Barzini, Renato Simoni, Arnaldo Cipolla, Mario Appelius, Alberto Moravia, Cesco Tomaselli, Virgilio Lilli, Enrico Emanuelli, Giorgio Manganelli, Goffredo Parise, Franco Fortini, Gianni Rodari, Carlo Cassola, and Carlo Rodari, as a recent anthology has summarized.

This literary connotation of the knowledge of China, and, more widely, of the East, in Italy had already been criticized by Giuseppe Tucci, the famous tibetologist and explorer, who in 1934 complained that:

There is a vague, ineffective, literary atmosphere around the Asian world: ethereal visions of the Orient which gratify all those who are bothered by the reality, because they do not know how to deal with it and delude themselves thinking to find the home of their fragilities and their fantasies somewhere far away.

Actually, travelogues were not mere descriptions of places or accounts of experiences: in those pages authors recounted their impressions, aiming at sharing emotions and viewpoints with their readers. By means of their writings they certainly tried to tame the sense of uneasiness and excitement provoked by the contact with the alienness of China; however, since it was the lure of the exotic that motivated their travel and the expectations of their readers, they also perpetuated and reproduced the exoticism of China, an exoticism functional to the representation of their own self and maybe of their readers’ selves too.

Notwithstanding the historical developments that changed the international position and domestic dynamics in Italy and China, and regardless of the shifts in Sino-Italian relations, through time this prose constructed a narrative of twentieth-century China basically centered on the paradigms of civilizational decadence, modernization,