

## INTRODUCTION

### ***Italianerie*: transculturality, co-creation and transforming identities between Italy and Asia**

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This special issue is the outcome of an international conference on *Italy and Asia: Past and Present* that we co-organised with the editors of *Modern Italy*, and which was generously supported by and held at Mahidol University (2018, Bangkok), for which we send here our heartfelt gratitude. It contains a series of selected essays from the conference researched and written by bi-tri-lingual, transnational and transcultural scholars whose focus here is the relationship between Italy and Asia. It examines the Asian reception, fascination with and reinvention of Italy in fields such as architecture, cinema, literature, fashion, digital media and geography, as well the Italian reception, fascination with and reinvention of Asia in the same fields of inquiry, through an in-depth analysis which underlines transcultural adaptation and interrelated processes of power between Italy and Asia.

By exploring the processes and the effects of transculturality and co-creation on the transforming identities of Italy and/in Asia and vice-versa, we aim to go beyond both the scholarship on Orientalism and the *J'accuse* of the postmodern critique, which often seem to recreate a dichotomous vision of the European-style Othering of Asia. We intend to offer instead a new approach to understanding the dynamics behind the multiple encounters and the uncanny enchantment (or disenchantment, perhaps) with Italy-in-Asia and Asia-in-Italy. Extending from the original French word and concept of *chinoiserie* (the eighteenth-century European 'fascination for China'), this special issue introduces the concept and analytical-interpretive paradigm of *Italianerie*. *Italianerie* has been taken both as a possible theoretical framework and as an intellectual provocation for our contributors to analyse the relation between Italy and Asia, as well as the intrigue of Italy in Asia and vice-versa. We argue that the 'fascination for Italy' and its specific cultural materiality go both ways, from Italy to Asia and vice-versa, shedding light on the multiple connections, comparisons and circulations of people, goods and ideas through a global, interconnected method of inquiry.

The opening essay invites the reader to rethink the relationship between Italy and China, and between Italians and Chinese, within a complex and nuanced transcultural frame. **Francesco Ricatti, Matteo Dutto and Rita Wilson** engage with transculturality focusing on the Chinese migration to Italy. They refuse any binary framework, which could confine the topic within restrictive national boundaries and/or stereotypical essentialisations of ethnic communities one against the other. Building upon the insightful argument put forward by Ilaria Vanni (2016)

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that inter-intra countries' social and cultural spaces are 'transcultural edges', the authors offer a new methodology to acknowledge, and critically engage with the complex transcultural ramifications of an increasingly globalising world. They focus on the large Chinese community living and working in Prato, Italy, and they argue that Prato as a community-space of transcultural encounter is a transcultural edge. Their newly proposed framework adds a totally different dimension to the existing literature on 'the Chinese in Prato', and develops along the lines of the potential that this transcultural edge has to create innovative and productive ecosystems. Whilst the pre-existing studies on 'the Chinese in Prato' mainly focus on their socio-economic impact on the host local community and the textile industry, isolating the Chinese community from the ethnic complexity of the area, our authors move beyond the national-immigrant and ultimately racialised guest-host binary frame to embrace a larger view and acknowledge the reciprocal permeability and transculturation between the Chinese community, the Italian community, and other ethnic groups.

**Mark Chu's** essay is complementary to that of Ricatti et al since they both use different kinds of sources to experiment with new approaches to the relation between Italy and China. Chu's essay offers a multi-layered reading of the ways in which Italian society comes to terms with the increasing presence of Chinese citizens in Italy, through an in-depth analysis of selected films and novels, namely Gianni Amelio's 2006 film, *La stella che non c'è*, and Alessandro Perissinotto's 2014 novel, *Coordinate d'Oriente*. Chu sheds light on the Italian cultural representations of the Chinese presence and its implications for the global-local, and ultimately transnational cycles and processes of industrial production. Chu is particularly interested in examining the tropes of contact, communication and intertwining of the socio-economic reality of the two countries. His focus on literature and film allows him to go beyond the binary paradigms of 'Made in Italy vs Made in China', or tradition vs modernity, to critically engage instead with the power dynamics of narratives which emerge from his sources, thus contributing to highlight the transcultural and transnational dimension of interrelated industrial processes, gender relationships, and last but not least ecological concerns.

**Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach's** article furthers the complexity of the transcultural frame through its examination of Sino-Italian fashion collaboration. It shows how transculturality and co-creation are not merely the outcome of such collaboration but also the process of fashion-making in China as well as Italy. Sino-Italian fashion collaboration was first characterised by the changing business relation then intense rivalry and economic tension between the two countries. While hybrid and transcultural products are the seeming expectation of their joint force, the cases in point here are the new Chinese realities in fashion-making, an altered statute for Italian and Chinese fashion, and more importantly, an advanced understanding of the making of global fashion in the transglobal landscape. Ling and Segre Reinach's study of Sino-Italian fashion collaboration has constituted a methodological framework to unpack the complexity of global fashion and its representation against the backdrop of global dynamics and transcultural exchange. They reveal the fascination of Italian fashion in China under the rubric of *Italianerie* to be reciprocal given a sizable share of economic intervention and intense socio-cultural competition between the two nations.

The concept of *Italianerie* is then further unpacked in **Maurizio Marinelli's** article, which focuses on the temporalities of spatial change. He extends the idea of *chinoiserie* and introduces the concept and analytical-interpretive paradigm of '*Italianerie*', as a new theoretical framework to analyse the creation, adaptation, and re-invention of a 'real-unreal' Italian-flavoured atmosphere in China. The fashion for a 'Chinese-esque' artistic influence was interconnected with the East India Companies' commercial activities, which made available in eighteenth-century Europe goods such as silk, lacquer, parasols, porcelain and bamboo. The transcultural re-imagining and commercial

reinvention of the Chinese world through the European mind materialised in European interior design, decorative art, architecture, landscape gardening, fashion, and stage design. Today, similar processes and practices of cultural re-imagining and commercial reinvention are taking place in China vis-à-vis Italy: Italian architectural styles, fashion, cuisine have become predominant as the epitome of taste, design excellence, and luxury. Marinelli's article analyses the transcultural strategies of imagining Italy in China in the past and the present, arguing that the 'fascination for Italy' (*Italianerie*) is deeply embedded in the distinctive forms and practices of spatial re-production in Tianjin's former Italian concession (1901–1945), re-conceptualised since 2002 as a 'New Italian-Style Town'. The vogue for an Italian transcultural-transnational atmosphere has reached its climax with the 'Florentia Village', a multi-million-dollar luxury designer outlet offering a template of Italian-flavoured essentialised atmosphere, which is now present in eight Chinese cities. Marinelli's interest in the transcultural strategies in Chinese urbanism leads him to shed light on the double-edged sword of commodifying the uncanny: the domestication of foreignness (*Italianerie*) makes it palatable to the nouveau riches' thirst for conspicuous consumption, but the multi-sensorial economy of luxury also functions as a transcultural strategy, which promotes an aspiration to be 'modern', 'prosperous' and ultimately 'happy', through designers' regime of capital used as power.

**Paola Voci's** contribution to this special issue also addresses the theme of transculturality by reiterating the need to go beyond dichotomous visions in the encounter between Italy and China. More specifically, Voci's article tackles Italian discourses on the 'rise of China': through an in-depth analysis of recent Italian documentaries about China, audiovisual texts and media content, she argues for the rise and the legitimacy of what she calls 'radical sinology'. This rarely explored subject is particularly timely in the light of Rome's recent endorsement of the Belt and Road Initiative (in March 2019). Radical sinology's transnational and accented perspectives intersect with both Chinese and Italian cultural and political sites, offering new insights into the complex realms of mutual knowledge and the relevant discourses of power. In contrast to the mainstream orthodox discourse of China as a great 'Italian business opportunity', this essay assertively upholds the heretical and anti-hegemonic perspective offered by scholarly projects such as *Chinoiresie*, among others, and by doing so it sheds light on the multiple dynamics of the encounters not only with Global China (and the relevant claim of a Global Italy, of course) but also with its extremely important subaltern identity formations. Decentering the wishful thinking which lies behind the master narratives of the discourse of the nation and its alleged civilisational grandeur, Voci shifts our attention to the counter-discourse of the subaltern China unveiled by the accented documentaries which is willingly obscured – if not annihilated – by mainstream narratives.

Through the study of travelogues by prominent Italian writers and journalists on China, Korea and Japan during the Fascist *ventennio*, **Linetto Basilone's** article skilfully narrates these countries' representations at the time. Beyond the colonialist attitude of positional superiority, the repertoire of imageries in these travel writings is, accordingly, intended to stabilise and consolidate the meaning of Italy, evoking a fascist sense of national identity among the Italian readership. Hence the dominant representations of Chinese and Korean societies are necessarily remote, decadent and exotic, while Japan appears as a progressive society resonant with Fascist Italy. Under the gaze of Italian Fascist writers, a complex interplay of national myths, colonial imagination, and racial prejudices and propaganda is depicted in these countries. East Asia, according to Basilone, has inscribed the precise historical and political context of Italian Fascism in which it gravitated. Any transcultural expression through the narratives upholds the dream of a strong nation under the Fascist imperial project. Under the framework of *Italianerie*, East Asia has served the

fundamental redemptive and self-reflective function at the domestic level of Fascist Italy for its grand scheme of work.

Last but not least, the special issue is closed with the encounters between Italy and Siam through an architectural quest. **Neungreudee Lohapon**'s essay illustrates the contribution of Italian art and architecture to the modernisation of Siam at the turn of the twentieth century. Italy was chosen as a source of modernity for Siam. Beyond the co-created Siam-Italian architecture is an encounter characterised by transcultural exchanges. In spite of the resistance to colonial power, Siam turned to a Western appearance for strength. Western (in this case, Italian) architecture and modern infrastructure were both privately and state funded, underlying the fundamental change for the façade of the Kingdom of Siam. The ubiquitous hybrid Italian outlook has thus manifested in a series of glorious Italian architecture across Siam. The fascination for Italian architecture and modernisation were consolidated by the appointment of Italian professionals and entrepreneurs by King Chulalongkorn. Lohapon highlights transculturality, in the case of the co-created Siam-Italian architecture, as an enchanting transnational encounter, as well as negotiation and exchanges, and shared cultural memories.

This special issue offers, for the first time, the innovative and original perspective of *Italianerie* in the quest for transculturality and co-creation. It addresses the discourses and the processual dynamics of the historical, cultural, and political-economic encounter between Italy and/in Asia. We argue that transculturality is an essential ingredient of *Italianerie*. Drawing on the increasingly multi-faceted and multi-layered encounters between Italy and Asia in the modern and contemporary eras, we have explored how the 'fascination for Italy' and its specific cultural materiality go both ways, from Italy to Asia and vice versa. Economic, political, and socio-cultural intervention to and from Italy and Asia instigate the fascination with and offer distinctive stimuli for the re-imagination of the two regions. Among the most significant examples, there are the Florentia Village in Wuqing, the Renaissance architecture in Siam, the Sino-Italian fashion labels and so forth, as the articles contained in this special issue demonstrate.

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### Notes on contributors

**Maurizio Marinelli** is the Co-Director of the Sussex Asia Centre, and Senior Lecturer in East Asian history at the University of Sussex. He has studied for many years the transformation of the hyper-colonial port-city of Tianjin (1860–1945) and its recent globalising ambitions using the lens of *histoire croisée* (entangled history). He has published his findings on Tianjin's urban transformation in two books (Palgrave, 2014, 2017) and numerous articles. His research has been published in several languages in various journals, including *Theory and Society*, *Emotion, Space and Society*, *China Information*, *Urban History*, *China Heritage*

*Quarterly, Cultural Studies Review, Journal of Postcolonial Studies, and the Journal of Chinese Political Science.*

**Wessie Ling** is a Reader in Fashion Studies at Northumbria University. Her research examines cultural identities in the production of fashion and cultural property of fashion. Author of *Fusionable Cheongsam* (2007), she co-investigated the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, UK) project, *Writing and Translating Modern Design Histories in East Asia for the Global World* (2012–2014), resulting in a co-edited volume, with Simona Segre Reinach, on *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape* (2018). With the ASEAN Research Fellowship at the Research Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) at Mahidol University (2018), she co-convoked the conference leading to this special issue. Her Rita Bolland Fellowship for Textile and Fashion Study at the Research Centre for Material Culture in National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands (2018/2019), will result in a special issue on Global Fashion for *ZoneModa Journal* (2019/2020), currently in progress.

## Reference

Vanni, Ilaria. 2016. 'The Transcultural Edge'. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 13 (1).

## Italian summary

Questo numero speciale di *Modern Italy* contiene sette saggi di studiosi internazionali sui rapporti tra l'Italia e l'Asia. L'attenzione primaria è sulla transculturalità, la co-creazione, il fascino e la reinvenzione dell'Italia in Asia (o dell'Asia in Italia) in settori e campi nodali quali l'architettura, il cinema, la letteratura, la moda, la comunicazione digitale, la storia e la geografia.