

ITALIAN LITERARY AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINA AND THE  
CHINESE (1949-2011)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Xin Liu: Italian literary and cinematic representations of China and the Chinese (1949-2011)  
(Under the direction of Federico Luisetti)

Italy and China have long shared a history of influential economic and cultural ties, and their communication is an important subject in intercultural studies. Although the association of Italians with China in ancient times has been sufficiently analyzed, the Italian textual and visual construction of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese remains a subject that is rarely touched by scholars. My research project provides some of the pieces that are now missing from the puzzle of Sino-Italian relations and cross-cultural studies.

The dissertation focuses on the portrayals of the PRC and its people in Italian travel notes, reportage, as well as fiction and documentary movies produced from 1949 to 2011. Through analysis of works of Italian authors and filmmakers, such as Franco Fortini, Curzio Malaparte, Goffredo Parise, Alberto Moravia, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Andrea Segre, the dissertation explores the romanticized manifestations of the Red Utopia in the 1950s, the critical reassessment of Maoist China in the 1960s and 1970s, and the stereotypical portrayals of China and the Chinese in recent Italian fiction movies.

By setting the changing representations in their historical context, the dissertation challenges come prevalent judgements and interpretations in the existing, limited scholarship on the theme, and reveals the influences of complex social, political, and cultural factors behind the transformation. The dissertation combines a variety of critical approaches drawn

from post-colonialism, film studies, gender studies, social psychology, and political theory to study the changing representations, and reveals the influences of complex factors in the (re)construction of identity, with the aim of proposing alternative interpretations, and providing some of the pieces that are currently missing from the puzzle of cultural studies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Italy and China have long shared a history of influential economic and cultural ties, and their communication is an important subject in intercultural studies. Although the association of Italians with China in ancient times has been sufficiently analyzed, the Italian literary and cinematic construction of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese remains a subject that is rarely touched by scholars. This dissertation focuses on the portrayals of the PRC and its people in Italian travel notes, reportage, as well as fiction and documentary movies produced from the 1950s to 2011. Through analysis of the changing face of China and the Chinese in works of Italian authors and filmmakers, the dissertation explores the romanticized manifestations of the Red Utopia in the 1950s, the critical reassessment of Maoist China in the 1960s and 1970s, and the stereotypical portrayals of China and the Chinese in recent Italian fiction movies. By setting the changing Italian representations of the PRC and the Chinese in their respective social and historical context, the dissertation challenges some prevalent judgements and interpretations in the existing, limited scholarship on the theme, and reveals the influences of complex factors behind the transformations, in the hope of providing some of the pieces that are now missing from the puzzle of Sino-Italian studies.

Among limited scholarship on Italian intellectuals' travel notes on Maoist China and its people are Angelo Pellegrino's 1985 work *Verso Oriente: viaggi e letteratura degli scrittori italiani nei paesi orientali (1912-1982)*, and Gaia De Pascale's 2001 book *Scrittori in Viaggio: narratori e poeti italiani del Novecento in giro per il mondo*. Both scholars' analysis echoes Paul Hollander's theory of political pilgrimage, which holds that all positive

depictions of communist countries by Western intellectuals are intentionally embellished at best, and propagandistic at worst. Nevertheless, unlike Pellegrino who has faith in the fidelity of Italian writers' critical accounts written in the 1960s, De Pascale quotes Edward Said with the implication that all the Italian representations of China and the Chinese are doomed to distortions. The first two chapters of my dissertation examine to what extent Pellegrino and De Pascale's conclusions are valid or suitable for analyzing the cases of Italian representations of Maoist China in the 1960s and 70s. Due to a lack of previous systematic research on Italian filmic representations of China and the Chinese, the third chapter mainly contains results of my original studies on the theme.

Founded in 1949 as a communist country, the PRC was inevitably involved in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In order to prevent communist expansion in Asia, the U.S. government advised its allies (including Italy) to form a common front against the PRC. Before the tension between China and the Western bloc eased in the late 1970s, only a few Italian intellectuals, mostly left-wingers, had a chance to visit communist China, and had the power to introduce, depict, and interpret Maoist China to curious Italian audiences. These Italian visitors' observations of the PRC and the Chinese can be generally classified into two categories: those accounts created before the watershed Sino-Russian split in 1960, and those that were produced after it. The pre-split years from 1949 to 1960 were characterized by passion and affection on the part of Italian visitors for the newly founded communist China and its people, while the post-split period from 1960 to 1978 was marked by dissent from Chinese ideologies and an exploration of exoticism in China.

The first chapter of the dissertation is based mainly on the works of three Italian visitors who travelled in the PRC during the 1950s. The resources include three travel notes: Gaetano Tumiati's *Buongiorno Cina* (1954), Franco Fortini's *Asia Maggiore* (1956), and Curzio Malaparte's *Io, in Russia e in Cina* (1958). Working for the famous socialist newspaper

*Avanti!*, Tumiati was one of the first Western journalists to visit the PRC. His travel notes mark the birth of the Italian intellectuals' post-colonial discourse on China, and set the tone for other Italian visitors' portrayals of China before 1960. Fortini was a famous Italian literary critic, poet, and one of the most active intellectuals of the Italian left. As a member of the Italian Socialist Party<sup>1</sup>, he went on an official visit to the PRC with the first Italian cultural delegation in 1955. His travel resulted in a book, *Asia Maggiore*, in which Fortini tried to draw an anatomy of the Maoist revolution, and to discover the new basis of China's future. Malaparte was, like Gaetano Tumiati, also an Italian journalist. After his trip to China in 1956, taken on behalf of the Italian Communist Party weekly *Vie Nuove*, Malaparte was often mentioned as an exemplar of the Sino-Italian friendship because he expressed his affection for China and the Chinese people in his book; he even willed his villa on Capri to the PRC government, stipulating that it would be made into a study center for Chinese writers.

The three Italian intellectuals used some common elements to construct their discourses on Maoist Utopia and its people. According to Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, the PRC is a beautiful, vibrant, and progressive country, where a kind, modest, and diligent people is led by some brilliant, incorruptible, and determinant leaders to construct cooperatively an advanced socialist civilization. Maoist China fueled the three Italian intellectuals' hope for a brighter future for social transformations in both China and Italy.

The connections between these travel notes and their authors' left-wing ideology are undeniable. In those years, the right to explore and interpret China was mainly granted to some Italian left-wing intellectuals who had sympathy for the PRC; thus, the individual ideology of these authors inevitably influenced Italy's construction of China. After the proven failure of Italian fascism after World War II, Italian intellectuals were keen to search for new

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Fortini was a member of the Italian Socialist Party from 1944 to 1956. He left the Party because of the Soviet military intervention in the Hungary Uprising.

values with the hope of reinventing their national culture. Promoting Communism as a good remedy for Italy's postwar woes, the Italian left-wingers elevated Maoist China as an alternative, better model, so as to challenge Italy to reappraise and reform its capitalist institutions and thought systems.

As a result, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte are vulnerable to accusations of being Orientalists or political pilgrims, who distort reality in order to transmit ideologies. In the limited scholarship on the theme, their accounts are often denied credibility, and condemned to be products of propaganda. However, when putting the three Italian visitors' accounts in their historical context, we will find that such accusations are unjust, because they exaggerate the impact of the Italian visitors' political ideology on their depictions, and overlook other important factors underpinning the positive representations. The three Italian intellectuals' favorable impressions were also based on the PRC's success in reconstruction and social reforms between 1949 and 1957, as well as the warm and friendly atmosphere between China and Italy created by the two governments attempting to improve their relations.

As I mentioned, the Italian visitors' accounts of Maoist China can be generally categorized according to two phases. In the first phase, Italian intellectuals elevated the PRC as a realized socialist utopia, and highlighted the similarities between China and Italy to prove the possibility of adopting the Chinese developing mode in their home country. However, in the second phase, beginning with the Sino-Russian split in the 1960s, the major theme of Italian representations of the PRC and its people switched to criticizing the unreasonable oddity of the Chinese society.

Chapter two of my dissertation focuses on this second phase, and examines three Italian visitors' works about China, including *Cara Cina* (1966), by Goffredo Parise; *La rivoluzione culturale in Cina* (1967), by Alberto Moravia; and Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary film *Chung Kuo* (1972). Parise was a well-known Italian journalist who won the Viareggio

Prize in 1965. A year later, Parise visited Maoist China when the Cultural Revolution was about to spread all over the country. Although the name of Parise's book is *Cara Cina (Dear China)*, this title turns out to be ironic, because much of the reportage focuses on the inconvenience of his travels in China, the oddity of local culture, and the strangeness of the Chinese people's lives. Parise attributed his boredom and the monotony of his trip to the backward Chinese culture and society, as well as the restrictions and surveillance from the Chinese authorities. Moravia, one of the most influential writers of his generation, travelled to China in 1967 with a visa document endorsed by the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai. When staying in the PRC, Moravia witnessed the chaos and radicalization during the Cultural Revolution. In *La rivoluzione culturale in Cina*, he openly questions the motives of the fierce campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, and candidly criticizes China's politicization of art and literature, religionization of Marxism and Maoism, as well as deification of Mao Zedong. Antonioni was a famous Italian left-wing intellectual and filmmaker. Unlike Parise and Moravia who went to China in the mid-1960s, Antonioni took his camera to document Maoist China in 1972, after the two countries had established diplomatic relations. The Italian film master had little interest in "the political and social structures which the Chinese revolution created" (Antonioni, *The Architecture* 327), but appeared to be very attracted by exotic scenes that were foreign and interesting to him. Additionally, in order to capture and highlight the perceived distinct essence of the Chinese people and their culture, Antonioni and his crew often used intrusive filming methods regardless of their Chinese subjects' willingness. Showing some indecent scenes, Antonioni's documentary movie *Chung Kuo* was labelled as an anti-China movie in 1974, and banned by the Chinese authorities until 2004.

The PRC and the Chinese portrayed in the works of Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni are very different from the images created in Italian writings during the 1950s. According to their accounts, Maoist China becomes a land full of exotic elements, an "Other" completely

different from their home country. By emphasizing the oddity of China and its people, Parise, Moravia and Antonioni destabilized the utopian image of Maoist China previously constructed by earlier Italian visitors.

There are several major reasons for the transformation of Italian representations of the PRC and the Chinese. First, from 1957 to 1976, China suffered from the undesirable consequences of a series of radical reforms, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Thus, it was not surprising that Italian intellectuals viewed the Chinese otherness as less acceptable, and travelled in China with a greater sense of suspicion and willingness to dissent. Second, after Khrushchev's speech on Stalin's cult of personality, and the Soviet military intervention in the Hungarian uprising, doubts arose among Italian intellectuals, and made them more critical of communist course and members in the Eastern bloc. Third, during the Sino-Soviet ideological split, Italian communist leaders supported the Soviet line of peaceful coexistence, and openly condemned the Maoist thoughts on class struggles and world revolution. The conflicts damaged the relations between Italy and China, and the association between the two communist parties. Due to the tensions, the Chinese authorities was inclined to place restrictions and surveillance on the Italian visitors' trips, which caused inconvenience and provoked criticism from the Italian intellectuals.

Regardless of the dramatic changes in historical context, some scholars, like Hollander and Pellegrino, use Moravia and Parise's accounts of the Cultural Revolution-era China as a standard to undermine the credibility of Italian travel notes of the 1950s. Their argument actually reflects an Orientalist mindset, neglecting the constant changes within the Orient and regarding it as a static entity. Additionally, the works of Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni are not mechanical reproduction of the reality, but rather creative treatments of the actuality, in which the Italian visitors marshal the evidence to construct their discourses. Hence, in addition to the fidelity, the Italian intellectuals' manifestation and interpretations of the

historical facts should also be examined. Admittedly, the books of Parise and Moravia, as well as the movie of Antonioni all had basis in the reality; however, the three Italian visitors' deliberate hunt for exoticism reflect their essentialist views of the Orient. With an approach so concentrated on the otherness of the unfamiliar, their works end up using a newly created stereotypical representation to replace the previously romanticized fantasy.

The third chapter of my dissertation focuses on the Italian cinematic representations of the Chinese people from 2006 to 2011. After Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* was banned by the Chinese government in 1974, China seemed to vanish from the sight of Italian filmmakers for almost three decades, with the only exception of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987).<sup>2</sup> Although this movie won nine Oscars at the sixtieth Academy Awards in 1988, its success did not motivate Italian filmmakers to produce more movies about China.

Nevertheless, in 2006, the situation changed with the staging of the "Year of Italy in China," a year-long cultural gala in major Chinese cities. Proposed by former Italian President Carlo Ciampi, the "Year of Italy in China" aimed to open a window through which the Chinese people could view Italian art, music, and design. The project brought many Italian experts in cultural fields to China, and re-stimulated some Italian filmmakers' interest in China and its people. As a result, almost twenty years after the release of *The Last Emperor*, the Italian film industry produced two movies with a Chinese setting in two consecutive years: *La stella che non c'è* (*The Missing Star*, 2006) and *Two Tigers* (2007). Revolving around Westerners' adventurous journeys in China, these two movies focus on presenting exotic aspects of China and Chinese life. From 2007 to 2011, while continuing to produce movies with Chinese themes, Italian filmmakers switched their focus from presenting exotic Chinese setting to exploring the experience of Chinese immigrants in Italy. This new trend began with *La Giusta Distanza* (*The Right Distance*, 2007), in which the Chinese are only extras acting as

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<sup>2</sup> Due to this article's specific focus on filmic representation, the 1982 American-Italian television miniseries Marco Polo directed by Giuliano Montaldo is not taken into consideration.



illegal immigrant workers silently lined up and taken into custody by Italian police. Produced in the years between 2007 and 2011, *Gomorra* (*Gomorra*, 2008), *Io Sono Li* (*Shun Li and the Poet*, 2011), and *L'arrivo di Wang* (*The Arrival of Wang*, 2011) are all related to the issues of Chinese immigration. This thematic switch was likely triggered by the protest in Milan's Chinatown in April 2007, which was "the first major violent protest by a single ethnic minority group against the police authorities in contemporary Italy" (Zhang 22). The conflicts between Chinese protesters and Italian police force manifested the growing tensions between Chinese immigrants and the local community. Between 2011 and 2015 when this dissertation is completed, China and the Chinese people stopped receiving attention from Italian filmmakers, and once again faded away from the frame of Italian movies.

These Italian movies on Chinese themes produced in 2006-2011 have generated scholarly discussion in recent years; however, the limited existing scholarship generally concentrates on only one or two among the above-mentioned six movies. For instance, Stefano Bona conducts a comparative analysis of *The Missing Star* and Antonioni's 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo* (Bona 41-58); Eddie Bertozzi studies the Chinese identities represented in *Shun Li and the Poet* and *The Arrival of Wang* (Bertozzi 59-73). These scholars are inclined to accept the recent Italian filmic representations as realistic portrayals faithfully reflecting the situations in the Chinese society as well as the real conditions of the Chinese people's lives, and contributing to "unveil new meaningful descriptions of alternative Chinese identities" (Bertozzi 60) interpreted and articulated by non-Chinese filmmakers. Despite the spate of postcolonial studies in the past few decades, the stereotypical characterization and portrayals of the Chinese people in the recent Italian movies still generally remain neglected, unquestioned, or even taken for granted. Moreover, the reasons for the wave of popularity of Chinese themes in the years between 2006 and 2011 have not received much scholarly attention.

By examining five recent Italian movies on Chinese themes (*The Missing Star*, *Two Tigers*, *Gomorrah*, *Shun Li and the Poet*, and *The Arrival of Wang*), the third chapter of my dissertation intends to raise audiences' awareness of the stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese, explore the socio-cultural factors that underpin the stereotypes and their prevalence, and call for more multi-dimensional cinematic representations of the Chinese people.

Most of these films under analysis are influential as they have gained recognition on various film festivals: with *The Missing Star*, Sergio Castellitto was awarded the Pasinetti Prize for Best Actor on the 63rd Venice International Film Festival; *Gomorrah* won the Grand Prix Prize of the Cannes Film Festival in 2008; in 2011, *Shun Li and the Poet* received the BIF&ST Prize for best film in the Bari International Film Festival; even *The Arrival of Wang*, a less famous sci-fi movie, was nominated for the "Controcampo Italiano" prize in the 2011 Venice International Film Festival. The only exception is *Two Tigers*, a B-class action movie with relatively little acclaim and box office success. I include it in my study for two reasons. First, given the relatively low number of Italian movies on Chinese themes, this film's contribution to establishing Italian audiences' conception of the Chinese cannot be neglected. Second, in terms of its portrayal of Chinese people, this movie also reflects some important patterns shared by its more influential counterparts.

In these movies, most Chinese characters are generally identified either with the problems they have as victims, or with the problems they cause as villains. Chinese actresses have played major roles in *The Missing Star*, *Two Tigers*, and *Shun Li and the Poet*. Unfortunately, these movies mainly take advantage of stereotypes which will be readily understood by the audiences, repeatedly assigning the stock character of "damsel in distress" to Chinese female characters. The three movies highlight the submissive nature of Chinese females, which in turn justifies the dominance of the westerners. Unlike Chinese women who are frequently depicted as damsels in distress, Chinese men are mostly portrayed as villains in

recent Italian movies on Chinese themes. They primarily function in the dual role of adversary and foil to the heroes: on one hand, they serve as obstacles the heroes must struggle to overcome in their own quest or during the rescue of their Chinese damsels in distress; on the other hand, these villainous characters exemplify traits that are diametrically opposed to those of the heroes.

The perpetuation and transmission of stereotypes about the Chinese in recent Italian movies has implications beyond the trends in the movies, as they serve to support and maintain the hegemonic ideologies of gender and race. Regarding the gender stereotype, the movies highlight males' superiority over females. Such characterization and plots are likely rooted in the patriarchal archetypes. However, it is also necessary to point out that, in these movies, the male superiority and dominance are exclusive to western men. The Chinese male characters cannot take leading positions because they are either portrayed as people lacking ability and intelligence to lead, or depicted as evil villains who are threats to society and thus should not be given the right to lead. The racial inequality and the two seemingly opposing portrayals of Chinese men are associated with the idea of Chinese inferiority and the myth of the yellow peril.

The stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese people can also be understood as instances of Orientalism. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is less about the Orient, the geographical area, than it is about the historical experience of confronting and representing the other. Said points out that the Orient was "made Oriental" (1979, 6) and that "the Orient helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience" (1979, 2). As a Eurocentric idea, Orientalism promotes the differences between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them"). Under the East/West, Self/Other polarity, Oriental and Westerner are binary categories defined always in reference to each other. Applying the conventional dichotomy, many of the selected Italian movies present the

Chinese and the Westerners in hierarchical relationships, thereby reinforcing the discursive subordination of the Chinese.

As social construction, the stereotypes can be challenged and overcome by revealing and critically analyzing their manifestations. Giving up the prevalent racial stereotypes, the two nations can achieve more accurate mutual understanding and more equitable cross-cultural interactions in the future.

## CHAPTER 1: NARRATING THE MAOIST UTOPIA

This chapter is based mainly on the works of three Italian visitors who travelled in the PRC during the 1950s. The resources include three travel notes: Gaetano Tumiati's *Buongiorno Cina* (1954), Franco Fortini's *Asia Maggiore* (1956), and Curzio Malaparte's *Io, in Russia e in Cina* (1958).

The three Italian visitors' travel accounts created in the 1950s clearly departed from the previous Italian conception of China and the Chinese. In the first half of the twentieth century, the perceived otherness of China and its people was mainly a means of affirming Italy and Italians' superiority. During those years, Italian Orientalist knowledge about China was marked by a subtle and persistent Eurocentric / Italo-centric prejudice against Chinese culture. However, the previously existing works of Italian diplomats and journalists had very little impact on Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, who made positive, sometimes even romantic descriptions of the PRC and its people.

Tumiati, Fortini, and Maleparte used some common elements to construct their discourses on Maoist China and the Chinese people. In their works, the Chinese landscapes are represented as symbols of vitality, sources of inspiration, or causes for déjà vu and sense of home; the Chinese masses and the country's leaders are portrayed as cooperative forces in social and cultural reconstruction; and Maoist China's achievements in material progress and consolidation of superstructure are described as extraordinary and inspiring. More concretely, according to the three Italian intellectuals, the PRC is a beautiful, vibrant, and progressive country, where a kind, modest, and diligent people is led by some brilliant, incorruptible, and determinant leaders to construct cooperatively an advanced socialist civilization. Maoist China provided the three Italian intellectuals with ammunition against the skeptics who

doubted that radical social transformation was possible and could be fruitful. The three authors' experiences in China fueled their hope for a brighter future for both China and Italy.

## Section 1.1: Inspiring Landscapes and Irresistible Déjà Vu

### Landscape as Vehicle of Emotions and Thoughts

Gaetano Tumiati, Franco Fortini, and Curzio Malaparte's respective trips to China all began with international flights from the Soviet Union to Beijing. Each author thus had a bird's-eye view of the changing landscape during the crossing of the China–Mongolia border. Tumiati, amazed by the dramatic changes in the landscape, wrote:

I confini sono linee astratte e dall'alto di un aeroplano non si può certo stabilire quando si lascia un paese e si fa ingresso in un altro; *tuttavia la diversità fra il paesaggio mongolo e quello cinese è tale da non consentire alcun dubbio*. La Mongolia è sabbia, la Cina è terra, anzi è argilla; la Mongolia è vento e siccità, la Cina è acqua; la Mongolia è deserto, la Cina è brulicar di villaggi e di genti. Nel giro di un quarto d'ora il paesaggio cambiò improvvisamente. (Tumiati 25, italics added)

Like Tumiati, Fortini was so enchanted by the scenery that he could not take his eyes from the porthole until the plane had arrived in Beijing:

Lentamente, *tracce di vegetazione cominciano a combattere con l'aridità*. Ed è un seguito di montagne, di catene dalle forme paradossali, dove l'erosione ha messo a nudo una sostanza bluastra, violetta, per creare la piana cinese verso la quale voliamo. *Non ho mai veduto né immaginato nulla di simile. È uno spettacolo straordinario*. E si avverte una enorme presenza umana, nei villaggi e nelle città luogo i fiumi, su per i terrazzamenti delle risaie che dispongono le loro curve di livello lungo le pendici l'assurdo festone della Muraglia. Un'ultima catena di monti e improvvisa, unita, distesa, la pianura; una pianura di colore verde e arancio tutta alberi orti case pagode strade risaie. Pechino. (Fortini 34, italics added)

Even Malaparte, who in his *Io, in Russia e Cina*, did not show much interest in landscapes and rarely mentioned natural views, could not resist the impulse to record his pleasure in passing over the border and overlooking the Great Wall:

A un tratto la sterminata distesa sabbiosa sembra impennarsi, aspre montagne erompono dal deserto, e sulla cresta delle montagne appare incisa una linea bianca, tortuosa, che ogni tanto precipita nel fondo delle valli, risale l'opposto pendio, s'inerpica per scoscese pareti di roccia, segue il filo tagliente di nere, acute giogaie. È la Grande Muraglia. *Siamo tutti col viso incollato ai vetri dei finestrini*,

*trattenendo il fiato.*

Ed ecco le montagne diventano colline, campi e villaggi appaiono nelle pieghe del terreno, poi è la pianura, in fondo alla pianura gialla una grande foresta di alberi di un verde tenero e trasparente, in mezzo al fogliame un bagliore di tetti dorati, di tegole verdi rosse turchine, di torri di porcellana bianca, di laghi di turchese e di giada: Pekino. (Malaparte 118, italics added)

In the cited paragraphs, the border between Mongolia and China has been visually represented through dramatic changes in the landscape. For all three writers, the China–Mongolia border functions as a gateway between the outside world and the fantastical Maoist utopia. Through their depictions of the changing landscape, the three authors manage to set a positive tone for their journeys within China even before they land in the country. Tumiatì's use of parallelism, Fortini's direct praise of the land's outstanding natural beauty, and Malaparte's vivid descriptions of the passengers' behaviors all serve to convey the three authors' excitement about and positive first impressions of China.

The three authors all depict China as a green land full of water, plants, paddy fields, and villages, in contrast with Mongolia (or Siberia), which they describe as a domain of sand, drought, and desert with no living creatures in sight. In the authors' descriptions, the objects that capture their attention are items that can be taken to symbolize two major characteristics of the eastern communist utopia: the abundant water and the rampant forests manifest the country's strong vitality, while the rice fields and populated communities indicate the advanced level of China's civilization. The authors' later depictions of the country emphasize these two themes repeatedly.

For instance, when travelling by train, Tumiatì described the scenery as follows:

Guardando dai finestrini del treno l'immensa distesa senza alberi della campagna cinese si ha l'impressione che *quella terra sia antichissima e stanca e nello stesso tempo nuovissima e vergine*. I contadini con gli abiti di tela azzurra o le tradizionali tuniche nere, i water-buffalos con le corte corna lunate sfuggenti all'indietro, le casette di fango dal tetto di paglia, gli argini delle risaie, i tumuli dei sepolcri, *danno a volte a quel paesaggio un aspetto addirittura preistorico, dove ogni energia sembra placarsi e morire in una esausta orizzontalità*. Ma appunto questa atmosfera primitiva, questi buoi lentissimi, questi aratri dal vomero di legno fanno pensare che *la terra sia stata sfiorata solo in superficie e che nasconda nel suo seno inesauribili*

*riserve di energie e di vita.* (Tumiati 171, italics added)

Tumiati's portrayal of the Chinese countryside does not merely represent the beautiful view; it also conveys the author's faith that China has inexhaustible energy hidden beneath its surface.

Fortini also wrote about the view through the train windows:

Nelle regioni che abbiamo attraversate, di giorno o di notte, guardando le figure dei contadini che lavoravano nei campi o i cascinali che entravano nella notte delle vallate, mai ho avuto il senso del "primitivo", del "malsicuro". Avessi dovuto camminare per quelle campagne, bussare a quelle porte, avrei trovata magari una grave miseria, ma sempre uomini civili, mai barbari. (Fortini 150)

The sketch of the peaceful scenery mainly serves as a starting point for presenting the author's meditations on Chinese civilization, including his conviction that the poor living conditions do not impede the Chinese people's innate civility.

Interwoven with the three authors' comments on the Chinese people, their depictions of landscapes contribute to a persuasive discourse. Specifically, the credibility of the writers' observations is enhanced by the blurring of the line between objective representations of reality and subjective accounts of experience. As psychological studies have demonstrated, emotions have the power to modify our judgments;<sup>3</sup> thus, the authors' descriptions of fascinating scenery can create positive emotions and connotations in the minds of readers and make readers more readily accept the authors' stances on seemingly unrelated subjects, such as the society and politics of Maoist China.

### **Landscape as Generator of Acceptance and Affection**

Immediately upon their respective arrivals in China, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte all experience a very strong sense of déjà vu. Riding a bus from the airport to the center of Beijing, Tumiati was moved by the exuberant cordiality of the scenery he glimpsed through the bus window, and he was surprised by the similarity between the suburbs of Beijing and

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<sup>3</sup> See Gillian Brown and George Yule's Discourse Analysis.



those of Naples. While Tumiati had been expecting an antipolis, a place completely different from Italy, suburban Beijing looked deeply familiar, as though he was at home.

Da ogni persona e da ogni cosa si levavano un caldo afflato d'estate morente, una cordialità esuberante, rumorosa e fraterna, un'animazione, un fervore che non riscaldavano soltanto la mia epidermide, ma scendevano fino alle fibre più intime. Dove avevo respirato quell'aria prima d'allora? Cosa stava succedendo? Perché mi sentivo commosso?

Quel sole, quella luce, quei marmocchi, quel brulichio... *Ma quella era Napoli!* Quella era la campagna alle porte di Napoli in un luminoso giorno di primo settembre! Una campagna napoletana senza salsedine e senza pini, una campagna napoletana ammolita ed intorpidita dal pullulare degli stagni e dal pigro galleggiare delle ninfee; ma pur sempre campagna napoletana.

Dopo aver percorso migliaia e migliaia di chilometri in aeroplano, *proprio nel momento in cui credevo di aver toccato agli antipodi, mi accorsi sorridendo di essere a casa.* (Tumiati 29, italics added)

Unlike Tumiati, Fortini could only recall some fragmentary pieces of the scenery that he saw on the first day because the rest of his journey brought an overwhelming amount of information and effaced some of the initial impressions. However, Fortini still clearly remembered his surprise at feeling a sense of déjà vu:

*Stupore, ma stupore di cose già note, già viste, come se avessimo fatto metà del giro del mondo per ritrovarci nella piana di Caserta o di Fidenza. ... Il rapporto tra gli alberi e le cose dei contadini, la pergola e il pozzo, la bicicletta e la viottola; il colore dei muri, dei visi umani, degli ortaggi; lo spartito dei campi, del granturco; i bambini sulle aie; i ciclisti operai che tornavano dalla città – tutto era un settembre italiano, con i suoi fossi, l'ozio prima di cena, il fumo dalle casipole, le nubi danzanti di moscerini, la conversazione col casellante del passaggio a livello, il carro di fieno che ingombra la strada e, diffusa con la luce, la presenza tiepida degli esseri umani per tutta la campagna.* (Fortini 37-38, italics added)

After landing in Beijing, Malaparte immediately went to see the Museum of Peking Man, in Zhou Koudian, thirty miles from the center of Beijing. On his way to the museum, Malaparte found the view in suburban Beijing to be very similar to that of the Minerva Square in Rome: “Sparse per i campi sorgono antiche tombe marmoree, e stele, colonne, dragoni ed elefanti di marmo che reggono sul dorso, come il Pulcino della Minerva, a Roma, una colonna, o una stele” (122).

The Italian authors' sense of familiarity with China does not cease after their first

encounters with China. Instead, the *déjà vu* continues to occur throughout their journeys. The extremely different sights in Beijing, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Chongqing, and Guangzhou all remind the authors of similar scenery in Italy. While getting a bird's-eye view of Beijing from the top of his hotel, Tumiati found the city to be like a sea of foliage divided into a sort of checkerboard by long, straight arteries of roads. The right angles of the intersections recalled for Tumiati the layout of Turin (34-35). In a chapter entitled "Marco Polo," Fortini lists the *déjà vu* experiences that occurred in his journeys throughout China:

I canali, i ponti di marmo, le barche affusolate, le lacche rosse sui tronchi di legno, il gusto delle maschere, le lanterne notturne, il modo di remare con un remo solo – *quante cose ricordano Venezia; c'è Venezia, in Cina, un po' dovunque, ad Hangchow, ad esempio, a Canton.*

E quella sera di festa e di folla notturna, a Pechino, quando ci han fatto attraverso due cortili del Palazzo Imperiale, con quei marmi alla luna, quei profili dei tetti, e ponti e canali illuminati dalle girandole, dai bengala rossi e azzurri – *una notte del Redentore, dall'ombra della piazzetta dei Leoni.* (Fortini 82-83, italics added)

Perhaps driven by nostalgia, Malaparte found similarities between the Chinese and European landscapes more often in the second half of his trip, as he traveled deep into western China. When approaching a monument out of Xi'an, Malaparte was moved by the sweet sadness of the autumnal countryside, which reminded him of Mantova and Aisne:

La campagna è molto bella, sebbene la giornata sia grigia, il cielo chiuso. I salici sulle prode dei fossi, e qua e là, nei campi, alte file nere, e alberi che sembrano pioppi giovani, dal tronco bianco, e paion sulle prime betulle. *La campagna mi ricorda certe campagne del mantovano, o certi paesaggi dell'Aisne: una dolce tristezza autunnale è in questo paesaggio, così trasparente.* (Malaparte 204, italics added)

Travelling 800 kilometers from Xi'an to Chongqing did not inhibit Malaparte from making new connections between the local Chinese scenery and that of Italy:

Vi sono momenti nei quali il paesaggio ricorda le campagne intorno a Varese, ad Arona, a Romagnano, altri nei quali mi viene incontro, a una svolta della strada, un'immagine ticinese, un villaggio, una valle, un'apertura di cielo cari a Francesco Chiesa, a Fogazzaro, al Fogazzaro della Valsolda. (Malaparte 213)

The authors' continual analogies between the Chinese and Italian landscapes may be

perceived as manifestation of the authors' homesickness. However, considered objectively, the authors' emphasis on the similarities in scenery has the effect of decreasing the psychological distance between the Italian readers and the setting of communist China. Those famous Italian sights, such as the beautiful scenery in Venice and the sublime Palazzo Reale in Caserta, not only facilitate Italian readers' imagination of the Chinese scenery hundreds of thousands of miles away, but also foster affinity among readers. In social psychology, similarity has long been recognized as an important determinant and a strong predictor of initial attraction in interpersonal affection.<sup>4</sup> Research shows that people value their own choices and opinions and enjoy being with others who share their preferences. Similarity generates liking as the agreement and acceptance of other people enhances a person's self-esteem and causes pleasure. The same psychological mechanism can also work in relationships between people and places. Thus, by associating Chinese scenery and monuments with sights that are readily acceptable to the Italian public, the authors enhance their Italian readers' acceptance of and appreciation for the Chinese views, and in the process promote a positive attitude toward the Maoist utopia.

A possible motivation for the authors' highlighting of visual similarities between the two countries lies in their desire to set China as a model for Italy's hoped-for socialist reforms. In addition to the similarities in scenery, the authors also emphasize, in other chapters, the common characteristics shared by the peoples in China and Italy. The resemblances provide evidence that it is feasible for Italy to follow China's path in social transformation.

### **Landscape as Embodiment of Exoticism**

Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte intentionally highlight the similarities between certain views in China and Italy in order to reduce the psychological distance between the readers and the distant land, and thereby to provoke positive emotions toward China on the basis of

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<sup>4</sup> See Beverley Fehr's Friendship Processes and Ellen Berscheid's "Interpersonal Attraction."

familiarity. At the same time, the authors carefully use depictions of exotic scenery to hold China at an appropriate distance from readers. In doing so, they prevent the sacred utopia from taking on the mundanity of the secular world, and they maximize the charm of China by fulfilling readers' fantasies of the eastern land.

One of the exotic elements that frequently captures the authors' attention is the idyllic rustic scenery. Overlooking the Chinese countryside from the airplane, Tumiati noticed that the Chinese villages were more peaceful, more tender, and in better harmony with nature than their European counterparts:

Dopo tante migliaia di chilometri attraverso le distese poco popolate della Siberia, quell'improvviso pullulare di vita aveva quasi un aspetto europeo. Ma il paesaggio era più pacato, più uniforme e più molle di quello del nostro continente. Più tenui e più pallidi i colori, più riposanti le linee, che tendevano tutte ad appiattirsi nell'orizzontalità della pianura e degli stagni .... (Tumiati 25)

During his visit to a village in northeast China, Fortini alternated his narrative between his meetings and depictions of the picturesque rustic scenes. Before listening to the reports of some local leaders, Fortini noticed that "Fuori c'era un bel sole lucido e il vento. Sui tetti di stame, dove era cresciuta una erbolina smorta, pigolavano gli uccelli" (102). On his way to visit some shops in the village, Fortini was moved by the peaceful rustic life: "Un pescatore getta la rete e la solleva. Qualche pesce si dibatte. Anatre e paperi filano tra le rive. Una natura semplice, senza violenza" (111). At the end of his visit to the village, Fortini did not forget to take one last glance at the tranquil rural scenes:

Usciamo e, oltrepassate le case del paese, ci avviamo per la campagna, tutta colorata dal sole. Un grosso, gonfio gatto grigio, si scalda vicino ad un muretto. Su di uno spiazzato qualche contadino lavora alla molitura del riso, facendo trascinare a due cavalli i grandi pesanti rulli di pietra. Tra le file dei gelsi e dei salici rossi vanno gruppi di contadine in vesti blu e verdi; e carrette di fieno. L'aria è fresca. Qualche betulla bianca fa sentire prossimo l'inverno. Le ombre sono viola e miti. (Fortini 113)

Tumiati and Fortini's depictions of the idyllic Chinese countryside pave the way for the two authors' later claims that, regardless of the material poverty in China, the people live happy

lives, appreciating the simple and tranquil lifestyle and pursuing spirituality rather than material desires.

In Tumiatì and Fortini's travel notes, there are also romantic descriptions of Hangzhou, a major city in southern China well known for its natural beauty. The two Italian authors both recount visits to the city's most popular sight, the West Lake. Traditionally, there are ten famous scenic spots on the West Lake, each remembered by a four-character epithet. Tumiatì watched the famous scene called “平湖秋月 (Moon over the Peaceful Lake in Autumn),” and expressed his appreciation for the tranquil scenery and the idealized fusion between human and nature:

Era una notte calma e serena, illuminata da una falce di luna ancora bassa all'orizzonte. L'aria era fresca e ferma, senza una bava di vento i lunghi rami dei salici piangenti pendevano inerti fino a sfiorare l'acqua. L'orlo rialzato del tetto di una casetta risaltava nerissimo contro lo sfondo più chiaro del cielo. *Tutto era immobile: sembrava che la natura avesse trovato il suo equilibrio perfetto e non respirasse nemmeno.* Poi una barca apparve sulla striscia d'argento che attraversava il lago, avanzò lentissimamente, scomparve di nuovo nel buio. (Tumiatì 194, italics added)

Fortini was taken to see a different famous scene, entitled “雷峰夕照 (Leifeng Pagoda in the Sunset)”:

Presso la riva di questo lago, al tramonto, mentre intorno è un perfetto silenzio, rompendo la superficie tranquillissima saltano i pesci. *Mi chiedevo se erano davvero esistite le folle dei giorni scorsi, i campi faticosi, i segni della lotta e della tensione.* Qui l'acqua tocca timidamente uno scalo di pietra, una siepe; in un giardino, fra prati d'erba rasa, fiori scarlatti, salici piangenti, con l'impercettibile moto controluce delle foglie. Quando si cerca l'orizzonte, tutta una cerchia di colline si dispone contro il cielo dove il sole è appena scomparso, e che ancora si illumina di verde e di viola. C'è nell'aria un profumo che va e viene, dolce: *olea fragrans*. Una casa si riflette nell'acqua, ombre d'uomini si muovono piano intorno a barche tirate sulla riva. Tre barche esilissime stanno dove il cielo si riflette ancora nel lago, in vetta a una collina una pagoda, come un campanile, si posa contro la luce. Riposo, silenzio, un filo di luna. Un uomo cammina nella penombra, affonda una rete entro una cesta calata nell'acqua e la solleva grondante, tutta squassata dai grossi pesci del vivaio. (Fortini 235, italics added)

The tranquil and fantastic view at the West Lake bewitched Fortini, inducing visions of arcadia in his mind. He started questioning the actuality of the frantic world, and he grew

uncertain about the existence of “le folle dei giorni scorsi, i campi faticosi, i segni della lotta e della tensione.” In reality, the West Lake not only has enchanting natural scenery, but also possesses an enduring cultural legacy immortalized by the historical monuments in the area, such as the Leifeng Pagoda. The culture-laden West Lake presented to Fortini the very infinity of time and space:

Il senso del passato e della vanità qui si posa anche sulla natura senza storia, apparentemente inumana. Qui, per la prima volta, nel corso di questo viaggio, è dato sentire inafferrabile e sempre presente, come il profumo che di continuo va e vien sull'aria, un tempo di larve. (Fortini 236)

While both Tumiati and Fortini depict the peaceful and harmonious natural scenery of the West Lake, only Fortini, with his romantic descriptions, highlights the amazing spiritual experiences that the sights can inspire in visitors. By recording his marvelous mystical experiences, Fortini mystifies the exotic and enchanting Chinese landscape and arouses readers' interest in the enigmatic eastern utopia.

Unlike Tumiati and Fortini, whose journeys focused on China's eastern coast, Malaparte followed the route of the Silk Road and explored the vast and wild western China. During his tour in Gansu province, Malaparte was very excited to see the prairie, which he had been craving for a long time:

Sono le steppe del Kansu, la soglia delle steppe della Mongolia. È uno spettacolo meraviglioso, *tutta la mia vita ho sognato di viaggiare nelle steppe dell'Asia Centrale*, fra le steppe della Mongolia, e le ultime catene del Pamir, dell'Himalaia. *È questo il solo paese del mondo che dia il senso della libertà, e dell'infinito. Il solo infinito che sia aperto davanti a te, che tu puoi percorrere, che ti appartiene.* Il mare non ti appartiene. Non puoi correre libero sul mare. Ti occorre chiuderti in una specie di bara di legno, abbandonarti in podestà in potere in signoria delle onde e dei venti. Se metti il piede fuori della tua bara di legno, sei morto. *La steppa è tua. È libera.* È fatta su misura dell'uomo e del suo cavallo. Puoi lasciare le guide sul collo del cavallo, lasciarlo andar dove vuole. Puoi salire sui monti dove son boschi immensi di abeti, e prati folti di erba verde, e ruscelli e fiumi, e animali selvatici. Dall'alto dei monti contempi il mare di sabbia e di erba rossa, *sei padrone di te e di tutta la natura intorno.* (Malaparte 160-161, italics added)

From Malaparte's point of view, the prairie is more open and welcoming to human exploration than the ocean, where people have to hide themselves inside boats. The far

horizon of the grassland in Gansu fills Malaparte with a wonderful feeling of freedom and a sense of infinity. Most importantly, Malaparte claims that the sight empowers the visitors to feel like the masters of themselves and of the nature around them. In this sense, the exotic landscape becomes an embodiment of the “主人翁精神 (sense of ownership)” repeatedly highlighted in Chinese political campaigns in the 1950s. According to the Chinese constitution, all of the privileges of the People’s Republic of China belong to the people, and the people are the masters of the country. Under the constitution, in post-civil-war China, most of the social and economic reforms were carried out in the name of granting ownership of the country to the public. The idea of empowering the masses could be very appealing to European leftist intellectuals, because, “for well over a century, leading Western intellectuals conceived of themselves as outsiders and critics [...] deprived of appropriate recognition, rewards, and power” (Hollander 401).

To sum up, in the three Italian authors’ romantic depictions of China, the land’s rural sights are idealized into exotic, enchanting sites full of mystical inspirations, freedom, and power. By idealizing the Chinese landscape, the authors elevate the country to the status of a sacred utopia.

### **Landscape as Bridge to Chinese Culture**

Both Fortini and Malaparte associate the sights in China with classical Chinese literature or visual arts.

Fortini’s *Asia Maggiore* includes four chapters about China that are devoted respectively to Beijing, Mukden (Shenyang), Shanghai, and Hangzhou. The first three of these four chapters start with classical Chinese verses as epigraphs. The chapter on Beijing begins with a poem written by Yang Ji, a Chinese intellectual who lived in the Ming dynasty. The pages about Mukden follow a poem written by famous Tang-dynasty poet Du Fu. Fortini’s chapter on Shanghai starts with a work of Gao Shi, another celebrated poet of the Tang dynasty. The

only exception is the chapter on Hangzhou, whose epigraph is an excerpt from *Livres des merveilles du monde/ Book of the Marvels of the World*, the travelogue describing Marco Polo's travels through Asia.

Among the Chinese literary works that Fortini quotes, Yang Ji's verse emphasizes the importance of cooperation among peasants; Du Fu's narrative poem narrates how his thatched hut was torn apart by autumn winds and expresses the poet's strong determination to build an ideal society where no intellectuals would have to struggle in poverty; and Gao Shi's poem vividly depicts a traveler's homesickness. Frankly, the connection between each of these poetic epigraphs and its proceeding chapter seems problematic, as the epigraphs neither foreshadow the content nor reflect the chapters' major themes. However, these poetic epigraphs still serve to remind Italian readers of the long and rich literary tradition in China, and they reinforce the positive image of an advanced Chinese civilization.

Other than the epigraphs, Fortini also continuously integrates the Chinese literary elements with his depictions of the country's landscape. Between the Italian delegation's visit to Mukden and their trip to Shanghai, the Italian intellectuals took a tour at the Great Wall. Although Fortini was sick and could not join the tour, he did imagine the view from the fryctoria and interpreted the symbolic meaning of the Great Wall. Based on three classical Chinese poems<sup>5</sup> that associated the Great Wall with cruel servitude and violent wars, Fortini concludes that the Great Wall is "tremila miglia di un faticoso nulla in mezzo al nulla dei monti lunari," and a "simbolo di esilio" that represents "ripetizione, vanità, paura, demenza, coraggio, tristezza" (126). Despite Fortini's negative interpretation of the Great Wall, the three Chinese poems that he quotes demonstrate Chinese intellectuals' long tradition of being concerned about and involved in politics and social issues. On his way from Beijing to Shanghai, Fortini found some tombs in the farmland. He expressed his tender melancholy

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<sup>5</sup> The three poems cited are "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute" of Cai Wenji, "Watering the Horse at the Great Wall" of Yang Guang, and "Pondering the Ancient Battlefield" of Li Hua.



with an excerpt from a modern Chinese poem written by Wen Yiduo in 1946: "... ti lascio dormire – ti copro con la nostra terra gialla, tanto leggera" (148). During his tour at the West Lake in Hangzhou, Fortini was glad to find "ville, giardini, luoghi di piacere che la poesia dell'età Song e il romanzo dei Ming ha celebrati" (235). Later in his trip, after narrating his mystical experiences on a pagoda in Hangzhou, Fortini cited a Chinese poem by Gao Qi of the Yuan dynasty to present his experience when leaving the pagoda and going downhill:

Ho salutato il bonzo della pagoda lontana e ho ripreso il cammino.  
Seguendo gli scampanii, esco sui monti nebbiosi.  
Abbaiano i cani nel bosco dei bambù,  
ai raggi obliqui del sole si vedono l'ombre degli uomini. (241)

Malaparte also frequently uses Chinese art pieces and depictions from Chinese literary works to describe Chinese scenery. On his way to the Museum of Peking Man, Malaparte enjoyed the beautiful and splendid landscape in the suburbs of Beijing, which reminded him of a famous landscape painting by Wang Ximeng<sup>6</sup>:

Il paesaggio è simile a quello dipinto da Uan Si Men, che visse alla fine del secolo XI, sotto la Dinastia Sung, nel suo famoso rotolo di seta lungo venti metri: Mille lidi montagne e di fiume (un lì corrisponde a mezzo chilometro), ora esposto nei Palazzi Imperiali di Pekino con altre meravigliose pitture cinesi fra le più antiche che si conoscano. Abbandonatosi in una barca al filo della corrente, Uan Si Men dipinse cinquecento chilometri di montagne e di fiume: montagne brune coperte di rocce di un turchese straordinariamente intenso, allucinante, valli di un verde morto, lontananze di un turchese pallido sfumante in grigio e in rosa, acque profonde e chiare, venate di verde, di turchese, di grigio. (Malaparte 119)

When visiting Lan Zhou, the capital of Gan Su province, Malaparte was amazed by the round and luminous moon in the empty sky, and he romanticized the view by analogizing it to the classical scenes in paintings of Ma Lin<sup>7</sup> and the verses of Du Fu<sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> Wang Ximeng was one of the most renowned court painters of the Song dynasty, and his landscape painting entitled "A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains" (《千里江山》) was one of the largest traditional painting in Chinese history, and has been described as one of the greatest works of Chinese art and kept in the permanent collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing.

<sup>7</sup> Ma Lin was a famous Chinese painter of Song dynasty.

<sup>8</sup> Du Fu was a prominent Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty. Along with Li Bai, he is frequently called the greatest of the Chinese poets.

E il cielo è terso, altissimo, la luna è come la luna nelle pitture di Ma Lin, come la luna nelle poesie di Tu Fu: (“Tra noi più chiaro è il volto della luna”): un disco rosso, perfetto, lucente, qualcosa di gelido, di astratto, in un cielo vuoto, sopra montagne nude, su un fiume immenso, su una terra gialla dove anche l’ombra della notte è gialla, e la notte stessa par fatta di terra. (Malaparte 158)

In the same vein, Malaparte also created a connection between the mountains in Chongqing and the dragons portrayed in traditional Chinese paintings and sculptures: “I monti son quelli della pittura cinese del tempo dei Tang: selvosi, e gibbosi, come di un serpe che strisciando si levasse sulla schiena, a modo come camminano i draghi nelle pitture e nelle sculture cinesi tradizionali” (211-212).

By repeatedly connecting the natural beauty in China with famous works in traditional Chinese literary and visual arts, Fortini and Malaparte romanticize the Chinese landscape, transforming the sights into art pieces and raising their aesthetic value. At the same time, the two authors keep reminding readers of the long tradition and great achievements of Chinese civilization, which, they believe, have provided Maoist China with a solid foundation.

## **Section 1.2: Authors of the Chinese Revolution**

### **Leaders as Symbol of the Chinese Revolution**

For Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, much of the country’s appeal is attributable to the leaders of Chinese society. Although the three Italian authors meet quite a number of Chinese leaders of different levels in their trips in China, Mao Zedong is undoubtedly the focus of their admiration.

Among the three Italian authors, Malaparte was the most fortunate, as he was invited to have a private conversation with Mao. Staying close to Mao, Malaparte was able to provide a very detailed account of Mao’s appearance:

Il Presidente della Repubblica Popolare della Cina, l’eroe della rivoluzione cinese, il capo di un popolo di 600 milioni di abitanti, è un uomo sui sessant’anni, di statura oltre la media, dalle spalle ampie, il viso largo, la fronte altissima, i capelli neri, folti e soffici. Ha i lineamenti regolari, gli occhi solo lievemente obliqui, il naso ben modellato, la carnagione pallida: non di quel pallore d’avorio che hanno in generale i

cinesi, ma di un pallore olivastro, simile a quello dei sardi. Ha un piccolo porro scuro sul mento, e i denti nerissimi, di ebano. Son così perfettamente neri e lucenti, che sembran fatti di ossidiana. ... Mi affascinava il suo sguardo: che è fermo, sereno, dolce, profondamente buono. (Malaparte 137)

In the eyes of Malaparte, this “hero of the Chinese revolution” does not seem to have any defects in his appearance. Even Mao’s black teeth are depicted as so perfectly black and shining. Malaparte interprets the flawless face of Mao as a manifestation of the Chinese leader’s good and generous nature, just as Mao’s life as a revolutionary activist reflects his courage, spirit of sacrifice, and strong determination: “Se la sua prodigiosa vita d’uomo di azione, di rivoluzionario, è lo specchio del suo coraggio, del suo spirito di sacrificio, della sua volontà di ferro, il suo viso è lo specchio del suo animo buono, generoso” (137-138).

In the course of his meeting with Mao, Malaparte also captured details in Mao’s behaviors that demonstrate Mao’s good manners and high respect for intellectuals. When Malaparte and Mao were walking together to the meeting room, “il Presidente, che mi ha accompagnato attraverso la lunga sala camminando alla mia sinistra, ma un passo dietro di me (i cinesi, tutti, dal Capo dello Stato al più umile contadino, sono cortesissimi), mi ha fatto cenno di sedermi in una poltrona” (137). While Malaparte was talking about the enormous price differences for commodities in China and Italy, Mao listened with attention, and “alzava ogni tanto il labbro superiore in segno di meraviglia” (139). At the moment when Malaparte hesitated to bring up the issue of some foreign missionaries imprisoned in China, Mao Zedong appeared to be open to any comment and criticism, and warmly encouraged Malaparte to speak freely:

Il Presidente mi ha risposto che avrebbe accolto con molto piacere qualunque mia critica, se di critica si trattava, e che comunque non solo mi consentiva, ma mi pregava di parlargli con tutta sincerità, essendo la franchezza quella dote che egli maggiormente apprezzava negli uomini, specie nei suoi collaboratori e negli amici stranieri. (Malaparte 140)

The meeting lasted for an hour and ended in a warm and friendly atmosphere: “[Mao] si è alzato, mi ha preso la mano, che ha tenuto a lungo stretta fra le sue, e sorridendomi come per

dar mi speranza, mi ha accompagnato fino alla porta, dove mi ha rivolto parole di simpatia e di augurio” ( Malaparte 144). Malaparte was deeply moved by Mao’s kindness and sympathy, and as he looked into Mao’s gleaming eyes, he felt that Mao was glad to put a hand on his shoulder.

Unlike Malaparte, during Tumiatì and Fortini’s journeys, they did not have a chance to talk with Mao Zedong. For them, the encounters with Mao are more a matter of observing the mysterious and inscrutable personage from a great distance.

At the beginning of a reception for foreign visitors hosted by Chinese central government in Beijing, Tumiatì saw Mao walking into a salon with other Chinese leaders: “Mao Tse-tung era al centro della fila. Più alto della media, massiccio, pesante, applaudiva anch’egli con pacatezza. Indossava una casacca oliva abbottonata alta al collo, senza insegne o decorazioni” (203). According to Tumiatì, Mao’s face looked the same as on official pictures and posters. However, Tumiatì still found three striking things in the Chinese leader’s appearance:

Tre cose colpivano in lui: l’altezza della fronte lievemente sfuggente (a prima vista si ha l’impressione che i capelli, ancora nerissimi, gli comincino a metà del cranio), il colorito relativamente roseo e la calma dell’espressione e dei gesti. Una calma nient’affatto glaciale e tuttavia così evidente e marcata da far pensare che nessuna emozione possa riuscire a incrinarla. (203)

Enchanted by Mao’s unique brand of charisma, Tumiatì could hardly take his eyes off Mao during the dinner. Through careful observation, Tumiatì became even more amazed by Mao’s innately authoritative demeanor: “nei suoi gesti non c’era ombra di formalismo, e tuttavia quella sua pacata naturalezza esprimeva un’autorità che nessuna etichetta avrebbe potuto ottenere” (204).

Fortini, unlike Tumiatì, did not have a face-to-face meeting with Mao Zedong; however, Fortini was invited to watch the National Day Parade from the reviewing stands beside Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace). During the event, he saw Mao standing on Tiananmen,

waving to the masses. Probably due to the distance between them, Fortini's portrayal of Mao is less detailed than Tumiati's. Instead, Fortini quickly moves from Mao's appearance to his focus, readiness, and power:

Mao è di statura abbastanza alta, grosso di corporatura, l'altezza della fronte dà l'impressione di una calvizie, e i capelli neri fanno cornice ai due lati del viso largo e severo. Non direi che abbia una espressione bonaria né patriarcale; piuttosto di una concentrazione interiore che ritardi i movimenti ma sia sempre pronta a traboccare in qualche moto, o parola, tagliente. Senti anche una forza, una gravità, fisica. (70)

Tumiati and Fortini were not content merely to observe Mao from a great distance. After their first encounters with the mysterious supreme Chinese leader, both Tumiati and Fortini started collecting more information on Mao from other resources, such as interviews, historical records, and Mao's own writings, with the hope of creating a more concrete image of Mao Zedong. It turns out that the more they know about Mao and his life, the more they become attracted by this exceptional Chinese leader.

What surprised Tumiati the most was Mao's incredible "poliedricità (polihedric nature)":

Quello che più sorprende, nella figura di Mao è la sua poliedricità. La storia conta un'infinità di grandi generali. E non mancano i condottieri che furono anche abili politici. Ma la figura di un uomo che a queste attitudini aggiunga anche grandi qualità di filosofo e di poeta è assolutamente eccezionale. Eppure per definire Mao non si può tralasciare nessuno di questi attributi: capo rivoluzionario, stratega, organizzatore politico, statista, teorico del marxismo, poeta. (206)

From Tumiati's point of view, Mao was both a philosopher and a politician, an inquisitive thinker who remained an activist. Providing a long list of Mao's titles, Tumiati depicts Mao as an ideal leader who combines great qualities that rarely coexist with such intensity in a single person.

Tumiati has already noticed the strong natural authority of Mao. The two important characteristics that often lead to natural authority are an assertive personality and the possession of essential skills or knowledge. Tumiati tries to explain Mao's strong natural authority by showing that Mao has both of these characteristics: the first quality is manifested in Tumiati's description of Mao's extreme calmness and confidence, and the second one is

demonstrated in Tumiati's interpretation of Mao's thoughts:

*Il punto di vista di Mao, che è il punto di vista fondamentale del marxismo, può essere riassunto così: il marxismo non è un dogma, è una guida all'azione. Interpretare i problemi cinesi alla luce del marxismo e trovare, alla luce del marxismo, soluzioni nuove per problemi nuovi, è stata sempre la preoccupazione fondamentale di Mao. (208, italics added)*

For Tumiati, Mao understands Marxism correctly, and he creatively develops the theories of Marx to resolve the unique problems in Chinese society. By equating Maoism with the fundamentals of Marxism, Tumiati elevates Mao to the status of Marx's legitimate successor. Such statements endorsed the orthodoxy of Mao's thoughts, and thus legitimated him as the top leader of communist China.

Fortini would agree with Tumiati's observation of Mao's "poliedricità." However, he was not quite interested in Mao's well-known identity as a philosopher-politician. As a poet himself, Fortini concentrated on Mao's attribute as an outstanding poet. After a casual discussion with his interpreter on a famous poem of Mao entitled "The Long March," Fortini realized the loss of meaning in translation,<sup>9</sup> which made him appreciate the original verses of Mao even more:

Mi fa notare che lo scarto semantico di questi versi (l'"innovazione", direbbe Spitzer) è nell'accezione negativa data alla parola "dragone", tradizionalmente positivo e benigno. C'è insomma una carica di 'ideologia rivoluzionaria', in questo identificare Chang Kai-shek con l'antico dragone del cielo, immagine dello spirito imperiale, che le parole "dragone" e "mostro" (sempre negative, nella nostra tradizione indoeuropea) non possono tradurre adeguatamente. (Fortini 149)

The new finding aroused Fortini's interest in Mao's poems, so he asked the receptionist for a collection of Mao's poems. To Fortini's surprise, the receptionist told him that there was no published collection of Mao's poems, because Mao was not content with the quality of his poems. For Fortini, the fact that Mao had not publish his poems demonstrated Mao's modesty and his unceasing quest for perfection. Fortini believed firmly in the high quality of Mao's

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<sup>9</sup> In the version which Fortini read, some verses of Mao were translated as "Con una lunga corda nelle mani, penso a quando legheremo il mostro"; however, they ought to be translated as "Sei-vette montagna su picco, Rossa bandiera largamente sventola vento ovest. Oggi lunga corda in mano, quando legare dragone". See Fortini's *Asia Maggiore* page 149.

works, because “ci sono degli avversari dichiarati del regime di Mao che confessano degna dei classici la sua prosa” (149).

In addition to Mao’s exceptional attributes, his dramatic life also adds to his appeal for Tumiati. When explaining the origin of Mao’s name, Tumiati romanticized the story, almost making it sound like Mao’s life as a revolutionary hero was determined at the moment that his parents decided to give him a name meaning “consecrating the Orient”:

[I genitori di Mao] decisero infine di chiamare il neonato col nome di Mao Tse-tung che, tradotto letteralmente, significa “la chioma consacra l’Oriente”. Ma certo i due contadini hunanesi non pensarono per un istante di attribuire a quel nome un significato simbolicamente presago. (Tumiati 205)

Tumiati was also amazed by the close correspondence between Mao’s early life and the turbulent years of China’s modernization. Mao was born at a time when China was wracked by civil strife, beset with terrible poverty, and encroached upon by foreign powers that were more advanced than itself. Mao, raised in a traditional Buddhist and Confucian environment, received a modern western education in adolescence and converted to communism soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917. For Tumiati, Mao’s growth corresponded to China’s struggles in its quest for power and modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century:

La prima formazione culturale di Mao non era stata di carattere marxista. La saggezza del confucianesimo paterno e la non “violenza” del buddismo materno avevano ispirato gli anni della sua prima giovinezza. Durante l’adolescenza la lettura degli illuministi e l’ammirazione per i progressi scientifici d’Europa e d’America lo avevano spinto a credere che la Cina avrebbe dovuto attendere la salvezza dall’insegnamento dell’Occidente. (“è veramente strano che i maestri debbano sempre invadere i paesi dei loro allievi!”), doveva scrivere ironicamente molti anni più tardi). Si era detto via via progressista, laburista, anarchico. Ma la Rivoluzione sovietica del 1917 e i moti cinesi del 4 maggio 1919 avevano agito da agenti catalizzatori e, nell’estate del 1921, a ventotto anni, era stato uno dei dodici fondatori del Partito Comunista Cinese. (Tumiati 207)

Founding the Communist Party of China was just the beginning of Mao’s heroic epic.

Tumiati believed that Mao’s great contributions to China’s revolution should never be understated:

Da tutto ciò è facile intuire cosa significhi Mao Tse-tung per i cinesi. Vuol dire la

terra ai contadini, la fine del soprusi medievali, l'abolizione della servitù della gleba. Mao Tse-tung vuol dire la liberazione nazionale, la scomparsa dei capitalisti stranieri, l'indipendenza. E ancora vuol dire le nuove fabbriche che vanno sorgendo in tutto il paese, le scuole, le dighe, le strade. In una parola Mao Tse-tung vuol dire il risveglio della terra, il risveglio di un paese di 500 milioni di uomini assopito da secoli. Per questo la popolarità di Mao è immensa. Il suo nome ha raggiunto anche i villaggi dispersi negli angoli più remoti delle regioni dell'interno, è conosciuto dai contadini analfabeti che vivono sulle montagne ai confine del Tibet o nell'Asia centrale, è entrato nelle canzoni dei mietitori e dei battellieri, *è già diventato leggenda*. (Tumiati 209, italics added)

Here Tumiati has listed Mao's important roles in different phases of the Chinese revolution, as well as the leader's significant impact on diverse groups of Chinese people. With incredible perseverance and consummately conceived strategy, Mao had successfully harnessed the forces of agrarian discontent and nationalism, then after twenty years of fighting, led an army of peasants from throughout China to victory in 1949. After establishing the People's Republic of China, Mao launched a series of sweeping campaigns, transforming a semi-feudal, largely illiterate, and predominantly agricultural country into a modern, industrialized socialist state. In Tumiati's words, Mao "became a legend," an important symbol of the Chinese socialist revolution.

Although Mao was the object of the western visitors' admiration, other leading cadres of different levels of the Chinese Communist Party also commanded the respect of the Italian visitors. For instance, Premier Zhou Enlai, the second-ranking leader of China, was depicted as a person who "ha una testa, una espressione, e una forza, che tutti hanno avvertito: intelligenza, energia, penetrazione" (Fortini 82). Similarly, the representatives of Chinese villages were very impressive to the Italian authors, as they "erano i 'quadri' contadini, destinati a far procedere la collettivazione delle terre; i veri autori della rivoluzione cinese" (Fortini 101).

In the travel notes discussed in this chapter, the Chinese political leaders are often depicted as embodiments of thrift, egalitarianism, and cosmopolitanism, whose living style and behaviors even positively influence the foreign representatives in China. For example, in



the interval of a performance hosted by Chinese central government, Fortini noticed that the top Chinese leaders, the foreign ambassadors and diplomats, all had to wait in line to get tea from a large water tank, and then drink out of cheap enamel mugs that Chinese soldiers commonly carried in their luggage during those years:

Nell'intervallo, se si voleva bere del tè, e altro non c'era, bisognava prendere dai tavoli disposti nel foyer una di quelle tazze smaltate che i soldati dell'Esercito popolare portano spesso appesa alla cintura, poi mettersi in coda presso alcuni grandi recipienti forniti di rubinetto e pieni di tè. Preceduti e seguiti da altri ospiti stranieri o attaches d'ambasciata o mogli di funzionari si giungeva dinanzi ad una vaschetta mezza colma di una soluzione al permanganato, rosso barbera; vi si sciacquava la tazza dove altri aveva bevuto, poi la si passava in un'altra vaschetta d'acqua e quindi si aspettava il proprio turno al rubinetto del tè. (Fortini 48)

On another occasion, the Chinese government turned a reception for foreign visitors and diplomatists into a dancing party, where all the attendees, with their vastly different backgrounds, enjoyed the friendly, cosmopolitan atmosphere:

Il ricevimento e la festa sono un esempio del nuovo cerimoniale e, nello stesso tempo della relativa mancanza di formalità. Uscito il ministro, infatti, si spostano i tavoli, si balla; ragazze cinesi con ufficiali polacchi, mogli di diplomatici inglesi con delegati albanesi... (Fortini 82)

Evidently, in the travel notes of Tumiatì, Fortini, and Malaparte, Mao and other Chinese political leaders are commonly depicted as gracious people who possess a combination of puritanism, idealism, and incorruptibility. These characteristics convinced the Italian authors that China was in the hands of trustworthy leaders who were not going to abuse their power.

Such perception also serves to justify the Italian authors' support of Mao's concept that China was a "people's democratic dictatorship."<sup>10</sup> This seeming oxymoron was justified using the following logic: although the Communist Party of China was the only party dictating the political, social, and economic development of the country, decisions and actions taken by the party leaders reflected a wide collective interest because the Party

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<sup>10</sup> "People's democratic dictatorship" is a form of government first expounded by Mao in 1949 in commemoration of the 28<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China. In his speech, Mao addresses the fact that there was still some class division in China, and that only "the people" deserved benevolence, stating that peaceful "reactionaries" would be given some land and forced to work until they too become "the people".

represented all the Chinese people. The Italian visitors believed that the brilliant Chinese leaders, with their operational supervisory mechanism of “criticism and self-criticism,” would never allow the “people’s democratic dictatorship” to degenerate into a dictatorship or a scramble for power.

Additionally, the leaders of the People’s Liberation Army also captured the Italian visitors’ attention. When celebrating the International Workers’ Day with some Chinese workers, Tumiatì ran into a middle-aged Chinese soldier, who “prese a ridere e a scherzare con noi divertendosi infantilmente alle difficoltà creata dalla differenza di linguaggio e finimmo per brindare tutti insieme battendoci grandi manate sulle spalle” (Tumiatì 128). Only after the ceremony did Tumiatì realize that the soldier was a general in the Chinese army who had recently come back from the Korean War. Sincerely moved by the sincerity of the Chinese soldiers, Tumiatì commented:

Ebbene se dovessi sintetizzare in una parola l’impressione che ho sempre ritratto dal loro comportamento non saprei trovare che questa: serenità. Naturalmente questa caratteristica fa spesso assumere loro atteggiamenti che farebbero schiattare un sottufficiale prussiano: ridono, scherzano, corrono, camminano canticchiando e tenendosi per mano. Insomma, sono diversi da tutti gli altri soldati del mondo. (129)

Fortini recounts a similar experience. Upon meeting two Chinese soldiers on a train, he did not realize that they were a high-ranking officer and his assistant. The lack of hierarchy among Chinese soldiers really impressed the Italian author: “Solo qualche ora più tardi ho saputo che erano un maggiore e il suo attendente. A distinguerli, non c’era che qualche ruga sul viso dell’ufficiale” (Fortini 49).

The Italian authors’ positive depictions of Chinese military officers have two major functions in their respective texts. On the one hand, the amiable and easily approachable Chinese officers serve as a vivid representation of the social equality and the lack of hierarchy and bureaucracy in Maoist China, manifesting an ideal social atmosphere that the western leftist intellectuals desired. On the other hand, the Italian visitors’ favorable views of

Chinese military leaders also showed their sympathy and support for Chinese military force, which had just gone through fierce conflicts with the United States in the Korean War in 1950–1953, and for Maoist China, which had suffered from the Western bloc's sanction and marginalization ever since its founding.

### **Women as Beneficiaries of the Chinese Revolution**

During their journey in China, the three Italian authors gladly found that the Chinese revolution had dramatically changed the status of Chinese women, empowering them and engaging them in political affairs and social reforms.

In traditional China, the women were victims of the Confucian family system, in which they were labelled inferior beings. In a chapter entitled “il dramma di nascere donna,” Tumiati discusses the miserable lives of Chinese women in the old days. According to Confucian doctrine, women's social role was based on the “three obediences”: during the course of her life, a Chinese woman had to obey first her father, then her husband, then her son. For many women living in traditional China, the only possible remedy for their continuous suffering was to tolerate and wait to become mothers-in-law, who could then wreak wrath on the younger females in the family. In the same chapter, Tumiati also writes about the foot-binding custom, which spread during the Song Dynasty from the upper class to the rest of society; the practice was adopted by most Chinese families until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Evidentemente, più che di un problema di estetica, doveva trattarsi di una questione psicologica. Le donne così mutilate, infatti, sono costrette ad un'andatura titubante che ricorda quella dei paralitici. Non solo non possono correre, ma non riescono neppure a camminare con disinvoltura. Traballano, esitano, tentennano. E questo, agli occhi dei maschi cinesi, doveva accrescere la loro femminilità, se per femminilità s'intende debolezza, inferiorità, bisogno di protezione. Naturalmente questo egoismo maschile si nascondeva inconsciamente sotto il velo delle regole estetiche. (Tumiati 101)

Tumiati acutely realized that foot-binding was more a psychological issue than an aesthetic one. While Chinese women were already taught to be obedient, respectful, humble, adaptable,

timid, and chaste, the binding of feet reduced her walk to a hobble and thereby reinforced her subjection.

In theory, Chinese women's cries for relief were answered in 1930–31 by the Nationalist government's new Civil Code, which introduced to China the concept of the "modern marriage," a contract that would require the consent of both parties and give women property and inheritance rights as well as equal treatment in divorce. Although the law appeared to be revolutionary, it was not enforced. As Tumiati claimed, "In pratica però si ottenne un solo risultato: l'abolizione della fasciatura ai piedi delle bambine. Per il resto tutto continuò come prima: restò la poligamia, restò il concubinaggio, restò il matrimonio per adozione" (104).

China's conventional family system was not fundamentally challenged until May 1, 1950, when the new Chinese government passed the Marriage Law, which Tumiati described as "il colpo decisivo (the decisive blow)" (106, my translation). This new law provided the legal basis for the equal position of women in modern China, removing all the old legal discriminations against women. Prostitution, arranged marriage, child marriage, polygamy, and the use of concubines were outlawed. Chinese women and men were given freedom of choice to marry, equal status within marriage, and equal rights to divorce. Between 1950 and 1953, divorce rates spiked, as many Chinese women took advantage of the divorce provisions to free themselves from arranged marriages. Tumiati found it surprising that "nella stragrande maggioranza dei casi il divorzio era chiesto dalle donne. In molti centri i divorzi chiesti dalle donne raggiunsero addirittura la proporzione del 92 per cento" (107). Compared with the situation in Italy, Tumiati believed that Chinese women's newly achieved economic independence had facilitated their decisions to dissolve loveless marriages:

Ma ciò dipenderebbe prevalentemente da fattori economici. Da noi infatti la donna sposata, la "casalinga", anche in caso di matrimonio infelice, sarebbe estremamente riluttante di fronte al divorzio, perché non saprebbe come affrontare la vita senza l'aiuto economico del marito. ... Una volta stabilito che uomini e donne hanno le stesse possibilità di lavoro, di impiego e di guadagno, è chiaro che tanto gli uni quanto le altre, qualora lo ritengano indispensabile, possono affrontare

tranquillamente il passo del divorzio. (107)

Here Tumiati's reasoning echoes the Marxist class theory in Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. When applied to women's issues, Marxist class theory explained that class exploitation was the origin of women's oppression. Therefore, the way to obtain women's emancipation was to end class exploitation. For this end to be achieved, women needed to unite and struggle for their freedom and equality. Mao Zedong also agreed on the connection between class liberation and women's liberation. As early as 1929, Mao already realized the decisive role of women in the success of the Chinese revolution. He claimed on the Ninth Party Congress of the Fourth Red Army: "Women comprised one-half of the population. Their poor economic position and extreme oppressed status are not only the evidence of their urgent need of revolution but also the indication of their being the determining force that will win the revolution" (All China Women's Federation 45). After taking power in 1949, Mao and the Party made a great effort to elevate Chinese women's social status and encourage them to participate in productive activities and political affairs. The Marriage Law gave women equality with men in law. Land reform and the "equal pay for equal work" policy granted women economic independence in both rural and urban areas. Women's equal participation in the work force was also made possible by the government's mass educational program, which was aimed at all levels, from basic literacy to complex technological training. Furthermore, the constitution also guaranteed women's equality in politics. All these policies fueled the rise of Chinese women in professional and political fields. The Party's commitment to women's equality was made clear in Mao's famous lines "women hold up half the sky" and "women can do everything men can."

Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte were very interested in and impressed by China's achievements in women's equality. Their depictions of Chinese women focus on the women's

new appearances and character traits.

The three authors all seem to have carefully tailored their descriptions of Chinese women's appearances so as to leave no room for any erotic imagination. When travelling in Hangzhou, Tumiati and his delegation crossed a river with the help of a group of boatwomen whom he described as "donne robuste, ma non brutte, col viso abbronzato dal sole" (194). In Shanghai, Fortini met Tsu Min, vice-chair of a public library:

Tsu Min ha un viso giovane e allegro, senza bellezza ma limpido come talvolta quello, da noi, delle giovani suore. Un'attenzione animata e viva più nello sguardo che nei moti del volto, quale diremmo di specie intellettuale; ma meno penetrante e febbrile. Porta corti i capelli che le scoprono il collo magro. (Fortini 182)

When Malaparte visited a museum in Xi'an, a female college student worked as his guide.

The Chinese girl "è una ragazza dal viso simpatico, i grandi occhi luminosi, i denti bianchi. È vestita della solita giacca e dei soliti pantaloni di cotone turchini, imbottiti. Due trecce nere le scendono lungo le spalle fino ai ginocchi" (Malaparte 186). None of these descriptions mentions any features that are normally used to distinguish the two sexes, such as the curves of the female body.

The only exception emerges in Malaparte's comparison of Chinese and Italian women's bodies:

Osservo le caratteristiche fisiche delle ragazze cinesi: il tronco lungo, le gambe corte, la seggiola bassa, il seno poco sviluppato, le braccia corte, le piccolissime mani. Sono agilissime nei movimenti, rapide al salto, fragili nella corsa, ed è straordinaria la prontezza con la quale, da ferme, e da qualunque posizione, spiccano la corsa. Sono fatte diversamente delle italiane, che hanno le gambe grosse, il seno ricco, i fianchi larghi; chi avrebbe la meglio? Le cinesi, forse. (220)

Although Malaparte comments on the shapes of Chinese women's bodies, the cited paragraph is written in an expository and informative genre, a form usually reserved for science articles, which hardly trigger a sense of eroticism in readers. Moreover, compared with their Italian counterparts, who have "il seno ricco (large breasts)," the Chinese females, with their "seno poco sviluppato (less developed breasts)," seem far less likely to become sources of sexual

attraction. Having made the comparison, Malaparte seems to believe that Chinese women, regardless of their less evident sex characteristics, have a superior body structure to Italian women. He bases this judgment on the Chinese female body's athleticism and physical strength, rather than on its supposed aesthetic value or sexual attraction.

In a word, Chinese women never appear to be objects of desire in Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte's travel notes. Instead, all of them are depicted neutrally in terms of sex and gender. Other than the authors' intentional control of their depictions, there are two other main factors that reduce the Chinese women's sex appeal and assimilate their image to those of males.

One important factor was the uniformity of clothing in Maoist China. As Tumiati noted:

La maggior parte degli uomini vestiva una uniforme di tela azzurra, molto semplice, abbottonata alta al collo come la divisa dei collegiali. Dovette passare qualche giorno prima che potessi rendermi conto che non si trattava di un'uniforme vera e propria, bensì di una specie di abito nazionale adottato spontaneamente dalla popolazione. Lo indossavano i "quadri" governativi ancor prima della fine della guerra di liberazione e i cinesi, trovandolo economico (si era in tempi di carestia), comodo per ogni sorta di lavoro, adatto ai tempi che si attraversavano, lo adottarono immediatamente abbandonando tanto le vecchie palandrane tradizionali (tonache strette e lunghe fino a terra) quanto gli abiti europei. Un'azione naturale e spontanea – anche se difficilmente comprensibile per chi respira l'atmosfera del mondo occidentale – come è naturale e spontaneo l'unirsi di più voci in un coro quando si lavora o si marcia. (31)

Behind the identical, baggy, uniform-like tunics, the distinctions between the two sexes were concealed, and the line between the two genders seemed to be blurred. For the Italian visitors, this nation-wide adaptation of the new clothing style was a remarkable visual manifestation of social equality and an indicator of women's equal status to men. However, the equality in appearance inevitably suppressed the women's expression of their natural beauty and attraction, making them asexual beings.

Another factor was that these Chinese women did not flirt with men as some western women might have done. Tumiati claimed that, throughout his journey in China, "non mi è mai capitato di cogliere uno sguardo, un gesto, una mossa che rivelasse il minimo senso di

civetteria” (110). Despite cultural differences, these “new Chinese women” did behave in ingratiating ways mainly because the social reforms had liberated them from their traditional subservience to men. With their newly achieved independence and social equality, Chinese women did not have to obey or try to please men. They could live with greater freedom and dignity.

Although the appearances of Chinese women in the Mao era did not seem alluring, their new character traits did increase their appeal to the Italian visitors. In the three Italian authors’ travel notes, Chinese women commonly played their role as embodiments of the new socialist civilization that had been created by the Chinese revolution.

Tumiati and Malaparte’s interest in Chinese women’s new characteristics was linked to Maoist China’s equalitarian social norms, which were applied to both men and women. Tumiati found that, in Maoist China, “ogni rapporto è scevro di quei mille sottintesi d’ordine sessuale che costituiscono le delizie della psicosi occidentale” (111). He then summarized Chinese women’s new traits: “Le loro doti sono la semplicità, la franchezza, la freschezza. Il loro spirito è la camaraderie. In una parola sono nuove. Molto più nuove delle operaie e delle impiegate d’Occidente che subiscono inevitabilmente l’influsso delle mode borghesi” (111). For Tumiati, the new character traits were the signs of Chinese women’s progressiveness:

È superfluo aggiungere che in generale noi italiani, abituati ad attribuire una importanza talora eccessiva ai fenomeni sessuali, non possiamo trovarci immediatamente a nostro agio in questa atmosfera. Tuttavia ogni volta che mi sono trovato di fronte a una donna cinese – ministro o studentessa, giudice o capo-reparto – ho avuto sempre la sensazione esatta, concreta, reale della loro superiorità nei confronti delle donne d’Occidente. Non che esse siano più intelligenti o più sensibili. Sono più avanti. Anche se hanno rozzi pantaloni di tela e non usano profumo. Anzi, sarei tentato di dire, appunto per questo. [...] Il rossetto per una donna che ha tutte le possibilità di guadagnarsi da vivere e che, avendone le capacità, può diventare Presidente della Cassazione, è soltanto una civetteria. (113)

Tumiati eulogized the Chinese women, elevating them to a status above Italian women. He believed that women’s quest for beauty also resulted from patriarchal oppression. Because Maoist China liberated women from oppression and granted their independence and equality,



Chinese women no longer needed to build their confidence and values on the physical beauty or the ability to please men. Progressive Chinese women could focus on their contributions to the nation's productivity and the development of their careers. To support his viewpoint, Tumiati listed a number of female cadres working in the Chinese central government to manifest Chinese women's rise in politics, and concluded:

In totale fra le più alte cariche governative figurano ben trentasei donne. Non c'è strada che sia loro sbarrata. [...] Naturalmente in questi casi non si tratta di personalità improvvisate: sono donne che hanno alle loro spalle un passato di lotta politica, di studi, di sacrifici. Ma dietro di loro viene una folla immensa di direttrici, di sindaci, di capi-reparto, di interpreti, di capigruppo. Tutte donne. (109-110)

Several years later, when Malaparte visited the country, the special treatment of women could seem awkward to ordinary Chinese people because in China “non v'è rispetto particolare per le donne. Per i bambini e i vecchi sì, non per le donne. Che sono in tutto uguali agli uomini, e si meravigliano se uno straniero cede loro il passo” (Malaparte 220).

Malaparte believed that women were not treated differently from men in Maoist China because the Chinese revolution and the wars had empowered the women, trained them to lead, and transformed them into a group more active and energetic than men:

Ma ho osservato che le donne, in Cina, sono più attive, più energiche degli uomini. Schiave fino a ieri, hanno mostrato di saper comandare. Questa loro attitudine si è rivelata ed imposta durante la guerra di liberazione: nell'esercito rivoluzionario di Mao, numerose eran le donne ufficiali. Vi era un'intera divisione di donne, nell'esercito di Mao, durante la Lunga Marcia. Molti uffici sono affidati a donne, e uffici anche importanti. (221)

Unlike Tumiati and Malaparte, who paid close attention to Chinese women's independence and dignity, Fortini concentrated on the morality and purposefulness of Chinese women. During a conversation, Fortini asked Tsu Min, vice-chair of a public library in Shanghai, two questions: why had human beings come to the world, and what did she desire most in her life? Tsu Min's reply to his first question was to be happy, and her answer to the second one was to end the exploitation of all the workers in the world. Fortini's interpretations of the two answers reflected his attempts to transform Tsu Min into a symbol

of the moral and purposeful Maoist utopia. First, Tsu Min's quest for happiness was interpreted as a very basic need for living, unencumbered by material aspirations: "la 'felicità' di cui mi parla Tsu Min [...] è qualcosa che si definisce, immediatamente, poveramente forse, dal suo contrario, l'infelicità, la bassezza, la miseria, la malattia e la morte" (Fortini 188). Second, Fortini admitted that Tsu Min's reply to the second question sounded like a standard reply based on communist propaganda; however, he still believed in the authenticity of her answer and spoke highly of the Party's capacity for convincing the public to internalize these communist values:

So che non mi sarà possibile impedire ai miei amici di sentirle, queste parole, come un imparaticcio di propaganda, come la formula che la giovane funzionaria sa di dover dire allo straniero... La vera, la potente novità del comunismo è questa: l'aver reso autentiche, sincere, feriali, quelle frasi da catechismo. (187)

Based on Fortini's interpretation, Tsu Min was set free from the bondage of the acquisitive instinct for material gain, and she became determined to pursue an ideal society in which all members of the working class could achieve emancipation. As a woman living a life guided by sound spiritual values, Tsu Min became a perfect symbol of the new socialist civilization that had been established in the Maoist Utopia where people were poor but enjoyed happy lives with their spiritual pursuits.

To sum up, the three Italian authors were all very impressed by the dramatic changes in Chinese women's lives. As Tumiati pointed out,

È difficile infatti rendere in poche parole la serietà, la dignità, la forza dimostrate dalle donne cinesi in questo brusco trapasso. Erano state imprigionate per secoli e secoli in una società che le considerava quasi come schiave, e all'improvviso si sono trovate di fronte alla più assoluta libertà e alle maggiori responsabilità. (109)

The Italian authors depicted women in China as a social group that had greatly benefited from the revolution. The socialist revolution not only emancipated the women who had previously been oppressed in traditional China, but also provided them with plenty of opportunities to achieve higher social status and to fully display their talents in the egalitarian

society. China's campaign for women's equality was perceived as a great success that could not only inspire women's emancipation in other countries, but also bring hope to the western socialist movements in general. As Fortini claimed, "Veramente (dico a noi) nessuna speranza ha diritto di essere abbandonata. Il comunismo cinese è la prova vivente di una molteplicità e di una ricchezza della rivoluzione che solo pochi anni fa pareva ipotesi o scommessa" (189).

### **Youths as Heirs of Communism**

While the Italian authors' interest in Chinese women laid in their sympathy for these previous victims of oppression, their attention to Chinese youths reflected a two-fold concern. On the one hand, young people in China were successors to the communist cause, and thus were considered to be predictors of the future of the Maoist Utopia. On the other hand, just like Chinese women, the youths in China had also been liberated from the strict family hierarchies determined by Confucianism, and thus represented the dawn of a more equal social life in Maoist China.

Young people have always been of great significance in movements for revolutionary social and political change. The international communist movement had placed stress on the creation of strong youth organizations since its earliest history. In his famous speech "The Task of the Youth Leagues," delivered at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Russian Young Communist League in October 1920, Vladimir Lenin said,

In a certain sense it may be said that it is precisely the youth that will be faced with the real task of creating a communist society. For it is clear that the generation of workers that was brought up in capitalist society can, at best, accomplish the task of destroying the foundations of the old, capitalist social life, which was built on exploitation. At best, it can accomplish the tasks of creating a social system that would help the proletariat and the toiling classes to retain power and to lay a firm foundation, on which only the generation that is starting to work under the new conditions, in a situation in which exploiting relations between men no longer exist, can build. (3-4)

This speech was given just after the end of the Russian civil war (1919–1920), at a time when the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power in Russia. In the speech, Lenin made it clear that

the youths were the key to ensuring the continuation of Communism. The communists in China also realized the great power of youth, especially when the post-World War II demographics made the youth an increasingly important sector of the population in China, as elsewhere. After taking power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party maintained a large Young Communist League for people aged fifteen to twenty-five, and an extensive youth organization called the Young Pioneers of China for children aged six to fourteen. The young generations' significance to China was manifested in Mao Zedong's now famous quotation:

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you. (Quotations 288)

Lenin and Mao's words both instilled in the young generation a serious sense of mission that socialism and communism was for them to build. In this sense, the Italian visitors' observations of Chinese young people could be considered as their search for insights into the future of Maoist China and its communist cause.

For Malaparte, the Chinese children were an unforgettable part of his journey in China. During his trip, he saw quite a number of Chinese children: "i più numerosi sono i bambini cinesi. I soliti vivaci, sorridenti, bellissimi bambini cinesi, a cui piace ridere, scherzare, fare il chiasso con sobrietà, direi con signorile distinzione" (265). According to him, "i bambini cinesi sono straordinari. Ed è commovente il rispetto, la cura che tutti hanno dei bambini in Cina" (265). He reported that the Chinese children playing in parks were more educated and better cared for than their Italian peers:

Una piccola folla di ragazzi si raccoglie intorno a noi, .... Ci sorridono. Hanno visi paffuti, le bambine, come dappertutto in Cina, hanno le guance ravvivate dal rossetto. Tutti portano scarpe, tutti indossano indumenti caldi, non un ragazzo è sporco o stracciato. ... *Vorrei che i nostri bambini, e non soltanto nella solita Calabria e nella solita Napoli, ma in Toscana, ma in Lombardia, in Piemonte, fossero tenuti così bene, fossero così puliti.* E così ben educati. Non ti toccano, non ti annoiano, si tengono a un passo di distanza: un bambinetto di forse tre anni, che m'era ruzzolato, non so come, fra i piedi, si è rialzato da sé aggrappandosi alle mie gambe, e alzando il viso mi ha sorriso come per chiedermi scusa. E anche tutti gli

altri mi han guardato sorridendo, come per chiedermi scusa. (Malaparte 232-233, italics added)

At first, Malaparte thought the Chinese children were following him or showing him around in order to get gifts. However, as he soon realized,

Non accettano, quel che io vengo offrendo loro, non accettano nulla, i bambini cinesi dicono: “Pu yao, no, no”, allontanando con la mano aperta il dolce o la polpetta di riso, o la banana, e si tirano indietro, con garbo, con signorile negazione, per farmi capire che il bambino cinese non mi fa festa per avere un regalo, ma perché gli piace farmi gli onori di casa. (266)

Malaparte found that the children in Maoist China were very different from those hungry, brazen-faced young beggars whom western visitors commonly encountered in the China of the Qing Dynasty, in the China of Warlords, and in the China of Kuomintang. To convince his readers of this, Malaparte insisted that he always faithfully depicted reality even if that meant going against the will of his Chinese hosts:

Non mi piace dir bugie, neppure per far piacere a un amico. E se avessi incontrato mendicanti, se avessi incontrato ragazzi affamati, accattoni, noiosi, lo direi. La miseria non è vergogna, per un popolo. È una vergogna per chi sfrutta la miseria, per chi se ne approfitta, per chi fonda sulla miseria l'ordine e il privilegio. E lo direi, se trovassi accattoni o ragazzi affamati. Saprei di non offendere il popolo cinese, ma coloro che lo hanno tenuto in schiavitù e miseria per tanti secoli. Ma *ora tutto è cambiato, in Cina: e te ne accorgi dai bambini.* (266-267, italics added)

As shown in the last sentence of the paragraph cited above, Malaparte appeared to believe that the dramatic changes in the upbringing and behaviors of children mirrored the great progresses that the Chinese communists had made since the founding of the New China.

When describing the Chinese youths, both Tumiati and Fortini emphasized the spontaneity of the group. While travelling by train, Tumiati saw several welcoming ceremonies at railway stations. Each time, there was a different group of Chinese youths singing and waving hands on the platform. In these events organized by the Chinese hosts, Tumiati seized the chance to observe and analyze the character traits of the Chinese youths:

Naturalmente un viaggio così organizzato si impediva di vedere i treni, i viaggiatori e le stazioni nel loro aspetto abituale e quotidiano. Tuttavia anche quelle cerimonie erano un aspetto importante della vita cinese d'oggi e contribuivano a completare il

grande quadro di una civiltà.

Proprio quelle accoglienze ufficiali, ad esempio, mi hanno rivelato alcuni lati caratteristici della gioventù cinese. ... il loro modo di cantare, di gridare, di gesticolare, di gettar fiori era una specie di libro aperto in cui si poteva leggere facilmente il loro temperamento e il loro carattere. Erano ordinati, ma di un ordine che non arrivava mai alla compassatezza militare. Anzi neppure vi si avvicinava. ... In una parola non aspettavano di marciare, aspettavano di ballare. Erano popolo, non erano esercito. Erano esuberanti, impulsivi, curiosi. E soprattutto freschi. (168-169)

Fortini also gladly found that those Chinese children in the Palace of Youth Pioneers showed “nessun segno di disciplina militaresca in questi ragazzi né di timore reverenziale di fronte al direttore che ci accompagna nella visita” (Fortini 171).

Why was the spontaneity, or the lack of military discipline, a great concern of Tumiatì and Fortini? The answer may lie in the Italian people’s collective nightmare of fascist regime. The Young Pioneers of China and the Communist Youth League of China might remind many Italian readers of the fascist youth groups, Opera Nazionale Balilla and Gioventù Italiana del Littorio, that had been established and led by the National Fascist Party of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. The two Italian fascist youth organizations placed great emphasis on paramilitary training, drills, and inspections, training young members to serve as the fascists of tomorrow. Tumiatì and Fortini’s highlighting of Chinese youths’ spontaneity reflected their attempts to distinguish the Chinese communist youth organizations from those of the fascist regime. Moreover, by highlighting the spontaneity of the Chinese youths, the two Italian authors presented their energy and freedom, thus expressing faith in these successors of the Chinese revolution and in the bright future of China’s communist cause.

Fortini was surprised by how knowledgeable Chinese youths were about Italy. In the library of a secondary school in the suburbs of Shanghai, Fortini saw a number of books in English and French, among which there was even an English translation of Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce’s book *Materialismo Storico ed Economia Marxistica*. After talking with students in the school, Fortini gladly found, “Italia significa per loro, naturalmente, Rinascimento, Michelangelo e Dan-Tin cioè la Divina Commedia. Ma il più

coraggioso, un ragazzo alto e occhialuto, aggiunge di conoscere anche un grande eroe italiano, Ka-ti Pa-ti; cioè Garibaldi” (161). At the same time, Fortini also felt ashamed for his and his fellow Italians’ ignorance about China:

Debbo dirle che, per una intelligente e colta studiosa italiana di mia conoscenza, Sun Yat-sen è un generale cinese? Che per la maggior parte di noi Confucio si situa a piacere cinque secoli prima o cinque secoli dopo Cristo? Che fino a pochi giorni fa non avevo mai sentito nominare Lu Hsun? Che non pochi membri della nostra delegazione “culturale” confondono lo Yang Tze col Fiume Giallo, la Manciuria con la Mongolia, la scrittura cinese con quella giapponese e il buddismo con il confucianesimo? (162)

With himself as a foil, Fortini highlighted the Chinese students’ knowledge about foreign countries, showing them as future constructors of China with broad perspectives. Fortini used his experience in this visit to challenge the western misconception of China as closed and to encourage his Italian readers to break through the walls of ignorance.

During his journey in China, Fortini also was glad to find that Chinese youths had been emancipated from the traditional family hierarchy and empowered to educate, motivate, and assist the older generations.

In traditional Chinese family system, the youths had once been a powerless and voiceless group. As the dominant philosophy in traditional China, Confucianism holds that social harmony is based on family harmony, which could be achieved by enforcing a strict family hierarchy. The family hierarchy was very emphatically symbolized in the Confucian concept of “filial piety.” The youths in a family were required to show obedience, respect, and deference to the elders in authority. When wills clashed, it was expected, and usually enforced, that the will of a senior family member should prevail over that of a younger one.

While the Confucian teachings valued elders’ authority with the utmost respect, Mao highlighted the progressiveness of the younger generations:

The young people are the most active and vital force in society. They are the most eager to learn and the least conservative in their thinking. This is especially so in the era of socialism. We hope that the local Party organizations in various places will help and work with the Youth League organizations and go into the question of

bringing into full play the energy of our youth in particular. (Quotations 290)

In the same note, Mao also described many adults and seniors as “more conservative,” or in other words, less revolutionary, than the youth. Referring to the youth as the most revolutionary force in society, Mao’s comment endorsed the young people, encouraging them to take the lead in social reforms and campaigns. The nation-wide mass education movement of the 1950s demonstrated the rising status of the youth in Chinese society. Many young people actively participated in the movement as teachers to improve literacy among the elders. During his visit, Fortini acutely captured this new phenomenon:

Le scuole invernali sono state istituite per i contadini adulti, è la stagione del riposo. Che i giovani insegnino ai vecchi, i figli ai genitori, ecco il capovolgimento della morale tradizionale; ed è un punto che i comunisti pongono molto in evidenza e non solo per propaganda ma perché è una realtà importante, questa dei genitori che ricevono dai figli lo stimolo ad imparare. ... È frequente, per le vie di una città cinese, scorgere una vecchia, zoppicante sui piedi deformi (solo la rivoluzione del 1911 abolì quella consuetudine) camminare sorretta dalla figlia e dalla nuora, spesso robuste ragazze della Nuova Cina, calzate di scarponi maschili. (181)

The narratives of the Italian authors indicate that, because the socialist revolution ended the exploitation and greatly reduced social tensions and insecurity, Chinese children were full of fun, warmth, and childhood spontaneity. The revolution liberated youths in China from the traditional family hierarchy, empowered them to educate the elder generations, and trained them to become builders of the future.

### **Intellectuals as Integrated, Useful Members of Society**

The lives of intellectuals in Maoist China were also sources of attraction for the Italian authors.

In a narrow sense, the term “intellectual” refers to people professionally engaged in mental labor, academic study, or critical evaluation of ideas and issues. As such, intellectuals are often considered to be products of modernity and inheritors of a faith in Enlightenment reason. However, in this section, the discussion of intellectuals is not based on this narrow definition, but rather on a broader definition used by Italian Marxist thinker Antonio



Gramsci.<sup>11</sup> One of the basic themes in Gramsci's works is the crucial role of intellectuals in political struggle and social movements. Gramsci was clear that the transformation from capitalism to socialism required mass participation. In writing about intellectuals, he employed a very broad definition of the term, claiming that "all men are intellectuals" (115), meaning that everyone has both an intellect and the potential to function as an intellectual in society.

In his notebooks, Gramsci also made a distinction between two types of intellectuals: traditional and organic. Traditional intellectuals are those who regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. They seem to be disinterested voices of reason outside the mechanisms of power. Gramsci pointed out that their independence is usually a myth and that they are essentially conservatives allied to and assisting the ruling group in society. The other type of intellectual, the organic variety, occupies the role of a representative of a class, one who gives the class meaning, helps to bind it together, and makes it function. Just as Gramsci stated,

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. (113)

With traditional intellectuals revealed to be in fact class-interested, intellectuals of both types can be viewed as representatives of sectional interests in a class society. For Gramsci, both traditional and organic intellectuals play important roles in ideological struggle. According to traditional Marxist theory, the ruling class bases its domination on force and coercion.

Gramsci claimed that, in addition to direct physical coercion, there was also an ideological hegemony, a pervasive form of ideological control and manipulation serving to perpetuate all

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<sup>11</sup> Gramsci was a founding member of the Italian Communist Party in 1921. Three years later, he became the party leader and a member of the Italian Parliament. However, when the fascists came to power in 1926, he was arrested, and forced to spend the rest of his life in prison. During the years behind bars, Gramsci completed thirty-two notebooks with his thoughts about Marxist theory and the future of communist movements. These notebooks were published after the war, and widely regarded as Gramsci's important contributions to the Marxist theory.

repressive structures. Therefore, in order to overthrow the domination of the bourgeoisie, there must be an upsetting of the consensus that justifies the interests of the ruling capitalist class, and in its place a socialist consciousness must be created. According to Gramsci, to achieve the goal, working class needs to produce its own organic intellectuals, and wins over a significant number of traditional intellectuals to the revolutionary cause.

During their respective visits in China, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte gladly found that the Chinese Communist Party seemed to have made great achievements, both in creating organic intellectuals from the working class and in reeducating and recruiting traditional intellectuals who were considered as allies with the capitalist Kuomintang government that ruled China in the first half of the twentieth century.

After the communist party had taken power in China in 1949, it had put great emphasis on forming a group of reliable working-class organic intellectuals. As Mao Zedong asserted:

To build socialism, the working class must have its own army of technical cadres and of professors, teachers, scientists, journalists, writers, artists and Marxist theorists. It must be a vast army; a small number of people will not suffice. This is a task that should be basically accomplished in the next ten to fifteen years. (Selected Works 1977 Vol. V 479)

In order to encourage people to be politically conscious and professionally competent, the Chinese government sent a large number of poor peasants and ordinary workers into educational institutions. Most of the Chinese intellectuals with whom the Italian visitors interacted during their journeys were these working-class organic intellectuals who had received most of their educations after the founding of the new China. For instance, during the visit in Mukden, a young Chinese author accompanied Fortini's delegation. This fun and enthusiastic author had once been a worker. "È un ex operaio, autore di un romanzo: sa che esistono Venezia e Napoli, che in Italia ci sono gli ulivi, e ce ne parla con entusiasmo; è un temperamento vivace, la sera, batte i nostri amici a biliardo, lanciando mugolii di gioia" (Fortini 116). Malaparte had similar experience in Langchow (Lanzhou), where he met a

Chinese writer, Ten Hong Tao, who had once worked on railway before the founding of the People's Republic of China. In his travelogue, Malaparte made a detailed description of this meeting:

Durante la cena ho parlato a lungo con lo scrittore Ten Hong Tao, che è di Tien Tsin, e prima della liberazione era un ferroviere. Ha cominciato a studiare e a scrivere dopo la rivoluzione: ha scritto una raccolta di racconti, dal titolo *Il lattaiio*, che hanno avuto gran successo in tutta la Cina. È un uomo semplice, ha qualcosa nel viso che fin dal principio mi ha interessato: una certa luce negli occhi, un modo di guardare un po' trasognato. ... "Io debbo tutto al partito" dice. È il partito che gli ha dato i mezzi per studiare, per liberarsi dalla miseria che gli impediva di aggiungere la sua voce a quella dei numerosi giovani scrittori della Cina comunista. (158-159)

These worker-authors were produced by the educational system of Communist China. They served to fight against the capitalist ideology and to promote the socialist consciousness.

According to Mao, "The revolutionary cause of the working class will not be fully consolidated until this vast army of working-class intellectuals comes into being" (Selected Works 1977 Vol. V 479). For Gramsci, the efforts to create organic intellectuals from the working class could also facilitate the recruitment of traditional intellectuals: "This assimilation and conquest [of traditional intellectuals] is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals" (116).

Compared with the creation of working-class intellectuals, the Chinese Communist Party had more experience in recruiting traditional intellectuals. As early as 1939, in a document drafted for the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao had outlined the Party's achievements in absorbing intellectuals, and highlighted the necessity of continuing to recruit revolutionary intellectuals in the future:

In the long and ruthless war of national liberation, in the great struggle to build a new China, the Communist Party must be good at winning intellectuals, for only in this way will it be able to organize great strength for the War of Resistance, organize the millions of peasants, develop the revolutionary cultural movement and expand the revolutionary united front. Without the participation of the intellectuals victory in the revolution is impossible. (Selected Works 1977 Vol. II 303)

However, recruiting traditional intellectuals could be a very challenging task. Mao and Gramsci were both aware that some traditional intellectuals might bring to the communist movement old habits of relating to the masses, for example, snobbery, condescension, arrogance, and so forth. Gramsci believed that such habits could deepen the division between intellectuals and the working class:

What a tragedy it would be, if the groups of intellectuals who came to the working-class, and in whom the working-class places its trust, did not feel themselves the same flesh and blood as the most humble, the most backward, the least aware of our workers and peasants! Then all our work would be useless and we should obtain no results. (Thomason 62)

In view of the gravity of the problem, Mao also stressed the importance of close identification by the intellectuals with the laboring masses. According to Mao, if intellectuals from the old society wanted to join the communist movement, they would have to “take a firm working-class stand after having been genuinely remoulded” (Selected Works 1977 Vol. V 479). In Mao’s view,

We [the Party] should assign appropriate work to all intellectuals who are reasonably loyal and useful, and we should earnestly give them political education and guidance so that in the long course of the struggle they gradually overcome their weakness, revolutionize their outlook, identify themselves with the masses, and merge with the older Party members and cadres and the worker and peasant members of the Party. (Selected Works 1977 Vol. II 302)

In the 1950s, special trainings located in educational institutions were the primary method used to “remould” the traditional intellectuals. In his travel notes, Tumiati wrote a long paragraph about the reeducation of Chinese intellectuals, with the hope of correcting westerners’ misconceptions of the system:

In Occidente si è molto ironizzato sui collegi istituiti dal Governo popolare cinese per la rieducazione degli intellettuali. Esistono? Quanti sono? Cosa sono? Esistono, attualmente sono cinque e servono a una categoria di persone più vasta di quanto non si creda: gli intellettuali non comunisti che, avendo constatato alla prova dei fatti progressi del loro Paese, vorrebbero contribuire attivamente al rinnovamento nazionale, ma ne sono tuttavia impediti dal fatto che nel nuovo ambiente si sentono come pesci fuor d’acqua. Non conoscono i principi marxisti cui sentono far di continuo riferimento, non comprendono il modo di pensare degli operai e dei contadini, non conoscono una fabbrica o una miniera, non hanno mai afferrato

l'esatto significato della parola classe, ecc. ecc. Tali scuole servono appunto a farli avvicinare a questo mondo dal quale si erano sempre estraniati. Gli operai e i contadini, che ben conoscono la realtà della vita ma nulla sanno di lettere e cifre, debbono curarsi sull'abbecedario e sulla tavola pitagorica; gli intellettuali, che sanno quanto è racchiuso nei libri, ma ignorano la realtà di milioni e milioni di uomini, debbono guardare in faccia la vita. Una scuola più difficile, a volte, di qualsiasi corso universitario. (139)

Tumati was convinced that Chinese intellectuals voluntarily went to the reeducation institutions with the hope of learning more about Marxist theory, communism, and the lives of the working class. For Tumati, the merging of the academics and "boffins" in ivory towers with the masses was a great achievement of social equality, representing the Chinese intellectuals' desire to fight against social differentiation and truly integrate into society.

For both Gramsci and Mao, the major task of the army of revolutionary intellectuals, which consisted of the working-class intellectuals and the reeducated traditional intellectuals, was first to expose the false reality of bourgeois culture, and then to stimulate an alternative culture of socialism and communism. Gramsci believed that revolutionary intellectuals who "have had the clear and marked conception that our epoch, the epoch of large industry, of great workers' cities of tumultuous and intense life, should have new forms of art, of philosophy, of customs, of language" (Thomason 62). In Mao's view, this new type of literature and art should be based on the life of the revolutionary classes. In his speech on Yanan Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, Mao stressed that "the audience of our literature and art consists of workers, peasants, and soldiers and of their cadres," and that "the life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich and fundamental; they make all literature and art seem pallid by comparison; they provide literature and art with an inexhaustible source, their *only* source" (Selected Works 1977 Vol. III 81, italics added). After the founding of the communist China, this speech of Mao was elevated to be the primary guideline of the literary and artistic creation. Since Mao highlighted the life of the working

class as the “only” source of revolutionary literature and art, socialist realism became a dominant style, which glorified the roles of the industrial and agricultural workers and their struggles for emancipation.

The three Italian authors discussed in this chapter generally supported the idea that revolutionary literature and art should be based on the changing life of the working class and on the social changes caused by class struggle. When Malaparte visited China in 1956, Chinese theaters still staged some performances of traditional Chinese operas. Malaparte believed that these classical dramas, based on stories in the Imperial era, were divorced from the reality of Communist China, and thus would not attract the working class. In his book, Malaparte suggested that Chinese dramatists should create more performances based on the authentic life stories of the proletariat:

Io sono sicuro che se la scena cinese moderna riflettesse la vita attuale, e avesse per protagonista l'operaio, non il contadino di tempi lontani, sarebbe più autentica, più vera, più vicina all'arte, e costituirebbe un elemento di quella estetica socialista che fin oggi non si è riusciti a creare neppure in Russia, e che tuttavia è uno dei massimi problemi che si pongono oggi agli artisti moderni. (190)

Although Malaparte admitted the problematic lack of aesthetic values in Russian socialist realist art, he still had faith that Chinese artists would be able to overcome the obstacle.

Fortini also held a mainly positive attitude toward the socialist realism applied in Maoist China. His stance was demonstrated in his interpretation of the case of Hu Feng.<sup>12</sup>

Hu Feng, although considering himself a Marxist, had been openly attacking the Chinese Communist Party's art policies since the early 1940s. The war years in the early 1940s were a period of immense growth in membership in the CPC. During the time of national crisis and political instability, the leadership of the CPC found it imperative to formulate a cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Born in 1902, Hu Feng was a Chinese writer and literary and art theorist. He joined the Communist Youth League in 1923 while attending school in Nanjing. However, at the height of Jiang Jieshi's offensives against the Communists in 1927, Hu Feng worked in the Propaganda Department of the Nanjing Government controlled by Jiang's Chinese National People's Party (Kuomintang). In 1928, Hu Feng went to study in Japan but was expelled from the country five years later due to his leftist activities. Upon his return, he joined the League of Left-wing Writers founded in 1930 by the famous Chinese left-wing author Lu Xun.

policy and eventually bring the disparate intellectuals together into a single moral that would resist fragmentation. Mao's speech on the Yanan Forum of Literature and Art in 1942 represented the CPC's efforts to assert the ideological hegemony of its discourse of national revolution and collectivism. Hu Feng's dissatisfaction with the Party's literary policy was first manifested in a 1945 essay "In the Struggle for Democracy (《置身在为民主的斗争里面》)", in which he wrote that Mao's promotion of literature's eulogizing role indicated that Mao did not want literature to exist at all, but rather wanted to strangle literature. According to Hu Feng, the Party's bureaucratic and theoretical control over writers in the 1940s had led literature to a dead end. From 1945 to 1954, Hu Feng continuously published articles on the issue, promoting his idea of "subjective fighting spirit." The Party tolerated his open defiance, still nominating him as deputy to the National People's Congress and assigning him an administrative position in literary circles after the founding of the PRC.

Nevertheless, the situation changed in 1954 when Hu Feng presented a long report, later known as the "Three Hundred Thousand Characters Letter," to the Central Committee, criticizing the rigid standards that the authorities imposed on literary creation. Hu Feng's report turned the literary polemic into a political issue and made him the target of a national criticism campaign. His constant emphasis on subjectivity made him vulnerable to accusations of idealism, which in those years was equivalent to anti-Marxism. For the critics, Hu Feng's idealism glorified the writers' subjective consciousness as a substantial, self-generating entity, autonomous from the material world. In addition to the criticism of his ideology, Hu Feng was also accused of attempting to subvert the government as a Nationalist agent. Based on his working experience in the Nationalist government in his early life, this new accusation of him being a counter-revolutionary excluded him from the "people" and justified the imprisonment of him and his followers. As a representative of Chinese government explained to Fortini,

Noi teniamo a distinguere fra libertà culturale e dovere di fedeltà allo Stato. La libertà di discussione nel campo ideologico è una delle libertà del cittadino. Ma non possiamo permettere che si approfitti della discussione letteraria o artistica per compiere attività controrivoluzionarie. [...] C'è libertà per le idee sbagliate. Non c'è libertà per i reazionari. (Fortini 247)

Like other members in his delegation, Fortini was upset about the case of Hu Feng:

“Peccato, questa storia di Hu Feng. Non è una storia cinese. È una storia nostra, ungherese, polacca... italiana. Era meglio se non gli capitava, ai cinesi” (253). Fortini tried to ask for more information from the interpreters after hearing a press conference held by Chinese government functionaries: “gli ho detto anche che non si era capito bene se l'attività politica anticomunista di Hu Feng si esprimeva in concreti comportamenti antigovernativi e antistatali o se si esprimeva nella sua azione culturale” (252). However, the interpreters were not able to provide him with more information than what was covered in the press conference. Despite his uncertainty about whether the punishment for Hu Feng was too harsh, Fortini was convinced that the case was not a conspiracy or literary purge. In his view, “non sembra verosimile che il Partito cinese, con tutti i problemi che ha di fronte, vada a creare un tale pasticcio solo per difendere il realismo socialista” (250).

Additionally, Fortini expressed his disagreement with Hu Feng's literary theory. In the two chapters dedicated to the case, Fortini quoted Hu Feng's own words to summarize Hu's subjectivist viewpoint: “‘Dov'è il popolo?’, si chiedeva. E rispondeva: ‘Intorno a voi’. ‘La vita è ovunque. Il punto di partenza è sotto i vostri piedi’” (Fortini 15). These words were extracted from a 1948 essay of Hu Feng entitled “For the Singers who Sing for the People,” in which Hu claimed that “the history is a unity, everyone's living condition is an aspect of the history, all the aspects are connected, therefore, everyone has the potential to have a profound insight in the history” (Hu 238, my translation). In these words, Hu actually denied the progressiveness of the working class that had been promoted by the Party, alleging that people from all classes had equal access to the core values of human history. In saying this,



Hu negated the necessity for writers to establish close connections with the working class, instead promoting a subjectivism based on the writers' mental activities. Fortini revealed the problem in Hu Feng's theory by using the device of *reductio ad absurdum*: "Sarebbe come dire, - commentò, - che voi tutti avreste potuto benissimo fare a meno di venire in Cina, per conoscerla; e restarvene in Italia, a casa vostra" (Fortini 15). After undermining Hu Feng's view, Fortini also used his own experience in China as evidence to justify the CPC's requirement for writers and artists to attain objective knowledge and raw material for artistic creation from direct contact with the working class:

Perché quel che si è andati a cercare in Cina e quel che alcuni di noi vi hanno trovato era in verità qualcosa che non si poteva trovare "sotto i piedi": era una novità di rapporti fra gli uomini. La riprova che, come dice Marx, "trasformandosi le basi economiche della società... si rivoluziona tutta la mostruosa superstruttura della società". ... La possibilità di quel mutamento era una convinzione, ma una convinzione teorica sempre pronta a tramutarsi in una convenzione o in una fede, in un dover essere, in un fine astratto e lontano, in una proiezione di perfettibilità personale. L'esperienza studiata sui libri non giova. ... Altro che "avvenga che può"! Noi abbiamo bisogno non solo di sapere se e come la società, cioè noi stessi, possa essere diversa, ma abbiamo bisogno che la società, cioè noi stessi, *sia* diversa, nella storia; e possibilmente in quella a noi contemporanea. (Fortini 18-19)

For Fortini, witnessing in person the concrete and objective social transformations that had happened in China greatly enhanced western leftists' determination to pursue the communist cause, which was a function that abstract theories and visions could not perform.

In short, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte were favorably impressed by Maoist China's great achievements in elevating working-class intellectuals and recruiting and transforming traditional intellectuals. According to these authors' depictions, most of the Chinese intellectuals appeared to be well-integrated, useful members of society, taken seriously and well treated by the higher authority. The Chinese government's policy to reeducate non-communist intellectuals, as well as the official requirement to connect artistic creation with the working class's struggles and emancipation, also received warm acceptance and approval from these Italian authors.

## The Masses as Foundation of the Revolution and New Civilization

Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte all eulogized the appealing personal qualities of the Chinese people in its aggregate form.

Tumiati admired the kindness and hospitality of the Chinese, which eliminated the distance among people:

Il cinese è un popolo simpatico. Anche se non avete mai conosciuto un cinese in vita vostra, anche se non sapete una parola della sua lingua e non avete un interprete a disposizione, anche se ignorate quasi tutto della storia e dei costumi della Cina, avvertite immediatamente la calda ondata di simpatia che emana da questa gente. La avvertite nella espressività dei gesti, nei larghi sorrisi, nella vivacità degli occhi scuri svirgolanti verso le tempie; la avvertite nella indicibile grazia dei marmocchi, nella spontaneità delle ragazze e delle donne, nella umana cordialità degli uomini, nella filosofica tranquillità dei vecchi dalle barbe caprine; la avvertite dappertutto, nelle campagne e nelle città, nei negozi e per le strade, fino a che vi abbandonate interamente a questo flusso, *perdendo completamente quel reciproco riserbo che per solito divide gli esseri umani cresciuti e vissuti in parti del mondo lontanissime l'una dall'altra*. (Tumiati 49, italics added)

Like Tumiati, Malaparte also spoke highly of the good manners of the Chinese, describing the people as noble and civilized: “la cultura, in Cina, per antichissima tradizione si accompagna sempre alla nobiltà e alla signorilità dei modi” (194). “La folla cinese è la più civile del mondo. Ed è una folla tutta operaia. Nessuno mai tenta di passare avanti ad un altro, nessuno urta un altro, e, se questo avviene per errore, si scusa” (Malaparte 220).

Fortini agreed with the other two Italian authors that the Chinese were “sempre uomini civili, mai barbari” (150). According to Fortini, even some propaganda art pieces failed in their task of demonstrating the Chinese as callous or fierce warriors because the people did not have those character traits in their nature. “È vero, qualche statua, qualche quadro della Nuova Cina vuol mostrarci qualche eroiche, facce feroci; ma, quasi sempre, sono invece sorrisi e sorrisi, un fiume di sorrisi. Il medesimo sorriso aperto che vedi ovunque per le vie” (Fortini 71). Moreover, Fortini’s positive impressions of the Chinese people were reinforced after watching the National Day Parade, in which he and other members of the Italian delegation experienced a mass demonstration of unity, joy, confidence, dynamism, and

power.

Non mi proverò nemmeno a descrivere la sfilata. Fin dal giorno seguente mi sono chiesto seriamente se tutto quello che avevo veduto era stato vero, di tanto aveva superata ogni mia immaginazione. Parole come “grandioso”, come “imponente”, sono assolutamente sbagliate, ... quello che più mi aveva turbato era stata la qualità della letizia, il colore suo. E aveva turbato anche i miei compagni di delegazione, persino coloro che più volevano mantenersi freddi, che più repellevano alle manifestazioni di massa, ai cortei, alle parate. ... Eravamo tutti un po' storditi e meravigliati; ci si guardava in faccia l'uno l'altro, posso dire di aver udito esclamazioni di stupore anche sulle labbra di chi meno m'era parso facile all'entusiasmo. E una frase sentivo ripetere, ..., e veramente non contavano più le opinioni politiche: - Chi pensa di piegare questo popolo è pazzo -. Mai come in quelle ore abbiamo avuta della verità contenuta nella rivoluzione cinese, della sua ragione assoluta. ... È possibile che ci si sbaglia? È possibile che qualcuno ci inganni, che questo popolo sterminato che ci passa dinanzi, sia, come pretendono i propagandisti americani, vittima di una tecnica diabolica, di una fredda volontà di dominio? No, mi rispondeva, non è possibile. (Fortini 66-68)

The Chinese people, as a whole, were both beneficiaries and creators of the new China, the Maoist Utopia. Hence, the praised qualities of the people were generally considered inseparable from the social system under which they lived. The relationship between Maoist authority and the Chinese people were seen as mutually beneficial. On the one hand, the Maoist government's authority and legitimacy derived from the support of these amazing people. On the other hand, the successful social system managed to capitalize on the excellence of the Chinese and bring out the best in the people.

### **Section 1.3: Achievements of the Red China**

In the preface of his 1859 book *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx explained his economic interpretation of history:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which there correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – what is merely a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within the framework of which they have hitherto operated. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. At that point an era of social begins. (3-4)

Based on this statement—as well as on his famous line from his 1847 article “The Poverty of Philosophy,” “The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist” (Writing of the Young Marx 480) —Marx is often interpreted as a technological determinist who believed that the economic base determines the superstructure in a one-way relationship. Indeed, for many Marxists, no proposition is more central than that socialism presupposes capitalism, that socialism becomes a real historical possibility only on the basis of the material and social accomplishments of modern capitalist production. The Marxist doctrine undoubtedly posed a serious question to the Chinese Communist Party, who inherited in 1949 a war-ravaged economy far less developed than the Russian economy at the time of the October Revolution.

In the decade after the founding of the PRC, many western visitors, including the three Italian writers discussed in this chapter, went to China with a particular interest in its social development, wondering how the Party would deal with the country’s backwardness and impoverishment that must surely inhibit the realization of socialism. During his visit in Xinjiang (Sinkiang), Malaparte wrote,

I cosacchi, gli uiguri, i kirghisi, i mongoli, compiono la trasformazione non da contadini in operai, come gli han, ma da pastori nomadi in operai. Il salto è maggiore. Nel Sinkiang, come nelle regioni confinanti col Tibet, studiare il fenomeno interessantissimo della creazione del socialismo nel deserto.  
*Contrariamente alle note teorie di Marx.* (175)

It was exactly the social experiments that were “contrary to the famous theory of Marx” that aroused the interest of Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte to explore the society of Maoist China.

### **Strengthening the economic base**

In a sense, the CPC was both beneficiary and victim of the retardation of modern capitalist development in China. On one hand, it was the failure of Kuomintang’s bureaucratic capitalism that permitted the CPC to come to power. On the other hand, it was the same failure that impeded the revolutionaries from realizing their socialist goals.

The leaders of the CPC were painfully aware that a preindustrial China lacked the Marxian-defined material preconditions for socialism. In his speech on the Commemoration of the Twenty-eighth Anniversary of the CPC in June 1949, Mao reaffirmed the Party's commitment to socialist and communist goals but relegated their realization to an unspecified future era.<sup>13</sup> However, more fortunate than the Russian Bolsheviks three decades before, the Chinese communists were less worried about the Marxist dilemmas posed by the economic underdevelopment because the Soviet Union seemed to provide a successful model of transforming a backward country into an industrialized socialist state.

The years from 1949 to 1958 were a time of great optimism and hope; however, the optimism was mitigated by a relatively pragmatic recognition of what was feasible. The slogan of the time, "three years of recovery and ten years of development," reflected the sober temper and moderate policies of the Chinese leadership during the early post-revolutionary years.

For most western visitors, the poverty of China was undeniable. Upon his arrival in Beijing, Fortini quickly observed,

Essi [i cinesi] sono pur sempre una categoria infelice, squallidi stracci su toraci ingobbiti; e se ancora sopravvivono per la scarsezza delle auto, l'aumento dei servizi pubblici ne lascia ovunque lunghe file disoccupate; e quando passi dinanzi a loro, ti chiamano con un breve suono gutturale. (40)

Nevertheless, China's era of poverty was normally introduced in its historical context. For instance, in the case of Fortini, the Italian author also admitted that there had already been improvement in the living condition of the Chinese, because "gli uomini che fin a pochi anni fa correvano a piedi, e ora, almeno, inforcano la bicicletta" (40). In the same vein, Tumati endorsed Maoist China by highlighting the country's miserable past:

Da secoli non si era mai vista una Cina senza "mandarini", senza feudatari, senza avventurieri stranieri, senza generali pronti a cambiar bandiera, senza treni che saltavano, senza saccheggi, senza fucilazioni in massa, senza sciacalli decisi a

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<sup>13</sup> See Mao Zedong's On the People's Democratic Dictatorship.

speculare sulle carestie. Tutto questo era stato spazzato via. (50)

Moreover, for the three Italian authors, even though China was still poor and backward, its efforts and accomplishments in material progress seemed indisputable. Fortini was impressed by the numerous construction projects in Beijing: “La Cina costruisce; costruisce casa, suole, dighe, strade con una furia, con una violenza indicibile; architetture sobrie, povere quasi sempre. *È aspetto più appariscente, più severo, della rivoluzione*” (59, italics added). Tumiatì praised the positive changes in Shanghai brought on by the CPC:

A poco a poco Sciangai ha perso il suo aspetto caotico, febbrile ed equivoco per assumere un volto calmo piano e disteso. Oggi è una grande città industriale completamente cinese. E una città ordinata. ... Il numero degli abitati è in continuo aumento, ma non si tratta di avventurieri, di stranieri, di speculatori. Sono nuovi operai che confluiscono dalle altre parti della Cina. Il numero delle case cresce, ma sono casette ordinate e razionali costruite secondo un preciso piano regolatore. (191)

During his tour in Urumucì, the “nuova città sorge nel cuore della steppa” (175), Malaparte recognized the cooperative efforts of China and the Soviet Union in constructing the major industrial center in western China:

L’architettura russa si riconosce in quasi tutti gli edifici, costruiti in questi ultimi sette anni, o ancora in costruzione: suole, alberghi, caserme, edifici pubblici, cinema, case operaie, magazzini, fabbriche. Da per tutto sorgono fabbriche: segherie meccaniche, acciaierie, stabilimenti di meccanica leggera e pesante, industrie tessili, silos, fabbriche di cemento, raffinerie di petrolio, stabilimenti chimici. (176)

Without modern technology, most construction in China was carried out by the manual labor of the masses, who were equipped with only very elementary tools. Nevertheless, what surprised the Italian visitors most was not the rather poor working conditions, but rather the Chinese workers’ popular enthusiasm.

When passing by a construction site in Beijing, Tumiatì was enchanted by the rapid movements of the Chinese bricklayers and other laborers, which reminded Tumiatì of the rapid-speed scenes in old comic movies. Despite the heavy workload, most of the workers at the site were singing work songs to synchronize their actions:

Tutta la mia attenzione era attratta dal lavoro dei muratori e dei manovali. ...

nonostante la durezza del loro lavoro, quegli uomini correvano. Quelli che preparavano le pietre, la ghiaia o il cemento lavoravano con furia febbrile, tanto che, a distanza, sembrava di assistere a uno di quei vecchi films comici in cui tutti protagonisti sono presi da una fretta epilettica. ... Per tenere la cadenza la maggior parte di quegli uomini cantava. (Tumiati 33)

Later in his journey, Tumiati was invited to visit a much larger construction site. Mobilized by the CPC's project of "Managing Huai River," around sixty thousand Chinese peasants were working together along the riverbank, constructing flood control dikes and drainage channels. For Tumiati, the scene was like a spectacular performance:

Il lavoro dei contadini sulle rive dello Huai è spettacolo impressionante e indimenticabile. ... Quei sessantamila operai accompagnavano il loro lavoro con una nenia ritmata che serviva a cadenzare i movimenti. Ogni squadra aveva un suo grido diverso e dall'intrecciarsi continuo e febbrile dei mille reparti, si levava un concerto ossessionante che riempiva il cielo fino al lontano orizzonte. Ritto in piedi accanto a un collega, osservavo in silenzio quello spettacolo grandioso e incredibile. (Tumiati 183-184)

Malaparte captured similar epic scenes during his trip. In suburban Xi'an, he saw thousands of Chinese laborers transporting industrial materials using large handcarts. The Italian author was moved by those hardworking "human-beasts," calling them "the most heroic among the Chinese people."

È uno spettacolo orribile e meraviglioso. Son migliaia di carrette, una dietro all'altra. Portano il materiale da costruzione alle fabbriche, ai cantieri sparsi per la pianura, lungo il Fiume Wu, e il Fiume Pa. ... La costruzione della Cina dovrà molto a questi uomini-bestie: *sono i più eroici fra tutti i cinesi*. (Malaparte 196-197, italics added)

Although China was more backward than Russia, the very consciousness of the backwardness seemed to give the Chinese people even greater determination to overcome it. According to the depictions of the Italian writers, the CPC succeeded in transforming the mass enthusiasm from wartime nationalistic passion into productive initiatives for social constructions in the post-war era. Just as Tumiati summarized,

La grande macchina della nuova Cina si era messa in moto. E funzionava. Da sola. Allora tutti i cinesi – anche quelli che non avevano partecipato alla rivoluzione, anche quelli che non avevano mai sentito parlare di Mao Tse-tung o lo credevano una specie di terribile diavolo rosso – si sono accinti a spingere la ruota che aveva cominciato a girare. Tutti lavorano indistintamente, tutti si sforzano con entusiasmo

di fare il più e il meglio possibile. Tutti i 500 milioni di cinesi, per quanto poveri, per quanto gravati dall'eredità di secoli e secoli di feudalesimo, "ci danno dentro". (51)

After witnessing the encouraging popular enthusiasm in social construction, the Italian authors all tended to be optimistic about China's modernization. For Tumiati, with the zeal of all the Chinese people, "la grande ruota avanza con un ritmo che, come le distanze e la popolazione, deve essere valutata con unità di misura particolari" (51). Malaparte was convinced that "la grande e positiva esperienza cinese assolve qualunque errore, perché è la prova manifesta e indiscutibile che la somma dei fatti positivi, nel moto del progresso, è superiore sempre alla somma degli errori" (282). Based on the achievements already accomplished by Maoist China, Fortini envisioned an industrialized China entering the socialist phase less than a decade from then:

I primi cinque anni della rivoluzione liberatrice sono stati quelli della pacificazione nazionale, della riforma agraria, dell'impostazione generale dello sviluppo socialista e – non lo si dimentichi mai – il collaudo delle energie e della passione nazionale nella guerra di Corea; i prossimi cinque anni decideranno del ritmo dello sviluppo industriale. *Non occorre ricordare che verso il 1965 la Cina dovrà esser passata alla fase socialista anche nell'industria.* (109, italics added)

### **Consolidating the superstructure**

While stressing the development of a material basis for socialism, the Chinese Communist Party did not forget the construction of socialist superstructure. In the first few years after founding the People's Republic of China, the CPC strove to retain the social order and stability mainly through political reforms and ideological consolidation. For the three Italian authors discussed in this chapter, it seemed difficult not to endorse the Chinese government's efforts to create a peaceful and unified society, especially given all the sufferings and conflicts the nation had gone through in the modern era.

One of the challenges faced by the Chinese leaders in their political reforms was how to identify the CPC's political base. Although the CPC officially claimed to be the party of the proletariat, it was the Chinese peasants, who comprised more than eighty percent of the



population, who served as the actual social base for the Maoist party's victory in the Chinese revolution. Moreover, during the long period of war, it was from the peasantry that the Party drew the majority of its members. As a result, even though the PRC was stated to be under the leadership of the working class, it was functioning through the alliance of workers and peasants, and primarily with the support of the peasantry. According to Tumati, the unique situation in Maoist China was not a deviation from the Marxist doctrine, but rather an evidence of the Chinese leaders' clear understanding and creative application of Marxist theories:

Possiamo dunque concludere affermando che le differenze esistenti fra lo sviluppo della rivoluzione cinese e lo sviluppo delle altre rivoluzioni socialiste, lungi dal rappresentare una deviazione, sono al contrario la prova concreta di come i comunisti cinesi abbiano compreso e applicato il marxismo-leninismo. Se essi avessero tentato di applicare alla Cina del 1949 formule valide per altri paesi e per altri periodi, si sarebbero mostrati succubi di quel dogmatismo che Mao Tse-tung, memore delle sue origini contadine, definisce "peggiore dello sterco di vacca che almeno serve per concimare i campi". (82)

Another aspect of Chinese political reforms that was often questioned was Maoist China's form of government. In commemoration of the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the CPC, Mao expounded the idea that the new China should be a "people's republic," a state of the people's democratic dictatorship.<sup>14</sup> In explaining the apparent contradiction in the term "democratic dictatorship," Mao claimed that democracy was to be extended to "the people," while the dictatorial methods were to be applied to the reactionaries. In Mao's view, "the people" included members of four social classes: the working class, the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie; meanwhile, the targets of the dictatorship were the landlord class and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, as well as the representatives of those classes, the Kuomintang reactionaries and their accomplices.

Based on the class distinctions that Mao made, he announced that the new political order was to rest on a broader social base, the so-called "national united front," which included all

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<sup>14</sup> See Mao Zedong's On the People's Democratic Dictatorship.

four social classes defined as “the people.” Hence, many non-communists participated actively in the new state’s policy-making process. Some of them were even given high positions in the administrative bodies. As Tumiatì observed in 1953, three out of the six vice-presidents of the PRC were non-communists. Among them, the most illustrious was Song Qingling, the widow of Kuomintang founder Sun Yatsen. Tumiatì praised the CPC’s decision to cooperate with some bourgeoisie groups, considering it to be a wise and pragmatic choice:

La proprietà privata delle grandi industrie non è certo un obbiettivo del socialismo, ma privarsi immediatamente dell’aiuto di industriali di larghe vedute in un paese dove le industrie erano ancora in fasce e dove i tecnici si contavano sulla punta delle dita sarebbe stata una forma di suicidio; il socialismo prevede la scomparsa della borghesia e l’avvento della società senza classi, ma combattere la “borghesia nazionale” sarebbe, nella presente congiuntura storica, un non senso. I rappresentanti del Partito comunista si riunirono quindi con i rappresentanti di tutte le organizzazioni contrarie a Chiang Kai-shek. (72-73)

Tumiatì also spoke highly of the CPC’s willingness to listen to the dissenters from other progressive political or social groups:

La struttura eterogenea di questo organismo può essere considerata il simbolo del regime attualmente esistente in Cina, dove la funzione di guida spetta indubbiamente al Partito comunista, il quale però, nell’assumere questo ruolo, ha mantenuto larghe possibilità di espressione alle altre forze politiche progressiste esistenti nel paese. (71)

The CPC’s political cooperation with non-communists was also highlighted by Fortini as evidence of the widespread appeal of the revolution and the broad popular support that Maoist China enjoyed:

L’edificazione cinese sembra avere il consenso della grandissima maggioranza della popolazione; ossia, per essere precisi, sembra ragionevole e probabile che la grandissima maggioranza dei cinesi che abbiamo veduti non solo trovi incomparabilmente migliore l’attuale regime di quanti prima ne abbia avuti, ma sia decisa a collaborare volenterosamente alle iniziative del governo. (Fortini 256)

While Tumiatì and Fortini primarily concentrated on the “democratic” aspect of Maoist China, Malaparte endorsed the country’s “dictatorship” and its targeting of the people’s enemies. During Malaparte’s meeting with Mao Zedong, he gladly told the Chinese leader that he was most favorably impressed by two things in China: the low prices and the humane

penal system. In his travel notes, Malaparte wrote about his astonishing experiences visiting prisons in 1956:

Durante la mia visita alle prigioni di Pekino, quel che più mi aveva impressionato erano le condizioni materiali e morali, particolarmente dignitose e umane, nelle quali vivono i carcerati. Non vi sono sbarre alle finestre. Le porte delle celle restano aperte notte e giorno. ... i carcerati, nelle ore in cui non lavorano (lavorano tutti, uomini e donne, condannati politici e criminali di diritto comune, negli stabilimenti tessili e nelle fabbriche di calze, annessi alle prigioni, o nei vari servizi interni, cucina, mulino, pastificio ecc.), vanno e vengono liberamente dalle celle ai cortili. Dopo le cinque pomeridiane, finita la giornata di lavoro, i carcerati s'intrattengono negli immensi cortili alberati o negli spacci, giocano al football o a pallacanestro, si recano al cinema, al teatro (v'è un cinema e un teatro, in ogni prigione da me visitata), si muovono cioè senza divieti di sorta entro il perimetro carcerario, nel quale non mi è mai capitato di vedere, e ho gli occhi buoni, un guardiano armato. (140-141)

Malaparte was astonished and pleased by the virtual absence of armed guards and window bars, by the open gates and the relaxed, genial atmosphere in the prison, where the prisoners seemed to respond well to the reeducation and rehabilitation that was accomplished through work therapy.

Tumiati and Fortini's comments inform readers that Maoist China was mainly a democratic country being run through political cooperation, and that the country was authoritarian only towards a very small number of persons who were excluded from the rank of "the people." Indeed, Malaparte's account of the Chinese penal system convince audiences that Maoist China did not apply coercive force even when dealing with the people's enemies. On the contrary, the Chinese authorities stressed reeducation and rehabilitation, using manual labor as a means of redeeming those who had lost contact with the masses, and helping these lost men and women to achieve eventual reintegration into society. In a word, the democratic dictatorship proposed by Mao seemed to be an ideal political system, one that functioned perfectly in the Maoist utopia.

In addition to establishing a new political system, the Chinese authorities also paid much attention in fostering a social consensus among the people. According to Italian Marxist

thinker Antonio Gramsci, the state could be divided into two parts: the political society, which is the arena of political institutions and legal control, and the civil society, which consists of the visible non-state sphere, including communities, families, and the educational system. For Gramsci, the political society was the realm of force, while the civil society was the realm of consent. He claimed that the working class could not dominate merely through force and coercion. Rather, alongside a direct revolution, the working class also had to exert intellectual and moral leadership in order to create a proletarian ideological hegemony within civil society while avoiding a counter-revolution or degeneration.

Like Gramsci, Mao Zedong also realized the significance of ideology in the revolution. Mao's emphasis on social consciousness can be traced as far back as the 1930s, long before the Party had gotten its power. Although Mao admitted, following Marx, the dominant position of a material basis in creating human history, he also stressed the importance of a superstructure for material progress:

While we recognize that in the general development of history the material determines the mental and social being determines social consciousness, we also – and indeed must – recognize the reaction of mental on material things, of social consciousness on social being and of the superstructure on the economic base. This does not go against materialism; on the contrary, it avoids mechanical materialism and firmly upholds dialectical materialism. (Selected Works 1977 Vol. I 336)

Just as the Chinese communists did not wait passively for capitalism to lay the material basis for revolution, so too they were not disposed to rely on a natural process of social development to bring about a socialist consciousness. Since 1949, the CPC had striven to legitimize the country's policies, to build social consensus, and to mobilize the population for social programs through all the available means of communication, including educational curriculum reforms, print media such as newspapers and posters, electronic media such as radio and television, and mass political campaigns.

Among the three Italian authors discussed in this chapter, Fortini had the greatest interest in exploring the CPC's efforts to build social consensus among the masses. In a

chapter ironically entitled “Brain Washing,” Fortini analyzed the CPC’s campaigns to promote socialist beliefs and values. From Fortini’s point of view, the so-called “social control” in communist China also existed in capitalist countries:

La società avviata al socialismo sembra esplicitare quanto è implicito nella società borghese: il “controllo sociale” che da noi è esercitato dal sacerdote, dalle persiane del villaggio, dal commerciante – ad un certo livello – o dai “doveri mondani” e dagli “uffici del personale” – ad un altro livello. (268-269)

Fortini did not believe that China’s “thought reforms” would destroy the people. Rather, based on his observations of the country, Fortini was convinced that the campaigns functioned as educational movements that helped people better understand themselves and their responsibilities: “Si trattava di fare compiere un esame di coscienza profondo, destinato a chiarire ad ognuno la propria condizione di classe, i moventi non individuali ma collettivi delle proprie azioni passate e presenti, delle proprie mancanze” (263). Therefore, instead of destroying people, the campaigns served to enlighten the Chinese people to live lives guided by sound spiritual values:

Ma in Cina, oggi? Si può avanzare l’ipotesi che questa “distruzione della persona”, come dicono i suoi avversari, sia invece un modo di “fondare” la persona, di fondarla facendole prendere coscienza delle proprie responsabilità sociali, disegnandole – con quella paradossale fiducia assoluta nel rapporto pensiero-espressione, interiorità-linguaggio, destinata forse un giorno ad incrinarsi o a complicarsi – la rete dei propri rapporti con il resto degli uomini.

Quelle pratiche possono essere una manipolazione dall’alto, ... ma sono indubbiamente uno dei mezzi con i quali questi popoli possono emergere ad un reale esercizio democratico, senza dover passare attraverso la fondazione della “persona” borghese-proprietaria. (Fortini 268)

After talking with a number of Chinese people on different occasions, Fortini concluded that the CPC had succeeded in making its people internalize socialist values. As he wrote, “La vera, la potente novità del comunismo è questa: l’aver reso autentiche, sincere, feriali, quelle frasi da catechismo” (187).

While praising China for its achievements in promoting and consolidating socialist ideology, Fortini also used the Maoist utopia as a mirror to reflect the problems in the Marxist

movements in western countries:

Bisognerebbe studiare origini, sviluppo e decadenza della pratica di critica ed autocritica nei partiti comunisti dell'Occidente; analizzare come essa possa diventare uno strumento di sopraffazione e di inganno nelle mani di "direttori di coscienza" cinici o spregiudicati. (268)

#### **Section 1.4: Good-Place or No-Place?**

Despite the popularity of postcolonial studies in recent decades, scholars have rarely touched the subject of how, during the Mao era, Italian literature represented the PRC and the Chinese people. Two exceptions are Angelo Pellegrino's 1985 work *Verso Oriente: viaggi e letteratura degli scrittori italiani nei paesi orientali (1912-1982)* (hereafter *Verso Oriente*), and Gaia De Pascale's 2001 work *Scrittori in Viaggio: narratori e poeti italiani del Novecento in giro per il mondo* (hereafter *Scrittori in Viaggio*). In both Pellegrino's and De Pascale's analyses of the Italian travel notes written about China in the 1950s, the scholars draw on two primary sources: Franco Fortini's *Asia Maggiore* and Curzio Malaparte's *Io, in Russia e Cina*. Both Pellegrino and De Pascale's work reflects the belief that Italian intellectuals' 1950s travel notes written about the PRC, including those by Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, served as transmitters of ideology, rather than as faithful depictions of reality. However, as this chapter shows, the travel notes are based on, and do in fact communicate, something of the reality of China in this period.

In Pellegrino's *Verso Oriente*, he categorizes the PRC depicted by Italian visitors of the 1950s as the "oriente ideologico (ideological Orient)" (VII). Pellegrino recognizes the differences between Italian intellectuals' representations of the PRC in the 1950s and those made after 1960, and he separates these accounts into different chapters. Rather than analyzing the differences in depth, though, Pellegrino tends to view the conflicting reports as those of different witnesses to the same subject. He considers Italian visitors' reports written in the 1960s, especially Parise's *Cara Cina*, to be more reliable and faithful depictions of the reality in Maoist China than earlier visitors' eyewitness accounts.

De Pascale, unlike Pellegrino, groups together the Italian accounts of the PRC from the 1950s and the 1960s in a single chapter of her *Scrittori in Viaggio*; she regards all of these accounts as evidence of Italian intellectuals' failure to understand the PRC. De Pascale seems to believe that, due to essential cultural differences between Italy and China, the Italian intellectuals' efforts to interpret correctly the social and cultural phenomena of the PRC are doomed to fail. In this light, De Pascale seems to like the word-by-word records of conversations produced by Parise in the 1960s, more than *Asia Maggiore* and *Io, in Russia e Cina*, whose authors tended to make interpretations based on their Western backgrounds. De Pascale's argument draws on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which she uses to suggest that Italian travel accounts about Maoist China are not generated from reality but rather constructed out of ideology. In short, both Pellegrino and De Pascale believe that Italian intellectuals' travel notes about the PRC in the 1950s served as transmitters of ideology, and could not stand up to rigorous assessments of their accuracy.

This interpretation by Pellegrino and De Pascale echoes Paul Hollander's theory of political pilgrimage, which holds that all positive depictions of communist countries by Western intellectuals are intentionally embellished at best, and propagandistic at worst. On one hand, the Italian travel writers themselves regard Maoist China as an “εὖ-τόπος,” a socialist utopia realized, a society with a better mode of development than contemporary Western capitalist countries. But on the other hand, the scholars, Pellegrino, De Pascale, and Hollander, would describe the Maoist China portrayed in these Italian travel accounts as the other utopia, “οὐ-τόπος (no-place),” an imaginary place that has never existed.

While Pellegrino does not apply any critical theories to support his conclusion, De Pascale quotes Edward Said and Paul Hollander in her analysis. Both Said's Orientalism and Hollander's theory of political pilgrimage come with the implication that the representations in these Italian writers' travel notes are intentional distortions of reality. In the following

sections, I examine whether Said and Hollander's theories are suitable for analyzing these cases. That is, I investigate to what extent the travel notes of Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, are either transmitters of ideology, or accurate accounts of reality.

### **The Meanings of Maoist Utopia**

Undoubtedly, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte all have good impressions of the PRC in 1950s. In their travel notes, the three Italian visitors all reviewed their fruitful journeys and summarized what, to them, were the symbolic meanings of the Maoist utopia.

The remarks of Tumiati are particularly illustrative of China's attractions, including its long and rich cultural tradition, its dramatic and turbulent modern history, and its new socialist civilization that was destined to influence the world:

La Cina, madre antichissima di civiltà, la Cina di Lao Tse e di Confucio, la Cina dei re e degli imperatori; la Cina del riso e del tè, delle invasioni straniere e dell'oppio, della poesia e delle guerre civili; la Cina della siccità e delle inondazioni, dei contadini e della rivoluzione, dell'Armata Rossa e della Lunga Marcia; la Cina di Mao Tse-tung, la Cina che con i suoi 500 milioni di abitanti e la sua nuova civiltà tanto peso può avere nel determinare le sorti del mondo. (26)

Among the appeals of Maoist China that the authors listed, the greatest attraction for Tumiati appears to have been the new Chinese civilization. Late in his book, Tumiati explained that the Chinese socialist revolution had created an egalitarian society with no exploitation or alienation. Based on the new social structure, a new socialist civilization was developed among all the Chinese people, leading them to dedicate themselves to the revolutionary cause:

Da secoli non si era mai vista una Cina senza "mandarini", senza feudatari, senza avventurieri stranieri, senza generali pronti a cambiar bandiera, senza treni che saltavano, senza saccheggi, senza fucilazioni in massa, senza sciacalli decisi a speculare sulle carestie. Tutto questo era stato spazzato via. La grande macchina della nuova Cina si era messa in moto. ... Allora tutti i cinesi ... si sono accinti a spingere la ruota che aveva cominciato a girare. Tutti lavorano indistintamente, tutti si sforzano con entusiasmo di fare il più e il meglio possibile. ... Sotto quest'impulso la grande ruota avanza con un ritmo che, come le distanze e la popolazione, deve essere valutata con unità di misura particolari. ... Sul triplice sfondo della vastità, della simpatia e della miseria della Cina balza in primo piano – predominante e trionfale – questo nuovo elemento: la trasformazione della Cina. (Tumiati 51)



At the end of the paragraph cited above, Tumiati pointed out that the transformation of China became a predominant characteristic of the country. Fortini shared the same view. However, unlike Tumiati, who was interested in the reasons for the transformation, Fortini concentrated on its potential implications for the socialist movements in other countries, claiming that “i cinesi stanno costruendo una società e una civiltà socialista che è destinata ad avere, a brevissima scadenza, una decisiva influenza sul resto del genere umano” (25). From Fortini’s point of view, the concrete progress of socialist reforms carried out in China provided a much more powerful stimulator than the abstract knowledge and social theories learned from books. As Fortini alleged, “noi abbiamo bisogno non solo di sapere se e come la società, cioè noi stessi, possa essere diversa, ma abbiamo bisogno che la società, cioè noi stessi, sia diversa, nella storia; e possibilmente in quella a noi contemporanea” (18-19). Because the reality in China made it clear that “è possibile non odiare quel che il giorno seguente ci porterà” (68), Fortini was convinced that “la Cina è questa meravigliosa lezione di pluralismo e di pianificazione comunista” (27). The significance of this “lesson,” of this realized model of Maoist Utopia, lies in its function to encourage the Western leftists, especially Italian ones, to pursue the socialist and communist cause:

La rivoluzione italiana ha da imparare da quella cinese non già la flessibilità ideologica, che da noi rischia di chiamarsi eclettismo e opportunismo, ma la fiducia nella possibilità di mutare realmente i rapporti fra gli uomini e di farla finita con gli spettri delle delusioni, dei compromessi, col cerchio del “sempre eguale” che ha imprigionato ormai tre generazioni. (Fortini 28)

After presenting Maoist China to Italians as an inspiring object lesson in successful social transformation, Fortini reflected upon the meaning of his delegation’s journey. He considered it to have been a valuable effort to enhance the Italian public’s understanding of China, to help rebuild the diplomatic relations between the two countries, and to push forward the socialist movement:

Ritornati in Italia, diremo e scriveremo tutto quello che avremo veduto e di cui veramente la maggior parte dei nostri connazionali delle classi dirigenti non ha

neppure la più vaga idea; e questo aiuterà obiettivamente alla ripresa delle relazioni diplomatiche del nostro paese con la Cina e sarà dunque un passo in avanti per la pace e sarà un passo in avanti per il socialismo. (Fortini 178)

For Fortini himself, the trip in China had a two-fold meaning. It not only allowed him to visit a socialist utopia, where “il popolo vive nella prospettiva di una pianificazione che già preoccupa e investe un avvenire, quale noi non vedremo” (Fortini 256), but it also made him better understand his own task as an Italian socialist:

Mi pareva di comprendere meglio quale difficile compito fosse stato assegnato a noi, che vogliamo il socialismo in Italia: la lotta contro l’astratta speranza e l’astratta disperazione, contro lo scoraggiamento della immobilità o la continua tentazione di mediare, di comporre, e cioè di rimediare. (Fortini 68)

Fortini was aware of the difficulty of the revolutionary cause in Italy, where “ritorneremo nel giro del rovello sterile, nel destino di un paese che non si muta, in una lentezza della storia dalla quale sembra non ci sia dato di sfuggire se non con l’ira” (179). However, his experience in the Maoist utopia made him more optimistic and determined to promote that cause back home. As he stated, “veramente (dico a noi) nessuna speranza ha diritto di essere abbandonata. Il comunismo cinese è la prova vivente di una molteplicità e di una ricchezza della rivoluzione che solo pochi anni fa pareva ipotesi o scommessa” (Fortini 189).

For Malaparte, communist China was synonymous with the kind-hearted Chinese people in aggregate. Malaparte found it amazing that, in the Maoist Utopia, the Chinese workers and peasants retained their amiable characteristics even after thousands of years of suffering:

La fame, la sofferenza, la schiavitù, l’ingiustizia fanno spesso duri e cattivi i popoli. Il popolo cinese, nonostante secoli e secoli di schiavitù, di fame, di umiliazione, di terrore, è rimasto buono. *E la grande lezione che si impara in Cina, nella Cina Popolare di Mao Tze Tung, non è soltanto una lezione di coraggio, di sacrificio, di tenacia nella lotta e nel lavoro, ma anche e soprattutto una lezione di modestia, di bontà, di onestà.* Durante il mio viaggio attraverso la Cina, dallo Shansì del nord all’estremità nord-occidentale del Turkestan, dal Kansu all’Hupei, avevo visto da vicino un popolo di contadini e di operai unito e compatto nella costruzione di una patria nuova, libera e giusta, di una Cina socialista. (279-280, italics added)

In Malaparte’s narratives, the concept of communist China was equal to the united Chinese workers and peasants. Because these people turned out to be modest, kind, and honest,

Malaparte was convinced that China was in good hands. Even though the Soviet Union's military intervention in the Hungarian uprising in 1956 had caused a severe crisis of confidence toward the communist bloc among the Western left-wing intellectuals, Malaparte still had strong faith in Maoist China and in the communist cause. He admitted that the Soviet occupation of Budapest was an error. However, he believed that the great progress made by the socialist movements outweighed the errors, and that the kind-hearted Chinese people would be able to solve any problem, correct any error, lead the communist cause to its right direction, and eventually bring goodness and justice to the entire world.

Anch'io ho sofferto nel leggere sui giornali le notizie di Budapest, ma questa sofferenza non si è mai accompagnata al dubbio. La grande e positiva esperienza cinese assolve qualunque errore, perché è la prova manifesta e indiscutibile che la somma dei fatti positivi, nel moto del progresso, è superiore sempre alla somma degli errori. ... Il fatto di trovarmi in mezzo ad un popolo di uomini buoni quali sono i cinesi, mi faceva sentire meno grave sull'animo il peso del male che tuttavia è nel mondo. Per questo sono grato alla Cina: non soltanto per le cure affettuose che tutti mi hanno prodigato nella mia lunga e pericolosa malattia, ma per la fede che ha saputo ispirarmi nell'avvento sicuro e inevitabile di un mondo di bontà e di giustizia. (Malaparte 282-283)

To sum up, Maoist China provided Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte with ammunition against the skeptics who doubted that radical social transformation was possible and could be fruitful. The three Italian intellectuals' experiences in China fueled their hope for a brighter future for Italian socialist movements. The connections between these travel notes and their authors' left-wing ideology are undeniable. Due to these connections, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte are vulnerable to accusations of being Orientalists or political pilgrims, who distort reality in order to transmit certain political ideologies. In the same vein, their accounts are deprived of fidelity, and condemned to be products of propaganda. However, as Said notes, "no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances" (1979, 11). Therefore, unless we simply deny the fidelity of any type of representations, it is arguable whether these connections are strong enough to make the three Italian visitors Orientalists or political

pilgrims, and disqualify them from faithfully depicting China and the Chinese.

### **Another Case of Said's Orientalism?**

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (Said 1979, 1)

The above quotation<sup>15</sup> from Said's *Orientalism* is De Pascale's starting point in her analysis of the Italian visitors' accounts of Maoist China. Admittedly, it is almost impossible nowadays to discuss issues of identity and intercultural communication without making reference to Edward Said, who, since publishing his highly influential *Orientalism* in 1978, has been generally recognized as one of the founding members of academic postcolonial studies. However, De Pascale's use of Said's *Orientalism* in her analysis of the Italian literary representations of Maoist China in the 1950s has pitfalls caused by limitations in Said's theory itself and by De Pascale's problematic application of it.

A central claim of Said's *Orientalism* is that European knowledge about the Middle East is not generated from reality, but rather is constructed based on preconceived archetypes drawn from literary texts and historical records of limited understanding of the facts of the Middle East. Thus, the Western body of knowledge on the East is marked by a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their cultures, which are associated with a sort of negative eternity, an immobilized and unproductive quality. Said presents a comparative and historical literary review of British and French scholars' and writers' discourse about the Middle East in order to illuminate the complex relationship between culture and the imperial enterprise, the complicity of European production of knowledge with the imperial project, the Eurocentrism in the human sciences, and the construction of colonial and postcolonial identities. For Said, the cultural hegemony of

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<sup>15</sup> The quotation in De Pascale's book is in Italian.

European ideas about the Orient reinforces the European sense of superiority over Oriental backwardness and overrides differing views on the matter; the result has been that what he terms Orientalism characterizes Westerners' consensus view on the East. New writers and scholars often feel enormous pressure to maintain Orientalism through their writing and study. Said presents Orientalism in such an unequivocal manner in order to stress the Western dominance of power, and to force Orientalism to reveal its suppressed historical origins and hidden ideological agendas.

In Said's afterword to his 1994 version of *Orientalism*, he claims that his motive in writing the book was not to accuse the West of misrepresenting the East, nor to show what the true Orient or Islam really are. Rather, to Said, his book is "explicitly anti-essentialist, radically skeptical about all categorical designations such as Orient and Occident, and painstakingly careful about not 'defending' or even discussing the Orient and Islam" (1994, 331). What Said is against is Orientalism which, as a system of thought, approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint, while neglecting historical changes. Said is anxious to demonstrate his suspicion of totalizing concepts and to affirm his oppositional, ironic critical stance. He claims that the uncritical acceptance of principal doctrines of one's field is a great danger within the academy. What is ironic about Said's account of Orientalism is that, variously extended and modified, is itself in danger of becoming a fashionable orthodoxy among scholars and in mass consumerism. His reductionism oversimplifies Orientalism, denying its diversity and criticalness.

The critical discourse of Orientalism cannot be considered as a globally conclusive theory because it overlooks the various relations between Eastern and Western countries, as well as the complex motivations that support diverse Western writers.

Although Said's 1978 book is mainly concerned with European intellectuals' treatment

of the Islamic world, he claims that he wishes to see the implications of his argument extended to all the areas of the Orient. Scholars like Bernard Faure and Colin Mackerras have found that Said's argument remains valid in the case of the Far East, including China. However, such extension is actually open to question, because Said's understanding of Orientalism seems to deny the variety in international relationships.

Generally speaking, unlike the Islamic world, China was never considered an immediate military threat to Europe. More specifically, China and the Chinese had very little contact with Italy and its people until the PRC carried out the Opening-up reforms in the 1980s. Without the underpinning of consecutive hostility, the Italian perception of China does not seem to have possessed intrinsic thematic consistency, and tended to vary depending on the specific sociocultural context, in comparison with the general European representations of the Middle East. With Italy's colonial presence in China in the first half of the twentieth century, Italian diplomats and journalists (such as Salvago Raggi and Luigi Barzini) usually made negative depictions of China and the Chinese people in order to highlight colonizers' superiority and to legitimize the Italian colonial exploitation and expropriation. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Italian narratives of China changed dramatically. Descriptions of Maoist China and its people were no longer used to affirm Italy's superiority, but instead were seen as illustrations of an alternative model that could challenge Italy to reappraise and reform its indigenous institutions and thought systems. The changing Italian representations of China and the Chinese raise questions about Edward Said's insistence on the durability of Orientalism.

From Said's point of view, all Orientalist discourses are harnessed to create a hierarchy of power between the West and the East, placing European culture above that of the Orient. He also claims that all discourse in the human sciences is inevitably caught up in the whole historical process, which, in *Orientalism*, he summed up as Western imperialism. As a result,

although Said insists that he never argues that Orientalism is evil or sloppy, Albert Hourani notes that the force of argument in Said's *Orientalism* has made it almost impossible to use the term "Orientalism" in a neutral sense (Said 1994, 341). The term has become one of abuse. Said, by labeling all Westerners as unconscious agents of imperialism, leaves no space for either individual ideology or genuine sympathy for the Orient. Said's oversimplified Orientalism does not apply to Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, who express great enthusiasm for Maoist China and show no inclination to establish Italian superiority by depreciating China and its people.

In addition to disregarding the diversity in Orientalism, Said also denies its productive criticalness, which played and still plays an important role in Europe's self-strengthening. For instance, during the Enlightenment, representations of foreign societies were often deployed in order to criticize the inadequacies of European civilization. As John Clarke has explained, Orientalism has taken on an inventive power, and for centuries has "assumed a counter-cultural, counter-hegemonic role, and become in various ways a gadfly plaguing all kinds of orthodoxies, and an energizer of radical protest, and in doing so it has often been in the business not of reinforcing Europe's established role and identity, but rather of undermining it" (28). The Italian visitors' representations of Maoist China in the 1950s provide evidence in support of Clarke's statement. Like the Italian colonizers in China during the first half of the twentieth century, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte also tend to symbolize the Chinese society in 1950s, with the hope of distilling some essential meanings from it. However, their purpose for doing so was no longer to highlight the Chinese backwardness as a foil of Italy's superiority. On the contrary, the alterity of China is used as a vehicle to convey the Italian writers' vision of an ideal mode of social development, and as a means to reappraise the Italian institutions and thought system.

Besides the inherent limitations of Said's theory of Orientalism, De Pascale's application

of the theory is also problematic. The root of the problem is that it is unclear what the term “Orientalism” means to De Pascale. As the term possesses multiple meanings, scholars who use it must clearly define their sense of the concept in order to avoid misunderstandings. Said himself, in the introduction of his 1979 book, clarifies his three-fold definition of Orientalism: Orientalism as an academic field; Orientalism as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinctions made between the Orient and the Occident; and Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient (1979, 2-4).

In De Pascale’s work *Scrittori in viaggio*, she does not explain her understanding of Orientalism, so the readers likely assume that she uses it exactly as Said does. However, none of the three definitions listed in *Orientalism* can fully apply to De Pascale’s research subject, the Italian writers’ travel notes written in the 1950s. Although these notes may be viewed as instances of knowledge production, they do not quite qualify as academic works. In addition, instead of highlighting ontological differences between Italy and China, Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte’s works emphasize the similarities between the two countries and their people; the authors want to promote the reforms in Maoist China as an alternative mode of social development practicable also in Italy. Moreover, in their travel notes, the three Italian visitors show no intention of dominating or restricting Maoist China. Therefore, one can only conclude that the term “Orientalism” must have a different meaning in De Pascale’s book. Based on the discussions and conclusion in *Scrittori in viaggio*, it seems that, for De Pascale, “Orientalism” refers to Western intellectuals’ construction of an idealized Orient for political purposes. This version of Orientalism also coheres with Pellegrino’s discussion, in which he describes Maoist China in Fortini and Malaparte’s accounts as the “Oriente ideologico (ideological Orient)” (93, my translation).

In short, De Pascale’s use of Said’s concept of Orientalism in her analysis of the Italian



travel accounts of the PRC in 1950s is problematic. First, the inherent limitations in Said's oversimplified theory make it almost impossible to apply the theory in the Sino-Italian cases. Second, although De Pascale quotes Said in her work, her definition of "Orientalism" is different from that of Said. De Pascale uses Orientalism only to indicate that the Italian intellectuals' writings about Maoist China in the 1950s were not generated from reality, a point with which Pellegrino appears to agree. It is exactly with this broader definition of Orientalism that De Pascale managed to reconcile Said's theory with Paul Hollander's theory of political pilgrimage.

### **Italian Political Pilgrims?**

The phrase "political pilgrim" was coined by Paul Hollander, who used it in the title of his influential book, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (hereafter *Political Pilgrims*). In the book, Hollander denounces Western intellectuals' admiration for communist countries, dismissing all their positive depictions as either intentional distortions of reality or the result of the communist countries' "techniques of hospitality"<sup>16</sup> and brainwashing propaganda. In Western intellectual discourses on the Cold War, Hollander's concept of "political pilgrim" has almost become an orthodoxy that scholars often uncritically accept when discussing the Western positive representations of the Eastern bloc. However, I would argue that Hollander's "political pilgrim" theory is not suitable for judging Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte's accounts of Maoist China.

In order to better understand *Political Pilgrims*, it is necessary to take into account Hollander's background. Born in Hungary, he fled to the West in 1956 when the Hungarian Uprising was repressed by Soviet forces. Considering himself to be a victim of

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<sup>16</sup> See Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims* page 347. According to Hollander, the techniques of hospitality refer to the entire range of measures designed to influence the perception and judgment of the guests.

communism,<sup>17</sup> Hollander felt strong hostility toward all members of the Eastern bloc. In *Political Pilgrims*, he does not support his criticism with historical evidence, instead assuming all readers agree with him that communist countries are the embodiment of utter evil. While accusing Western intellectuals attracted to China of having confirmation bias and only reporting good things, Hollander himself appears to have prejudice that only allows him to perceive China in a negative way.

In *Political Pilgrims*, Hollander's attacks on Westerners' admiration for the PRC are based on an absolute dichotomy: on one side of the duality are the free, moral, and civilized Western powers; and on the other are the authoritarian, amoral, and barbaric Eastern countries. This binary vision was one of the central themes of Cold War era political discourse, in which each bloc constructed its self-definition by framing the other as the enemy that possessed the undesirable characteristics. Decades after the Cold War ended, it is perhaps time to question the Cold War dichotomy that casts two opponents with absolutely opposite characteristics, and to realize the limits and pitfalls in Hollander's binary view, a view that oversimplifies the complexities of the social and political phenomena in those years.

In fact, Hollander himself is aware of the risk of overgeneralizing the complex Western representations of the PRC. At the beginning of his chapter about the Western pilgrimage to China, Hollander admits,

In regard to the visits to China, somewhat sharper differences may be noted between the attitudes of Americans and Western Europeans than in the case of the journeys to the Soviet Union and Cuba. Western Europeans have been going to Communist China for a longer period than Americans .... For Western Europeans, whose countries extended diplomatic recognition to China long before the U.S., visiting China did not have the same associations of daring adventure or delicious novelty which it has acquired for many Americans. Unlike Americans, European intellectuals traveled to China without feeling the need to expiate the sins of their country and with less of an expectation of an impending crisis in their own society. (278-279)

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Hollander serves on the national advisory council of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. See <http://victimsofcommunism.org/mission/board-advisory-councils/>

Even so, Hollander maintains a strong faith that his theory of “political pilgrims” can bridge the gaps among diverse groups of Western visitors and among different periods in which the trips took place. Hollander claims to have captured the fundamental characteristics of all Westerners’ positive depictions of Maoist China from 1949 to the late 1970s. According to Hollander, “The general frame of mind of the intellectuals embarking on their trips was similar. ... Now, as before, the visitors were anxious to avoid the imposition of standards or values which could lead to the making of critical judgments” (284). As a result, in the analysis, Hollander does not hesitate to use very general terms such as “Western intellectuals” or “visitors,” to refer to the Western Europeans and Americans who traveled to Maoist China. He also concludes that, “like the sympathetic visitors to the Soviet Union and Cuba, many travelers to China were also ready to see things in a more favorable light” (Hollander 286). With the preconception that the PRC ought to be evil, Hollander only considers the criticisms in Sven Lindquist’s *China in Crisis*, Alberto Moravia’s *Red Book and the Great Wall*, and Simon Leys’ *Chinese Shadows* to be faithful representations of the reality in Maoist China. Regardless of the dramatic socio-political changes in the PRC from 1949 to the late 1970s, Hollander overgeneralizes the lives of millions of people in a large country across three decades, and he condemns all Western accounts that differ from his own judgment.

Unlike Said, who believes that Western intellectuals should be held responsible for false representations of the East and easterners, Hollander condemns both parties involved in the construction of positive images of communist countries. On one hand, Hollander believes the Western “political pilgrims” are guilty of confirmation bias in their accounts, showing a strong predisposition to find only good things in the communist society and feeling uneasy about criticizing their friendly hosts. On the other hand, Hollander accuses the communist countries of strictly controlling foreign visitors’ exposure to reality, and using “techniques of hospitality” to disarm Western intellectuals. The question is whether these accusations can

fairly be leveled against Tumiati, Fortini, Malaparte, and the PRC in the 1950s.

Admittedly, Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte all present positive, sometimes even romantic, descriptions of the PRC and its people. Among them, Tumiati does show a predisposition to interpret aspects of Chinese society in a positive way. For instance, during his tour, Tumiati was surprised that “in qualsiasi casa operaia entrassimo la madre di famiglia ci mostrava sempre quelle tre cose [l’acqua, la luce elettrica, e il gas] con l’orgoglio” (154). He did not consider the phenomenon to be part of a propaganda campaign, as Parise and Moravia would do in the 1960s, but rather viewed it as a manifestation of Chinese workers’ sincere pride in their improved living conditions.

However, Fortini and Malaparte do not appear to be deliberately embellishing their depictions of China. In Fortini’s *Asia Maggiore*, readers can also find descriptions of the negative aspects of the PRC. For example, even though Beijing inspired so much déjà vu in Fortini upon his arrival, the city landscape was not always pleasing to him. In Fortini’s notes, the Italian poet often complains about the dust flying in the Chinese capital: “il polverone faceva tossire; e certo, con la pioggia o la neve, quelle vie dovevano essere una palude di fango” (65). Moreover, Fortini captures the depressing scenes in southern districts of Beijing while wandering alone in the area during a windy afternoon:

Erano vie di miseria nera, nel senso proprio di questo colore, un nero fondo di botteghe, pietre, soglie, depositi, cortili, stamberghe. ... Com'erano tristi quelle vie ..., qui il sangue era ormai quasi irrigidito, era un letargo dal quale nessuno si sarebbe più svegliato. Meglio allora tornare sulla via principale dove il traffico sollevava nuvole di polvere che costringevano a camminare col fazzoletto sulla bocca. (84-85)

Fortini also makes candid comments on the poverty and disorder in Guangdong Province:

Anche l’arrivo a Canton dà subito il senso di entrare in una città diversa da tutte che abbiamo vedute; non c’è qui né l’ordine intelligente di Pechino, né la schiettezza brusca del Nord-est né l’equivoco ‘Occidente’ di Shanghai: qui il viaggiatore può vedere la Cina di prima, o almeno qualcosa che le assomiglia molto. La folla è più povera, più disordinata e disfatta; le differenze sociali, più visibili. ... Per le vie, la miseria si mostra soprattutto nella sorte infelice delle frotte di ragazzi, che paiono abbandonati a se stessi. ... Stanno torme di bambini, con le facce gonfie e le occhiaie

della sottoalimentazione, che recano sulle spalle, insaccato in un panno, un fratellino più piccolo; molte donne faticano, facce invisibili sotto il largo cappello di strisce di bambù, e si portano il figlio appeso, come un morticino, dietro le spalle. (272-273)

In Guangdong, Fortini recounts, he met a young Chinese girl who begged from him, and he witnessed “molta gente dormiva sui marciapiedi, fra le bancherelle della verdura e le bucce di banana” (276). The Italian writer includes all these encounters in his travel accounts. Like Fortini, Malaparte does not deny the material shortage in the PRC.

Furthermore, both Fortini and Malaparte are outspoken in their criticism on some social issues they witness on their travels in the PRC. Fortini openly expresses his disapproval of the CPC’s treatment of Hu Fen, a Chinese writer and literary theorist who was accused of being a counter-revolutionary after criticizing the Party’s cultural policies. Similarly, Malaparte criticizes the PRC’s adaptation of the socialist realism promoted by the Soviet Union. He believes the imposition of socialist realism suppresses the Chinese artists’ creativity, and ironically detaches some performance in Chinese theaters from the ordinary audience.

Anche questa è forse una prova dei limiti, delle insufficienze del realismo socialista quale è inteso dai sovietici, e quale è stato imitato dalla Cina Popolare; che quei tentativi non sono riusciti forse non perché manchi ingegno e coraggio nei giovani scrittori, commediografi, musicisti cinesi, ma perché lo schema preso a modello non si adatta alla vita, allo spirito cinese. Perché lo schema imposto ai giovani artisti dall’alto, non è giusto, è errato, è falso. (Malaparte 190)

In short, among the three Italian visitors discussed in this chapter, Tumiati seems to fit in Hollander’s category of “political pilgrim,” as he tends to report only positive experiences and observations. By contrast, Fortini and Malaparte do not seem to be intentionally embellishing their depictions of Maoist China; rather, they persist in faithfully recording and critically examining the reality they observed there. Hence, it would be an unfair generalization to characterize all three Italian intellectuals as political pilgrims or transmitters of propaganda.

Hollander’s criticisms also target the host governments. Although he admits that “all

societies prefer to show their brighter side to foreign visitors (as do individual hosts to their guests)” (349), he insists that the countries in Eastern bloc show greater eagerness and determination to control the experiences of the visitors. For Hollander, these countries have two major “techniques of hospitality”: one is to disarm foreign intellectuals with generous and attentive treatment; the other is to manipulate the travel experience and impress visitors through carefully selected itineraries.

Hollander claims that the Western visitors “could not help feeling that it is not nice to turn around and be harshly critical of those who showered them with kindness, who took such good care of them” (352). To support his point of view, Hollander quotes Orvill Schell: “A ‘friend of China’ felt constrained from disappointing his host by writing anything critical or unflattering” (Schell 10). However, the idea that Western visitors could be easily manipulated by warm treatment is not applicable to Fortini and Malaparte. Not to mention depictions of China’s negative aspects in the two Italian writers’ accounts, Malaparte even makes a clear statement to highlight his persistence in faithfully representing the host country:

Tu mi conosci, caro Zella, e sai che non mi piace dir bugie, neppure per far piacere a un amico. E se avessi incontrato mendicanti, se avessi incontrato ragazzi affamati, accattoni, noiosi, lo direi. La miseria non è vergogna, per un popolo. È una vergogna per chi sfrutta la miseria, per chi se ne approfitta, per chi fonda sulla miseria l’ordine e il privilegio. E lo direi, se trovassi accattoni o ragazzi affamati. Saprei di non offendere il popolo cinese, ma coloro che lo hanno tenuto in schiavitù e miseria per tanti secoli. (266-267)

The paragraph cited above can be taken as a direct answer to Hollander, who appears to underestimate the Western intellectuals’ commitment to critical and independent thinking, as well as their determination to fulfill social responsibility as mystery breakers.

Hollander condemns the host countries for manipulating the travelers’ experience, and for ensuring that the visitors’ contacts were carefully selected and officially authorized. According to Hollander, “The tours were generally overorganized, leaving little time for the visitor to reflect, let alone engage in unscheduled, unsupervised, or random sight-seeing”

(375). Admittedly, this phenomenon of controlling visitors' experiences did exist in certain periods; during their visits in mid-1960s and early 1970s, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni all experienced highly restrained tours with close surveillance. However, Italian visitors' experience in the 1950s was very different, as the Chinese government tended to give foreign visitors more freedom in those years.

In reports of the 1950s, one can find Italian visitors' footprints all across China. Unlike Parise and Moravia who were only allowed to stay in major cities on the east coast of China, Malaparte was granted access to the central and western parts of the country. During his journey around China, Malaparte went to Taiyuan, Xi'an, Lanzhou, Jiuquan, Hami, Urumqi, Datong, and Chongqing. This visit was not unique in its scope; when Italian filmmaker Carlo Lizzani took his camera to document Maoist China in 1957, his crew also reached inland regions in the PRC, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia.

Not only were foreign visitors granted permission to explore most regions in China, but also the "benign surveillance" (376) over the foreign visitors was much less intense in the 1950s than in the two decades that followed. Although Fortini went to China with an Italian delegation, he explored the Chinese cities all by himself several times. One day in Beijing, he wandered through the city's narrow streets, and reached a public park at the foot of the Forbidden City (Fortini 64). Another time, he went alone to the southern part of Beijing in search of antique stores (Fortini 84). One night in Guangzhou, Fortini also took a walk alone in the city to observe the local people's lifestyle (275). Like Fortini, Malaparte also had opportunities to engage in unscheduled and unsupervised interactions with the Chinese people. Even when government officials were present, the Italian visitors in the 1950s were not cut off from China's reality, as later Italian travelers would experience in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, during his journey in China, Malaparte encountered three different funeral processions and made detailed depictions of them. Lizzani also captured traditional

Chinese funeral customs in his 1957 documentary movie *La muraglia cinese*. A few years later, the funeral scenes were carefully kept out of foreigners' sight. Parise and Malaparte left no record of witnessing them, and Antonioni's request for permission to film funeral ceremonies was rejected by Chinese authorities.

There are two major reasons why China's "techniques of hospitality" do not seem to have been as much in play for the Italian visitors of the 1950s as Hollander claims. First, different from Hollander's assumption, the Chinese government's warm treatment did not necessarily lead to foreign visitors' self-censorship and readiness to cooperate. At least, Fortini and Malaparte were not reluctant to pose tough questions in their travel accounts. Second, Hollander neglects the changes in the Chinese government's treatment of Western visitors through decades, and assumes all the foreign travelers were under the same intense controls and surveillance. As a matter of fact, the Italian visitors in the 1950s enjoyed much more freedom in China than the Western intellectuals who went to the PRC in the 1960s and 1970s.

To sum up, Hollander's idea of political pilgrimage is not a universally applicable theory, and it does not apply to Fortini and Malaparte. Given these two authors' efforts to represent Maoist China faithfully just as they observed it, it would be unfair to label them as political pilgrims. Even though Tumiati does seem predisposed to write about only good things in China, his behavior could also be interpreted as a challenge to the predominantly negative views of China that were prevalent in the Western mainstream during the Cold War. Moreover, it is inappropriate to attribute all positive depictions of China in the 1950s to Western intellectuals' confirmation bias and the host government's brainwashing techniques, because such accusations completely overlook the accounts' basis in reality.

### **The Travel Accounts' Basis in Reality**

It is unfair to deny the fidelity of Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte's positive depictions of



China based solely on their differences from later travel accounts written in the 1960s. To use Cultural Revolution-era China as a standard for assessing the accuracy of travel accounts of the 1950s reflects an Orientalist mindset, neglecting the constant changes within the Orient and regarding it as a static entity. To determine the credibility of the three Italian visitors' accounts of the PRC in the 1950s, those accounts must be examined in their own social and historical contexts.

Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte's praise of the PRC's achievements in welfare, construction, and social reforms are based on their awareness of the disastrous conditions of Chinese society before 1949. When the PRC was established in 1949, the country was facing economic and social breakdown. The Chinese economy was in crisis after almost forty years of wars. Right after taking power, the CPC had to tackle poverty, inflation, unemployment, underinvestment, and lack of skilled personnel. Meanwhile, in society as a whole, disease, prostitution, illiteracy, drug addiction, and organized crime were endemic, while social services were in utter disarray. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 compounded these problems, as the PRC soon got embroiled in military conflicts with the United States.

In the three Italian writers' travel notes, they all admit that China was still poor and backward by the material standards of Western developed countries; however, they also point out that the PRC's accomplishments in restoring the economy and improving the people's living conditions are indisputable, as compared to the pre-revolutionary era. The writers' views are supported by economic statistics. By 1952, in mainland China, price stability had been established, commerce had been restored, and industry and agriculture had regained their pre-war peak levels of production. The CPC's First Five-Year plan from 1953 to 1957 also turned out to be quite successful, as the industrial production increased at an average annual rate of nineteen percent during those years (N. Chen 244), and national income grew at a rate of nine percent each year (N. Chen 141). After the land reform, agricultural output

also augmented substantially, averaging increases of about four percent each year (N. Chen 364).

With regard to the political and social transformations in the PRC, Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte highlight the stability and equality realized in Chinese society. These depictions were also based on reality.

The social stability was achieved mainly through the Chinese government's efforts to forge class coalition, and its determination to fight against evil deeds in the society. On one hand, before the Great Leap Forward in 1958, the PRC leaders appeared as realists who adopted a cautious approach to class struggle and social transformation. Mao categorized the political nature of the period (1949–1957) as “new democracy.”<sup>18</sup> According to Mao, the PRC in that era was not a socialist society based exclusively on the working class, but rather a transitional society that relied on broad class coalitions of the peasantry, the proletariat, and the national and petit bourgeoisies. While relegating the realization of communist goals to an unspecified future, the CPC emphasized the urgency of creating a strong and stable state during those years. Because class struggle was limited, “per le vie delle città cinesi incontri ancora l'imprenditore privato, l'industriale, sua moglie, i suoi figli, protetti dalla qualifica di ‘borghesia nazionale’” (Fortini 49). Meanwhile, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte all found it amazing and impressive that the central government of the PRC recruited quite a number of intellectuals with very diverse class and political backgrounds to serve in crucial, high-ranking positions. On the other hand, the PRC government organized mass educational campaigns against drugs, gambling, prostitution, and criminal organizations, and even conducted raids on the sites of these illegal activities, which essentially eradicated these social problems in the first half of the 1950s. These actions proved the Maoist government's effectiveness and benevolence in carrying out social reform.

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<sup>18</sup> See Mao Zedong's “On New Democracy” in Selected Works, Vol. II, page 339-384.

The PRC's progress in improving social equality also drew much attention from Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte. Egalitarianism was an enduring theme in Mao's political and social programs. The new state enacted and strictly implemented laws to protect and empower women and youths, two vulnerable social groups that had traditionally been oppressed in Chinese society. The Italian visitors were especially in favor of the new Marriage Law, because it prohibited concubinage and forced marriage, and it gave Chinese women the right to own property, hold employment, and initiate divorce. Even though the travel notes do not mention the PRC laws that were designed to protect children from abuse, the three Italian writers attribute the happiness and spontaneity of Chinese youths to their improved living conditions and social status.

In connection to the emancipation and empowerment of the previously vulnerable social groups, a series of social reforms were carried out to uphold the socialist ideal of equality. For instance, the land reform in the countryside helped to abolish the system of feudal exploitation on the peasantry, the new social distribution system managed to reduce the disparities in wages and housing, and the state-run social welfare services safeguarded people's basic needs, including childcare, education, recreation, and health care. The government's efforts, together with the country's universal poverty, contributed to the high level of social equality in Maoist China in the 1950s. Even though the social hierarchical differences were not completely eliminated, they were reduced to a low, almost invisible, level. In short, the Italian writers' admiration of the PRC's equality also had their basis in reality.

Being intellectuals themselves, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte had great interest in the living conditions of Chinese intellectuals. During their trips to the PRC, the three Italian writers were favorably impressed by Maoist China's achievements in elevating working-class intellectuals and recruiting and transforming traditional intellectuals. According to these

authors' depictions, most of the Chinese intellectuals appeared to be well-integrated, useful members of society, taken seriously and well treated by authorities. Scholars have doubted these descriptions. For instance, in *Political Pilgrims*, Hollander claims that the PRC's treatment of intellectuals "was always worse than what the visitors judged it to be" (333). However, there is historical evidence that supports the Italian writers' depictions of a peaceful and productive relationship between the PRC and intellectuals. On one side, a huge wave of overseas scholars returning to China between 1949 and 1955 manifested intellectuals' passion for and faith in the newly established country.<sup>19</sup> On the other side, the PRC also showed good intentions to improve its relationship with intellectuals. In a speech delivered in 1956, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai reviewed the first few years of the PRC's policies, criticized some cadres' negative attitudes towards intellectuals, and emphasized that the modernization of the country relies "on the close cooperation of physical and mental labour, on the fraternal alliance of workers, peasants and the intellectuals" (Communist China 1955-1959 129). Based on the evidence, it is clear that, before 1957, the PRC leaders and the intellectuals were both convinced that their goals of higher achievements were not conflicting, but interdependent.

Certainly, it would be an overstatement to describe the years between 1949 and 1957 as a golden age in the PRC's history, as the country was still struggling with many difficulties, and some of the reforms turned out years later to be unsuccessful. However, given the extremely low starting point, the progress made by Maoist China in the era were really remarkable and encouraging. The founding of the PRC and the success of the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) occasioned euphoria among the leaders and elicited a good deal of optimism among workers, peasants, and many patriotic people in the middle and upper classes. The positive social atmosphere was most evidently manifested in the Chinese

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<sup>19</sup> See Shen Zhihua's The Choice at the Crossroad.

people's working sites. As the three Italian visitors often captured in their journey, despite the Chinese workers' elementary tools and poor working conditions, they always showed great enthusiasm for construction and production.

However, the positive socio-political conditions in the PRC were changed dramatically in 1958 when the Chinese authorities launched the Great Leap Forward campaign. In the period of radical transformation from 1958 to 1961, the Chinese authorities promoted rapid, sweeping nationalizations, tight central control of the economy, and sometimes forced appropriation of food from the peasantry. The rash and overly idealized socialization campaign resulted in famine and economic regression, costing the country great momentum in social and economic development. The disaster was later compounded by the Sino-Soviet Split and the catastrophic Cultural Revolution. It is not reasonable to criticize the Italian visitors for not foreseeing the upcoming disasters in the PRC, as even Chinese leaders Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were not able to envision the tragedies that occurred in the country during the 1960s and 1970s.

To sum up, when analyzing Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte's depictions of Maoist China, one should not overlook the fact that these accounts are based on reality, nor neglect the dramatic social changes in the PRC in the years before and after 1957. The positive comments made by the three Italian visitors were not deceptive illusions created to transmit political messages, but instead were representations rooted in real historical contexts.

### **The Travel Accounts' Basis in International Relations**

The 1950s marked the beginning of the Italian intellectuals' tendency to turn the decades-long cycle of cynicism toward China into another cycle of romanticism. In addition to the visitors' personal affection for the country and sympathetic political ideology, the new tendency in the 1950s to romanticize China was also born of the changes in Sino-Italian relations that came after the Second World War.

Immediately after WWII, with the Peace Treaty of February 1947, Italy had renounced all its rights and concessions in China. The treaty symbolized the end of the Italian colonial occupation in China, which for decades had functioned as the basis of Italian Orientalist representations of China. In April 1949, just a few months before the PRC was established on the Chinese mainland, Italy signed a Friendly Treaty with the Nationalist government, led by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). The Nationalists soon lost the civil war and retreated to Taiwan. As a result, when some European governments<sup>20</sup> took the initiative and recognized the newly founded communist country in 1949, the Italian government, led by the Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi, found itself in an embarrassing situation. On one hand, De Gasperi would have liked to follow the British approach and recognize the PRC. On the other hand, Italy was eager to become a member of the United Nations (UN), where the Republic of China (ROC) governed by Jiang Jieshi still played a crucial role as a permanent member on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

In February 1950, the Italian government finally decided to improve its relations with the PRC. The Italian Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza even sent a telegram to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, affirming the Italian government's intent to recognize the PRC (Pini 67). The Italian government's initiative was welcomed by the PRC, which was then striving to expand international recognition in the hope of taking over the ROC's position in UNSC. However, in the early 1950s, amidst the forging of the Sino-Soviet alliance, McCarthy's anticommunist campaign, and the outbreak of the Korean War, relations between the PRC and the West quickly became seriously strained. The tension between the Eastern and Western blocs hindered the Italian initiative and forced the Italian government to take a prudent stance.

Two events, the end of the Korean War in 1953 and the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, seemed to present new opportunities to ease the tension between East and West

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<sup>20</sup> The governments of the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Holland, Sweden, and Switzerland.

and to improve Sino-Italian relations through economic and cultural channels. The economic channel was established in 1953 by Dino Gentili, an Italian socialist businessman. He successfully avoided the American restrictions placed on trade with communist countries, developing promising business contacts with the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade that had been set up in 1952 by Zhou Enlai. Meanwhile, in the 1950s, Sino-Italian cultural interactions became more frequent and productive. From 1954 to 1957, several Italian delegations were granted access to Maoist China. It was during this period that Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte's trips to China all took place. The Sino-Italian economic and cultural contacts were further enhanced by Italy's admission to the UN at the end of 1955, which untied the knot linking Rome and Taipei.

Seen in this light, the favorable accounts that Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte wrote of the PRC reflect the improvement in Sino-Italian relations in the 1950s, and resonate with the two governments' efforts to form an alliance at that time.

## CHAPTER 2: CHINA IS FAR AWAY

The Italian visitors' accounts of Maoist China can be generally categorized according to two phases. In the first phase, Italian intellectuals elevated the PRC as a realized socialist utopia, and highlighted the similarities between China and Italy to prove the possibility of adopting the Chinese developing mode in their home country. However, in the second phase, beginning with the Sino-Russian split in the 1960s, the major theme of Italian representations of the PRC and its people switched to criticizing the unreasonable otherness of the Chinese society.

This chapter focuses on the second phase mentioned above, and examines three Italian visitors' works about China, including *Cara Cina* (1966), by Goffredo Parise; *La rivoluzione culturale in Cina* (1967), by Alberto Moravia; and Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary film *Chung Kuo* (1972). The PRC and the Chinese people portrayed in the works of Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni are very different from the images created in the Italian accounts during the 1950s. According to the three Italian visitors, Maoist China becomes a land full of exotic elements, an "Other" completely different from their home country. The Chinese landscapes no longer cause déjà vu or sense of belonging in the Italian intellectuals. Although the Chinese are still described generally as a benevolent and peaceful people, their good characteristics are considered to be innate and apolitical, which have nothing to do with the social and political system of the Maoist China. The Chinese authorities are not given credit for its people's good qualities, but criticized for being a threat to their citizens' inborn virtues. Moreover, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni were not favorably impressed by Maoist China's material progress, or its construction of superstructure. In short, the PRC is not regarded as a better society, or a cradle of an advanced socialist civilization. By emphasizing the oddity of



China and its people, Parise, Moravia and Antonioni destabilized the utopian image of Maoist China previously constructed by earlier Italian visitors.

## **Section 2.1: Unrecognizable Utopia**

### **Landscapes as Reasons for Boredom**

At the end of his travel notes, Goffredo Parise explains why he has not written much about China's landscapes:

Del paesaggio non ho quasi mai parlato, in primo luogo perché un viaggio in Cina è, come mi pare di avere spiegato, un viaggio così intensamente ideologico e contraddittorio che il cervello impegna tutte le energie e ne lascia poche agli occhi; poi perché la natura non mi ha molto impressionato. (231)

First, his efforts to make sense of the intensely ideological and contradictory culture of China seem to have burned up Parise's energy, impeding him from paying much attention to the scenery. Second, Parise candidly admits that the landscape in China is not quite impressive to him.

However, Parise does depict the Chinese landscape in his *Cara Cina*, and the descriptions of both the natural and cultural landscapes play an important role in the book. They convey the author's emotions and thoughts about his journey in communist China.

For Gaetano Tumiati, in Beijing, "si diffonde nell'aria un senso di calma e di vastità del tutto insolito per i panorami cittadini e che ricorda piuttosto i grandi spettacoli della natura: il lento corso di un fiume, l'immensità di una foresta, la maestosità di una pianura" (36).

However, in the eyes of Parise, the capital of China is far from a green land full of water and plants. Instead, the Beijing in Parise's impression is "una città posta ai confini di una sterminata pianura secca, arida, battuta dal vento che arriva a folate violente dai deserti della Mongolia interiore e porta con sé nubi di polvere gialla, dura e sottile che penetra dappertutto" (25). On his trip to visit the Great Wall, Parise also recorded the landscape that he saw in the suburbs of Beijing:

Fino a quando le colline non diventano gobbe sassose, color fango, stupide e inespressive come i cani cinesi. ... Salendo ancora, la gobba diventa gigantesca, storta, rognosa, dolorosa, obesa e così brutalmente e ottusamente fisica da far pensare con tristezza impotente e incomprensiva quanto è brutta, a volte, la crosta terrestre. (86-87)

As a city situated at the confines of a dry plain, a city surrounded by mangy hills, a city frequently attacked by sand storms, Beijing through Parise's eyes does not seem to have much appeal in terms of its natural beauty.

If the natural landscape of Beijing is just not impressive to the Italian author, the cultural landscape—that is, the historical monuments—are actually provoking to him. Unlike Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, who commonly reported affectionate déjà vu experiences or feelings of being at home when they visited Beijing in the 1950s, Parise suffered from “una intollerabile noia fisica (an intolerable physical boredom)” (27, my translation) during a tour in the historical district of Beijing and the Forbidden City:

È una città insieme geometrica e labirintica: un quadrato dentro un altro quadrato che contiene a sua volta un quadrato e così via. ... Infine ad ogni quadrato, come ad ogni casa, ad ogni cortile, ad ogni oggetto, ne corrisponde quasi sempre un altro identico che gli sta di faccia e questo numero di quadrati che si moltiplicano forma così una città tutta parallelismi, analogie, ripetizioni. (25-26)

The boredom also reminded Parise of another annoying form of repetition that he experienced during his journey in China—the endlessly repetitive, vacuous political propaganda:

Infatti un discorso del presidente Mao può essere tagliato a metà senza perdere il suo senso in quanto la seconda metà non è altro che la ripetizione della prima. E come il discorso del presidente Mao, che pure è uno dei più brillanti stilisti della divulgazione che la storia conosca, gli scritti o i discorsi di molti dirigenti del partito si possono tagliare in quattro, contenendo due volte lo stesso discorso del presidente Mao ripetuto due volte, e così via, fino al cinese della strada che è un puro strumento fonico in serie le cui capacità di ripetersi sono teoricamente infinite come per tutti gli strumenti in serie. Con questo non voglio dire che il cinese ripete senza conoscere il significato di quello che ripete, ma ripete lo stesso evidentemente per il puro piacere di ripetere. (25-26)

This connection between boring landscapes and annoying propaganda then led to “a completely intellectual and metaphysical excitement” (Parise 27). Parise believes that he has

found the cultural and historical origin of Chinese people's passion for repetition: "[i palazzi imperiali di Pechino] non sono case, stanze, saloni, stanze da letto, appartamenti per le concubine e la servitù, qualcosa insomma di utile, pratico e concreto, bensì una convenzione dell'ordine, insieme astratta e figurativa" (28). For Parise, the repetitive layout of the Forbidden City reflects the nation's emphasis on stability and order, which explains "perché i cinesi ancora oggi si ripetono tanto senza mai stancarsi" (25).

Parise's negative impressions about the seemingly identical buildings in the Forbidden City are actually common among the Italian visitors. Due to the differences in artistic expression between China and the West, other Italian delegates, such as Fortini, also found it difficult at first to understand Chinese art pieces. As Fortini writes in his book,

Ma più d'uno, ho detto, ho veduto scontento del primo incontro con l'architettura, con la musica, con la pittura classica cinese per l'apparente uniformità, e la mancanza di elementi drammatici e sublimi. Non voglio presumere di averle intese; ma ho dovuto tornare più volte nei cortili del Palazzo Imperiale prima di cominciare a sentire la sua rigorosa lezione di architettura, e più volte ascoltare quella musica o curvarmi sulle sete dipinte prima di avvertire che dal ragionamento qualcosa, in me, stava passando alla fantasia e alla commozione. (60)

However, Parise, unlike Fortini, does not seem to have the inclination or energy to carefully observe and appreciate the Chinese arts. Instead, Parise seems impatient with the visits arranged by his Chinese hosts. His resistance can be detected in his depictions of the Summer Palace. Different from the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace was a masterpiece of Chinese landscape garden design well known for its variety. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) included the Summer Palace on its World Heritage list. According to the description on the UNESCO website, in the Summer Palace, "The natural landscape of hills and open water is combined with artificial features, such as pavilions, halls, palaces, temples, and bridges to form a harmonious ensemble of outstanding aesthetic value."<sup>21</sup> Parise himself calls the Summer Palace "la sola e maggiore espressione

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<sup>21</sup> See the description on UNESCO webpage <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/880>.

individuale di tutta la Cina” (90) and “un’eccezionale opera d’arte” (92). However, surprisingly, the Italian author still transforms the imperial garden into a wearisome list of “fake things”:

Finto è il lago fatto scavare apposta, finta la montagna innalzata con blocchi di granito tenuti insieme dal cemento, finte le pagode che sono imitazioni dell’antico, finti e inutili i templi in cui non ci andava nessuno, di oro finto i budda nei templi, finte le piscine che non hanno acqua, finta evidentemente la nave che la sublime mitomane .... Se avesse potuto avrebbe fatto costruire anche un cielo finto. (Parise 91)

Beijing is not the only Chinese city that does not please Parise, Shanghai also fails to leave a good impression during the Italian author’s encounter with it:

Questa, dicono, era la più splendente e la più corrotta città di tutto l’Estremo Oriente. Oggi, forse proprio per questo, è un sogno: tanto reale nei particolari, quanto irreale nell’insieme, proprio come i sogni. ... Infine questa città-incubo europea è, invece, cinese perché abitata oggi soltanto da cinesi: appunto come in un sogno in cui, dal sottosuolo, una popolosissima specie di insetti operosi fosse salita attraverso un buco e si fosse mangiata l’altra, assai meno numerosa specie parassita che viveva in superficie. Viene da dire: ben gli sta. (Parise 180-181)

Parise labels Shanghai a “city of nightmare,” and compares the Chinese people living in Shanghai to a large group of insects crawling up from the subsoil to prey upon the parasites living there.

In a word, Parise’s depictions of Chinese landscapes reflected the author’s strong feeling of boredom during the journey. For Parise, the scenes are not appealing or romantic, but simply another boring aspect of China that causes his deep tiredness.

### **Landscape as a Mirror to Reflect Problems in Maoist China**

Alberto Moravia does not offer many depictions of Chinese scenery in *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina* (*The Cultural Revolution in China*) for two reasons. First, as the book title suggests, most of the content of the travel notes focuses on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the influential nationwide social and political movement initiated by Mao Zedong. Second, the notes depict Moravia’s second trip to China. It is very likely that he had already been to most of the famous places of interest in China during his first visit to the country in 1937. As

a result, sightseeing was very likely not a priority for Moravia when he travelled around Maoist China in 1967.

In *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina*, most of the descriptions of the Chinese natural and cultural landscape can be found in two chapters: “Paese Aragosta (Lobster Country),” and “L’Odio del Passato (Hatred for the Past).” “Paese Aragosta” is based on Moravia’s tour on the Great Wall, while “L’Odio del Passato” revolves around the Italian writer’s visits to the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs. The former communicates Moravia’s thoughts about China’s position in the global community and its relations with other countries, while the latter provides Moravia’s reflections on Maoist China’s position in history as well as the nation’s relationship with its own past.

In “Paese Aragosta,” Moravia writes about the mysterious and prosperous view beyond the Great Wall: “tra un merlo e l’altro ci affacciamo e guardiamo. Al di là della gola, oltre una specie di ciglio di arbusti, si scopre un’immensa pianura verde, luminosa, dorata di sole, misteriosa e prospera” (153). Although the peaceful and prosperous plain described here is part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China, the depiction does not eulogize the natural beauty of China. Instead, it is used as evidence to support Moravia’s argument against the construction of the Great Wall.

From Moravia’s point of view, the Great Wall is a symbol of China’s conservatism, and by extension a representation of the Chinese people’s arrogance and ignorance of the outside world. Moravia doubts the stated purpose for the construction, that is, the protection of the Chinese people from the invasion of northern barbarians. Instead, Moravia believes that the real motive for building the Great Wall was to block communication between the Chinese and other races, so as to maintain the nation’s biological purity and to prevent its culture from being contaminated by outsiders:

Si sa che la Grande Muraglia è stata costruita per impedire le invasioni dei Barbari. Ma chi erano i Barbari? ... I Barbari erano tutti coloro che non erano cinesi.

D'altra parte, al di là della Grande Muraglia, non c'era, non poteva esservi per i cinesi un popolo sia pure barbaro; c'era soltanto il Vuoto. Questo Vuoto era stato creato dalla Grande Muraglia stessa, cioè dai cinesi, a partire dal momento in cui avevano cominciato a costruire la Grande Muraglia. Senza Grande Muraglia, niente Vuoto.

Così, stringendo dappresso la definizione, la Grande Muraglia difendeva e proteggeva la Cina contro il Vuoto, ossia il Nulla. La Cina era ciò che c'era, che esisteva, che aveva importanza. Fuori della Cina non c'era niente, non esisteva niente, niente aveva importanza.

... La Grande Muraglia era stata costruita contro i Barbari perché i Barbari avrebbero potuto introdurre in Cina sangue nuovo, idee nuove. ... Ma il fine della Cina non era di svilupparsi o cambiare bensì di durare. (Moravia 148-149)

According to Moravia, the Chinese people's exaggerated sense of superiority over the foreigners is also explicitly revealed in the sculptures on the major gates on the Great Wall:

Scendiamo e ammiriamo la porta. ... Belle sculture in bassorilievo la ricoprono fuori e dentro. Il motivo è quello che ci si poteva aspettare, dato il luogo e la funzione del monumento: la civiltà rappresentata da eroi, saggi e imperatori che schiaccia il capo alla barbarie raffigurata in forma di draghi, di serpenti e di mostri. Chi entrava in Cina doveva capirlo subito: egli usciva dal vuoto della barbarie ed entrava nell'esistenza della civiltà. (151)

When Moravia praises the amazing view beyond the Great Wall, he is not trying to inform readers of China's natural beauty. For Moravia, at that moment, he is looking at the "non-China," the so-called barbarian regime, the "Vuoto," that has been blocked out for centuries by the Great Wall. Right after the sentences describing the plain to the north of the Great Wall, Moravia elevates the landscape into the metaphysical sphere, turning the natural view into an abstract symbol of diversity and renewal:

E allora ci torna l'idea che il Vuoto contro il quale la Cina aveva voluto difendersi con la Muraglia, in realtà non era che il Diverso e forse, chissà, il Migliore. La Grande Muraglia forse doveva non soltanto difendere e proteggere ma anche impedire paragoni, confronti.

Del resto la rivoluzione che ha rinnovato la Cina è proprio venuta di là ..., c'è la Russia di Lenin e poi l'Europa di Marx. Cioè la patria delle idee barbare che hanno ringiovanito la decrepita vecchiona dai piedi minuscoli e dall'etichetta secolare. (153-154)

Moravia thus assumes that "Se la Cina non avesse costruito la Grande Muraglia e fosse rimasta aperta a tutti gli influssi e le idee e le novità straniere, forse non sarebbe andata in decadenza" (154). He also points out that "il problema del comunismo cinese, oggi, è forse di

nuovo quello dell'antico impero celeste" (150). During his journey, Moravia is surprised that the Chinese people showed very little interest in Italy or Europe. He attributes the attitude to a traditional Sinocentrism: "la Cina si è sempre considerata come il centro del mondo. Il quale dava ma non riceveva né desiderava ricevere" (158). Maoist China's self-isolation, its people's ignorance of the outside world, as well as their lack of interest in learning about foreign countries, are all major concerns of Moravia that he repeatedly stresses in *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina*. It is quite evident that Moravia would prefer Maoist China to open up to the rest of the global community and participate actively in international and intercultural communication.

In "L'Odio del Passato," Moravia reports his tour in the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs, two famous tourist destinations that all the other Italian delegations had visited. However, the particular social context of the Cultural Revolution made Moravia's experiences in these two places of interest very different from those who travelled to China in the 1950s.

When Gaetano Tumiati went to China in 1954, he anticipated, based on his experiences from previous trips in the Soviet Union, that the Chinese communists would eagerly show him the buildings and factories built after 1949 as achievements of New China. However, to his surprise, the first sightseeing trip arranged by the Chinese hosts is to visit the Summer Palace. Tumiati speaks highly of the arrangement, believing that Maoist China is very mature in dealing with the country's past:

Mi annunciava ad esempio la tendenza a ricollegare i reali valori del passato a quelli del presente; mi annunciava il profondo amore di tutti i cinesi per ogni manifestazione artistica; mi annunciava soprattutto la maturità di un popolo che neppure nei giorni culminanti della rivoluzione si abbandonò a furori iconoclasti e che oggi, a quattro anni di distanza, sa giudicare fatti ed eventi con una serenità che avrei pensato possibile soltanto dopo tre lustri. (41)

Thirteen years later, when Moravia arrived in China, the social atmosphere was completely different. From 1966 to 1968, the country was undergoing a fierce Red Guard

campaign to destroy the “Four Olds,” the old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. The term “Four Olds” first appeared on Jun 1, 1966, in an editorial on *People’s Daily*, “Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons,” where the four old things were labelled as anti-proletarian. They were said to have been “fostered by the exploiting classes, [and to] have poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years” (Li 427). In August 1966, Lin Biao, the designated heir to Mao, endorsed the term and authorized the Red Guard units to set out to smash the old things. Motivated by pure revolutionary ardor, the Red Guards raided and ruined thousands of cultural and historical buildings and sites. They even broke into households of suspected enemies of the revolution, destroying all the items that they associated with the “Four Olds,” including paintings, sculptures, books, religious images, and furniture. The savagery of this mass campaign is probably attributable to youthful ignorance and bravado, mixed with a collective fear that the counterrevolutionaries wished to restore the old society. The young rebels’ destruction of national treasures is incalculable. Fortunately, at the height of this fierce campaign, Premier Zhou Enlai intervened and stationed military guards at important cultural sites to prevent them from being ruined by the Red Guards (Kraus 44). Otherwise, Moravia would not have been able to have a tour of the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs in 1967.

Because the stated purpose of Zhou’s protection of the major monuments was to maintain them as educative sites that revealed the emperors’ exploitation to the public, Moravia very likely knew nothing about the Premier’s attempts to safeguard the historical sites. What Moravia did witness was an overwhelming hatred for the past shown in the Red Guards’ propaganda and vandalism. Considering the hatred for the past to be a spontaneous collective response born out of Chinese modernization, Moravia shows his disapproval of the vitriolic tendency by writing positive descriptions of the historical monuments. Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte all viewed traditional Chinese culture as an integrated part of Maoist



China, as a solid foundation of the new socialist civilization, and thus they praised the beautiful historical sites to eulogize the richness of Maoist China's cultural and historical background. Moravia, by contrast, considers Chinese history and convention to be the antithesis of Maoist China, and so he uses positive descriptions of the amazing views in the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs to criticize the vandalism movement that was launched by the Chinese government and to denounce the Red Guards' frenzied smashing of old treasures.

According to Moravia's account, the Summer Palace is an artistic masterpiece that presents an incredible variety with elegantly simple walls, plants, and water:

Gli elementi di questi paesaggi sono tre: l'opera in muratura, la vegetazione, l'acqua (canali, fiumi, laghi, vasche, ecc ecc.). È un tema solo, come ho detto; ma è incredibile quante variazioni ne abbiano saputo trarre gli sconosciuti artisti o meglio artigiani che hanno dipinto gli ovali. (159)

Moravia also appreciates the animal statues lining the Spirit Way in the Ming Tombs. Unlike Parise, who believed that the statues "non sono belli, di per sé, perché la fattura è infantile e somigliano più a giocattoli che a statue" (Parise 89), Moravia found them stylish, mysterious, and appealing: "[due file di grandi statue] portano tutte quante lo stampo del genio cinese: quello stile o stilizzazione inconfondibile insieme bizzarra e piena di buon senso; rustica e raffinata; monumentale e familiare; realistica e decorativa; rituale e mondana" (Moravia 163).

After showing readers the beauty of the two historical monuments, Moravia moves on to denounce Maoist China for not only failing to appreciate the beauty, but also even trying to destroy it.

In the Summer Palace, Moravia found some paintings on the Long Corridor that were covered by a layer of red veneer. Moravia deliberately asked the guide, Mr. Li, to explain the veneer, even though he had already had an answer in mind and believed firmly in it:

Domando al signor Li: "Come mai queste scene con figure sono tutte ricoperte con una mano di vernice rosa?"

Risponde tranquillamente, con doverosa menzogna: "Non sono state ancora

restaurate.”

*Non è vero. E lui sa che io so che lui sa che non è vero.* In realtà le scene di genere sono state ricoperte perché mostravano i potenti del passato assorti a vivere una vita tranquilla, innocente, sorridente, graziosa, piacevole e raffinata. Ma il popolo non deve saper niente del passato o meglio di questo aspetto del passato. Il passato sono soltanto i latifondisti che martirizzavano i contadini. ... Ma non entra in testa al signor Li e in genere alle autorità che si occupano in Cina della propaganda, che quegli stessi latifondisti così crudeli ed esosi potessero essere al tempo stesso gli uomini raffinati, pieni di buone maniere, laureati in lettere, discepoli di Confucio, sensibili al bello, versati nelle arti che erano dipinte negli ovali della galleria, oggi ricoperti di vernice rosa. (Moravia 159-160, italics added)

Moravia was convinced that he had caught the guide lying to him. From Moravia's point of view, Mr. Li was trying to cover up the fact that Chinese authorities had sought to conceal the positive aspects of the old society in order to reinforce the propagandistically negative view of the past. This seemingly legitimate assumption is actually problematic. At that time, in 1967, the ongoing Red Guard campaign to destroy the "Four Olds" was at its height, and it had gained approval from the central government. If the paintings in the Summer Palace were covered by the Maoist authority or by Mao's Red Guard followers, it is very unlikely that Mr. Li, a guide selected for his high ideological and political consciousness, would feel uneasy or embarrassed to tell Moravia what had happened, and that he would have to make up a story to hide the truth. In fact, according to some documents declassified after the Cultural Revolution, the staff of the Summer Palace covered the paintings in accordance with the instructions of Premier Zhou so that the Red Guards would have no excuse to destroy them (Ai 16-20). Therefore, it seems clear that instead of Mr. Li striving to cover up some deceptive attempts of the Chinese authorities, he was either unwilling to reveal the real motive for covering the paintings, or he simply did not know about the true reasons for the covering. However, even though Moravia's conspiracy theory may prove false, the Italian writer's disapproval of Maoist China and its people's hatred for the past is true and explicitly declared.

After a discussion with Mr. Li about the Ming Tombs, Moravia once again expresses his

frustration with the Chinese people's fanatical negation of the past:

[Moravia] "Tutto questo è molto bello. Anche la bellezza educa."

[Il signor Li] "Non c'è niente di bello in tutto questo. Ma è bene che si sappia come venivano sepolti gli imperatori."

Dice sul serio? Probabilmente sì. Il senso del bello in Cina oggi è stato sostituito dal senso del buono. Questa tomba non è bella perché non è buona. (Moravia 165)

In his book, Moravia intentionally places this conversation after a detailed description of the Ming emperors' fascinating tombs, likely so that the audience will share Moravia's surprise at how the absurdly powerful hatred for the past could blind Chinese people like Mr. Li and prevent them from acknowledging and appreciating the obvious beauty of the artistic masterpiece.

In short, descriptions of China's natural and cultural landscapes have important functions in two chapters of Moravia's *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina*. In "Paese Aragosta," the beautiful natural view beyond the Great Wall is romanticized as a great source of new ideas and inventions, while the Great Wall is transformed into a negative symbol of China's conservatism that has blocked the communication between China and the outside world and led to the decadence of the Chinese empire. As Moravia points out, the Chinese communists had the same tendency of self-isolation as their ancestors did. In this context, the causal relationship between the construction of the Great Wall and the decline of pre-modern China should be read as a warning to Maoist China of its dangerous seclusion. In "L'Odio del Passato," Moravia praises the appealing, peaceful, and elegant cultural sites, like the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs, using them as foils to reveal and criticize the absurdity of the Chinese people's fanatical hatred for the antique. In the two chapters, the beautiful natural views and cultural sites are not treated as integral parts of Maoist China, but rather are used as mirrors to reflect the problems of the communist country.

### **Landscapes as Signs of Politicization**

At the beginning of the documentary movie *Chung Kuo*, Michelangelo Antonioni states,

“Arriving from Europe, we thought of exploring mountains and deserts. But the fact is, most of China remains inaccessible and forbidden.”<sup>22</sup> He uses it as an excuse for the lack of representations of China’s natural landscapes in the movie. Additionally, Antonioni does not show much interest in those famous tourist sites and historical monuments in China. For instance, Antonioni considers the Great Wall to be “a single monument to represent the inutility of military arts;”<sup>23</sup> and believes that “there isn’t much of a point in going inside [the Ming Tombs].”<sup>24</sup> Even the Temple of Heaven, which Antonioni describes in voiceover as “the most beautiful and mysterious”<sup>25</sup> temple in Beijing, only deserves a few shots in the film. It turns out that, in terms of landscapes, Antonioni and his crew were most attracted to the signs that could manifest China’s pervasive politicization. These signs include the pictures of revolutionary leaders, as well as political posters, slogans and statues.

When filming in Tian An Men Square, right after describing Beijing as the heart of China and the Square as the heart of Beijing, Antonioni shows the large portrayals of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin placed in the center of the Tian An Men Square, to highlight the importance of these figures in the mind of the Chinese. Visiting a mountain village in Henan, Antonioni takes several shots of the politicized antithetical couplets on the sides of doors leading to people’s homes. He also patiently explains to the audience the meaning of these “fanciful inscriptions,”<sup>26</sup> such as “Oppose individualism, criticize revisionism!”<sup>27</sup> It shows

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<sup>22</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:03:09-00:03:17)

<sup>23</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:35:00-00:35:04)

<sup>24</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:39:19-00:39:22)

<sup>25</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (01:05:22-01:05:27)

<sup>26</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part Two. (00:26:26-00:26:30)

<sup>27</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part Two. (00:26:35-00:26:38)

that, even in remote countryside, where people hardly benefited from the nation's economic progresses, the politics was always put in command. In Shanghai's Yuyuan Garden, Antonioni was not only amazed by the classic Chinese garden design, but also impressed by a propagandistic statue of working class revolutionaries at the entrance of the garden. He films this piece of political art from different angles, and uses close-ups to present details of the revolutionary fighters who hold their rifles high. Put at the end of the sequence dedicated to the tranquil views of Yuyuan Garden, the shots of the statue serve as a reminder to bring the audience back to the reality of the era of the Cultural Revolution, when the class struggles and socialist revolution were the center of Chinese people's life. When documenting the street scenes in Suzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai, Antonioni repeatedly uses camera movements to emphasize the close connections between the politics and the ordinary Chinese people. The camera either zooms out from a close-up of political posters and slogans to the masses and vehicles passing by, or it goes conversely from a panorama of the streets to the pieces of political publicity.

Antonioni does not only look for the political signs in the open space, these signs are also protagonists of his representations of the indoor space. During the tour to the Museum of Ming Tombs, Antonioni completely ignores the treasures found in the imperial tombs, because all his attention is captured by a propaganda exhibition that narrates the sufferings and revolts of the peasants in the Ming Dynasty. In Linxian, Hebei, Antonioni records a committee meeting of an agriculture commune. The sequence starts with a close-up of a picture of Chairman Mao attached on the wall, and gradually zooms out to show the attendees in the meeting room. At the same time, the voiceover tells the audience that Mao's quotations were used as a starting point of the peasants' discussions. The combination of camera movement and voiceover thus emphasizes Mao's strong influences on Chinese people's everyday life. Through Antonioni's trip to Southeast China, he also acutely captured and

intentionally highlighted the political posters and slogans in most of the places that he visited, including a store in Suzhou, a medical clinic and an elementary school in Nanjing, as well as a teahouse and a theater in Shanghai.

In conclusion, in Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, the political signs are highlighted as the major theme of Maoist China's cultural landscapes. The omnipresent political posters and slogans manifest the excessive politicization in China during the era of the Cultural Revolution. Although these posters and slogans were undoubtedly an integrated part of the Chinese people's everyday life in the early 1970s, Antonioni's deliberate attempts to single them out repeatedly in the movie reflect his intention to represent China as an exotic "Other," a country where people's lives were very different from those of the Western audiences.

## **Section 2.2: Changing Face of the Utopians**

### **Mao as a Sacred Figure**

Many Italian intellectuals who visited China in the 1950s were able to see Mao Zedong in person. However, by the time Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni travelled to China in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the supreme leader of China had become less accessible to the Italian visitors. None of the three Italian visitors reported having encountered the Chinese Chairman during their journeys, never mind having a private conversation with him as Malaparte had. Although Mao does not appear in person before Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni, he is paradoxically omnipresent throughout their trips in the communist country. During the 1960s and 1970s, Mao was not only the center of the Chinese government but also the center of the lives of ordinary Chinese people.

The somehow overwhelming omnipresence of Mao in those days is vividly manifested in a conversation between Parise and his Chinese interpreter. Knowing the interpreter had applied to join the Chinese Communist Party, Parise asked the Chinese man how the Party would determine his qualification. The interpreter answered,

Il partito lo sa, lo viene a sapere attraverso i fatti. I fatti non sono altro che il riflesso della fede ideologica che uno possiede. E la fede si ottiene soprattutto per mezzo della lettura delle opere del presidente Mao Tse-tung. Senza fede e conoscenza delle opere del presidente Mao non solo non si arriva a nulla, ma si scivola inesorabilmente verso il concetto borghese della vita e della società, cioè verso il revisionismo khruscioviano, giù, giù, sempre più giù fino al capitalismo. (Parise 15)

Here the tendency of shifting into Soviet revisionism or Western capitalism is regarded as something similar to the “original sin,” the imperfection into which humans are born.

Meanwhile, learning the works of Mao is viewed as the only remission for the sin. Evidently, in those days, Mao achieved a status of sanctity and was worshiped as the savior of the Chinese people. Parise asked further questions regarding the interpreter’s daily life:

[Parise (P)] “E lei legge sempre le opere di Mao Tse-tung?”

[Interpreter (I)] “Ogni sera, come milioni e milioni di cinesi. Questa lettura serale dà la forza di lavorare meglio il mattino successivo nello spirito del marxismo-leninismo per l’edificazione socialista del nostro paese.”

[P] “E non legge niente altro?”

[I] “Leggo i giornali e mi informo sulla guerra d’aggressione nel Vietnam, voluta dagli imperialisti americani, nemico numero uno di tutti i popoli, per il dominio sul mondo. ...”

[P] “E poi cos’altro fa? Va al cinema, a teatro, a passeggio con sua moglie, insomma cosa fa quando è libero?”

[I] “Studio, perché devo perfezionarmi nel mio francese che va molto male: per esempio leggo le opere del presidente Mao tradotte in francese.”

[P] “E altri libri, oltre quelli del presidente Mao?”

[I] “Altri libri, certamente. Ora sto leggendo il diario di un semplice soldato che lavorava molto, moltissimo, nello spirito del marxismo-leninismo appreso leggendo le opere del presidente Mao e ha sacrificato la propria vita nell’insegnare agli abitanti di un villaggio l’uso degli esplosivi. ... Poi vado al cinema e a teatro, dove danno film e drammi che ricordano l’eroica resistenza della nostra Armata Rossa contro l’invasione giapponese ..., e la vittoria finale del popolo cinese nella lotta per la conquista del potere condotta dal presidente Mao Tse-tung.” (Parise 15-17)

The interpreter’s life appears to completely revolve around the study of Mao’s thoughts. He reads Mao’s works every evening, tries to improve his proficiency in French through reading the French translation of Mao’s quotations, and spends his free time reading stories of role models with devotion to Mao, or watching movies and performances that were made to highlight Mao’s achievements in the war era. By directly quoting the Chinese young man’s own words, Parise reveals the rising cult of Mao in China and demonstrates the excessive and

single-minded zeal of Chinese revolutionaries.

In his book, Parise rarely comments on Mao. The only exception is that he takes Mao as an example of Chinese people's passion for endless repetition. He denounces Mao's speeches for being prolix and full of repetitions: "Infatti un discorso del presidente Mao può essere tagliato a metà senza perdere il suo senso in quanto la seconda metà non è altro che la ripetizione della prima" (26). Although in the same paragraph Parise claims that Mao's discourses are still more concise than those of Chinese cadres, and calls Mao "uno dei più brillanti stilisti della divulgazione che la storia conosca" (26), these seemingly complimentary comments are meant to be sarcastic. While Parise's frustration over the Chinese red tape is probably legitimate, the use of irony also reveals his feeling of patronizing superiority. Moreover, given that Parise is very angry with the inefficient Chinese bureaucracy and repeatedly condemns it in his book, it is very likely that he does not hold a very positive view of Mao, the leader of the Chinese bureaucrats.

Compared with Parise, Moravia holds a more complicated but mainly positive attitude toward Mao. Like Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, Moravia also admires Mao for his great qualities and capacity of dealing with various tasks. As Moravia observes, Mao "ha fatto di tutto ed è stato tutto: uomo politico, agitatore, capo militare, legislatore, filosofo, poeta, organizzatore economico e così via. Egli è stato al tempo stesso il Lenin il Trotzki e lo Stalin (ma anche il Maiakovski) della Cina" (102). Moravia disagrees with Khrushchev, who considers Mao to be a small bourgeoisie of rural origin. For Moravia, Mao is "eroe eponimo," "l'uomo che dà il proprio nome a tutta un'epoca, a tutto un aspetto di una determinata società" (133). To enhance the understanding of his Italian audience, Moravia compares Mao to some outstanding leaders in Western history, such as Peter the Great of Russia and Oliver Cromwell of Great Britain:

Con costoro [Pietro il Grande di Russia e Oliviero Cromwell d'Inghilterra] Mao ha in comune la formazione culturale complessa e travagliata, il coraggio fisico, il



talento militare, le fortune avventurose facilmente mitologizzabili e infine e soprattutto quel non so che di enigmatico e di popolare, di comune e di ambiguo che viene non già dall'impegno, ma dalla natura. (134)

Moreover, Moravia claims that Mao is even better than his two Western counterparts because of his unique creativity in politics and ideology. Moravia admits that Khrushchev and Mao both played important roles in modern history, but also points out that the role of Khrushchev was as a negative destructor, while Mao's role was that of a positive creator of a new ideology:

Certo Kruscev avrà un posto nella storia per aver abbattuto il mito menzognero di Stalin; ma sarà un posto, inevitabilmente, di specie negativa. Mao, invece, secondo noi, avrà un posto positivo ... per avere creato un'ideologia nuova capace di soppiantare l'ideologia sovietica. (134)

Even though Moravia speaks highly of Mao's great qualities and considers him to be an exceptional leader and hero of the time, he also realizes the rising cult of personality centered on Mao and considers it problematic and dangerous. The term "cult of personality" was made popular by Khrushchev's "secret speech" of 1956, in which the Soviet leader criticized Stalin and the excesses and abuses under Stalin's rule, chalking these up to a "cult of personality." Since then, the term has been closely associated with totalitarianism and believed to be a dangerous factor that can easily lead to social disasters such as purges, repressions, and even wars.

At first, Moravia comes out in defense of Mao. He tries to convince the audience that the case of Mao is different from that of Stalin:

Secondo noi, si coglie la differenza tra il cosiddetto culto della personalità di Stalin e quello di Mao. ... Mentre il culto di Stalin appariva rivolto alla persona del dittatore, in maniera affatto empirica e moderna, il culto di Mao sembra essersi quasi subito spostato dalla persona al pensiero, cioè al libro, colorandosi di religiosità contadina e primitiva. Il culto di Stalin tradiva l'ammirazione per l'uomo eccezionale, per il demiurgo, per l'eroe; quello di Mao rivela invece un patetico bisogno di stabilità, un anelito profondo a un ordine duraturo. (104-105)

According to Moravia, the Chinese people do not worship Mao Zedong, but rather have faith in his ideas. Moravia also highlights Mao's emphasis on social stability, believing that Mao

would not launch bloody purges or violent conflicts as Stalin had.

Moravia has heard about the incident of Wang Guangmei (wife of the former Chinese president Liu Shaoqi) that took place a few months before his arrival in China. Liu Shaoqi replaced Mao as President in 1959 and implemented policies of economic reconstruction to reinvigorate the country's agriculture and industry that were ruined by the failed Great Leap Forward. Liu Shaoqi's wife, Wang Guangmei, a talented science graduate of the Catholic Furen University in Beijing, was then well known in China as its beautiful, articulate, sophisticated first lady. However, in early 1967, at the eve of the Cultural Revolution, Mao and his followers openly accused Liu of being the most high-ranking "capitalist roader" in the Party. Right after the announcement, the young Red Guards quickly set out to attack the former first couple. Kuai Dafu, a high-profile rebel leader at Qinghua University (Tsinghua University), made a plan to inveigle Wang Guangmei out of her domicile. He telephoned Wang, claiming that her daughter had been hit in an accident and was in the hospital. Soon after Wang arrived, the Red Guards detained her and forced her to do self-criticism in front of a huge crowd.

Although in *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina* Moravia reports in great detail the Red Guards' arrest of Wang, he probably was not informed of the violence involved in the "struggle sessions" against the former first lady. Otherwise, the Italian writer might not be so optimistic about the fate of Liu and his family:

Ma Mao non è Stalin. Mao non vuole il potere personale attraverso la violenza, come Stalin. Mao l'educatore, Mao il dialettico, vuole il potere ideologico attraverso la persuasione e l'educazione. Così egli non desidera che Liu Sciao-sci sia ucciso bensì che cambi idea, cioè che si riconosca eretico e abiuri l'eresia.

Si tratta, insomma, non già di una lotta per il potere personale, di specie staliniana; bensì di una lotta per l'ortodossia, di specie ideologica e religiosa. Il risultato pratico, secondo noi, sarà: o Liu Sciao-sci abiura e rimane presidente; o non abiura e rimane presidente lo stesso fino alla fine del mandato; a meno che prima non si dimetta e si ritiri a vita privata. Potremmo sbagliarci: magari domani apprenderemo che Liu Sciao-sci sarà processato alla maniera staliniana e "confesserà". Ma non lo crediamo. (Moravia 132)

Moravia seems to believe that, unlike Stalin, who wanted to eliminate his enemies and rivals through violence, Mao only intends to re-educate and persuade dissenters; thus, Liu and his family would not face the Stalinist violent persecution. Moravia assumed that Liu could continue serving as the president if he was willing to give up his wrong policies, or would at least be allowed to finish his presidential term even if he refused to change his mind. At the end of the cited paragraph, Moravia also lists a potential bad ending in which Liu would be forced to confess in the Stalinist way.<sup>28</sup> Even though Moravia immediately asserts that he does not believe things would go that way, the necessity to include this possibility alongside his more optimistic predictions still reveals the Italian author's growing doubts about Mao and his leadership.

Experiences like this add to Moravia's worries about Mao's cult of personality. Later in the book, when discussing the Sino-American conflicts, Moravia writes,

Ora il grande nemico di Mao non sono gli Stati Uniti, bensì il fondamentale, confuciano conservatorismo cinese. Il pericolo è che, morto Mao, il suo pensiero venga imbalsamato e la sua figura divinizzata. Il modo con il quale in Cina, negli ultimi tempi si è ingigantito il culto della personalità e si è proceduto alla confucianizzazione, ossia trasformazione in autorità ortodossa del pensiero di Mao, non è molto rivoluzionario. (136)

For the first time, Moravia recognizes the Chinese trend of deifying Mao and acknowledges it to be a dangerous tendency. Even so, Moravia does not single out Mao's cult of personality, instead continuing to tie it to the canonization of Mao's works and carefully avoiding depicting Mao as too similar to Stalin.

Near the end of his journey, in front of a Stalin-style statue of Mao, Moravia eventually gives up his efforts to defend Mao, and he candidly expresses his distaste for and frustration over Mao's cult of personality:

In fondo mi dispiace che Mao, a settantaquattro anni e dopo un'intera vita lontana da

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, even the worst situation that Moravia imagined did not come close to the tragedy that actually happened to Liu and Wang. In 1968, Liu Shaoqi was removed from all his positions and expelled from the CPC. A year later, Liu died of pneumonia in an unheated prison room, after being refused medical treatment. Wang Guangmei was imprisoned until the end of the Cultural Revolution, and was not told of his husband's death for many years. In 1978, three years after the death of Mao, Liu and Wang were rehabilitated by the CPC.

qualsiasi adulazione, abbia finito, sia pure per motivi politici, per ricorrere al culto della personalità, come già Stalin e certamente in maniera più ossessiva di Stalin medesimo. ... E ancora più mi dispiace che così nelle statue di Stalin come in quelle di Mao, l'espressione sia la stessa: sorridente, affabile, paterna. (170)

When discussing the necessity of the Great Wall, Moravia quotes a Daoist teaching of Laozi to argue that “La vita, nel momento della sua pienezza e della sua maturità, non ha bisogno di Grandi Muraglia” (155). In the same vein, the fact that Moravia has to continuously speak in defense of Mao’s reputation as a great leader actually reveals the weakness of Mao’s idealized figure, which was on the verge of collapse.

Antonioni’s documentary movie *Chung Kuo* was shot in 1972 when the Cultural Revolution was still ongoing and the cult of Mao remained on a very high level. Although Antonioni claims that *Chung Kuo* does not focus on China’s political and social system, he seems very interested in seeking the images of Mao and presenting them on the big screen. Throughout his journey, Antonioni acutely captures and highlights portrayals of Mao found in theater, conference room, grocery store, medical clinic, elementary school, and people’s home.

Through the Cultural Revolution, Mao became the supreme leader of China, the “Helmsman” of the Chinese revolution, who personified the governance of the CPC and its communist cause. Even though the Chinese communist government does not come into sight in *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni uses the omnipresence of Mao’s images to represent the Party’s strict control over all aspects of public and private life in China.

In conclusion, Chairman Mao was still a major focus of the Italian visitors in 1960s and 1970s. However, in the works of Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni, Mao was no longer depicted as an amiable, approachable, and versatile leader, but rather a distant and mysterious figure whose pictures, statues, and quotations were widely held and exalted by the Chinese masses. Even though none of the Italian intellectuals discussed in this chapter directly criticizes Mao and his behaviors, they all express their worries about the deification of Mao

and the canonization of his thoughts.

### **Grassroots Cadres as Bureaucrats**

During their journeys in China in the 1950s, the Italian visitors usually gained very positive impressions of the Chinese grassroots cadres. At a basic level, the Chinese cadres were considered by the Italian left-wing intellectuals to be “i veri autori della rivoluzione cinese” (Fortini 101), who combined in their characters puritanism, idealism, and incorruptibility. Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte praise Maoist China for eliminating social classes and hierarchy, and they regard the Chinese grassroots cadres as the embodiment of the country’s social equality.

However, based on Parise’s frustrating trip to China in 1966, he strongly disagrees with his predecessors’ positive comments on Chinese cadres. From Parise’s point of view, the cadres in China are bureaucrats belonging to a distinct social group separated from the ordinary Chinese public. Parise attributes this undesirable social division to the dictatorship of Maoist China, which gave birth to the prevalent bureaucratism and automatism in the administrative apparatus. Parise also accuses the dictatorship of alienating the Chinese cadres and making them lose their “style,” their innate grace and kindness:

Lo stile in Cina non soltanto non è raro, ma è di tutto il popolo cinese. Perché dico popolo cinese? Dico popolo cinese per distinguere dalla massa dei burocrati di partito, che sono molti e in molti casi hanno perduto lo stile, cioè l’anima cinese. Come mai? Non sta a me chiarirlo ora, ma sarei tentato di attribuire la colpa non tanto all’ideologia, quanto all’amministrazione di questa ideologia che, come ogni amministrazione quando giunge ai massimi poteri, cioè alla dittatura, perde le caratteristiche dell’umanità (tra cui, massima, è ancora e sempre lo stile) e assume quelle dell’automatismo. Dire automatismo è come dire noia, ma l’automatismo e la noia di molti burocrati cinesi possono portare il nostro malcapitato viaggiatore occidentale alla disperazione e alla follia. (229)

As the last sentence of the cited paragraph reveals, most of Parise’s anger and despair result from the intolerable drudgery and disregard of the Chinese government officials. Based on the narratives in *Cara Cina*, Parise’s main complaints against his Chinese hosts are two-fold: the Chinese authority’s surveillance and restrictions over his trip and the slowness and

carelessness of Chinese bureaucrats in dealing with his requests.

In the 1950s, Italian visitors enjoyed more freedom during their journeys within China. For instance, Fortini could walk freely around Chinese cities with no interpreter or government agent at his side, and he even had the chance to directly interact with young beggars wondering the stresses of Guangzhou. In the same vein, Malaparte was able to reach some western provinces of China, such as Xinjiang and Sichuan, and to observe some traditional Chinese customs like funeral processions.

However, during the 1960s and 1970s, western visitors appeared to have only very restricted access to Maoist China. As Parise observed, Chinese authorities tended to keep a close watch on foreigners' journeys.

Chi viaggia in Cina non può spostarsi da una città all'altra se non ha un permesso della polizia; non può parlare con nessuno se non ha un interprete; non può fissare una stanza in un albergo, un posto in treno o in aereo, una poltrona a teatro, un appuntamento in un ufficio, insomma non può fare nulla senza il *China Travel Service*.

...

Inutile chiedere di andare nel Sinkiang, nel Tibet, nell'Anhui, nel Chinghai, nello Yunnan e in altre province. Non si può. Dapprincipio dicono che mancano i mezzi di trasporto, e in parte è vero, alla fine ammettono che non si può per ragioni di sicurezza militare. Della Cina un visitatore può vedere dunque soltanto la parte est. (131, 138)

According to Parise, western visitors were suffering from restraints to their liberty during their stay in China. They were not able to move or do anything without the permission and assistance of the China Travel Service, the only travel agency in China, which was controlled by the Chinese government. Moreover, trips to the western regions of China were no longer available to foreigners.

The situation seemed to be the same when Michelangelo Antonioni took his cameras to document Maoist China in 1972. At the beginning of *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni also emphasizes that "most of China remains inaccessible and forbidden."<sup>29</sup> In his article "Is it still possible to

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<sup>29</sup> See Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, Part One. (00:03:14-00:03:17)

film a documentary?”, Antonioni also records the Chinese authorities’ attempts to limit his movement as well as his own resistance to the imposed travel plan:

In our first meeting in Peking with the functionaries of Chinese television, we showed a map of China, upon which we had marked what were to be the stops in our imaginary journey – which was to remain as such. It was, in fact, an ideal, and therefore absurd itinerary. To cover all of it, it would have taken six months. And this was the reason that the Chinese put forward in refusing it. But it was not the real reason. Our itinerary had already been established by them, and it was completely different. We discussed it for three days. ... It was a harsh and courteous battle that had neither winners nor losers. A compromise came out of it, and the film that I filmed in China is the fruit of this compromise. (The Architecture 110-111)

In addition to the imposition of predetermined travel plans, the Italian visitors also found themselves cut off from the real life in China by the government’s practices of controlling tourism.

The rigid travel plans denied the possibility of spontaneous encounter and exchange, as the westerners were constantly confronted with Chinese communist cadres who were trained to function as mouthpieces for the CPC. Parise was annoyed by the identical and repetitive propaganda speeches given by CPC members at all the work sites that he visited:

Quello che mi colpisce, come in ogni altro luogo di lavoro che ho visitato fino a questo momento, è che le persone che incontro sono sempre membri del partito, poi che le frasi sono uguali, alla lettera. I termini di confronto sono sempre: prima della liberazione, dopo la liberazione; nella vecchia società, nella nuova società. E molte altre che sembrano uscire, e infatti escono, da un libro stampato. (155)

When Parise was visiting the Women’s Federation in Shanghai, it was arranged for him to meet with a group of female CPC members, whom he depicted as “sei suore di una religione laica che si chiama comunismo cinese” (191). According to Parise, these representatives of Chinese women were carefully selected bureaucrats who had been charged with indoctrinating the foreign visitors:

Queste donne sono state scelte per avere un colloquio con me ..., infine per indottrinarsi sulla situazione della donna in Cina. Ora questi elementi sono tutt’altro che eleganti, ineffabili, affascinanti; al contrario sono per loro natura al di fuori dell’eleganza, privi di mistero e noiosi. Sono, in una parola, burocrazia. (193)

Antonioni also had to deal with the surveillance and interventions from his Chinese

hosts. At the outset of *Chung Kuo*, the Italian film master already complains, “with an unflinching persistence, our guides keep us from taking a step away from the prescribed itineraries.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Antonioni did not give in to the pressure. Later in the movie, he reports two conflicts between his crew and the Chinese authorities. One of the conflicts occurred when Antonioni found a private market in Linxian, where peasants bartered cattle and agricultural products on the roadside. Because the state sought to restrict private marketing activity, the Chinese guides intentionally ignored Antonioni’s request to stop the car, trying to prevent him from filming the marketplace. However, despite their guides’ futile attempts to stop them, Antonioni and his crew jumped out of the moving vehicle and insisted on shooting. The Italian director is so proud of this rebellious behavior that he provides a very detailed account of the incident in the voiceover. Another conflict took place when the crew requested to visit a remote mountain village in Henan. Upon their arrival, the governor of the village was reluctant to give them the permission to enter. Additionally, during the time of their stay, the governor supervised the residents’ behaviors to ensure everything was captured properly. He even forced out of sight the elderly people, especially those wearing shabby clothes. Although Antonioni failed to capture the authentic rural life scenes in the village, he was still able to put up resistance to the Chinese authorities’ restrictions, by narrating in voiceover all the governor’s actions of hindering the shooting. Briefly, in Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo*, the Chinese cadres are depicted as socialist hardliners striving to distribute and promote the CPC’s propaganda, and meanwhile as obstacles set by the Party to impede the Italian director from approaching the reality of Maoist China.

In the second place, the Italian travelers’ interactions with the Chinese seem to be impeded by their lack of linguistic mastery in Chinese and the constant presence of interpreters and administrators. Both Moravia and Parise report that they were always

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<sup>30</sup> See Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo*, Part One. (00:03:22-00:03:27)



accompanied and observed by Chinese guides and interpreters. In his travel notes, Moravia expressed his surprise at finding that he had to conduct an interview with a Chinese intellectual with three interpreters sitting around them. The interpreters have probably been assigned to the meeting not just to facilitate the conversation but also to conduct surveillance and take notes. Parise felt himself being cocooned by the interpreters, who were “giovani, di solito, molto simpatici, addirittura affascinanti nel loro arrabattarsi tra il dovere di buoni ospiti e lo zelo di perfetti burocrati” (134). As a result, Parise made an appointment to meet with a group of university students who majored in French, with the hope of overcoming the linguistic isolation. Although the meeting seemed to be uninhibited by the language barrier, Parise was still not able to get rid of the surveillance of the Chinese authorities, who sent a university director and a French professor to keep him company:

Ho chiesto di incontrarmi con studenti di lingua e letteratura francese per poter parlare direttamente senza interprete e per questo mi accoglie un giovanissimo professore di francese, gentile, delicato e femmineo, insieme al direttore amministrativo dell’Università. (95)

In short, the Italian visitors appear to be separated and isolated from the reality in China by the government’s careful ministrations and controlled tourism. Their aspirations to unmediated cultural communication with the Chinese were subject to continual frustration.

Moreover, as the most frustrated traveler among the three Italian intellectuals discussed in this chapter, Parise’s complaints of the Chinese grassroots cadres also result from the slowness and carelessness of the officials in dealing with his requests. According to Parise’s account, each interaction with the government officials was “una perenne lotta tra la pazienza e la noia” (132), because “passano i giorni, non arriva la risposta alla domanda e nemmeno l’informazione sulla risposta alla domanda. Irritazione, proteste, musi, antipatia, noia da parte nostra: sorrisi, sorrisi e ancora sorrisi da parte loro” (133). One of Parise’s requests was to make an appointment with a director of the Chinese Ministry of Culture in order to promote the cultural communication between the two countries. Impatient with the government

agency's inefficiency in handling the simple request, Parise decided to go directly to the director's office without official permission. To stop Parise's rule-breaking attempt, his interpreter pretended to be sick and quickly left for the hospital. Right at that moment, Parise realized: "E dunque, anche con l'interprete, tutto un palleggio di noia e pazienza, che poi diventa un palleggio di rimorsi. Infatti l'interprete, pur di non trasgredire agli ordini, è disposto anche a dire bugie, a tradurre rovescio" (135). Left with no means of achieving his goals, Parise was forced to accept the undesirable reality, as he sadly wrote: "col tempo che non l'aiuto della riflessione realistica e cioè che quello che è, è, ed è inutile protestare, si giunge alla conclusione di usare il loro stesso sistema: la pazienza" (133).

Given all the conflicts described in this chapter, it is not surprising to see Parise comparing his visit to a mental and physical imprisonment:

Chi viaggia in Cina, e non è ospite del governo, è ospite (pagante) del *China Travel Service*, la sola agenzia turistica cinese. In entrambi i casi è prigioniero, anima e corpo. ... Le catene di questa prigionia non sono soltanto la lingua cinese, ma anche la totale burocratizzazione della propria persona e infine un senso di estraneità quasi biologica che al viaggiatore appare molto più profondo e misterioso di quanto cultura, leggi, usi, costumi e perfino ideologia politica possano tentare di chiarire e superare. (131)

For Parise, the most depressing aspect of the journey is his experience of alienation, as the Chinese bureaucracy necessitated his acceptance of its existence as a social norm.

Although Moravia did not criticize the Chinese cadres as Parise did, he did not seem to have a positive impression of them. His attitude toward Chinese cadres is manifested when explaining reasons for launching the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of his trip, Moravia believed that, through the mass movements, Mao wanted to get rid of the whole bureaucratic system, and establish direct contacts with the public (99). Moravia did not denounce the perceived motive of Mao, but tended to depict it as the Chinese leader's effort to empower and reconnect with his people. It reflects that Moravia considered the Chinese cadres to be useless and dispensable at best, but more likely as an obstacle of the Chinese

revolution.

To sum up, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chinese cadres were no longer highlighted as embodiments of thrift, egalitarianism, and cosmopolitanism. Instead, they were often portrayed as symbols of an inefficient and corrupted bureaucratic system, or as alienated, fanatical hardliners of a totalitarian authority.

### **Women as Victims under Repression**

Among the three Italian intellectuals discussed in this chapter, Parise is the one most attracted by Chinese women, while Moravia shows least interest in the topic. In between these two positions, Antonioni's stance is a bit complex. Although Antonioni takes many shots of Chinese women, and uses some extreme long close-ups to capture details in their gestures and facial expressions, he hardly makes comments on these women caught by his camera. While leaving no comment on Chinese women, Antonioni frequently speaks about the Chinese youths and the Chinese masses in general. In this sense, it is likely that Antonioni does not want to single out the Chinese woman as a special social group, but rather regard them as an integrated part of the Chinese adults.

Unlike Moravia and Antonioni, Parise paid a lot of attention to Chinese women during his journey. Generally speaking, Parise holds a positive attitude toward Chinese women. Although Parise divides the Chinese women that he met during the journey into three groups based on their physical attractiveness according to the Western aesthetic standard, he claims that all the Chinese women, regardless of appearance, possess inner beauty, which is perceptible not through eyesight but through intuition:

Ho visto decine e decine di donne cinesi, dalle più umili facchine che tiravano il carretto fino alle intellettuali che occupano posti di grande rilievo. Alcune erano belle: di uno stile così alto, così naturale, così antico e ineffabile da avvicinarsi a quell'*unicum* nell'entomologia femminile che fu Marilyn Monroe. Altre, meno belle, sempre nel senso che si dà in Occidente alla bellezza femminile, e tuttavia, nell'apparizione, nei movimenti, nello sguardo, insomma nel disporsi dinamicamente nello spazio, ispirate e lievi come farfalle. Altre ancora, nelle campagne e nei luoghi di lavoro duro come le fabbriche, non belle, forse brutte, ma

così intense e dolorose, o allegre e umane da diventare subito belle, bellissime. Potrei continuare all'infinito con altri esempi perché la donna cinese, e la generalizzazione è pertinente, è diversissima dalla donna occidentale e, bella o brutta, è quasi sempre bella. Questa bellezza è data, lo ripeto ancora una volta, dallo stile. Perciò lo strumento per giudicare la donna cinese non è e non deve essere l'occhio, come avviene in Occidente, bensì l'intuito. (192-193)

In his travel notes, Parise does not talk much about the ordinary women of the second level, but he does narrate his meetings with the most and least beautiful Chinese women.

The most beautiful Chinese woman whom Parise met on his journey was a thirty-five-year-old doctor who worked in a hospital of traditional Chinese medicine. Parise was so attracted to this woman that he wrote a very detailed depiction of her, which turns out to be the longest description of an individual living in Maoist China written by the Italian visitors discussed in this dissertation:

Usciamo e la dottoressa sfilava la maschera di garza: è la persona più bella che mi sia capitato di vedere quando sono in Cina. È una donna sui trentacinque anni, di statura piuttosto piccola, il capo, come ho già detto, chiuso nella cuffia, il corpo nascosto dal camice, le gambe coperte da larghi pantaloni di tela blu. Vedo dunque di lei il volto, le mani, le caviglie nei calzini bianchi di nailon, i piedi chiusi dentro scarpette basse di pelle nera, come quelle delle comunicande o delle bambole. Da questi soli elementi ricavo la sua bellezza. In particolare dal volto e dalle mani. Il volto è pallido, lievemente solcato da qualche ruga agli angoli degli occhi, la fronte è alta, convessa e trasparente come quella dei neonati, tanto che si vedono pulsare le vene azzurre che la percorrono dall'alto in basso. Gli occhi neri sono dolcissimi, allegri e al tempo stesso profondi e quasi addolorati. Le ciglia lunghe e nere, bocca piccola, gonfia e palpitante anche quando, anzi, soprattutto quando sta in silenzio, i denti chiusi, perfetti e scintillanti, le guance appena rosee con la fossetta nel mezzo. Non un velo di trucco, come del resto tutte le donne in Cina. Le mani sono molto curate invece, e sembrano sentire il contatto degli oggetti ancora prima di toccarli. Anche quelle palpitano. Lo stesso per i piedi che appena sfiorano il terreno subito si rialzano in un altro passettino. Quando stanno fermi lei li solleva di continuo, come e quanto può: o poggiandosi sul tallone, o sulla punta, o su un piede solo: il tempo di sosta di una farfalla. Parla soltanto cinese e non potrebbe parlare altro che cinese, con voce tenue, a momenti sibilante e acuta: ma sibilante come il verso di un insetto e acuta come il suono di un grillo. Una piccola ciocca di capelli neri, quasi blu, le attraversa un sopracciglio blu e la tempia. Siccome la tempia pulsa, anche i capelli si muovono impercettibilmente.

Questo è quanto di lei si vede e si ode ma non è ancora la sua bellezza perché la vera bellezza è sempre misteriosa: si sente, ma non si può dire. Non resta che contemplarla nell'illusione, sempre disillusa, di penetrarne il mistero. Ma il mistero, appunto, non si penetra, bensì riconduce un'altra volta all'illusione, dunque alla contemplazione: è quello che faccio per tutto il tempo della mia visita all'ospedale, riflettendo che la sua professione è in stretto rapporto con la sua bellezza, in certo

senso la nutre e, per così dire, la veste. (122-123)

In Parise's description, he highlights the Chinese woman's physical attractiveness. As her body was covered by a white overcoat and her legs were hidden under loose pants, Parise could only perceive her physical beauty from her face and hands. It seems that Parise's appreciation of this beautiful Chinese doctor is based on aesthetic pleasure rather than sexual desire. Such platonic affection is not only owing to the woman's conservative dressing style, but also to the special characteristic of her mysterious beauty as an integration of physical attributes (outer beauty) and psychological factors (inner beauty). As Parise states at the end of the cited paragraph, this Chinese woman's inner beauty is associated with her profession. Based on the narratives in the rest of the chapter dedicated to this Chinese female doctor, she seems to be a skillful, intelligent, and kind-hearted doctor and practitioner of acupuncture. She was able to quickly release Parise's joint pain with a few thin needles, and said that she initially chose to learn acupuncture because it could cure people but "non provoca alcun dolore" (127).

By contrast, Parise also reports his interactions with some Chinese female workers who handled heavy manual labor.

Ho visto molte donne tirare carri pesanti, alle stanghe, oppure, se i carri sono stracarichi, alla cinghia legata al carro; camminano lentamente e tirano, stando piegate fin quasi a terra. Abbiamo fermato un carro e ho voluto parlare direttamente con una delle donne. ... Ho ripetuto anche a lei che quello non mi pareva un lavoro per donne.

...

Ha sorriso e ha guardato le altre donne che ridevano.

"Io non conosco l'Europa e l'Occidente, io sono una donna cinese. È un lavoro faticoso, ma tutti i lavori sono faticosi. Forse in Europa non debbono lavorare come noi ma noi dobbiamo farlo perché c'è ancora molto da fare in Cina, noi dobbiamo costruire tutto da soli e la Cina è grande e ha molti abitanti." (Parise 64-65)

For Parise, these Chinese women are "non belle, forse brutte, ma così intense e dolorose, o allegre e umane da diventare subito belle, bellissime" (192). Because these women are not aesthetically attractive, Parise kindly avoids describing their appearance, instead highlighting

their traits of inner beauty and portraying them as friendly, energetic, and diligent people.

Parise admits that the universal beauty, style, and elegance of Chinese women is a new phenomenon. He believes that all Chinese women have eschewed vulgarity thanks to the elimination of prostitution:

Per concludere voglio aggiungere che la caratteristica, diciamo così, interiore oltre che esterna della prostituzione, è la volgarità. Perché prostituzione significa dare amore in cambio di denaro. Ora si potrà dire tutto dei cinesi, ma assolutamente non si può dire che sono volgari. La volgarità è estranea a questo popolo. In particolare alle donne cinesi, la cui leggerezza, dolcezza, ma soprattutto stile, non dico esclude, ma non conosce nemmeno che cos'è la volgarità. (Parise 220)

Although Parise acknowledges the progress that Chinese women have made since the founding of the PRC, he does not give credit to Maoist authorities for the positive changes. On the contrary, he seems to believe that the connections with the CPC and the devotion to the communist cause could only alienate Chinese women, making them lose their femininity and positive qualities.

In a chapter entitled “Donne e Bugie (Women and Lies),” Parise describes such alienation that he observed in a group of female representatives of the Women’s Federation in Shanghai:

Mi trovo di fronte a sei suore di una religione laica che si chiama comunismo cinese. L’unica non iscritta al partito, la pediatra, è infatti la sola che, nonostante la divisa, mostra negli occhi tristi e profondi una vocazione più femminile che marxista. Tutte le altre, compresa l’attrice che pure è graziosa, hanno in volto, in modo diverso ma con grande evidenza, i tratti di una volontaria e al tempo stesso forzata deformazione delle caratteristiche femminili. (191-192)

From Parise’s point of view, these Chinese women have been selected to indoctrinate him, and their masculine appearances represent the deformation of their femininity: “Ecco la deformazione; infine quegli abiti, che potrebbero essere portati in modo femminile, sono portati invece in modo dichiaratamente maschile” (194). As a result, Parise believes that these female communists should be distinguished from ordinary Chinese women. He considers them to be the CPC’s bureaucrats, “che sono molti e in molti casi hanno perduto lo stile, cioè

l'anima cinese" (Parise 229). Labeled bureaucrats, these female representatives are thus not expected to possess the great qualities of Chinese women. What happened later in the meeting seems to confirm Parise's expectations. A Chinese actress told Parise about the tragedies that occurred to her family before 1949, claiming that the story was never shared with others. While all the other Chinese female representatives appeared to be moved by the sad story and cried together with the actress, Parise was exasperated because he believed that the Chinese actress had told a lie about the exclusivity of her story, as he had just read the same story in another western visitor's travel accounts.

Io non soltanto non sono commosso, ma sono seccato e divertito insieme. Divertito per l'ingenuità della commedia, affidata, guarda che astuzia, proprio a un'attrice. Il racconto può benissimo essere vero, perché fatti del genere erano usuali in Cina, ma "l'esclusiva" del dolore è falsa. È falsa perché pochi giorni prima, in un libro di Catherine van Moppès, *A chacun sa Chine*, Editions Albin Michel, pagina 268, ho letto la stessa storia ... recitata e messa in scena evidentemente per tutti i visitatori stranieri. Seccato perché, anche se occidentale, non sono un babbeo. Divertito ancora perché, con ingenuità stupida e cinese al tempo stesso, tutti pensano di avermela fatta. (Parise 199)

According to Parise's narratives, although he was quite offended at these Chinese female communists' attempts to deceive him, he did not condescend to expose their lies. He did enjoy playing a trick on these naïve Chinese minds in return, though, convincing them that their simple tricks had worked well.

Even though Parise speaks highly of Chinese women's inner beauty and "style," he tends to view these good qualities as gifts with which Chinese women were born, and never associated with the socialist revolution and reforms launched by the Chinese communists. In Parise's *Cara Cina*, the CPC is not recognized as a progressive force that has helped the Chinese women to achieve their emancipation; rather, it is accused of being a broken bureaucratic system that has caused the alienation of its female members and made them abandon their innate good natures.

### **Youths as Conformists**

The works of the three Italian visitors discussed in this chapter cover the different conditions of Chinese youth before, during, and after the Red Guard campaign. Parise traveled in China in June 1966, when the Cultural Revolution had just been launched. At that time, the schools and colleges were still functioning, and the youngsters had not yet been radicalized. Moravia's trip took place in 1967, at the height of the Red Guard movement, so the Italian writer was able to observe and analyze the youth rebels. Four years after the end of the Red Guard campaign, when Antonioni went to document Maoist China in 1972, the Chinese youths no longer showed any violent tendencies or eagerness to rebel.

During his journey, Parise made an appointment to meet with a group of university students who were majoring in French; his hope was to overcome the linguistic isolation and to get rid of the Chinese interpreter-bureaucrats' surveillance. As discussed in a previous section, Parise's attempt to have unmediated communication failed because the authorities sent a French professor and a university director to sit in on the meeting. However, what impressed Parise the most was the extreme shyness of the Chinese students and their lack of freedom to choose their future careers.

To Parise, it seems that the Chinese students were excessively shy and showed unreasonable distress in front of him: *"La loro timidezza è sconcertante: alcuni tremano e si aggrappano alla mano di un compagno un po' meno tremante a cui però tremano le labbra e non riesce a spicciare parola se non dopo un balbettio che si conclude in un benvenuto"* (100). Based on Parise's depictions of the Chinese students, their physical manifestations of uneasiness are even intense enough to impair their ability to behave or speak normally. By arbitrarily attributing these Chinese youngsters' bewildering reactions to shyness, to their fear of interacting with unfamiliar people, Parise presents a negative image of Chinese youth to his Italian audience. Many Italians, raised in a culture that values confidence and encourages interpersonal interaction, would likely perceive shyness as weakness or even social



dysfunction.<sup>31</sup> Parise does not consider the possibility that these Chinese students might not be anxious because they were facing him, but instead due to the presence of their French teacher and the director of the university. The two waves of anti-rightist movements in 1957 and 1959 silenced the voices of dissidents in the PRC and established the CPC's unchallengeable authority. Raised in the conformist social atmosphere, the young students were reasonable to feel overly concerned about their performance in this meeting; for them, this meeting could be a serious political assignment. In this light, these youngsters' awkward behaviors could be seen as manifestations of their eagerness to perform well under the scrutiny of the authorities.

Another thing that surprised Parise during the meeting was the lack of freedom allowed to these Chinese young people in deciding their own career paths. When a student told Parise that she was willing to do whatever job the state would order her to do, the Italian journalist appeared shocked, and he quickly asked, "Non ha una preferenza? Insegnamento, traduzioni, interprete ...." The student replied, "Farò quello che il partito riterrà più utile per il mio paese e lo farò come se l'avessi scelto io. Per me non ha importanza il lavoro, quanto il fine di questo lavoro. Il fine di ogni lavoro deve essere il trionfo dell'idea marxista nel mondo" (Parise 1010). Her optimistic confidence in the state and enthusiasm for the Marxist cause could be sincere; however, her response still reveals the problematic reality that all the Chinese youngsters had to confront until 1985: under the planned economy system, all graduates were assigned jobs by a central government placement agency. With no freedom of choice, many graduates were bound to be disappointed with their work if it had little relevance to their hopes and aspirations.

In a word, both aspects of this meeting with Chinese university students that Parise found impressive were indications of the restrictiveness and oppression that the educational

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<sup>31</sup> See Kenneth Rubin, Sheryl Hemphill, Xinyin Chen, and Paul Hasting's "A cross-cultural study of behavioral inhibition in toddlers: East-West-North-South."

and political authorities had put on the Chinese youth before the Red Guard campaign. The historical context may also explain why these Chinese youngsters, as Parise depicts them, showed no hint of the spontaneity that the Italian visitors of the 1950s had highlighted. The Chinese youths seem to have lost their spontaneity and instead tend to be submissive.

During Parise's visit to China, the Cultural Revolution had already been initiated, but it had not yet spread into a mass nationwide movement. In summer 1966, Mao Zedong called upon China's young people to rise up against the transgressors (so-called "reactionaries and revisionists") among the communist cadres of all levels, and to sweep away all forces of evil (literally translated as "cow ghosts and snake spirits"). Having announced itself as a war against bureaucratic privilege and oppression, the movement won massive popular support, especially from the university and secondary school students. About two months after Parise left China, in early August 1966, young students wearing armbands bearing the characters for "Red Guard" appeared on the streets of Beijing. With the encouragement of Maoist leaders in the capital, Red Guard groups were organized in other parts of China within a few weeks. During the autumn of 1966, millions of rebellious youth flocked to Beijing to receive the personal blessing of Mao, who was considered the supreme commander of the Red Guards. In those years, when personal and career paths all seemed clearly prescribed, the Cultural Revolution offered an unprecedented opportunity for Chinese teenagers to map out new social spaces where their youthful identities and autonomy could be freely presented and fully expressed. Encouraged by Mao's famous slogan "to rebel is justified," the youthful rebels set out to attack all of the existing party apparatus. The rebellion soon extended to all forms of authority, including parents, teachers, doctors, scientists, artists, and intellectuals of every kind. Regardless of the CPC central authorities' efforts to harness the Red Guards' vicious attacks by the end of 1967, the upheaval continued, and even resulted in armed conflicts between different branches of the Red Guards. When Moravia arrived in China in

mid-1968, all the schools and universities had been closed for almost a year, and the Red Guards' frenzied attacks against the social authorities, Party apparatus, and the "Four olds (the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits)" were sweeping the entire country.

During his interactions with some Red Guards, Moravia realized that the youth campaign was primarily based on the deified presence of Mao and the rebellious energies of the youngsters who believed themselves to be acting "per Mao contro tutti" (128). Unlike some people in the West and the Soviet Union, Moravia did not consider the Red Guards to be "teppisti," but rather regarded them as "*boy-scouts politici, fanciulli in crociata*" (130).

In his travel notes, Moravia repeatedly characterizes the Red Guards as just a group of children who are naïve, ignorant, and innocent, but at the same time fanatic and aggressive: "Sono bambini per la freschezza, per l'ignoranza, per l'ingenuità, per l'aggressività; ma soprattutto sono bambini per la qualità candidamente religiosa della loro credenza" (128). "Le guardie rosse hanno la totale ignoranza, la totale fiducia in Mao, la totale religiosità che domani potrebbe portarli, innocenti e fanatici, alla guerra in qualche Nord Vietnam o Nord Corea. Bambini, ripeto; e dei bambini hanno pure la povertà luminosa, castità ignara" (129). Although Moravia witnessed some fierce movements of the Red Guards, he still believed that violence could not reflect the true nature of Chinese youth. According to Moravia, the emphasis on peace and harmony in the traditional Chinese culture has become second nature to the Chinese people, and it functions to restrict their violent impulses:

La cultura, in altri termini, è così antica in Cina da essere diventata una seconda natura. Anche nei momenti di massima violenza privata o pubblica i cinesi stentano a ritrovare la violenza primitiva della natura originaria sotto la seconda natura che hanno acquisito attraverso la cultura. (139)

Moravia also believes that, unlike their violent western peers, the Chinese children are both civil and educated, and are being raised in a Confucian culture where respect, intelligence, and order are valued:

l'occidentale nasce violento e ci mette la vita intera ad imparare ad essere colto e

civile; invece il cinese nasce colto e civile e deve imparare ad essere violento. ... Il bambino cinese, in passato, era iniziato prestissimo ai riti del rispetto verso i superiori (genitori, dirigenti, imperatore) nonché alle massime della saggezza confuciana che, appunto, era all'origine di quei riti; mentre il bambino occidentale giocava e tuttora gioca prima di tutto al soldato; per accostarsi poi molto più tardi (e quasi sempre di malavoglia) ai libri. (139, 141)

For this reason, Moravia considers violence to be against the nature of the Chinese young people, something that the Red Guards have to force themselves to acquire in order to carry out their violent revolution. For Moravia, the cultural difference “spiega il carattere spontaneo muscolare, sanguigno, brutale della violenza dell'occidentale; e quello invece volontaristico, nervoso, mentale, isterico della violenza cinese” (139-140).

As Moravia perceives the Chinese as a people that have been born to be peaceful, the violence of the Red Guards thus reflects the Chinese youngsters' self-alienation. Even though Moravia does not directly comment on the undesirable transformation of the Chinese youth or accuse the Chinese leaders of being responsible for it, he expounds Mao's leading role in the youth movement and predicts the tragic ending of the Red Guard campaign by comparing it to the Children's Crusade in medieval Europe. Moravia makes it clear that the young Red Guards are the chosen instruments to implement the directives and instructions issued by Mao: “Vale a dire che Mao, per scatenare la Rivoluzione Culturale, si è rivolto alla parte più inesperta, meno dotata di senso critico, più violenta, più portata a negare, a distruggere e più capace di entusiasmi della popolazione cinese” (99-100). Then, the Italian writer intentionally compares the Red Guard campaign with the disastrous events of juvenile crusaders that are said to have taken place in the thirteenth century:

Ma a me [le guardie rosse] fanno venire in mente un ricordo storico: quello della quinta crociata, la cosiddetta crociata dei fanciulli. Nel 1207, Stefano, un pastorello dodicenne fanatico, munito di una lettera che diceva essergli stata inviata da Cristo, riuscì a tirarsi dietro da tutta Europa migliaia di ragazzi e ragazze affermando che una volta giunti al mare, questo si sarebbe aperto, come già il Mar Rosso davanti agli ebrei, e loro avrebbero potuto camminare all'asciutto fino a Gerusalemme e liberarla. Ma giunti a Marsiglia, il mare non si aprì; si aprirono invece le stive di alcune navi di loschi mercanti, i quali, invece di portare i ragazzi in Terrasanta, li portarono ad Algeri e li vendettero tutti quanti come schiavi. (Moravia 129)

Based on Moravia's narrative, thousands of children and teens, fired up by religious fanaticism, followed a French boy to Marseille in the belief that the sea would part on their arrival and allow them to march to Jerusalem and liberate the sacred place. The miracle did not happen, however, and many of these youngsters ended up being sold into slavery by cruel merchants. Although the facts of the actual historical event of this children's crusade have long been disputed, Moravia uses his version as a metaphor to illustrate the essential characteristics of the youth rebellion in Maoist China and as an allegory to convey his worries about the potentially dire consequences of the Red Guard campaign. For Moravia, the Red Guard rebellion is not more than a manifestation of fanaticism, of the young generation's uncritical zeal and obsessive enthusiasm for the deified Mao and his thoughts. Moravia is worried that these young people might be sent to a horrible end only to benefit some political schemers' factional purposes. What happened from the second half of 1967 to the end of 1968 seems to have confirmed Moravia's expectations. After reaching the predetermined goal of purging some Party officials, the CPC central committee decided to put an end to the youth rebellion, which was turning into an increasingly chaotic and anarchist movement. The army was sent to disband radical student and worker organizations in the provinces, where the Party had ceased to function as a national organization. Many young activists were arrested and imprisoned, including Kuai Dafu, the famous leader of Red Guards at the Qinghua University (Tsinghua University). However, Moravia would not learn about these events until his next trip to China in the 1980s. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Moravia kept his thoughts to himself, and he bade farewell to "le guardie rosse ci salutano agitando per aria il libretto rosso delle citazioni di Mao" (132).

Antonioni also considers the Chinese youths to be an important theme. The Italian film master is aware that "China is a country of the young. Half of its population is less than 20."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Antonioni's Chung Kuo, Part Two. (01:06:59-01:07:04)

When Antonioni shot *Chung Kuo* in 1972, the youth rebellious campaigns in China had ended for four years. Several Red Guard leaders, who refused to follow the Party's guideline to restore order at the end of 1968, were arrested and sent to prison or work camps in remote rural regions. Although the audience can still find some Chinese young people wearing armbands of Red Guards in *Chung Kuo*, it is no longer possible to find traits of violence or eagerness to rebel among these youths. By contrast, based on the representations in *Chung Kuo*, the most significant characteristics of the Chinese children and teens in 1972 are their obedience and sense of discipline. Following Antonioni's camera, we can see Chinese teens marching from their school to work in local agricultural communes, students in elementary school quickly reacting to the commands from their teacher and gathering in a military formation, children in kindergarten sitting quietly in a circle when watching their peers' dance and singing performances. As Antonioni concludes, "[the Chinese youths] are quiet, obedient, and not at all capricious."<sup>33</sup>

Antonioni attributes the characteristics of the Chinese youths to the politicized education system in Maoist China. He reveals that all Chinese schools, including kindergartens, were supervised by local revolutionary committees. According to Antonioni, "Starting from childhood, [the Chinese youths] are prepared for the future life in a collective society;"<sup>34</sup> and "the basis for education is the thoughts and sayings by Mao, his language, examples of his gestures."<sup>35</sup> He also points out, "almost all songs [that] they [Chinese youths] are singing have political connotations."<sup>36</sup> In other words, the Chinese education system was shaping a new generation according to the communist ideology, fostering their collectivism, obedience,

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<sup>33</sup> See Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, Part Two. (01:07:10-01:07:13)

<sup>34</sup> See Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, Part One. (00:21:02-00:21:05)

<sup>35</sup> See Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, Part Two. (01:11:57-01:12:02)

<sup>36</sup> See Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, Part One. (00:21:06-00:21:11)

class consciousness, sense of discipline, as well as loyalty to Mao and the CPC. The system seems to succeed in making Chinese children internalize the promoted values. Antonioni's camera even captures a boy in kindergarten voluntarily tidying the stage properties after his performance.

In short, the Chinese youths shown in *Chung Kuo* are generally disciplined and obedient. They provides the audience with an impression different from the violent Red Guard rebels depicted by Moravia, and the joyful and spontaneous youngsters portrayed by Italian visitors in the 1950s. Although their obedience and emotional restraint may echo some descriptions made by Parise in the mid-1960s, most of the Chinese youths captured in *Chung Kuo* are not shy, except those living in remote mountain villages.

To sum up, from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the Chinese youths seem to have lost their fun, warmth, and childhood spontaneity. Their characteristic traits changed dramatically according to the Party's varying guidelines in different eras. When there is call for revolution, they could become fanatic and violent rebels; when there is need for social and political stability, they could turn into disciplined and obedient followers. In the years when individuality was denounced and strictly oppressed, the Chinese youths acted as conformists uncritically following the rules of the Maoist authorities.

### **Useless Intellectuals**

When traveling in China during the 1950s, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte were favorably impressed by the active cooperation between the state and the Chinese intellectuals. From 1949 to 1957, the CPC had shown flexibility toward the intellectuals, relying on their services to complete the social and economic reconstruction. The successful implementation of the First-five-year plan greatly enhanced the state–intellectual relationship. Delivered in January 1956 at a meeting of the CPC central committee, Premier Zhou Enlai's speech, "Report on the Question of Intellectuals," recognized the intellectuals' great contributions to

the socialist construction. Zhou also stressed in his report the necessity of continuing to increase the number of progressive intellectuals. He believed that, in order to lead China into becoming a modern, industrialized state, the Party needed to recruit more intellectuals, first by raising the existing intellectuals' political consciousness, and then by educating and training more people who could join the ranks of the intellectuals.<sup>37</sup> Zhou's speech pioneered a number of policies and reforms in favor of the intellectuals, convincing them that their goals and ambitions in no way conflicted with the CPC's communist cause. With Fortini and Malaparte having visited China during the honeymoon of CPC authorities and Chinese intellectuals, it is not surprising that they formed a good impression about the interactions between the well-integrated intellectuals and their caring administrators.

However, the situation changed dramatically due to the "Hundred Flowers Campaign" in 1957. Despite the damaging influences of Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" on the global socialist movements, Mao still felt confident enough to launch the "Hundred Flowers Campaign," a mass campaign encouraging the intellectuals of different and competing ideologies to openly discuss political issues and directly criticize the bureaucratic practices of Party cadres. From March to July 1957, the campaign seemed to veer out of control, as criticism shifted toward the legitimacy of the CPC and the ideology that it upheld. In reaction against the attacks, Mao halted the "Hundred Flowers Campaign" in late 1957 and initiated the "Anti-Rightist Movement" to purge the intellectuals who appeared to favor capitalism or Western civilization over collectivization. The "Anti-rightist Movement" resulted in the persecution of thousands of intellectuals labeled "rightists," interrupted the country's liberalization trend, and reinforced the role of communist orthodoxy in public expression.

Moravia was very knowledgeable of the political campaigns launched against Chinese intellectuals in late 1950s and early 1960s. In his travel notes, Moravia lists some of the most

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<sup>37</sup> See Zhou Enlai's Report on the Question of Intellectuals, Delivered on January 14, 1956, at a Meeting Held Under the Auspices of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to Discuss the Question of Intellectuals.



famous Chinese intellectuals who had been persecuted since the “Hundred Flowers Campaign,” considering these incidents to be predecessors to the Cultural Revolution:

La politica dei cosiddetti “cento fiori” è stata smentita da altri fulmini, ovverosia scomuniche, caduti su alcuni “fiori” come i film *La vita di Wu Hsium* e *La destituzione di Hai Juei*; e le teorie artistiche di Hu Feng: scrivere la verità; di Tsint Ciao-yang: la larga via del realismo; di Ciao Tsiuan-lin: l’approfondimento del realismo; ancora di Ciao Tsiuan-lin: i personaggi indecisi; di Ceu Ku-ceng: la sintesi dello spirito dell’epoca; di Hsia Yen: l’opposizione al ruolo decisivo del soggetto; e così via. Altro che cento fiori. Tutto il mazzo veniva sterminato e solo rimaneva, grande, immenso, invadente, esclusivo, il fiore di Mao Tze-tung. Contro quei “fiori” e altri boccioli dello stesso genere si sono scatenate le prime avvisaglie della Rivoluzione Culturale. Insomma i nemici della Rivoluzione o se si preferisce le vittime, vanno ricercati tra i quadri, ossia tra gli uomini di cultura. (118-119)

As Moravia observes, a number of mass campaigns of criticisms against intellectuals were launched after 1957 to suppress divergent thoughts and their expressions, in an effort to firmly reestablish Mao’s line as the orthodoxy.

Among the incidents that Moravia mentions, the one involving *La destituzione di Hai Juei* (*Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*) is considered to be the immediate trigger of the Cultural Revolution. Staged in 1961, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* is a theater play in which Hai Rui, an honest official of the Ming Dynasty, is dismissed from office after criticizing the Emperor for tolerating the corruption in the imperial government. At the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the play was interpreted by some literary critics who were associated with the CPC authorities as an allegory for the conflict between Peng Dehuai and Mao Zedong.<sup>38</sup> According to the critics’ interpretation, Hai Rui was metaphorically equated with Peng, while the unreasonable and unapproachable Ming emperor represented Mao. The play was branded as a counter-revolutionary conspiracy to attack Mao. The author of the play, Wu Han, a well-known historian and vice-mayor of Beijing, was removed from his position and imprisoned.

As one of the first intellectuals persecuted at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Wu Han inevitably drew attention from Parise, who was in Beijing while this vice-mayor was

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<sup>38</sup> In 1959, Peng Dehuai, one of the CPC’s most senior leaders, criticized Mao for the disastrous Great Leap Forward at the expense of his career.

jailed. After gathering information from different sources, Parise expressed his disapproval of the Chinese authorities' poor treatment of the intellectuals in a chapter entitled "Inutilità degli Intellettuali (The Intellectuals' Uselessness)." The chapter was largely based on Parise's discussions with various Chinese people about the issue. The extensive use of direct quotation in the chapter reflects Parise's attitude toward the Wu Han case and the Chinese people's reactions to the case. Parise, for his part, appears to have believed that the whole case of Wu Han was so unreasonable and ridiculous that all his Italian readers should have no difficulty understanding its absurdity merely by reading the exact words used in the interviews. For Parise, any commentary from the author would be superfluous.

To demonstrate how the major character in Wu Han's play has been distorted, politicized, and over-interpreted, Parise quotes the words of a female student from Beijing University:

[Hai Rui] aveva perduto tutto, cioè il potere, perché era stato licenziato, ma gli restava però il coraggio di lottare ancora per le sue idee. Cioè per le idee del revisionismo e dell'opportunismo di destra. Cioè contro la linea generale del partito, contro la linea ideologica e politica stabilita dal nostro presidente Mao Tse-tung. (109)

In addition to this, Parise also reveals the Maoist authorities' intense politicization of arts and literature by quoting the discourse of a representative of Chinese Writers Association (CWA):

[Parise (P):] "Da un punto di vista artistico, letterario, l'opera di Wu-Han è bella o no?"

[Representative (R):] "No, perché l'arte è legata al contenuto. Il contenuto di Hai-Ri è pessimo."

...

[P:] "E i letterati di mestiere, cioè voi, se non sbaglio, che cosa fanno?"

[R:] "Andiamo nei campi e nelle fabbriche a imparare a scrivere dai contadini e dagli operai. Se si vuol scrivere per le masse bisogna stare tra le masse. ..."

[P:] "Cioè un'arte indifferenziata, un'arte che non è più arte. Un prodotto in serie che va bene per tutti. ... Anche da voi l'arte è un prodotto in serie."

[R:] "È vero, ma è innanzi tutto un prodotto ideologico, marxista, di una ideologia al servizio delle masse. In Occidente l'arte è una merce non ideologica, al servizio del capitale. ..."

...

[P:] "Vorrei il suo parere personale: crede che Wu-Han e tutti quelli che chiamate opportunisti di destra abbiano torto?"

[R:] “Hanno torto marcio e le assicuro che quanto le dico è assolutamente quello che penso. Per due ragioni fondamentali. Primo, se uno sta costruendo un grattacielo non gli si va a dire: guarda che casca. Perché chi lo dice diventa subito antipatico. Secondo, il popolo deve veramente essere convinto che il grattacielo che sta costruendo è il più grande, il più bello e il più giusto grattacielo del mondo. Perché se non è convinto di questo non lo costruirà mai. O, se lo costruisce senza esserne convinto, non gli importerà poi nulla che caschi.” (113-114)

As a coordinator of the Chinese government, the CWA served to exercise political and artistic control of the Chinese writers' literary activities and to guarantee that the CPC's literary norms were adhered to. In this sense, Parise uses the words of the CWA representative to reflect the CPC's policies regarding the intellectuals. In the first place, the Chinese intellectuals' literary and artistic works were highly politicized. The works were not evaluated on the basis of their artistic value, but only judged in terms of their political functions in promoting the government's ideology. As a result, after being marked as a counter-revolutionary work, Wu Han's theater play was not considered by Chinese authorities as one with any artistic value. In the second place, socialist realism became the only style of art that was endorsed by the Chinese authorities. In those years, the only acceptable mode of literary and artistic creation was to make direct connections with the working class and glorify their daily life and work. The Chinese authorities at the time demanded the intellectuals' close adherence to the CPC's doctrine, leaving no room for independent thinking, political contention, or free artistic expression. By using direct quotations, Parise presents the politicization of China as being so pervasive that the CWA representative accepted it as a social norm and did not hesitate to admit that Chinese intellectuals had the political task to convince the public of the advantages of the communist cause.

Although Parise does not explicate his own definition of “intellectual” in his *Cara Cina*, his choice of the phrase “Inutilità degli Intellettuali (The Intellectuals' Uselessness)” for the title of the chapter and his devotion of the chapter to Wu Han demonstrate the Italian

journalist's strong dissatisfaction with the conditions of Chinese intellectuals living under strict control of the authorities. The title implies that, for Parise, the autonomy of intellectuals is essential for intellectuals to be useful and to perform their social duties. The "useful" intellectuals, in the mind of Parise, are probably free in their intellectual and artistic pursuits, and in their choice and appreciation. The activities of the "useful" intellectuals should not be predetermined by political interference or bureaucratic supervision. Parise is evidently frustrated and even angry at the Chinese authorities' policies that undermined the autonomy of intellectuals. However, what makes him more disappointed is the fact that some Chinese intellectuals have given up their duties of social criticism and adapted to the officially assigned roles to propagate the Party's doctrine. Once again, Parise expresses his frustration over such submissive self-adaptation by using direct quotation from his conversation with a Chinese professor of French Literature:

Al più anziano insegnante di francese chiedo che cosa pensa di Proust. Risponde:  
"Le sembra uno scrittore per il popolo?"  
"Sartre, Camus?"  
"Esistenzialisti, individualisti, borghesi."  
"Robbe-Grillet?"  
"Rivoluzioni letterarie per capitalisti." (98)

Moravia had very similar experience during a discussion with a Chinese intellectual about some Western or Russian writers (115-116). In both cases, the Chinese intellectuals being interviewed have followed the CPC's guidelines to politicize the foreign writers, mechanically simplifying the writers into ideological icons.

The Chinese intellectuals' adaptation and self-internalization of the CPC's doctrines, or more precisely, of Mao's thoughts, is also manifested vividly in Moravia's depictions of his debate with a Chinese writer. During his journey through China, Moravia made an appointment to meet with a Chinese writer. To his surprise, three interpreters showed up to assist and monitor the meeting. Even more surprising is that the three interpreters' presence later turned out to be unnecessary because Moravia and the Chinese writer communicated in

the same language, the language of Mao:

Lo scrittore ha in mano il libro rosso delle citazioni di Mao. Come, del resto, ce l'ho io e ce l'hanno i tre interpreti. Lo sfoglia, l'apre, ci dice la pagina che tosto andiamo a cercare, quindi legge ad alta voce: "Tutte le conoscenze autentiche derivano da esperienze immediate."

Capisco che debbo rispondere nello stesso modo: con Mao. Senza esitare apro anch'io il libro di Mao, annunzio il numero della pagina, e, appena loro l'hanno trovato, leggo con violento tono didascalico: "La causa fondamentale dello sviluppo delle cose e dei fenomeni non è esterna ma interna, si trova nelle contraddizioni interne delle cose e dei fenomeni."

Lo scrittore non è tanto contento. Sorride ma i suoi occhi scintillano dietro le lenti in maniera minacciosa. Riapre il libro, annunzia la pagina, legge: "Noi neghiamo l'esistenza non solo di un criterio politico astratto e immutabile ma anche di un criterio artistico astratto e immutabile: ogni classe in ogni società di classi possiede un criterio suo così politico come artistico. E qualsiasi classe in qualsiasi società di classi mette il criterio politico al disopra di quello artistico."

Punto nel vivo, sfoglio il libro, dico la pagina, leggo: "Le opere che mancano di valore artistico, anche se progressive, restano inefficaci dal punto di vista politico."

Sorridendo con fiele, lo scrittore consulta il libro di Mao, proclama: "La nostra letteratura e la nostra arte debbono servire alle grandi masse del popolo e prima di tutto agli operai, ai contadini e ai soldati."

Ribatto, previa rapida ricerca nel libro: "Sarebbe a nostro avviso pregiudizievole per lo sviluppo dell'arte e della scienza ricorrere alle misure amministrative per imporre un certo stile e una certa scuola e proibire un certo altro stile e una certa altra scuola."

Rapido, sorridente e rabbioso, mi controbatte leggendo: "La cultura rivoluzionaria è per le masse un'arma potente della rivoluzione. Prima della rivoluzione, le prepara ideologicamente; durante la rivoluzione costituisce un importante e indispensabile settore del fronte generale della rivoluzione."

Dolcemente, soavemente, rispondo a mia volta dal libro: "Il vero e il falso nell'arte e nella scienza è una questione che deve essere risolta dalla libera discussione negli ambienti artistici e scientifici, dalla pratica dell'arte e della scienza, e non con metodi spicci."

Lo scrittore comprende che io desidero finirlo con questo pedantesco, medievale duello a base di citazioni di Mao; e tutto ad un tratto tace, serio e come in attesa. (Moravia 113-114)

The absurdity of this so-called "pedantesco, medievale duello (pedantic medieval duel)" lies in the debate's form and content.

In terms of its form, the debate was conducted under an unspoken rule that both sides had to argue by reading aloud paragraphs from *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (commonly known as the "little red book"). Throughout the debate, neither Moravia nor the Chinese writer used his own words to address issues or make comments. However, even

though both sides rigidly obeyed the rule of only quoting Mao, each man probably had his own reasons for doing so. On one hand, the Chinese writer appears to support the CPC's policies on literary and artistic creation and seems to believe that only Mao's words can expound on the authorities' theories and practices. His excessive use of Mao's quotations reflects his conformity to the Chairman and the Party's dominant ideology. With unquestioning conformity, the Chinese writer has even given up the right to formulate sentences, relying completely on Mao's expressions. On the other hand, Moravia's compliance with the rule is likely a deliberate imitation, for comic effect, of his Chinese opponent's bizarre behavior. Moravia's depictions of the debate's solemn procedure only serve to make the event look more absurd and ridiculous to his readers.

With regard to the debate's content, the fact that Mao's words are used to support the two opposing standpoints of Moravia and the Chinese writer reveals the ambiguity in the Chairman's teachings. The Chinese writer uses Mao's quotations to explain the Party's doctrine that literature and art are not independent creative domains; rather, they are political tools that must be put under Party control in order to raise the public's political consciousness and promote the revolutionary cause. At the same time, Moravia quotes Mao to address the necessity and importance of protecting the freedom of artistic expression and creativity. It is bizarre that such a book containing contradictions was viewed in China as the only and always correct guidelines for people's daily life and work. It is also striking that the Chinese writer had given up his independent and critical thinking in order to conform completely to the Party's official interpretation of Mao's words. As a result of his conformity, he does not realize the ambiguity of Mao's quotations as Moravia had, and he was not willing to admit the ambiguity even after Moravia had made it clear.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution Moravia acutely realizes that the movement is a war against the intellectuals (or the "uomini di cultura" as he called them), he expresses

his frustration at the Chinese intellectuals' conditions by commenting on the country's general cultural policy: "La Cina, dicono i cinesi, deve liberarsi dell'influenza sovietica. Ma prima di tutto, secondo me, dovrebbe liberarsi del realismo socialista, dell'arte di propaganda" (116). In the accounts of Parise and Moravia, the Chinese intellectuals are no longer integrated members working actively in the social construction, but a group of victims that were deprived of power by the country's repressive cultural policies.

### **The Masses in Danger of Degeneration**

After traveling through China in the 1950s, Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte associated the Chinese people's good qualities with the PRC's political system and praised the latter for bringing out its people's virtues. Years later, although Parise, Moravia and Antonioni also depicted the Chinese people in aggregate, speaking highly of the people's high moral standards, they all tended to deny the causal relationship between the CPC's administration and the Chinese people's manifestation of positive qualities.

Soon after Parise's arrival in China, he captures a scene that represents the love and kindness of the Chinese. When a teenager from the countryside was struggling to skate on the ice in a rink, a number of the other skaters came to help him and voluntarily teach him how to skate:

[Il ragazzo] muove qualche passo, cade ancora ed ecco dal centro della pista, uno, due, quattro, dieci pattinatori corrono ridendo verso di lui e lo sorreggono, gli insegnano i primissimi passi, lo trasportano a braccia perché impari. Lo guardo attentamente e vedo che sprizza felicità e amore verso i suoi maestri, verso i pattini che gli stringono i piedi nudi, verso gli spettatori che in quel momento, come in risposta all'ondata di amore semplice e vitale che spande dal ragazzo, applaudono tutti insieme. (Parise 20-21)

After witnessing many incidents like this one, Parise candidly admits that his interactions with the Chinese people move him, and he attributes the emotion to the Chinese people's "totale mancanza di volgarità (absolute lack of vulgarity)" (32, my translation).

Later in his travel notes, Parise summarizes the Chinese people's good qualities in one

word, “stile (style).” According to Parise, “lo stile” is the most appropriate translation of the Confucian term “Li.” Parise believes in the Confucian term “vuol dire diplomazia, *politesse*, buone maniere” and “significa, prima di ogni altra, Cina e cinesi” (220). After identifying the Chinese with the “stile” and “Li,” Parise sets out to explain the origin of this mental and moral quality of the people in China:

La civiltà, cioè quella somma di elementi culturali che via via modificano la struttura primitiva dell’uomo, arricchendola, e successivamente spesso depauperandola, ha raggiunto nel popolo cinese stadi così elevati che è difficile distinguere l’elemento culturale e storico da quello naturale e biologico. Insomma, visti così, per la durata di un viaggio, dalle distanze che si sono dette e valendosi dell’intuito, i cinesi sono un popolo che possiede *naturalmente* quella qualità che si può conquistare, e con grande spreco di energie, soltanto *storicamente*. Questa qualità è lo stile. (228)

By highlighting “naturalmente” and “storicamente” with italics, Parise calls readers’ attention to his comment that the Chinese people’s decency is not a new phenomenon born after the founding of the PRC, but rather a historical legacy handed down from their ancestors, one that has been transformed, during the transmission, from a cultural element into a biological characteristic. In other words, Parise intends to convince his audience that the admirable qualities of the Chinese people have little or nothing to do with the communist revolution in China. To draw an even more rigid line between the Chinese people’s “stile” and the Maoist authorities, Parise asserts that the good qualities of the Chinese have never been compatible with the country’s ruling power, from ancient times to the present:

Questi tratti e caratteristiche a pensarci bene non rispondono né alla astratta superbia della Città Proibita, né alla violenza ideologica dominante. Ma forse astratta superbia di ieri e violenza ideologica di oggi hanno in Cina molti più punti in comune di quanto storia, logica e dialettica possano prevedere, e ad essi questo popolo dall’aria così dolce è misteriosamente avvinto. (33)

It is obvious that, unlike Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte, Parise does not perceive the Chinese people’s manifestation of “stile” as an achievement of the CPC’s revolution and reforms. On the contrary, Parise equates the Maoist leaderships with the feudal emperors, considering them as oppressors who have made the Chinese people’s lives miserable. For



Parise, the CPC does not contribute to bringing out the Chinese people's good qualities, but rather has caused alienation among the people. He believes that those people associated with the Party have been changed by the system into bureaucrats who have lost their innate good natures in the transformation:

Lo stile in Cina non soltanto non è raro, ma è di tutto il popolo cinese. Perché dico popolo cinese? Dico popolo cinese per distinguere dalla massa dei burocrati di partito, che sono molti e in molti casi hanno perduto lo stile, cioè l'anima cinese. Come mai? Non sta a me chiarirlo ora, ma sarei tentato di attribuire la colpa non tanto all'ideologia, quanto all'amministrazione di questa ideologia che, come ogni amministrazione quando giunge ai massimi poteri, cioè alla dittatura, perde le caratteristiche dell'umanità (tra cui, massima, è ancora e sempre lo stile) e assume quelle dell'automatismo. (Parise 229)

At the end of his *Cara Cina*, Parise makes a comparison between the Europeans and the Chinese people:

Infine dirò che questo viaggio di continuo confronto tra noi italiani ed europei e il popolo cinese mi ha portato a concludere che i cinesi hanno urgente necessità di imparare da noi, Europa, due cose: l'analisi e la sintesi: cioè la libertà. E noi da loro altre due cose non meno importanti: lo stile della vita e l'aiuto reciproco: cioè l'amore. (234)

Although the author appears to be fair-minded when calling on Europeans and Chinese to learn from one another, the comparison still reveals Parise's binary world view. Parise summarizes the characteristics of the two peoples into two words: *liberty* for the Europeans and *love* for the Chinese. He asks the Chinese to learn from the Europeans' reason, analysis, and liberty, which were emphases of the Age of Enlightenment, the intellectual movement that had had a lasting impact on the West and set the foundations of Western modernization. These European characteristics are symbols of modernity and advanced civilization. On the other hand, the characteristics of the Chinese are summarized as love, style, and mutual aid. These features can easily remind people of the lost "Golden Age," the period of primordial peace and harmony in Greek mythology and legend. Earlier in *Cara Cina*, Parise himself also depicted the nature of the Chinese as a historical legacy passed down from ancient times. In this sense, the characteristics of the Chinese represent an idealized and nostalgic vision of the

simple and primitive society, and function as a reminder for the Europeans to retrieve the decency and bliss that they used to have. To sum up, the Europeans, with their reason and liberty, are the symbol of modernity, while the Chinese, as possessors of ancient good traits, resemble the fossils or historical monuments that have been preserved due to the society's backwardness and isolation.

In *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina*, Moravia also praises the morality and virtues of the Chinese, commenting on the antithesis between the kind, peaceful Chinese people and the CPC authorities' calls for violent revolution. Like Parise, Moravia believes that the Chinese people's good characteristics derive from their long cultural traditions, especially from the impacts of Confucianism and Daoism. Moravia quotes Confucian and Daoist teachings to show that both ancient Chinese philosophies focused on the harmony among self, nature, and society, and criticize violence as a disruption of the proper harmony. Additionally, Moravia agrees with Parise that the traditional Chinese culture has become a biological feature of the people in China, who were thus born to be educated, civilized, and peaceful: "La cultura, in altri termini, è così antica in Cina da essere diventata una seconda natura. ... l'occidentale nasce violento e ci mette la vita intera ad imparare ad essere colto e civile; invece il cinese nasce colto e civile e deve imparare ad essere violento" (139-140). To convince his readers, Moravia also compares the thoughts of Eastern and Western philosophers:

La citazione di Mao è lunga; quella di Confucio brevissima; ma il significato è pur sempre lo stesso: la violenza si insegna e si impara. L'uomo non nasce violento, l'uomo nasce colto e civile. ... L'occidentale Clausevitz, invece, consiglia di non sottrarre, con l'insegnamento ossia l'uso della ragione, la violenza alle forze emotive del soldato. Quest'ultimo [l'occidentale] nasce violento ed è bene che la sua violenza rimanga intatta, senza aggiunte o modificazioni mentali. (140-141)

However, Moravia claims that the peaceful nature of the Chinese was under challenge in the PRC, as Mao believed that violence was necessary for the achievement of a peaceful communist order. Mao's view was made clear in his well-known statements, such as "A

revolution is not a dinner party”<sup>39</sup> and “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”<sup>40</sup>

In response to Mao’s call for revolution, millions of Chinese people, especially the youth, had to violate their peaceful natures and learn to act violently. Moravia was not content with way the Chinese people were changing under pressure from the authorities, and he felt melancholy when witnessing the Chinese revolutionaries’ “volontaristico, nervoso, mentale, isterico” (140) violence.

Despite his uneasiness for the emergence of violence in China, Moravia still believes that the Chinese people are residents of a Utopia. Moravia’s understanding of Utopia is very different from that of Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte. For the Italian visitors who traveled to China in the 1950s, the country governed by the CPC was an ideal society for its achievements in social and political reforms, for its rapid construction and development, and for its success in motivating a large number of people to work hard for a high moral purpose and for the communist cause. Put simply, Maoist China was perceived as a Utopia in the 1950s due to its potential to develop rapidly into a strong and prosperous country without undergoing the conflicts and crisis caused by capitalism. By contrast, Moravia considers the PRC of the 1960s to be a Utopia precisely because of the country’s poverty:

La Cina, oggi, dà l’impressione di essere tutto un solo sterminato paese povero, di una decente, fiera ma anche spietata povertà. Miseria non sembra esservi, come c’era invece in passato; ma lo stile, il colore, il tono, la maniera di vivere, la visione del mondo della povertà sono dappertutto. Una povertà singolare, non soltanto contenta di se stessa ma anche dimostrativa e didascalica. Come a dire: “Ecco di che cosa ha bisogno l’uomo. Tutto il resto è superfluità, dunque lusso, dunque vile corruzione di tipo sovietico oppure occidentale.” (118)

In a mood of disgust with capitalism, consumerism, and the “ricchezza più disumana” (83) of Western developed countries, Moravia believes that the universal and uniform poverty of the Chinese is “la condizione normale dell’uomo” (81), as everyone is provided with the

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<sup>39</sup> See Mao Zedong’s “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” in Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. I, page 28.

<sup>40</sup> See Mao Zedong’s “Problems of War and Strategy” in Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. II, page 224.

necessary but not the superfluous. He claims that a Chinese “non è un consumatore; è un uomo che acquista un indumento necessario secondo una certa idea che egli si fa dell’uomo” (85). According to Moravia, the Chinese people “sono poveri, ... ma nessuno potrebbe mettere in dubbio che la loro umanità sia completa, cioè che le manchi qualche cosa che potrebbe essere ottenuto attraverso la ricchezza, cioè il superfluo” (80). Moravia also writes of his sense of relief at the sight of the poverty of China (79), because he assumes that the consumerist society in the West would dehumanize people while the common austerity and poverty among the Chinese would do the reverse.

Although Moravia elevates China to the status of a Utopia, he does not attribute the realization of the Utopia to the efforts of the Chinese people or to the leadership of the Maoist authorities. On the contrary, Moravia realizes that his idealized vision does not go well with the Chinese people and the CPC’s goals to eliminate poverty and encourage economic growth. Therefore, he has to admit the potential ephemerality of the Chinese Utopia due to the antithesis between the perceived ideal conditions in China and the Maoist government’s attempts to change the conditions:

In altri termini la Cina oggi è per me un’utopia realizzata, forse involontariamente, forse casualmente, non importa. È realizzata e io la prendo come esempio per il mio ragionamento. Poi, forse, la Cina diventerà un paese come tutti gli altri, inclusi i paesi comunisti di osservanza sovietica, nei quali ci sono i poveri perché ci sono i ricchi e viceversa. Ma per ora, oggi, la Cina è un paese povero senza ricchi, cioè un paese nel quale povertà è sinonimo di normalità. (Moravia 81)

As Moravia states in the cited paragraph, the Chinese Utopia had been realized probably involuntarily and by chance, and the country might be degraded into a normal one just like all the others in the world when it achieved the economic advancement proposed by the Maoist government. In other words, for Moravia, neither the Chinese people nor the Maoist government is the designer and creator of the Utopia, but rather potential destroyers that would ruin the perfection of the Chinese society.

Antonioni also appreciates the kindness and friendliness of the ordinary Chinese people.

He believes that in China one can “witness the virtues of the long-forgotten times: decency, modesty, the spirit of self-restraint.”<sup>41</sup> Like Parise, Antonioni regards the good qualities of the Chinese as legacy from a lost “Golden Age” in human history. This explains why Antonioni was so eager to explore the remote mountain village in Henan. Since people’s lives in the village remained intact from the outside influences, Antonioni and his crew expected to capture the Chinese people’s most natural and authentic traits. Regardless of the hindering from the governor of the village, Antonioni was content with his findings. Through the visit, Antonioni “witnessed a gallery of astounded faces” in the village, but he “never noticed any expression of hostility.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, he realizes, “the pains and sentiments are nearly invisible in China. They are concealed behind propriety and restraint.”<sup>43</sup> These comments and their related visual representations conveys Antonioni’s belief that the positive characteristics of the Chinese people are mainly cultural legacy passed down from their ancestors. In other words, these omnipresent good qualities of the Chinese have little or nothing to do with the CPC’s socialist revolution and reforms.

In conclusion, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni all praise the virtues of the ordinary Chinese people in their works. However, unlike the Italian visitors in 1950s, the three Italian intellectuals discussed in this chapter do not associate the positive characteristics of the Chinese with the PRC’s reforms and administration. Additionally, according to Parise and Moravia, the CPC could potentially destroy the Chinese people’s excellent qualities in the future.

## **Section 2.3: Plight of Maoist China**

### **Material Progress as Sand Castle**

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<sup>41</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (01:03:34-01:03:40)

<sup>42</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part Two. (00:28:27-00:28:33)

<sup>43</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part Two. (00:19:29-00:19:32)

Maoist China's achievements in modernization are not appealing to Parise, Moravia, or Antonioni. However, each of these Italian visitors has distinct reasons for his lack of interest in China's material progress.

Parise appears to be very annoyed by the official tours to the Chinese factories because the authorities keep putting similar events on his agenda: "Oggi, come ieri, come l'altro ieri e come quasi ogni giorno in Cina, visita a una fabbrica e a una scuola" (155). It turns out that, in addition to the repetitiveness of the factory tours, the Italian journalist is also bored because the Chinese industries and constructions all seem backward to him. Parise's sense of superiority is manifested in his sarcastic comments on his unwilling acceptance of the arranged visits: "Poi si finisce per accettarla perché non è mai imposizione e violenza ma assomiglia piuttosto alla petulanza orgogliosa e ingenua di un bambino che vuol far vedere il castello di sabbia costruito sulla spiaggia. Perché non accontentarlo?" (136) Here Parise depicts his compromise as a condescending action to lull the naïve Chinese people into a false sense of happiness and satisfaction.

Although Moravia appears more understanding of the Chinese people's eagerness in showing their factories, he also has little interest in the industrial constructions in China. As Moravia explains, "per i comunisti le fabbriche hanno un significato morale e politico di progresso liberatorio e di rivoluzione industriale sull'abborrita civiltà contadina e artigiana; per me invece le fabbriche sono fabbriche e basta e sono tutte uguali, in Cina come in Europa" (124). However, unlike Parise, who seems to look down upon the backwardness of Chinese modernization, Moravia's indifference primarily consists in his idealized vision of poverty and his hatred for the dehumanized richness of Western society. According to Moravia, austerity and poverty are the normal conditions of human beings:

La povertà e la castità, a ben guardare, sono le due condizioni normali dell'uomo o per lo meno dovrebbero esserlo, oggi e in questo mondo. In quanto oggi e in questo mondo non vedo come l'uomo possa cessare di essere un produttore-consumatore se non attraverso la povertà e la castità. (91-92)

Unlike Western capitalist societies, which put people and objects on the same level (177), the culture of Maoist China, where “consumo e profitto sono stati il primo ridotto al puro necessario e il secondo abilito” (183) is considered by Moravia to be a Utopia, “un paese nel quale povertà è sinonimo di normalità” (81). In this sense, Moravia’s lack of enthusiasm over economic growth may reflect his genuine concern that the growth might eliminate the country’s poverty and thus destroy the foundation of the Utopia.

In the case of Antonioni, the master filmmaker admits candidly in his essay “China and the Chinese” that his documentary film does not concentrate on the achievements of Maoist China, but rather on the Chinese people who most clearly symbolize the changes that happened in the country after the liberation.

The film is entitled Chung Kuo, which means “China”. In reality I did not make a film about China, but about the Chinese. ... And I tried to look at man more than at his accomplishments or at landscape. Let me be clear on this: I think of China’s contemporary socio-political structure as a model, perhaps inimitable, worthy of the most attentive study. But the people are what struck me the most. (The Architecture 116)

To summarize, the material progress in Maoist China seems to have lost its appeal to the Italian visitors discussed in this chapter, who traveled to the country in the 1960s.

### **Political Religion**

For Parise and Moravia, who visited China in the mid-1960s, the superstructure of the host country was highly associated with politics. Under the slogan “Politics in Command,” all the aspects of Chinese life were subject to an excessive politicization. Both Parise and Moravia acutely realized that politics had been elevated to the status of a new religion in Maoist China.

Soon after his arrival in China, Parise claims that Marxism and Leninism have become a political theology in China, a subject of Chinese people’s religious practice:

Come vivono i cinesi? Immaginiamo un seminario, grande come la Cina, dove si studia e si pratica il marxismo-leninismo non come scienza bensì come teologia politica e dove seicentocinquanta milioni di seminaristi sono organizzati e suddivisi

secondo una gerarchia che è, grosso modo, quella di una qualunque comunità religiosa. (37)

When Moravia traveled to China in the summer of 1967, the most important theme of Chinese politics was unquestionably the Cultural Revolution that had recently been launched by Mao. After witnessing the parades of the Red Guards, Moravia found that these young rebels' dances and oaths of loyalty to Mao were "[simili] ai canti rustici, alle danze paesane, alle musiche campestri di certe feste religiose in Italia e altrove" (96), while the innumerable propaganda posters also had "uno stile religioso, di una religiosità contadine e tradizionale" (99). According to Moravia, the youthful Red Guards were responding to Mao's call for Cultural Revolution with their own religious rituals. Additionally, Moravia claims that the "Little Red Book" (*Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*) was also transformed into a religious icon, which the members of the Chinese public had to always carry with them. To convince the audience of the great religious significance of the "Little Red Book," Moravia draws a parallel between the quotations of Mao and Don Abbondio's breviario depicted in *Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*):

[Il piccolo libro rosso delle citazioni di Mao] è un surrogato della coscienza e al tempo stesso il perno di un sistema di comportamenti rituali. ... È un brano molto noto dei *Promessi Sposi* e vi si parla di Don Abbondio e del libro che l'accompagna nella vita cioè il suo breviario. ... l'intellettuale si limita a leggere un libro; ma l'uomo di fede se lo porta dietro.

E infatti ecco i più importanti tra i gesti che si possono fare con un libro e che da sei mesi hanno trasformato i cinesi in tanti scolari dediti all'*ipse dixit*: si porta in giro il libro per mostrare che lo si ha e allora abbiamo la segnalazione, magari l'ostentazione. (101)

Moreover, Moravia points out the similarity between the Chinese people's pursuit of uniformity and the monasticism in Western religions, saying "per trovare qualcosa di simile all'uniformità cinese in Europa, bisogna pensare agli ordini monastici" (118). After identifying the superstructure of Maoist China with a new political religion, both Parise and Moravia express their unfavorable opinions about the religionization of politics. According to their accounts, the CPC's cultural policies should be held responsible for the creation and



development of the political religion in China.

The CPC's policies on culture, literature, and arts were primarily based on Mao's thoughts. As early as the 1940s, Mao had clearly expressed his view that "all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics."<sup>44</sup> Hence, for Mao, "Revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people."<sup>45</sup> After the seizure of political power in 1949 and the subsequent control of the economy in the 1950s, Mao became increasingly worried that some of the communist cadres "who were not conquered by enemies with guns and were worthy of the name of heroes for standing up to these enemies, but who cannot withstand sugar-coated bullets; they will be defeated by sugar-coated bullets. We must guard against such a situation."<sup>46</sup> Mao's prescription was to eliminate the attractive yet corrupting culture from China's feudal past or from foreign bourgeois countries.

Moravia seems to correctly understand the intentions behind Mao's war against the country's own past and the cultural influences from western countries:

Per Mao, le classi si forgiavano freddamente, consapevolmente, cinicamente l'arma della cultura al fine di difendere i loro interessi. ... E' ovvio l'effetto di una tale teoria: condanna in blocco dell'arte e del pensiero del passato, straniera e cinese, volontarismo e politicizzazione nella cultura maoista. ... Se la cultura è un'arma di classe cioè un'arma per fare il male o il bene, la cultura occidentale o che sembri occidentale va colpita senza pietà e in tutti i suoi aspetti. (119-120)

Moravia also reviews Mao's abrupt volte-face during the Hundred Flowers period and the purge of critics during the subsequent Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957. For Moravia, these changes mark the Chairman's own autocratic transformation and lead to the more radical

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<sup>44</sup> See Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art" in Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. III, page 86.

<sup>45</sup> See Mao Zedong's "On New Democracy" in Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. II, page 382.

<sup>46</sup> See Mao Zedong's "Report to the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China" in Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. IV, page 374.

movements in the Cultural Revolution. As Moravia points out, “Tutto il mazzo veniva sterminato e solo rimaneva, grande, immenso, invadente, esclusivo, il fiore di Mao Tze-tung. Contro quei ‘fiori’ e altri boccioli dello stesso genere si sono scatenate le prime avvisaglie della Rivoluzione Culturale” (119). The Italian writer believes that what happened in China “tratta di una austerità totalitaria basata sull’idea molto semplice che la controrivoluzione può annidarsi dappertutto, anche in un tubetto di rosso per le labbra” (Moravia 120). Moravia expresses his disapproval of the Maoist cultural policies by comparing Mao to Girolamo Savonarola and Giovanni Calvino, two controversial figures in Western religion who destroyed cultural items perceived to be signs of heathenism. Moravia is afraid that Mao’s movement to eliminate non-communist cultures might be more damaging than those of his two European counterparts, for Savonarola and Calvino’s destruction of culture “si trattava pur sempre di piccole comunità, non di settecento milioni di individui” (Moravia 120). In making the comparisons, Moravia depicts Mao as a person comparable to Western religious activists, and he makes Mao’s Cultural Revolution equal to a religious purification.

In their travel notes, both Parise and Moravia also provide detailed depictions of the CPC’s two-fold propaganda strategy to control Chinese culture. On one hand, the Chinese authorities strove to remove anything that they considered to be signs of feudal or bourgeois influence; on the other hand, the government canonized Mao’s thoughts, reinforced the cult of Mao, and fostered a proletarian and revolutionary culture to fill up the cultural vacuum.

The first sign of the CPC’s cultural control was found in its book censorship. At least until 1957, Fortini still reported that it was easy to find western books and journals, as well as their Chinese translations, in Chinese bookstores and libraries. However, in the mid-1960s, the Chinese bookshops were full of works that supported the dominant communist ideology. The only foreign works remaining on shelves were those perceived to promote class struggle, which was an emphasis of the CPC in those years:

Al centro delle librerie le opere di Mao. Agli scaffali e sui banchi opere di divulgazione scientifica, biografie di eroi nazionali, opere di Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin e O Ci Min, romanzi nazionali, molti dei quali ricalcati sulle vite degli eroi dell'anno che sono l'equivalente delle nostre *stars*. A differenza delle nostre, queste *stars* cinesi sono tutti morti a furia di lavorare. Pochi i romanzi stranieri tradotti: *Guerra e pace*, *I miserabili* e qualche altro. Mi avvicino alla cassa dove una giovane donna paga un libro. Chiedo il titolo del libro: *Come apprendere bene il pensiero di Mao Tse-tung*. (Parise 69)

The book censorship also reached the libraries, leading to the removal of all the foreign books except those of left-wing or communist intellectuals. As Parise observes, “[alla biblioteca francese,] c'è realmente poco e, nel poco, un poco troppo di Elsa Triolet e di Aragon” (99).

The ideological purification was not something that Chinese authorities would consider to be embarrassing. On the contrary, it was seen as a great achievement that was worth mentioning repeatedly in propaganda. In an official visit to a Chinese engineer's home, the host proudly showed Moravia his book collection, which only consisted of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao's works (Moravia 126). No wonder, then, that Parise draws the conclusion that “i cinesi imparano a leggere e a scrivere per poi conoscere quasi esclusivamente le opere di Mao Tse-tung” (45).

In terms of eliminating the traditional culture, Parise and Moravia both notice the restrictions put on the visual and theatrical arts. The Chinese people's hatred for their own historical legacy was based on Mao's teaching that “in literature and art criticism there are two criteria, the political and the artistic, ... but all classes in all class societies invariably put the political criterion first and the artistic criterion second.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the ideological correctness of an art piece was the precondition for its artistic value. Therefore, Moravia's Chinese guide claimed that in Ming's tombs, “non c'è niente di bello,” as “il senso del bello in Cina oggi è stato sostituito dal senso del buono. Questa tomba non è bella perché non è buona” (Moravia 165). According to Moravia, this attitude explained the covering of ancient

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<sup>47</sup> See Mao Zedong's “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art” in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. III, page 88-90.

paintings in the Summer Palace. The same logic also applied to the Red Guard campaigns against the “Four Olds (the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits)” in 1967, “il vandalismo delle guardie rosse che rovinano i monumenti, bruciano i libri, distruggono insomma con furore tutto ciò che è rimasto della vecchia Cina” (Moravia 162).

Without interest in the Chinese monuments, Parise’s complaints about the extinction of traditional culture mainly consist in the monotonousness of the theatrical works in Maoist China. For Parise, the performances in Chinese theaters are so uniform that he can summarize all of them with a brief paragraph:

Con questa breve e schematica esposizione ho raccontato, senza pretenderlo, le trame di tutte le Opere di Pechino, di tutte le riviste, di tutti i drammi, di tutti i *musicals*, di tutti i film e potrei quasi dire di tutti gli spettacoli acrobatici che si danno in Cina dalle sette alle dieci di sera. Naturalmente cambiano ambiente e nome del villaggio, cambiano i personaggi, ma la storia e il sugo della storia, le scene, le truccature, i costumi, la musica, rimangono in sostanza gli stessi. (76)

What Parise watched in Beijing are the so-called “revolutionary operas,” products of radical theatrical reforms that were directed by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. These new operas are considered “revolutionary” because they tell stories from China’s recent revolutionary struggles against foreign and class enemies, and show Mao and his thoughts as playing a central role in the victory of Communist China. From Parise’s point of view, these revolutionary operas are “il falso di un dramma popolare concepito dalla genialità propagandistica di un gruppo di uomini politici e dunque inautentico,” for the reason that “da un lato si prova un sentimento di ribellione e di protesta contro la strumentalizzazione totale di mezzi espressivi liberi e individualissimi ...; dall’altro si ammira la resa politica, calcolata alla perfezione” (79). Parise finds these politicized theatrical works somehow similar to the commercials in the West, but even more annoying than their Western counterparts due to their uniform promotion of the communist ideology:

In parole povere questa persuasione dinamica è lo stesso della pubblicità in Occidente. ... Noia una, noia l’altra, con una differenza: che la pubblicità commerciale si differenzia dalla persuasione politica innanzitutto per la diversità del

prodotto (una è merce, l'altra è ideologia) e poi per la concorrenza. ... In Cina si reclamizza fundamentalmente una cosa sola, cioè il marxismo-leninismo e i suoi dirigenti ... Noi abbiamo dunque la soddisfazione e la libertà di scegliere un numero teoricamente infinito di oggetti, loro una sola ideologia. (76-77)

While these revolutionary operas became dominant during the mid-1960s, the traditional operas as well as most of the foreign plays and films were condemned as symbols of feudal or bourgeois cultures, and thus banned in China. In response to Parise's questions about the ban, his Chinese interpreter offered the official explanation:

[Le opere tradizionali] raccontava sempre le solite storie di amori tragici dell'imperatore, dei mandarini e delle concubine. Le masse ... dopo il lavoro non vogliono vedere per protagonisti di uno spettacolo, e dunque eroi, proprio i protagonisti della vecchia società che li sfruttava. ... I drammi e i film stranieri parlano solo di due cose: dell'amore e della paura di fare la guerra. Sono dunque immorali. ... Perché il popolo cinese non deve temere la guerra ma prepararsi alla guerra nel caso di una aggressione americana. Quanto alle storie di amore esse hanno perfino l'amore e non la costruzione socialista del Paese, né la rivoluzione mondiale contro il capitalismo. Inoltre i cinesi si vergognano a vedere queste cose. Sono dunque inutili e anche immorali. (Parise 80-81)

In connection to the book censorship and radical theatrical reforms, the Chinese people's everyday lives were also transformed into a battlefield where the communist puritanism fought against the feudal and bourgeois hedonism. Based on Parise and Moravia's accounts, there was only one bar and one restraint in Beijing. Moravia and his wife believed that these places were kept open to educate the foreign visitors, making them feel guilty for their pursuit of bourgeois pleasure (167). Additionally, the Chinese intellectuals and young students were frequently sent to work in the farms and factories in order to maintain their connection with the working class and avoid new class divisions (Parise 97-98). Moreover, the social atmosphere in China during the 1960s also turned out to be more conservative than the decade before. Upon his arrival at Beijing University in 1956, Fortini encountered a group of university students enjoying social dance in a yard. However, when Parise came to Beijing University ten years later and asked some students whether they went to dances sometimes, the Chinese youngsters had no idea what he meant by the word. Eventually, "a questa

domanda deve intervenire il professore perché, mi spiega, i ragazzi non sanno nemmeno cosa sia. Lo illustra prendendo una ragazza e mostrando l'atteggiamento del ballo occidentale. Tutti ridono" (Parise 102).

As Moravia concludes, the Maoist cultural policies of the 1960s secluded the country from the outside world. He depicts these cultural policies as "una specie di Grande Muraglia autarchica e nazionalista con la quale, fatto non nuovo nella sua storia, la Cina miri a rinchiudersi dentro le proprie frontiere culturali per un lunghissimo tempo, noncurante del resto del mondo, sufficiente a se stessa" (Moravia 120).

By eliminating the influences of traditional and foreign cultures, the Chinese authorities sought to glorify the person and the thoughts of Mao Zedong, making him the icon of proletarian and revolutionary culture. Although the Chairman had long enjoyed a high reputation as a great leader, the cult of Mao had never become so pervasive until the Chinese government launched a nationwide campaign in 1964 to turn the whole country into a "great school of Mao Zedong Thought." The Chinese people were advised to study Mao's writing, follow his teaching, and act according to his instructions. Billions of copies of the "Little Red Book," the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, were printed from 1964 to the end of the Cultural Revolution.

As part of his efforts to defend Mao, Moravia does not describe Mao as a deified figure when analyzing the issue of glorification of the Chairman and his thoughts. Instead, he claims that the Chinese people are not worshipping Mao but have faith in his thoughts. For the same reason, Moravia avoids explicitly equating the "little red book" with the Holy Bible, probably in the hope that his readers might not compare Mao to Jesus. Even so, the Italian writer makes it clear that he disapproves of the canonization of Mao's writings and thoughts. After his debate with the unnamed Chinese writer, in which they communicated by quoting Mao to one another, Moravia was certainly aware of the Little Red Book's pivotal role as a guide for

the Chinese people's ritual behaviors in their political religion. For Moravia, the canonization of the Little Red Book is a process of "confucianizing" Marxism:

Qui non si tratta di un'operazione intellettuale, bensì di un'operazione, in maniera generica, religiosa. ... Occorre sottolineare una volta di più il significato del consiglio di Lin Piao, di imparare a memoria il libro per uno studio e un'applicazione costanti. Infatti, proprio questo si è fatto per secoli con le massime di Confucio. ... Anche allora si intendeva che era più importante ricordare che capire o che comunque la capacità mnemonica era una forma di intelligenza. ... La memoria trattiene e conserva tutto quello che non può né deve essere soggetto a critica e dunque a cambiamento; ossia la memoria è un processo mentale che serve a conferire autorità, cioè imbalsamare qualche cosa che non si vuole che si corrompa. La confucianizzazione del maoismo sarà dunque soprattutto una trasformazione in autorità, per mezzo della memoria, di un'esperienza personale cioè dell'esperienza di Mao. (104)

Moravia believes that the Chinese authorities required the public to memorize the quotations so that the Maoist teachings would become a substitute for conscience, an internalized norm that could not be challenged. After reaching this conclusion, Moravia criticizes the trend of glorifying Mao and his thoughts in China: "Il modo con il quale in Cina, negli ultimi tempi si è ingigantito il culto della personalità e si è proceduto alla confucianizzazione, ossia trasformazione in autorità ortodossa del pensiero di Mao, non è molto rivoluzionario" (136).

Once again, Moravia does not point a finger to Mao, but almost makes it sound like an unknown third party should be blamed for the propagation of his thought.

However, from Parise's point of view, the whole persuasion process, or so-called "brain-washing" operation, is simply based on endless and coercive repetition:

Il "lavaggio del cervello" è una operazione semplicissima, che ha tutte le apparenze della cortesia e usa come strumento (di tortura) la ripetizione delle cose. Ho capito che non è difficile persuadere, convincere e perfino entusiasmare: basta ripetere cento, mille volte la stessa cosa e, automaticamente, si otterrà persuasione, convinzione, entusiasmo. Ma come per noi tutto questo è disperazione e quasi follia, per i cinesi è consuetudine. (230)

According to Parise's account, the propaganda in China is so simple and annoying that it could only work on the Chinese, and could never be used in a Western society. Parise's hasty generalization and detached position both manifest his self-perceived superiority over the

Chinese.

In addition to revealing the factors behind the rise of political religion in China in the mid-1960s, Parise and Moravia also capture some of the early signs of two undesirable consequences caused by the Party's cultural policies. Based on the accounts of the two Italian intellectuals, it is clear that the censorship against traditional and foreign culture, as well as the canonization of Mao and his thoughts, lead to overwhelming ignorance and fanaticism among the Chinese people. In many cases, the ignorance and fanaticism seem to go hand in hand: the ignorance was maintained by the single-minded zeal of fanaticism, while the fanaticism was reinforced by the obstinate ignorance of alternative views.

In *Cara Cina*, Parise offers a vivid depiction of the fanatics that he encountered on a meeting with Chinese teachers. The director of the school claimed that innocent people were being killed by the American troops who occupied European countries, and that the living conditions in the Soviet Union were very miserable. When Parise tried to correct the director's misconceptions of Europe and the Soviet Union, the Chinese man showed fanatical behaviors, which were so intense that they even affected the interpreter:

Lui insiste ripetendo interamente la frase di prima. Insisto anch'io. Lui ripete un'altra volta con voce alterata. A questo punto mi accorgo che impallidisce ed è preso da un forte tremito. I tratti del volto si affilano, si tendono, la bocca diventa un taglio sottile da cui esce una voce stridula e sempre più alta, i gesti esprimono violenza e col taglio della mano fende l'aria come con una spada. Infine si alza dalla sedia e le sue parole diventano urla. È terreo e cerca di dominare la balbuzie con gesti insieme tremanti e scattanti. ... È la prima volta nella mia vita che vedo in faccia il fanatismo politico: è ripugnante e pietoso al tempo stesso, ma fa paura. ... L'interprete traduce fedelmente, così fedelmente che anche lui diventa pallido, tremante e urla e sibila. Capisco che stanno dandomi una lezione. (Parise 162-163)

However, what scared Parise the most were not the gestures and words of the director and the interpreter, but rather the reactions of the other Chinese attendees at the meeting who “stanno seduti tranquilli, con un sorriso errante sulle labbra, e non sembrano affatto turbati” (Parise 162). The tranquility of these Chinese teachers in front of their director's epilepsy-like behaviors indicate that the manifestations of political fanaticism in public have become



widely accepted by the Chinese people. Struck by the absurd atmosphere at the meeting, Parise states, “nel guardarli mi sento violentemente e sprezzantemente escluso dal luogo dove sono e dalle persone vicine. Escluso non è la parola esatta. È più esatto dire cacciato via” (162-163). Fortunately, the director soon calmed down and acted as though nothing had happened. “Nessuno, nemmeno lui, s’è accorto che sul suo volto è passata invece la morte” (Parise 163). The fanaticism of these Chinese teachers and their director seems to derive from their lack of knowledge about the outside world. Even though only one of them knew the geographic position of Italy, they all seemed very confident about the issues of Italy and Europe when quoting the information from official media, and they seemed to firmly believe that they had obtained the truth.

While the people’s ignorance served to support the rise of fanaticism in China, the fanaticism also exacerbated the ignorance. Following the Marxist doctrine on social development, which predicted the ultimate triumph of socialism and Communism over capitalism, the Chinese authorities created a discursive Occidentalism that constructed an imaginary West to show the superiority of Marxism and explicate its teleology. The expression of resistance to capitalism usually proceeded with essentialist descriptions of Western Europe and North America whose people struggled in great misery because of the oppression of capitalism and the degenerate Western lifestyle. Such Occidentalism enabled the revival of Sinocentric imagination by presenting China as the heart of the proletarian world revolution. The strong trend of Sinocentrism resulted in the Chinese people’s lack of interest in foreign countries. As Moravia writes,

Mentre io dimostro curiosità per lui, per la Cina, per le cose della Cina, lui, dal canto suo, non ne manifesta alcuna per me, per l’Europa, per le cose dell’Europa. E mi dico che questo è ancora un tratto molto cinese. I cinesi, infatti, si credono e probabilmente sono autosufficienti. Mai un cinese mostrerà curiosità per le cose straniere; mai si informerà, chiederà, si interesserà. (114)

In his travel note, Moravia only records one inquiry about Italy. The question is from a Red

Guard who wondered, “Voi in Italia studiate e imparate a memoria il libro delle citazioni di Mao Tze-tung?” (132) Rather than show curiosity about the situations in Italy, the youngster more likely intended to make a deliberate display of the Little Red Book, the canonized work of their sacred leader. With the mass campaigns against the “Four Olds (the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits),” the Sinocentrism became exclusively based on the modern communist culture, rejecting influences from both foreign and traditional culture. The fanaticism in the society convinced the Chinese people, especially the young students, that “il passato distrutto sarà senza dubbio sostituito da un futuro altrettanto ricco di saggezza e di raffinatezza” (Moravia 162). As a result, the Chinese people, especially the youth, became more ignorant and narrow-minded.

To sum up, both Parise and Moravia reported that the CPC’s dominant ideology had been transformed into a quasi-religious belief in China. The political religion of Marxism and Maoism was promoted by the Party’s conservative cultural policies, which cut off the Chinese public’s contact with both traditional and foreign cultures. Parise and Moravia pointed out the perils of such tendency, as it had caused and continued to exacerbate the ignorance and fanaticism of the Chinese masses.

Although Antonioni repeatedly claims that his documentary movie focuses on the Chinese people instead of their political and social system, he also touches some of the issues previously mentioned by Parise and Moravia. According to the images captured in *Chung Kuo*, the cult of Mao and the politicization of life remained pervasive in China in 1972. The portrayals of Chairman Mao were widely present in public and private spaces. His quotations were made into the starting point of party cadres’ political meetings and ordinary workers’ group discussions. The Party did not change its cultural policy and still regarded socialist realism as the only correct way of artistic creation. As Antonioni observes in a discussion about an art exhibition, “the moderator praises the artists, because, following the teachings of

Mao, they put art to the service of workers, peasants and soldiers.”<sup>48</sup>

The political propaganda fostered fanaticism, and seemed to have invaded in the Chinese people’s everyday language. For instance, an elderly female worker at a cotton factory in Beijing explains to Antonioni why she has no grandchild, saying “to build socialism, it is better if the families are not too large.”<sup>49</sup> During the daily after-work group discussion at the same factory, some young female workers use political slogans to summarize their work of the day, claiming “we must spin and weave for the revolution,”<sup>50</sup> and “we must manufacture good cotton and contribute to the World Revolution.”<sup>51</sup> In connection to the political fanaticism, Antonioni also points out the Sino-centrism among the Chinese people. Based on his observation,

For the Chinese, this giant space filled with silence [, Tian An Men Square,] is the center of the world, [...] and the heart of Beijing. And Beijing is the political and revolutionary center of China. And China is Chung Kuo, the Middle Kingdom, an ancient cradle of the world civilization.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, Antonioni also records some changes in Chinese society since mid-1960s. For instance, Antonioni recognizes China’s attempts to open up to the rest of the world, even though “it still remains a distant and largely unknown world.”<sup>53</sup> Another difference lies in the Chinese people’s attitude toward their feudal past. Unlike Moravia who witnessed the people’s strong hatred for their history, Antonioni notices the pleasure of the Chinese tourists in the Forbidden City, which makes him convinced that “the modern Chinese have a peaceful

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<sup>48</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:30:19-00:30:29)

<sup>49</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:28:13-00:28:18)

<sup>50</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:30:31-00:30:34)

<sup>51</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:30:41-00:30:46)

<sup>52</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:02:02-00:02:21)

<sup>53</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part Three. (00:37:16-00:37:19)

relationship with their past. They see its grandeur as a motivation to look into the present.”<sup>54</sup>

Another evidence of this changed social atmosphere is the reopening of Liu Li Chang in Beijing, an antique trading street brimming with shops selling all sorts of curiosities. Only four years after the fierce “Breaking Four Olds” campaign in 1968, the traditional Chinese culture was no longer viewed as an anti-revolutionary factor to be eliminated. These changes reflect the mutability of Chinese society, which should not be perceived as static throughout the era of Mao.

In conclusion, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni all depict in their works the pervasive cult of Mao, the excessive politicization of life in China, and the undesirable consequences caused these issues, such as the ignorance and fanaticism of the Chinese people.

## **Section 2.4: Truth about China and the Chinese?**

### **Changes in the Representations**

In Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte’s accounts written in the 1950s, all the three Italian writers make positive, sometimes even romantic descriptions of the PRC and its people. According to them, the PRC is a beautiful, vibrant, and progressive country, where a kind, modest, and diligent people is led by some brilliant, incorruptible, and determinant leaders to construct cooperatively an advanced socialist civilization.

The portrayals of the PRC and the Chinese changed dramatically in Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni’s works in the 1960s and 1970s. The Chinese landscape no longer serves as symbol of vitality, source of inspiration, or cause for déjà vu and sense of home. For Parise, the Chinese natural view is unimpressive, while the cultural sites are repetitive and annoying. Moravia believes that the sceneries in the PRC mirror the social and political problems in the country. According to Antonioni, the famous Chinese natural landscape is inaccessible, and the cityscape manifests the country’s overwhelming politicization. None of the three Italian

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<sup>54</sup> See Antonioni’s Chung Kuo, Part One. (00:52:46-00:52:53)

visitors reports any signs of déjà vu or sense of belonging. In their observation, the Maoist China becomes a land full of exotic elements, an “Other” completely different from their home country.

Unlike Italian visitors in the 1950s, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni do not depict the Chinese masses and the country’s leaders as cooperative forces in social and cultural construction. In their accounts, the country’s authorities are portrayed, to different extents, as a repressive force over the ordinary Chinese people.

Although the Chinese are still described generally as a benevolent and peaceful people, their good characteristics are considered to be innate and apolitical, which have nothing to do with the social and political system of the Maoist China. The Chinese authorities are not given credit for its people’s good qualities, but criticized for being a threat to their citizens’ inborn virtues. Parise accuses the Maoist government of contaminating its employees’ good nature, and depriving them of their original honesty. From Moravia’s point of view, the Chinese leaders’ call for radical social movements forced the Chinese youths to give up their peaceful nature, and transformed them into violent rebels. Antonioni reports seeing Chinese cadres hiding old and poor residents in a village in order to create better rural view for foreign visitors. Moreover, Parise and Moravia both found the Chinese intellectuals being marginalized and powerless due to the country’s politicization of culture.

Meanwhile, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni openly doubt the capacity and virtue of the Chinese authorities, from Chairman Mao on the top to the unnamed grassroots cadres. Mao Zedong remained a focus of these Italian visitors, but his positive image was challenged. In the Italian visitors’ accounts written in the 1950s, Mao was usually depicted as an amiable, versatile, brilliant, and flawless leader. Among the three Italian intellectuals discussed in this chapter, only Moravia continued portraying Mao as a great leader comparable to some legendary European emperors. Yet, even Moravia admits in his book that Mao made some

mistakes. Moravia believes Mao was at least partly responsible for the failed Great Leap Forward, and suspects that Mao was repeating the same mistake of Stalin in establishing personality cult. Holding very negative attitude toward Chinese administrative apparatus, Parise depicts Mao as the leader of a corrupted, malfunctioning political system. In Antonioni's documentary movie, Mao does not appear in person, but his omnipresent pictures, statues, songs, and quotations are presented as symbols of personality cult and excessive politicization.

In addition to their doubts in Mao, the three Italian intellectuals also raise questions to the Chinese administration system. According to Parise's accounts, the Chinese government officials were careless, inefficient, and dishonest. Parise claims that the Chinese bureaucrats transformed his journey in the PRC into a mental and physical imprisonment (131). Moravia describes the corrupted Chinese bureaucratic system as an obstacle blocking the communist course of China, which is ought to be removed by the Chinese public. Although the Chinese cadres are not shown in the documentary movie *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni mentions several conflicts between his crew and the Chinese government officials both in his article "Is it still possible to film a documentary?" (*The Architecture* 107-114), and in the voice-over of his movie. For Antonioni, the surveillance and interventions of Chinese bureaucrats seriously impede his realist gusto. In a word, the Chinese officials and cadres were no longer considered to be "i veri autori della rivoluzione cinese" (Fortini 101), but rather accused of being conformists subservient to the authorities, and corrupted bureaucrats inhibiting the country's progress.

Unlike the Italian intellectuals who traveled to the PRC in the 1950s, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni were not favorably impressed by Maoist China's material progress, or its construction of superstructure. The three Italian visitors, especially Parise and Moravia, denounce the deification of Mao and the religionization of communism and Mao's thoughts.

Although Antonioni did not directly comment on general social and political issues in Maoist China, his documentary movie contains many long shots of the signs of Chinese politicization, such as the wall posters, paintings, and the omnipresent portrayals of Mao. Additionally, Antonioni repeatedly mentions in the voiceover that Chinese schools attempted to indoctrinate the Maoist and collectivist ideology to the youths. The selected shots and statements can reflect the Italian film master's criticisms for the dangerous trends of personality cult and over-politicization in the PRC. According to the three Italian intellectuals' accounts, the political religion in the PRC was so prevalent and powerful that it even transformed the Chinese language, and changed the way in which Chinese people communicated with one another.

To sum up, in Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni's accounts, the PRC is no longer depicted as a better society, or a cradle of an advanced socialist civilization. Angelo Pellegrino and Paul Hollander treat the differences in Italian representations of China and the Chinese created before and after 1960 as an issue of fidelity, as contradiction between false and true description of the reality. On the one hand, they consider Parise and Moravia's criticisms of Maoist China to be faithful representations of the PRC, and use them as a standard for reality check. On the other hand, they brand Tumiati, Fortini, and Malaparte as political pilgrims who construct "oriente ideologico" (Pellegrino VII). As discussed in my previous chapter, Pellegrino and Hollander's accusations are unfair to Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte, because the three Italian authors also generated their accounts based on the reality. In fact, the differences existing in the Italian visitors' representations of Maoist China are results of the substantial transformations in the Chinese society after 1957, and the changes in Sino-Italian relations during the 1960s and 1970s.

### **Basis in Reality**

Some changes in the Italian intellectuals' representations of the PRC and its people were

based in the historical reality in Maoist China that had gone through a series of dramatic social and political changes after 1957.

Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni's disinterest in or even negative impression of the Chinese landscapes were caused by several reasons. First, due to Chinese government's restrictions on foreign visitors' trips during the 1960s and 1970s, the three Italian intellectuals had to spend most of their time in the major cities on the eastern coast of China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Because these cities have been subject of travel notes for decades, their natural and cultural landscapes could hardly raise any interest in Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni who went to China with the hope of discovering a new land. Second, although the natural sceneries in the PRC during the 1960s and the 1970s did not differ much from those in the 1950s, many Chinese historical and cultural sites were ruined because of the fierce mass campaign to destroy the "Four Olds" launched in mid-1960s. Only a few monuments, such as the Forbidden City and Summer Palace, were retained deliberately by the Chinese authorities to educate the public and foreign visitors about the feudal exploitation. Even the monuments that had fortunately survived from the anti-four-olds movement could not receive careful maintenance and restoration as they did in the 1950s. Hence, it is not surprising that these cultural sites in disrepair did not look appealing to the Italian visitors.

The different depictions of the Chinese leaderships, as well as their relationships with the public and the society reflect the Italian visitors' loss of faith in the Chinese administrative apparatus, and doubts about the flawless image of Chairman Mao.

The Italian intellectuals' negative impressions of the Chinese political apparatus partly lies in the birth of a privileged new class of government officials and Party cadres in the PRC. Although the First Five Year Plan led to great economic and industrial successes, it also "led to the growth of bureaucracy, new social inequalities and privileged elites" (Meisner 191).



Some officials and cadres “had come to adopt the attitudes of traditional mandarins and Guomindang bureaucrats and enjoyed similar privileges” (Meisner 177). The central government in Beijing was aware of the alienation among its officials. In a speech delivered in May 1956, Lu Dingyi, the head of the Central Committee’s Propaganda Department, criticized the arrogance and ignorance of some privileged Party members:

They claim to be always right and fail to see the merits of others .... They take offence at the critical opinion of others. They always see themselves as the erudite teachers and others as their puny pupils. ... These comrades had better stop this self-glorification right away. ... They had better be modest, listen more often to others’ criticism ... make a point of learning what they can from people outside the Party. (Communist China 1955-1959 157-162)

In order to rectify the alienated cadres, Mao Zedong launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign in May 1956, with the hope that intelligentsia would serve as a potent source of criticism of bureaucracy, elitism and authoritarianism. At the eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in November 1956, Mao emphasized his determination to deal with the growing bureaucracy:

There are several hundred thousand cadres at the level of the county Party committee and above who hold the destiny of the country in their hands. ... We must watch out lest we foster the bureaucratic style of work and grow into an aristocratic stratum divorced from the people. The masses will have good reason to remove from office whoever practices bureaucracy, makes no effort to solve their problems, scolds them, tyrannizes over them and never tries to make amends. I say it is fine to remove such fellows, and they ought to be removed.<sup>55</sup>

However, as some Chinese social critics went further to attack the CPC’s communist ideology, Mao put an end to the Hundred Flowers campaign in early 1957. Frustrated by the Hundred Flowers campaign, Mao did not give up fighting against the bureaucracy. He initiated the Xiafang (“Sent down”) movement, which emptied urban administrative offices, and sent about a million state officials and cadres to engage in physical labor in the countryside between 1957 and 1958 (Meisner 188). Nevertheless, his attempts to consolidate

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<sup>55</sup> See Mao Zedong’s “Speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China” in Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Vol. V, page 333.

the government did not turn out efficient. According to the accounts of Parise and Moravia, the careless and unproductive bureaucracy remained an evident problem in the PRC even in 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Another reason for the Italian visitors' complaints was that the Chinese state officials and Party cadres all seemed to uncritically accept the authorities' policies, and serve as transmitters of official propaganda. The Italian intellectuals' observation reflect changes in the PRC's social atmosphere after the Hundred Flowers campaign. During the Hundred Flowers campaign, Chinese intellectuals did level the attacks on bureaucracy, elitism and authoritarianism that Mao had sought. However, some critics went further to denounce the CPC's socialist ideals and policies. As a reaction to these criticisms, Mao started the Anti-rightist campaign and Socialist Education campaign from 1957 to 1959. During the wrongly-extended Anti-rightist movement, more than four hundred thousand Chinese intellectuals were branded as "rightists" (people who favor capitalism) and punished.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, the nationwide Socialist Education campaign served to convince the Chinese masses of the communist course, and to strengthen the CPC's authority on social and political issues. After the two campaigns, the Chinese social critics and dissidents were generally silenced, and Mao's thoughts and the CPC's policies were elevated as orthodoxy. Moreover, because the failure of the Hundred Flowers Campaign shook Mao's faith in a basically unified people and a generally pro-socialist intelligentsia, the Chinese authorities placed increasing emphasis on discipline and centralism, rather than freedom and democracy, after 1957 (J. Chen 55-56). The trend continued until the end of the Cultural Revolution. Even in February 1977, the CPC chairman Hua Guofeng, Mao's successor, still advocated that "we will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave" ("Study Well"). In the repressive social atmosphere, many

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<sup>56</sup> The data is from the website of News of the Communist Party of China.  
<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64165/70293/70309/4823709.html>. Accessed on April 24, 2015.

Chinese officials and cadres chose to keep their actions and expressions in accordance with the authorities' stance on socio-political issues.

The changes in Italian intellectuals' attitudes toward Mao also resulted from some historical events occurred after 1957, such as the Great Leap Forward, the growth of Mao's cult, and the Cultural Revolution.

The failure of the Great Leap Forward movement in 1958-1961 added a first crack on Mao's previously established perfect image. Because the industrial successes of the First Five Year Plan (1953-1957) came with new social inequalities and ideological decay, Mao worried that such economic plans would move China further away from a socialist and communist future. His conclusion was that socialist ends could be attained only by socialist means. Therefore, Mao abandoned the modest and realistic policies in the first half of the 1950s, and launched the Great Leap Forward campaign in 1958, aiming to quickly transform the PRC into a socialist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. The radical campaign saw economic regression (The Cambridge History 493), and caused the Difficult Three Year Period (1959-1961, also known as the Great Chinese Famine). The Italian visitors who went to the PRC in the 1960s were not ignorant of Mao's failure in Great Leap Forward campaign. As Moravia comments in his book,

[In 1957] avvenne il Grande Balzo in Avanti, cioè il tentativo di trasformare gli arretrati contadini cinesi in operai agricoli modernissimi di specie russa o addirittura americana; e di accollare alle aziende agricole statali la maggior parte della produzione dell'acciaio. ... Invece questa volta il ricorso alle masse entusiaste sì, ma inesperte e arretrate, provocò un disastro: cadde naturalmente la produzione dell'acciaio e a causa del disordine provocato da tanti cambiamenti, cadde anche la produzione agricola. (108)

The Great Leap Forward campaign shows that Mao could also make mistakes, and his wrong choices could cause catastrophes. The fact reminded the Italian intellectuals to reassess their previous idealized impressions about Mao, and made them more critical of Mao's ideas and actions.

Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni were also concerned about Mao's growing cult. As the Anti-rightist campaign and Socialist Education movement at the end of the 1950s swiped away most differing views in the Chinese society, the 1960s witnessed the deification of Mao, and canonization of his thoughts. The failure of the Great Leap Forward did not ruin Mao's reputation, because the negative effects were mostly attributed to grassroots cadres' misunderstanding of Mao's guidelines.<sup>57</sup> In 1964, Mao's writings were collected and compiled into a handbook, the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, also known as the Little Red Book. According to Parise and Moravia's accounts, the handbook was widely distributed, and almost turned into a sacred item in mid-1960s. At first, Moravia tried to defend Mao by distinguishing the canonization of Mao's works from personality cult. However, after witnessing the Red Guards who were rebelling against everything but Mao, Moravia had to acknowledge the existence of Mao's cult. Moravia's hesitation derives from the left-wing intellectuals' traumatic disillusion of Stalin. At the Twentieth Soviet Party Congress in February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin for having fostered a leadership personality cult and directed purges of the Communist Party. Since then, the "personality cult" was regarded as an indication associated with serious political and ideological crisis. Hence, it is not surprising that the Italian visitors were alert of and worried about the dangerous trend in Maoist China.

Besides, the Cultural Revolution also caused unease among the Italian visitors, and led them to question the CPC's attempts to enforce socialist superstructure. Parise and Moravia were very critical of the Chinese authorities' suppression of foreign and traditional culture. Witnessing the violent Red Guard movement, Moravia felt upset for the Chinese youngsters' radicalization, and their abandon of innate peaceful nature. Traveled to the PRC in early 1970s, Antonioni's criticisms targeted the country's excessive politicization manifested in

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<sup>57</sup> CPC leader Lin Biao gave a speech at the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in 1962 to support Mao. See Roderick MacFarquhar's *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng* page 130.

pervasive posters, slogans, songs, performances, and mass campaigns. As the primary advocate of the Cultural Revolution, Mao was held responsible by the Italian intellectuals for the undesirable changes in the PRC.

None of the three Italian visitors discussed in this chapter was in favor of the PRC's economic progress.

Parise and Antonioni's disinterest in the PRC's modernization seem to lie in the widened gap between China and Italy's economy from late 1950s to early 1970s. On the one hand, due to the failed, hasty socialization carried out during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese economy was stagnant, if not ruined. The prosperity in China predicted by Italian visitors in the 1950s did not come true in the 1960s and 1970s. The PRC in 1966 was still so poor and backward that Parise even described China's constructions as kids' "castello di sabbia" (136). On the other hand, Italy had a period of sustained economic growth after the Second World War. The Italian economy experienced an average rate of growth of GDP of 5.8% per year between 1951 and 1963, and 5.0% per year between 1964 and 1973 (Crafts and Toniolo 428). Thanks to the economic boom, Italy was transformed from a poor, mainly rural nation into a major industrial power. "Social security coverage had been made comprehensive and relatively generous. The material standard of living had vastly improved for the great majority of the population" (Spotts and Wieser 194). As a result, it is not surprising that Parise and Antonioni felt that the Chinese economy and modernization were still in a rudimentary stage.

Moravia's aversion to China's material progress had a different reason, although it was also rooted in the economic development in Italy. The doubling of Italian GDP between 1950 and 1962 saw the birth of the post-war consumerist society (Calavita 53). While the country was flooded with a huge variety of cheap consumer goods, Italian intellectuals were critical of the pervasive influence of consumerism. For instance, Pier Paolo Pasolini argued that the

consumerism was vacuous, decadent, and fascistic (Testa 84). He chastised the Italian youth for the corruption of submitting to consumerism (McQueen 133), and aimed to combat Western consumerism with nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past:

I made [the *Trilogy of Life*] in order to oppose the consumerist present to a very recent past where the human body and human relations were still real, although archaic, although prehistoric, although crude; nevertheless they were real, and these films opposed this reality to the non-reality of consumer civilization. (Rumble 63)

Like Pasolini, Moravia also saw the negatives in the modern, consumerist culture. As he claims, “Il fine della civiltà moderna è il consumo cioè lo sterco. [...] La civiltà del consumo è stercoraria. La quantità dello sterco emesso dal consumatore è in effetti la prova migliore che il consumatore ha consumato” (Moravia 86-87). Moravia believes that poverty and simplicity are the only solutions to the consumerist crisis:

La povertà e la castità, a ben guardare, sono le due condizioni normali dell’uomo o per lo meno dovrebbero esserlo, oggi e in questo mondo. In quanto oggi e in questo mondo non vedo come l’uomo possa cessare di essere un produttore-consumatore se non attraverso la povertà e la castità. (91-92)

It is based on this belief that Moravia finds the Chinese people’s poor and simple lives “di sollievo” (79), and worries that the modernization and economic development may cause cultural decay in Maoist China as they did in the West. Therefore, for Moravia, the material progress is not an appeal, but a threat to the utopian, egalitarian poverty of the Chinese.

The last but not the least, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni criticized the deification of Mao, as well as the canonization of Marxism and Mao’s thoughts. As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, the three Italian visitors’ observations also had basis in the reality, as the dangerous trends of personality cult, and over-politicization of life reached their height during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.

In conclusion, the dramatic social and political transformations occurred in the PRC from the end of 1950s to the late 1970s served as reality basis of the representations created by Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni. However, the three Italian intellectuals’ impressions of

Maoist China were not only influenced by the domestic problems in the PRC, but also impacted by the deteriorated Sino-Italian relations.

### **Changes in Sino-Italian Relations**

Parise, Moravia and Antonioni's travel experiences in Maoist China during the 1960s and 1970s seemed to be much worse than those of Tumiati, Fortini and Malaparte in the 1950s. It not only reflects the domestic changes in the PRC through the decades, but also mirrors the Chinese authorities' changed attitude toward Italy and Italian Marxists.

The Italian intellectuals' tendency to romanticize Maoist China in the 1950s coincided with the Chinese and Italian governments' tentative efforts to establish diplomatic relations. As the Geneva Conference in 1954 presented an opportunity to ease the tension between Eastern and Western Blocs, the economic and cultural channels between Italy and China were reopened after the Korean War. During the second half of the 1950s, several Italian delegations were granted access to Maoist China. According to these Italian visitors' accounts, the Chinese government warmly received them, and gave them much freedom during their trips. In those years, the Italian delegates were treated as friends by Chinese authorities, because their home country was considered to have higher possibility of socialist transformations compared with other Western European countries. As a matter of fact, between the end of the WWII and the Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) became the strongest political party of the Italian left, and attracted the support of a large number of Italian working class and intelligentsia. In the 1950s, although the two countries had not had diplomatic relations, the CPC developed a friendly and cooperative partnership with the PCI. The Chinese leaders recognized and supported the Italian communists' endeavors to push social changes in Europe, and hoped their Italian comrades would recognize the PRC, and collaborate with China in Communist International. The Chinese authorities' favorable impressions were manifested in their views

about Palmiro Togliatti, the General Secretary of the PCI. During a private meeting in 1957, Mao Zedong asked Curzio Malaparte about Italy's achievements in social transformations, and praised Togliatti as a good thinker (Malaparte 137-138). In those years, the Chinese media also portrayed Togliatti and Italian communists as friends of the Chinese people. Even a Muslim nomad living in a remote region in Western China knew about Togliatti, and asked Malaparte to bring his greetings to the leader of the PCI (Malaparte 158).

Sino-Italian relations changed dramatically in the 1960s. Official contacts between Rome and Beijing were interrupted, because the American government applied containment policy toward the PRC and advised its allies not to recognize Maoist China. In addition to the frustrating contacts with the Christian Democrats ruling in Italy, the PRC's relations with Italian communists also fell in crisis. In 1962, the Sino-Soviet split widened. Mao and his followers had faith in revolution as the only way to bring about socialism, and opposed Khrushchev's theme of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West. In the dispute between Beijing and Moscow, Togliatti sided energetically with the Russians, and strove to restrain the Italian left's enthusiasm for Mao's "simplistically revolutionary interpretation of Marxism" (Drake 220). Togliatti's moderation became more evident at the end of the turbulent 1962, in the aftermath of the Cuban crisis, the Indo-Chinese War, and, most importantly, the violent strikes in Turin. In Togliatti's concluding speech at the tenth congress of the PCI, held in December 1962, the General Secretary of PCI highlighted the necessity to safeguard world peace, and officially accused China of being warlike (Griffith 79). The Chinese state media soon replied with "The Difference between Comrade Togliatti and US," a long editorial that was later amplified and published as a pamphlet.<sup>58</sup> The editorial restates the PRC's standpoint regarding war and peace:

On the question of how to avert world war and safeguard world peace, the Communist Party of China has consistently stood for the resolute exposure of

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<sup>58</sup> The editorial was published on People's Daily on December 31, 1962. The pamphlet was entitled More on the Differences between Comrade Togliatti and us, and published in 1963.



imperialism, for strengthening the socialist camp, for firm support of the national-liberation movements and the peoples' revolutionary struggles, for the broadest alliance of all the peace-loving countries and people of the world, and at the same time, for taking full advantage of the contradictions among our enemies, and for utilizing the method of negotiation as well as other forms of struggle. The aim of this stand is precisely the effective prevention of world war and preservation of world peace. ("The Difference")

The CPC saw its conflict with Togliatti as one between authentic revolutionary Marxism-Leninism and bourgeois reformism, and levelled counterattack on Togliatti's abandonment of the revolutionary project: "under no circumstances is a Marxist-Leninist Party allowed to use the pretext of certain new social phenomena to negate the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism, to substitute revisionism for Marxism-Leninism and to betray communism" ("The Difference"). Admittedly, during the 1960s, several left-wing activists in Italy, such as Raniero Panzieri and Adriano Sofri, still held very positive attitude toward the PRC and Maoist line (Drake 218-221). However, their voice was much weaker than that of the PCI's mainstream right-wing faction. Therefore, the escalation of the conflict between the CPC and the Italian communists saw no clear relaxation until the late 1970s.

As a result, it is not surprising that, when Parise and Moravia traveled to the PRC in 1966, the Maoist authorities were suspicious of both Italian Christian Democratic government and the Italian communists. At that time, from the PRC's point of view, Italy was a Western capitalist country following closely the American guidelines, and had refused to recognize the PRC for more than fifteen years. In other words, the Italian government did not appear to be very friendly to China. Meanwhile, the PCI was no longer regarded as a fraternal party of the CPC, but rather a revisionist party aligned with China's "number-one enemy," the Soviet Union (Radchenko 207). Even the establishment of Sino-Italian diplomatic relations in 1970 did not completely ease the tensions between the two countries, nor the strains between the two communist parties. On the one hand, Italy was still a capitalist country, and thus perceived as a potential enemy in the upcoming world revolution. On the other hand,

although the PCI gradually broke away from the Soviet Union since the end of the 1960s, it also moved further away from the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy held firmly in Maoist China. Hence, the PCI was still branded as a revisionist party. As a result, when Antonioni and his crew went to document Maoist China in 1972, the Italian visitors did not enjoy treatments for comrades that Fortini and Malaparte used to receive in the 1950s. Instead, Antonioni experienced the surveillance, restrictions, and less thorough services that Parise and Moravia encountered in the mid-1960s.

Seen in this light, the neglect, constraint, and difficulties occurred in Italian visitors' trips to China in the 1960s and 1970s were more than signs of growing bureaucratism in Maoist China; they reflected the changes in Sino-Italian relations. Evidence can be found in Parise's *Cara Cina*. When Parise attempted to schedule a meeting with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, he was told that Zhou was too busy. However, Parise soon found that Zhou still had time to meet with the Ballet Troupe of Guinea, so he angrily protested to the Chinese government officials. To his surprise, the Chinese cadres candidly admitted that, compared with Italy, Guinea was more important to China in terms of communist course and world revolution, and thus deserved Premier Zhou's time and energy:

Sorridendo mi hanno risposto che l'incontro coi ballerini della Guinea, invitati dal governo cinese, era un incontro politico che poteva aprire le porte a molti altri incontri politici con un paese da un punto di vista marxista più importante dell'Italia. Poi che la Guinea era un paese ad alto potenziale rivoluzionario, mentre il potenziale rivoluzionario dell'Italia era, come dire, ridotto. Infine che l'Italia non aveva rappresentanza diplomatica in Cina e questo non era un atto di amicizia nei confronti dei cinesi che sono pronti ad accoglierla. Mi hanno detto tutto questo con giri di frase e scusandosi, ma insomma me l'hanno detto. (Parise 234)

To sum up, the differences in Italian visitors' experiences before and after 1957 not only show the domestic socio-political changes in the PRC, but also reflect the changing Sino-Italian relations in those years. The tensions between Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War, as well as the conflicts between the Maoists and the Italian communists all had negative impacts on the Chinese government's treatments for the Italian visitors, and

eventually aggregated the Italian intellectuals' bad impressions of Maoist China.

### **Shadow of Essentialism**

In *Scrittori in Viaggio*, Gaia De Pascale groups together the Italian accounts of the PRC from the 1950s and the 1960s in a single chapter. She believes that the Italian intellectuals' representations of Maoist China are what Edward Said categorized as Orientalist construction. In my previous chapter, I argue that De Pascale's use of Said's concept of Orientalism in her analysis of Fortini and Malaparte's works is problematic, because of the inherent limitations in Said's oversimplified theory, as well as De Pascale's unstated extension of Said's concept. However, due to the remarkable differences in the Italian travel accounts of Maoist China written before and after 1957, it is necessary to assess whether De Pascale's conclusion is valid concerning Parise and Moravia's travel notes.

Despite the still existing inherent limitations in Said's theory, the concept of Orientalism actually appears to be more suitable in the cases of Parise and Moravia than for the works of Fortini and Malaparte. Said gave Orientalism a three-fold definition: Orientalism as an academic field; Orientalism as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinctions made between the Orient and the Occident; and Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient (Said 1979, 2-4). While the first definitions cannot apply to Parise and Moravia's travel notes, the second and third ones seem to well describe the two Italian writers' essentialist view of culture, as well as their comments based on the essentialist views.

By "essentialist view of culture," I mean both Parise and Moravia use a notion of culture as "static, fixed, objective, consensual and uniformly shared by all members of a group" (Wiken 62). It is easy to find evidence of this essentialist view in the travel notes of Parise and Moravia, who consider the cultural characteristics to be almost biological. For instance, Parise claims that "La civiltà ... ha raggiunto nel popolo cinese stadi così elevati che è

difficile distinguere l'elemento culturale e storico da quello naturale e biologico" (228).

Moravia makes a very similar statement: "la cultura, ... è così antica in Cina da essere diventata una seconda natura" (139). Moravia even believes that the cultural traits are inheritable among the Chinese people: "il cinese nasce colto e civile" (139-141). According to Parise and Moravia, the culture is not just historical legacy handed down from ancestor, but almost functions as biological characteristics that can be transmitted by blood or gene. In other words, Parise and Moravia transform the distinctions between the Orient and the Occident into something ontological.

Parise and Moravia also used their essentialist view of culture to judge the social phenomena they observed in the Chinese society. In addition to their belief that a culture's inner core can remain intact through the history, the two Italian writers also have a conception of human beings as bearers of culture, whose identities and behaviors are determined by their culture. In this vein, Parise and Moravia do not consider trends and occurrences in the Chinese society to be temporary phenomena caused by certain socio-political context, but show great interest in finding explanations in the nation's perceived culture and tradition. For example, Parise made a connection between the monotonous propaganda delivered by radio and cadres and the seemingly repetitive pattern of architecture in the Forbidden City, and concluded that "i cinesi non conoscono la noia ... la ripetizione è un modo d'essere se non addirittura l'essenza dell'espressione cinese. Così nella concezione urbanistica di mille anni fa, come nella organizzazione sociale di oggi" (20-21). Like Parise, Moravia also interpreted situations in Maoist China as manifestation of the Chinese culture. When visiting the Great Wall, Moravia found some beautiful sculptures on the ancient gates, and regarded them as signs of the Chinese people's exaggerated sense of superiority over the foreigners (151). With the Sino-centrism assumption in mind, Moravia later explained the Chinese people's lack of interest in Italy as "un tratto molto cinese. ... Mai un cinese mostrerà curiosità per le cose

straniere; mai si informerà, chiederà, si interesserà” (116). Parise and Moravia did not know what they witnessed were some extreme and exceptional situations that only appeared during the Cultural Revolution. The other Italian intellectuals who went to the PRC before or after the Cultural Revolution had very different experiences.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, those phenomena are not representative in Chinese history, and they do not have much to do with the Chinese tradition.

Parise and Moravia’s misinterpretations are caused by their strong faith in the cultural essentialism and determinism, which has the risk of developing into “cultural racism.”<sup>60</sup> Even though Parise and Moravia did not use the cultural differences to construct racial or national hierarchy in their works, the cultural essentialism manifested in their travel accounts is certainly a target of Said’s criticism. In *Orientalism*, Said claims that he is against a system of thought, approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint, while neglecting historical changes (1994, 333-334).

Today, the “processual theory,” as Christoph Brumann names it, is a new notion of culture widely shared by many contemporary social scientists and critical theorists. According to the theory, cultures and communities are seen as constructed, dialectically from above and below, and in constant flux.<sup>61</sup> Culture is known as a historically created system of meaning and significance, which is “constantly contested and subject to change” (Parekh 148). The new notion of cultural enhances global cultural communication, and reduces the risk of conflicts caused by global migration and cultural conservatism.

In short, Said’s criticism of *Orientalism* can apply to Parise and Moravia’s travel accounts of Maoist China, as the two Italian writers manifested essentialist view of culture in their works, and made some comments based on the essentialist views.

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<sup>59</sup> For example, both Fortini and Malaparte report that the Chinese people are curious about the outside world.

<sup>60</sup> See Pierre-André Taguieff’s “The New Cultural Racism in France.”

<sup>61</sup> See Christoph Brumann’s “Writing for Culture: Why a Successful Concept Should not be Discarded.”

Because De Pascale, in *Scrittori in Viaggio*, only focuses on the Italian literary representations of the Maoist China, she does not comment on Antonioni's documentary movie *Chung Kuo*. Can De Pascale's argument apply to *Chung Kuo*? In other words, does Said's concept of Orientalism also cover *Chung Kuo*? To answer this question, we need to go back to Said's three-fold definition of Orientalism. Although the first and third definitions are not quite suitable for the case of *Chung Kuo*, the second one may explain Antonioni's zealous pursuit for exotic scenes.

When shooting the documentary movie, Antonioni appeared to have particular interest in things that looked foreign and strange to him. For instance, in Beijing, he took a long shot of an old Chinese woman stumbling across a street, and zoomed in to focus on her tiny, bound feet. When filming a village in Henan, his camera was attracted by a little pig peeing on the ground. On the street of Suzhou, when seeing a young man transporting a sick middle-age woman by cart, Antonioni gave a close-up to the pale face of the patient and captured the bewilderment in her eyes. In a documentary movie entitled "Chung Kuo (China)," the included scenes should be the most representative ones, so that the movie can most efficiently manifest the characteristics of the country within limited screening time. Seen in this light, Antonioni's disposition to capture the exotic and bizarre scenes reflects the Italian filmmaker's belief in essential distinctions between the strange China and the normal Occident.

In his articles written about *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni repeatedly emphasizes his realist gusto. Instead of mechanically recording the sights in the PRC, Antonioni believes that he has the responsibility to penetrate through the appearance, and reveal the real essence of China for the audience. For Antonioni, the essence of China seems to be something natural and intrinsic, because he complains that, in China, one "has a way of hiding himself and of pretending sometimes to appear better – or different, anyway – than what he is" (The

Architecture 109). In order to capture the Chinese people's inherent attributes and to make his documentary more authentic, Antonioni used several methods to prevent his Chinese targets from showing their social decorum, the norms that set down appropriate social behavior and propriety. The first method is to film in undeveloped areas. Because the peasants in remote mountain villages were much less sophisticated than the citizens in urban area, it is easier for Antonioni's crew to record the residents' natural behaviors and facial expressions.

Antonioni's second method is to take candid shots. In the opening sequence of *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni used the zoom to steal close-ups of some Chinese young women waiting to have their photos taken in Tiananmen Square. By taking shots from a distance without the subjects' awareness, Antonioni caught his targets' relaxed state and natural, or even subconscious, actions. The third method that Antonioni applies in *Chung Kuo* is to film with an "intrusive, even aggressive camera" (Xiao 115). When filming from a short distance, Antonioni sometimes focused his camera on some Chinese passersby to make long takes, sometimes suddenly turned his camera to film the surprised onlookers standing around. In both ways, Antonioni intentionally forced his subjects out of their comfort zones in order to capture their spontaneous reactions to the stimuli. This method is aggressive, because the director often insisted on filming, regardless of his subjects' evident dislike and attempts to dodge the camera. As a result, there are tensions shown in *Chung Kuo* when Antonioni's filming went against his targets' wishes. With all the methods listed above, Antonioni strove to inhibit the manifestation of Chinese etiquette, and to capture what he perceived as the most natural and authentic traits of the people.

Unlike Parise and Moravia who clearly attribute the otherness of China and the Chinese to the nation's semi-biological, inheritable cultural tradition, Antonioni does not define the nature of the Chinese essence. However, the way Antonioni constructs the representations in *Chung Kuo* reflects his essentialist view that China is an exotic land ontologically different

from the West, the symbol of normalcy.

The essentialist view of fundamental distinctions between China and the West seems to be widespread among Western intellectuals in those years. Supporting examples can be found in some Western critics' interpretations of the Chinese government's reactions to Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*.

To Antonioni's surprise, *Chung Kuo* was banned by the Chinese authorities soon after its public screening in Italy and the United States. On 30 January 1974, Chinese state news paper *People's Daily* published an article entitled "A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks – A Criticism of Antonioni's Anti-China Film 'China'," accusing Antonioni of purposely denigrating socialist China by shooting only unfruitful lands, lonely old people, tired animals and ugly houses:

Hostile towards the Chinese people, he used the opportunity of his visit for ulterior purposes; by underhand and utterly despicable means he hunted specifically for material that could be used to slander and attack China. His three-and-half-hour-long film does not at all reflect the new things, new spirit and new face of our great motherland, but puts together many viciously distorted scenes and shots to attack Chinese leaders, smear socialist New China, slander China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and insult the Chinese people. ("A Vicious")

Starting with the official article of condemnation published on *People's Daily*, 800 million Chinese people were mobilized into a mass criticism campaign for the movie that most of them did not even have a chance to see.

The furor prompted Umberto Eco, an Italian essayist and critic, to publish an article entitled "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo," in which he argued that the Chinese people's misunderstandings of *Chung Kuo* were based on their profoundly different visual aesthetic, and distinct view of modernity. Susan Sontag, an American filmmaker and activist, also joined in the debate. In her book *On Photography*, Sontag commented on Chinese criticisms of *Chung Kuo*, regarding them as an illustration of radical differences between eastern and western image cultures. These two influential Western critics



both considered the Chinese mass criticism campaign against *Chung Kuo* to be conflicts between two fundamentally different civilizations.

However, Eco and Sontag's essentialist interpretations were later proven as not suitable for the case. Antonioni himself recalled that in the first screening of *Chung Kuo* in Rome in early 1973 some representatives of the Chinese Embassy in Rome showed up and praised the film:

When the film was finished, the first persons, outside of my collaborators, to whom it was shown, were some representatives of the Chinese Embassy in Rome. The ambassador didn't show up. There was the director of the New China agency and two or three others. At the end of the screening these persons expressed themselves positively. "You", they said, "Signor Antonioni, have looked at our country with a very affectionate eye. And we thank you." That was the first reaction of certain Chinese responsible people. (*The Architecture* 327)

The Chinese diplomatic officials' comment showed no sign of being offended for intercultural misinterpretations. Moreover, after the ban on *Chung Kuo* was lifted, most Chinese audiences also provided warm responses to the documentary. On Douban, China's most popular social networking service for book, film and music reviews and recommendations, among the 9860 Douban users who evaluated *Chung Kuo*, 38.7% of them gave the film five stars (the highest score), 47.5% marked four stars, 12.6% three stars, 0.9% two stars, 0.3% one star. Also, among 134 people who shared their film reviews about *Chung Kuo* on Douban, 114 of them believe the film deserves four stars or above (out of five stars).<sup>62</sup> These data also prove that *Chung Kuo* is not a case of conflict between the Chinese and western cultures.

As the former director of Chinese State Council Information Office Yang Zhengquan confirms, the campaigns against Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* in 1974 was primarily a political issue that went far beyond the film itself (Yang 55-59). Actually, the mass criticisms on *Chung Kuo* mainly resulted from the Chinese authorities' eagerness for international

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<sup>62</sup> One can gauge Chinese audience's response to *Chung Kuo* by browsing Douban. Douban page for *Chung Kuo*: <http://movie.douban.com/subject/1292327/> Accessed 27 June 2013.

reputation, and a conspiracy of Jiang Qing (Mao Zedong's wife) to attack the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. During those years, Chinese people were suffering from mass hysteria and social disorder caused by the Cultural Revolution; and voices from state media were to be accepted unconditionally. Given the social abnormality in China during the period, the Chinese criticisms of *Chung Kuo* published in 1974, especially the fighting talks in *People's Daily*, should be viewed as results of political assignments, rather than accurate description of the Chinese public's views of the film, or evidence of essential cultural distinctions.<sup>63</sup>

In conclusion, although Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni's works were generated from the historical facts in the PRC in the 1960s and 1970s, the way they treated and interpreted the actuality reflect their essentialist views, which appeared to be prevalent among intellectuals in Western countries through those years. The essentialism supported the three Italian intellectuals' deliberate hunt for otherness in Chinese society. Due to Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni's pursuit of an imaginary, unique Chineseness, their works end up using a new stereotypical representation to replace the romanticized one constructed by earlier Italian visitors in the 1950s.

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<sup>63</sup> See Xin Liu's "China's Reception of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*."

### CHAPTER 3: THE CHINESE IN RECENT ITALIAN MOVIES

The emergence of China and the Chinese as major subjects of Italian movies can be traced back to 1957, when filmmaker Carlo Lizzani took his cameras to China to document how Mao Zedong's revolution was changing the world's most populous nation. Lizzani's *La Muraglia Cinese (Behind the Great Wall)*, released in 1959, was the first color film to show footage of China to Western audiences. In the film, Lizzani tended to romanticize China and its innovative social fabric by intentionally staging many scenes to show the country as an astounding political laboratory, and an incarnation of a new world civilization. Presenting very positive images of China to western audiences, *La Muraglia Cinese* may have raised the Maoist government's expectations for Michelangelo Antonioni's 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo (China)*. However, unlike Lizzani who appreciated Maoist social reforms, Antonioni had no interest in "the political and social structures which the Chinese revolution created" (The Architecture 327). Antonioni was keen to capture the exotic and traditional aspect of China that had not yet been changed by the communist revolution. Because *Chung Kuo* failed to meet the Chinese authorities' propaganda needs in the era of the Cultural Revolution, it was labelled an anti-China movie in a 1974 Chinese political campaign and then banned until 2004 (Liu 23-24).

In the three decades after 1974, China seemed to vanish from the sight of Italian filmmakers. The only exception was *The Last Emperor* directed by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci.<sup>64</sup> As the title suggests, this 1987 movie is about the Qing Dynasty's last emperor, Puyi, whose life is depicted in the film from his ascent to the throne as a small boy to his

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<sup>64</sup> Due to this article's specific focus on filmic representation, the 1982 American-Italian television miniseries *Marco Polo* directed by Giuliano Montaldo is not taken into consideration.

imprisonment and political rehabilitation by the Chinese Communist authorities. This biopic also portrays China's turbulent development during the crisis from late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. Although *The Last Emperor* won nine Oscars at the sixtieth Academy Awards in 1988, its success in the international market did not motivate Italian filmmakers to produce more movies about China.

The situation changed dramatically in 2006, with the staging of the "Year of Italy in China," a year-long cultural gala in major Chinese cities that highlighted Italian art, music, and design. The event was proposed, initiated, and approved in 2004 during Italian President Ciampi's state visit to China. Designed to open a window through which Chinese people could view Italian culture, the project enhanced the two countries' mutual understanding and laid the groundwork for future cooperation. The "Year of Italy in China" succeeded in drawing attention from Italian experts in cultural fields and boosting the Italian general public's interest in China. Therefore, almost twenty years after the release of *The Last Emperor*, the Italian film industry produced two movies with Chinese setting in two consecutive years: *La stella che non c'è* (*The Missing Star*, 2006) and *Two Tigers* (2007). Both movies mainly revolve around Westerners' adventurous journeys in a supposedly verisimilar contemporary China. In *The Missing Star*, Vincenzo Buonavolonta, a conscientious Italian maintenance technician who fails to alert Chinese buyers to a deadly structural flaw in a blast furnace, goes to China in order to find the new owner and fix the problem. Unlike *The Missing Star*, *Two Tigers* is an erotic femme fatale actioner in the tradition of *Nikita*,<sup>65</sup> telling the story of a beautiful killer Gilda who defies orders to protect her newly acquainted friend Lin, a high-class Chinese call girl, from being assassinated by

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<sup>65</sup> The meaning of *Nikita* here is two-fold. First, it refers to a 1990 Franco-Italian action film which centers around a young woman named Nikita who is recruited from prison to work as assassin for a government-funded organization. Second, the title also refers to an American television series with a similar plot which focuses on a female spy and assassin named Nikita who strives to destroy a secret agency that trained her. Both the film and the TV series portray a strong female protagonist who makes use of firearms to defend against or attack a group of antagonists.

international criminal organizations.

From 2007 to 2011, while continuing producing movies with Chinese themes, Italian filmmakers switched their focus from presenting an exotic Chinese setting to exploring the experience of Chinese immigrants in Italy. This new trend began with *La Giusta Distanza* (*The Right Distance*, 2007), in which the Chinese are only extras acting as illegal immigrant workers silently lined up and taken into custody by Italian police. A year later, *Gomorra* (*Gomorrhah*, 2008) casts Chinese actors as garment factory owners who ends up being murdered for competing with local Camorra-controlled firms. Italian filmmakers' interest in Chinese immigration issues reached its height in 2011 with the release of *Io Sono Li* (*Shun Li and the Poet*, 2011) and *L'arrivo di Wang* (*The Arrival of Wang*, 2011). *Shun Li and the Poet* concentrates on a romantic but problematic relationship between Shun Li, a young female immigrant worker from China, and Bepi, a local fisherman in Italy. Amidst xenophobic tension from both the Chinese and local communities, Shun Li and Bepi are eventually forced to separate. In the Sci-fi movie *The Arrival of Wang*, a kind-hearted Italian translator Gaia helps Mr. Wang, a Chinese-speaking extra-terrestrial, escape from the Italian government's secret base, only to find that Wang and his people are cunning alien invaders aiming to conquer the Earth with their military forces.

This thematic switch was likely triggered by the protest in Milan's Chinatown in April 2007, which was "the first major violent protest by a single ethnic minority group against the police authorities in contemporary Italy" (Zhang 22). The conflicts between Chinese protesters and Italian police force manifested the growing tensions between Chinese immigrants and the local community. As the massive influx of Chinese immigrants continued causing social and economic concerns in Italy, the theme of conflicts between the Chinese and the local residents remained popular in Italian movies from 2007 to 2011, until the mass media noticed that the Chinese community was silently slipping away from the recession-hit

Italy after 2011.<sup>66</sup> From 2011 to 2015 when this dissertation is completed, China and the Chinese people stopped receiving attention from Italian filmmakers, and once again faded away from the frame of Italian movies.

This chapter is based on the five major Italian movies on Chinese themes produced between 2006 and 2011: *La stella che non c'è* (*The Missing Star*, 2006), *Two Tigers* (2007), *Gomorra* (*Gomorrhah*, 2008), *Io Sono Li* (*Shun Li and the Poet*, 2011), and *L'arrivo di Wang* (*The Arrival of Wang*, 2011). Through examination of the characterization, plots and DVD covers of the five Italian movies produced in 2006-2011, the chapter analyzes the perpetuation and transmission of stereotypes about the Chinese people, as most Chinese characters are generally identified either with the problems they have as victims, or with the problems they cause as villains. The chapter also reveals the common patterns with which the images of Chinese are constructed, and explores major socio-cultural factors underpinning the stereotypical portrayals, such as patriarchy, ethnocentrism, as well as the resurgence of yellow peril ideology provoked by Chinese immigration issues in Italy.

### **Section 3.1: Female Victims**

From 2006 to 2011, Chinese actresses have played major roles in three Italian movies: *La stella che non c'è* (*The Missing Star*, 2006), *Due Tigri* (*Two Tigers*, 2007), and *Io Sono Li* (*Shun Li and the Poet*, 2011). The small number of Italian movies on Chinese women means that the contributions of the three selected Italian movies are likely to be powerful in cultivating images of Chinese women in Italy. Unfortunately, *The Missing Star*, *Two Tigers* and *Shun Li and the Poet* rarely present portrayals of Chinese women that counter or extend the prevalent images. On the contrary, they take advantage of stereotypes which will be readily understood by the audiences, repeatedly assigning the stock character of “damsel in

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<sup>66</sup> See Guy Dinmore's report “Immigrants abandoning recession-hit Italy” on *Financial Times*, and Paolo Brogi's article “Crisi e affari, i cinesi lasciano l'Italia serrande chiuse nella China Town di Roma” on *Corriere della Sera*.

distress” to Chinese actresses.

### **Chinese Damsels in Distress and White Hero/Heroine**

As a classic archetype in world literature, the “damsel in distress” is usually a beautiful young woman who is placed in a dire predicament and requires a hero to rescue her. In the conventional plot, the damsel is usually a blue-blooded young woman imprisoned in a castle or cave, and the hero can usually convince her to marry him after the rescue. Although the three Italian movies do not completely follow the conventional plot, their Chinese damsels are indeed portrayed as passive, even backward members of the underclass who are cast as victims in their own lives.

The damsel in *The Missing Star*, Liu Hua, was born in a poor, remote village in Western China, where people’s living conditions had not yet been improved by the modernization and economic development of China. More fortunate than Shun Li and Lin, Liu Hua has the chance to go to college, but due to her poor academic performance, she is assigned to study the Italian language, which she sees as an undesirable major. For some reason, she drops out of university and jumps into the labor market. After losing her job as an Italian-Chinese interpreter, she does odds and ends in a library in Shanghai, struggling to make a living with her meager income. Most of her peers and friends are also migrant workers living in overcrowded apartments. In her private life, Liu Hua’s status as an unwed mother causes her further difficulty. The painfulness of her position, and her history of failed relationships, become clear to the audience in a discussion she has with Vincenzo about her son Shaolin. Sitting in her grandmother’s dilapidated house, Liu Hua complains to Vincenzo about China’s controversial One-Child Policy, enforced through large fines, which causes some poor people to either hide or abandon their extra children. Her concerns about the policy and the fact that she has to conceal her undocumented son in her rural hometown imply that Shaolin is an unwanted child abandoned by his biological father, who probably favors another child born in

a different romantic relationship. The lives of Liu Hua's parents are never mentioned in the movie, but she reveals that she has only her grandmother to turn to for help, and she also confesses that she deeply regrets having disappointed her parents. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that her parents are dead or have cut off their relationship with her out of frustration at her poor life decisions. With devastating failures in school, work, family, and relationships, Liu Hua feels so shattered that she almost accepts her supposed fate and gives up efforts to start over. Her depression is clearly demonstrated when she claims that her entire life is a mistake.<sup>67</sup>

Like Liu Hua, the damsel Shun Li in *Shun Li and the Poet* is also a single mother suffering a painful separation from her son. With the hope that she would be able to make a brighter future for her son in Europe, Shun Li moved to Italy and left her son in China with her father. In order to reunite with her son, she must first work off the debt that she owes to the Chinese brokers who paid her way to Italy, and then she must raise enough income to eventually bring her son over. Until her debt is extinguished, she is essentially a captive in the system of modern indentured servitude, under the control of Chinese businessmen. At the story's outset, Shun Li lives in cramped quarters and endures long hours in a textile factory on the outskirts of Rome. She appears to be a lone, reticent, and almost emotionless manual worker. The camera captures her standing alone on a balcony in early morning, silently producing shirts in a noisy workshop, and quietly walking with the flow of pedestrians in a crowded street. Her only conversation before she leaves Rome occurs when her boss abruptly informs her of her new job assignment. Even in this dialogue, Shun Li only says a few words to inquire how long the work may last. However, Shun Li's vibrant and ebullient letters to her family reveal that her coldness and quietness do not reflect her true personality, but rather function as her silent protest against her torturous reality.

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<sup>67</sup> In the film, Liu Hua says to Vincenzo, "io (sono) venuta al mondo storta." The official Italian subtitle for the line is "Io sono nata storta," while the official English subtitle is "I came into the world crooked."



Other than her large debt, lack of freedom, and separation from her family, Shun Li's anguish is further compounded by her loneliness and incompatibility with the community of Chinese workers. The film's opening scene sheds light on Shun Li's great passion for poetry, as she enacts a floating candle ceremony in a bathtub and recites an ancient poem on the Dragon Boat Festival to commemorate renowned Chinese poet Qu Yuan. Her lovely ritual is soon rudely interrupted by a drunken Chinese male coworker, who comes into the bathroom and laughs at her. In a close-up, we see Shun Li remain in silence with her eyes closed in distaste at the sound of the man urinating in the toilet right behind her. When the camera follows the man out of the bathroom, it shows that several Chinese workers are drinking, smoking, trash talking, and gambling in drab and oppressive tenements. Obviously, Shun Li's humanistic spiritual pursuits do not mesh with the aimless life of her vulgar Chinese coworkers, who just muddle along. Leaving Rome on a rainy day, Shun Li arrives in Chioggia where she starts tending bar at a waterside tavern frequented mostly by local fishermen. The new position requires her to quickly cross the language barrier, and it challenges her ability to deal with the Italian customers who are reluctant to accept her. Shun Li is as bewildered by the new environment as the crusty male customers are bemused by her quietly exotic presence. Even though most Italians living in the town know very little about China, her arrival soon elicits the xenophobic hatred against Chinese immigrants. Shun Li always masks herself with a smile at work; however, she inevitably feels anxious and powerless when facing exploitation, xenophobia, cultural alienation, and isolation from family.

Of these three Chinese female characters, Lin is the most secretive; her family background is never mentioned in *Two Tigers*. Unlike the female leads of the other two movies, Lin does not need to worry about financial problems, as we can see her clients bring her large sums of money in exchange for her sexual services. However, although Lin lives a

convenient life in a beautiful condo in Shanghai, she is deeply embarrassed and self-conscious about her degrading work as a prostitute. In one scene, after gladly telling her friend Gilda that they share much in common, Lin apologizes immediately because she worries that comparing herself to Gilda may be perceived as offensive. Besides her discontent with her profession, Lin is also trapped in a dangerous romantic relationship, an affair with a middle-aged European man named Michel Ducroix. At first, Michel appears to be a married man who is planning to divorce his wife in London and start a new life with Lin. As the story develops, though, we discover that Michel is actually a swindler who has defrauded a company of thirty million dollars and is being chased by professional killers hired by the company he has defrauded. He does not have a wife, although he is planning to marry an English aristocrat in London so as to protect himself from his enemy's revenge. To Michel, Lin is nothing but a diversion, a free channel in which to release his sexual desire. Before Lin even knows the truth about Michel, she has been listed as a target for assassination by the criminal organization because she is considered Michel's relative.

Because of their prescribed powerlessness and submissiveness, Liu Hua, Shun Li, and Lin demonstrate similar tolerance of their serious life predicament, but they show no ability or active attempts to break through the barriers. With the hope of improving their living conditions, they have to seek help from other people. However, in the movies, their compatriots are portrayed either as incapable of helping them, as indifferent to their problems, or even as victimizers who cause their suffering. Such an environment is an ideal setting in which the white hero can appear. Each movie stages several encounters between the western heroes and their Chinese "damsels in distress"; these encounters shape the power relationship between western superiority and eastern backwardness.

In *The Missing Star*, Vincenzo and Liu Hua first meet in Italy when the former crashes the Chinese delegation's dinner party to warn these foreign buyers that a control unit in the

furnace is defective. In this meeting, the power relationship between Vincenzo and Liu Hua is predetermined by their professional relationship: he is striving to deliver an important message to Chinese delegates for whom she works as an interpreter. With autonomy, clear objectives, and strong determination, Vincenzo actively takes the dominant position. Meanwhile, Liu Hua's job requires her to translate and convey Vincenzo's message, which automatically assigns her a subordinate position that follows Vincenzo's lead and helps him achieve his goal. The power relationship between these two characters is soon reinforced and justified by Vincenzo's language proficiency and technician expertise, which grant him the authority to judge Liu Hua's working performance. Impatient with her slow and inaccurate translation, he chastises her, takes her dictionary, and communicates directly with the leader of the Chinese delegation. The reproaches from the authoritative Vincenzo embarrass Liu Hua and later cost her the job. Compared with Vincenzo's powerful expression of autonomy and spontaneity, Liu Hua's reactions explicitly demonstrate her submissiveness. Bearing the criticism, she stands up and silently leaves the room. The camera later captures her sobbing alone in the rain outside the building.

Because Vincenzo and Liu Hua set off on the wrong foot, when he tracks her down in a library in Shanghai, she is resistant to his approach, pretending not to know him and only speaking Chinese to him. Here Liu Hua's refusal of Vincenzo's request challenges the power relationship previously established between the two. However, once Vincenzo reveals the motive of his trip in China, Liu Hua is immediately moved by his genuine concerns and ends her childish revenge. She still seems cold and reserved in front of him, but only in a staged way, as she not only tells him when the train departs for Wuhan, but also gives up her work in Shanghai and jumps into the wild chase with him. With his moral high ground, Vincenzo defends and retains his dominant role in the relationship. Meanwhile, Liu Hua has to accept his request and keep following his lead as her refusal would be morally indefensible. Some

critics believe that Liu Hua reluctantly agrees to accompany Vincenzo and that she looks at his offer as a well-paying job. I disagree with such interpretation. Liu Hua sets out to find the elusive factory voluntarily without even a verbal contract with Vincenzo; therefore, she has completely no clue whether she will get paid. Until the train is half way to Wuhan, they have their first discussion on her payment in which Liu Hua does not seem to care how much money she can make out of this journey; instead, she just tells Vincenzo to pay whatever he wants to pay.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, later in the movie, after learning about Liu Hua's own personal struggles, Vincenzo tries to convince her to quit and stay with her family. When hearing Vincenzo say "why are you doing this? I haven't given you a cent," Liu Hua is very upset as her good intention has been misunderstood as desire for money. She angrily stares at him and responds slowly and sarcastically: "Pay me right now! Not a small number, a huge amount! Give me all you have!"<sup>69</sup> These two scenarios both indicate that payment is not Liu Hua's major concern when she starts helping Vincenzo with his search. In short, Liu Hua's decision to set off with Vincenzo clearly reflects her acceptance of his dominant status.

The first meeting between Bepi and Shun Li is less dramatic, but it also manages to show the power differential between them. On Shun Li's first day of work in the tavern, Bepi comes in and orders a coffee with prune liqueur. With her poor Italian vocabulary, Shun Li does not completely understand his order, so she serves him a cup of coffee without liqueur. Bepi goes behind the bar, takes the liqueur off the shelf, shows her the image of prune on the label, patiently repeats to her the brand name in Italian, and pours a measure into his coffee. When Shun Li thanks him for teaching her, Bepi takes a sip of his drink and gently suggests

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<sup>68</sup> On their trip to Wuhan, Liu Hua and Vincenzo have the following discussion:

Liu Hua: "Quanto mi dai di soldi? (How much will you pay me?)"

Vincenzo: "Quelli che vuoi. (The amount you want.)"

Liu Hua: "Quanto dici tu va bene. (Pay what you want.)"

<sup>69</sup> The original conversation is in Italian. Vincenzo says, "Ma tu perché lo fai? Non ti ho dato neanche un soldo." Liu Hua responds, "Tu paghi me adesso! Non pochi soldi, tanti! Tutti quelli che puoi!"

her to serve hotter coffee in the future. In their first encounter, Bepi plays the role of a mentor who gives Shun Li help and advice on her job. This mentorship is built upon Bepi's superior mastery of the Italian language as well as his greater familiarity with the tavern, which are both important categories of knowledge for which Shun Li longs. When Bepi sits down with his friends, Shun Li comes to collect a debt from some clients at the table. Bepi does not show up his fellow fishermen, who pretend that they are not the people whose names Shun Li reads out. Bepi's tacit cooperation with the local regular clients hints at their long-term friendship. When Shun Li gives up dunning and walks away, Bepi creates an impromptu doggerel verse about her- "She came from the East to serve my people; she does not speak Italian well, but she seizes money firmly in hand"<sup>70</sup> - which makes all his Italian friends burst into laughter. Compared with Shun Li who speaks slow and clumsy Italian, Bepi is not only capable of conversing fluently with Italians, but he is also able to play on words to entertain his local fellows. In contrast to Shun Li's alienation and loneliness, Bepi has long been accepted by the local community and is largely assimilated into Italian culture after living there for thirty years.

In *Two Tigers*, Gilda first meets Lin in the hallway of their apartment building when the latter sees a client out the door. At the moment, the two female characters only make brief eye contact and do not exchange a word. Soon after, Gilda finds that she can peep into Lin's bedroom from her own balcony, and apparently likes to take advantage of it. From the perspective of Gilda, the camera captures some erotic scenes in which Lin has sex with her clients. Intrigued by what is happening next door, Gilda once leans her body in order to get a clearer view, but accidentally shoves a flowerpot off her balcony. Lin, now aware of the peeping neighbor, continues her affairs as normal, without a hint of discomfort. In the

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<sup>70</sup> The translation is made by me. In the movie, the original Italian line is: "è venuta dall'Oriente, per servire la mia gente; parla poco italiano, ma gli schei tiene bene in mano." The English subtitle in DVD says "she came from the East to serve man and beast, her Italian is not great, but she keeps accounts straight."

snooping sequences, Gilda plays the role of surrogate for the audience, while Lin is objectified as an exotic female body open to the wilful observations and judgments of the viewers. Figured as a seductress who provides visual pleasure, Lin also absolves Gilda and the movie audience of the guilt of voyeurism by displaying composure under their gaze.

After presenting Gilda and Lin's relationship as one of active observer and submissive subject, the movie moves on, in Gilda's next two encounters with Lin, to highlighting Gilda's power and strength. When two robbers break into Lin's apartment, Gilda quickly comes over and subdues the two bandits. Appreciating Gilda's life-saving intervention, Lin offers Gilda a tour of a dojo where local people receive martial arts training. Lin's martial arts teacher, who demonstrates overwhelming superiority in a practice fight with Lin, invites Gilda to practice with him. Correctly anticipating the master's moves, Gilda gracefully dodges his attacks and effortlessly knocks him down twice. With armed thugs and Kong Fu master as foil, Gilda shows her incredible strength and earns the dominant role of the femme fatale. Lin quickly accepts Gilda's superiority. Shortly after the scene where Lin is saved by Gilda and witnesses the heroine's superior physical power, Lin comes to Gilda's apartment looking for company and solace. Soon, the audience sees Lin lying in Gilda's arm as the two watch TV on a couch. The pose of the two characters illustrates their power relationship, in which Gilda is dominant and active while Lin is submissive and passive. In another scene, Lin cannot stand the sound of a client snoring in her bedroom, so she comes to Gilda's apartment again. Sitting down with Gilda, Lin starts pouring out her heart and her woes. Her eagerness to share with Gilda the struggles in her secret romantic relationship indicates her reliance on the latter.

In terms of characterization, the three movies share many similarities. After portraying Liu Hua, Shun Li, and Lin as damsels in distress who are stuck as powerless victims in their own lives, the movies introduce white heroes whose superiority to the Chinese damsels is manifested in several staged scenarios.

## Rescue of Chinese Damsels in Distress

Although the Chinese women seem cold and reserved when the white heroes first come onstage, the women soon accept these powerful and humane white soul mates and start displaying the softness and elusive charm that they have previously hidden inside. In the three movies, after the power relationships are fully established, the plots mainly revolve around the process of the western heroes' understanding, acceptance, and rescue of their Chinese damsels. In these actions, the different natures of the heroes and damsels are highlighted to justify and reinforce the power relationships.

In *The Missing Star*, Vincenzo's relationship with his Chinese guide Liu Hua grows deeper as they reach many dead ends in their search for the faulty furnace. Because this is a road-movie, the journey outweighs the destination in importance. However, the meaning of the journey is different for the two characters. The complex chase for the furnace provides a pretext for Vincenzo to demonstrate his heroism by overcoming obstacles, while Liu Hua finds in the journey the redemption for which she has been yearning. Before Vincenzo finds Liu Hua in China, she has followed many wrong turns in her life journey and ended up trapped as a poor single mother with no degree or stable job. Vincenzo's arrival in China enables her to escape from that problematic life. At the beginning of their journey, Liu Hua is eager to prove to herself that her life is not a complete mistake and that she can still accomplish something right and meaningful. She thus exhibits an overly strong desire for control, trying to collect information and make decisions all by herself without communicating with Vincenzo. This is attributable to the psychological defense mechanism of overcompensation, the attempt to make up for an undesirable character trait by exaggerating its opposite. In order to convince herself that she has gotten over her weakness, insecurity, and lack of confidence, she simply switches to the other extreme. This manic personality change only causes chaos and indicates that she is not able to accept her real self.

Fortunately, in their long trip across the country, Liu Hua learns more about the humane concerns of Vincenzo who gives her the acceptance that she so desperately desires. She gradually lets her guard down and begins to reveal to him the vulnerability that she has previously hidden inside. In a key moment, after being verbally abused by a Chinese man who considers her to be a prostitute selling service to Vincenzo, Liu Hua feels wronged and falls into Vincenzo's arms for consolation. As Liu Hua's only physical contact with a man in the entire movie, the firm embrace is an important symbol of her close relationship with Vincenzo. Later in their trip, Liu Hua brings Vincenzo to her rural hometown to take a rest; the act shows that she has so much faith in him that she is no longer afraid to show him her illegal son and miserable past. As their relationship develops, Liu Hua completely gives up her attempts to take the lead. When the two are stuck in the Gobi Desert, Liu Hua sits on a mound, sobbing, reviews her life, and candidly discloses to Vincenzo all of her problems. The retrospective confession symbolizes her acceptance of her weakness and her subordinate role. It is also the moment when she completely relinquishes the leading position to Vincenzo.

Vincenzo, taking back control of the search, also apparently gains the right to make decisions for Liu Hua. Without asking her permission, he leaves money in her bag as payment and sends her home while she is napping on a truck. The scenario suggests that Vincenzo has no faith in Liu Hua's capability of making rational decisions, and that he knows better than her what is good for her and her family. Hence, in order for Vincenzo to successfully rescue the damsel, he has to make plans for her regardless of her own thoughts. Liu Hua's later reactions are evident that Vincenzo has made the right choice. When Vincenzo finally completes his quest, he finds Liu Hua sitting demurely at the train station, waiting for him. Here Liu Hua is no longer the stubborn and aggressive figure that she was in the first half of the film. She has become a timid, thoughtful, and soft-spoken woman who appreciates all that Vincenzo has done for her. When Liu Hua asks Vincenzo to fix a toy for



her son, he gently replies, “Once toys got fixed; now we toss them out, like our shoes. *We*’ll buy him a new one.”<sup>71</sup> Here the broken old toy serves as a metaphor of Liu Hua’s burden, her painful past. As the times change, Liu Hua must stop regretting her past mistakes and focus on creating a brighter future. By using the first person plural subject pronoun “we,” Vincenzo implies that he will maintain a close relationship with Liu Hua and her son. Understanding the warm message in Vincenzo’s words, Liu Hua bashfully smiles and lowers her head.

The redemption that Vincenzo brings to Liu Hua is two-fold. First, his kindly acceptance encourages her to bravely face her painful past and embrace her weakness. Second, his company and protection in the future will support her as she starts over and creates a better life. The basis of Vincenzo’s successful rescue of Liu Hua seems, in the end, to be his correct understanding of Liu Hua’s personality and needs. This point is implied in the last shot of the film. Liu Hua raises her face and softly asks Vincenzo in Chinese, “Is it very difficult to find the factory?” Without any clue or interpretation, Vincenzo correctly understands her question and answers in Italian: “No, no, it worked out fine. I was lucky.”<sup>72</sup> In this surreal, romanticized scene, even a language barrier cannot prevent Vincenzo from completely understanding his damsel.

In *Shun Li and the Poet*, the development of the relationship between the two major characters is accelerated by Bepi’s assertiveness. At a fellow fisherman’s retirement party, Bepi manifests his thoughtfulness as he is the only person who prepares a gift to comfort and cheer up the newly retired friend. Shun Li is so moved by Bepi’s tenderness at the party that she smiles happily at him after they drink a toast. After the party, Bepi actively engages Shun

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<sup>71</sup> Emphasis on “We” is added by me. Vincenzo says in Italian, “Una volta I giocattoli si aggiustava, ora si buttano, come le scarpe. Ne compreremo uno nuovo. (Once toys got fixed, now we toss them out, like our shoes. We’ll buy him a new one.)”

<sup>72</sup> Liu Hua says in Chinese: “找到那个工厂，是不是很难？” Vincenzo replies in Italian, “No, no, è andato tutto bene. Sono stato fortunato.”

Li in a conversation by reintroducing himself as a Yugoslavian immigrant and comparing their common Communist backgrounds. His friendly openness makes her feel comfortable enough to reveal her secrets to him the next day. She shows him photos of her family in China and sobbingly discloses her painful separation from her son. During this conversation, Shun Li finally takes off her smiling disguise and shows her loneliness and vulnerability to Bepi in whom she finds a reliable ally. After that, a comfortable bond develops between Bepi and Shun Li, and their growing affection leads to a little rendezvous.

After Bepi discovers the emotional fallout of Shun Li's displacement, Bepi attempts to bring her redemption according to her needs. To ease Shun Li's homesickness, Bepi invites her to his rented flat so that she can make an international call to her son in China. Knowing that she is from a family of fishermen and loves water, Bepi takes her out to fish on his boat. Feeling so excited and comfortable with Bepi's company, Shun Li shows her liveliness on his boat, and teaches him a sweet Chinese nursery rhyme while they are fishing together. Later, Bepi brings Shun Li to his fishing hut in the middle of the sea, where she stands in the sun with her face turned upward and her eyes closed, experiencing true release. Thanks to the tranquil atmosphere created by Bepi, Shun Li finds the precious serenity that temporarily relieves the stress and anxiety in her everyday life. Moreover, Bepi reinforces their bond through their common passion for poetry. Bepi is intrigued to hear that Shun Li has deep respect for a great Chinese poet, Qu Yuan, whose death anniversary is commemorated every year by placing floating candle-lit paper lanterns on water. One day, when rain floods Chioggia's canals and seeps into the buildings, Bepi floats a little candle in the tavern and exchanges a knowing smile with Shun Li who is amused by the warm scene. Nicknamed "Poet" because of his penchant for whimsical verses, Bepi also writes a love poem for Shun Li. Different from the doggerel that he created at their first meeting, this verse<sup>73</sup> is full of

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<sup>73</sup> Following is the poem that Bepi writes for Shun Li. The English translation in parenthesis is made by me.  
Tutti i fiumi scendono al mare (All rivers flow to the sea),

graceful romantic imagery and tender humane concerns, honestly conveying Bepi's poetic affection for Shun Li.

Bepi's dominant assertiveness is also manifested in his physical contacts with Shun Li. In the progression of their mostly platonic connection, the two characters only have intimate contact twice, and both instances are initiated by Bepi. The first one occurs when Bepi and Shun Li sit side by side on the fishing raft under the sun. Bepi lays his hand on Shun Li's shoulder and gently pulls her into his arms. She submissively leans into his embrace, where she seeks solace. Their second physical contact happens when Bepi brings his love poem to Shun Li as a gift. Although Shun Li clearly tells Bepi that she does not want to marry him, she still accepts the gift with gratitude. After she sentimentally recites the verse, Bepi stares at her affectionately and gently strokes her face. Despite the pointed claim that she made just a moment ago, Shun Li does not resist; she once again accepts Bepi's approach. These scenes present an explicit portrait of the two characters' immense mutual affection, highlighting the active actions of the white male character as well as the passivity and submissiveness of the Chinese woman. In a letter to her family, Shun Li writes about her interesting findings: the Italian word for the restless "sea" is masculine while the Italian word for the calm "lagoon" is feminine. This comparison serves as a metaphorical manifestation of the power relationship between the active Bepi and the passive Shun Li.

When the burgeoning affection between the old fisherman and the Chinese barmaid becomes fuel for gossip, both characters face the disapprobation of their respective communities. Bepi's friends begin to talk about him behind his back and express their disapproval to him, for they see the Chinese as alien invaders who are bent on ruling the

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senza poterlo riempire (but cannot fill it).  
C'è un vento freddo (There is a wind that is cold),  
ma scalda il cuore (but it warms the heart).  
Fa sorridere Li (Make Li smile),  
come un piccolo fiore (like a little flower).

world. While the local community foments distrust of and paranoia about Chinese immigrants, Shun Li's Chinese employers warn her to break off contact with Bepi because they want to maintain a low profile in the town. These Chinese brokers threaten to move her to another city where she would have to start paying off her debt all over again. Bepi and Shun Li behave very differently in dealing with the external pressure imposed on their fragile relationship. When Bepi's fellow fishermen friends become prejudiced anti-Chinese cynics and even unite with an undesirable local bully in publically condemning the interracial relationship, Bepi bravely defends his love at risk of losing his local chums, and eventually has a physical clash with the obnoxious young bully. On the other hand, when Shun Li finds herself torn between her affection for Bepi and her deep longing to be with her son, she quickly succumbs to pressure and abruptly ends her relationship with Bepi. When she realizes that Bepi has become an outcast to his former friends and that he keeps running into conflicts with local people because of her, Shun Li decides to accept her brokers' offer to displace her, even though it means she must restart paying her debt from zero in another place. Her hope is that, after her departure, Bepi can return to his normal, peaceful life. The two characters' different reactions to the crisis in their treasured relationship reflect their distinct personality traits. Bepi is a brave warrior who can face challenges and fight under pressure, while Shun Li is a powerless and submissive victim who easily surrenders and tends to avoid conflicts by sacrificing herself. As such, the failure of Bepi's attempts to rescue Shun Li is attributable to the latter's quick compromise, rather than to a mistake on Bepi's part.

As an action film, *Two Tigers* has a much thinner plot than the other two movies. In the first half of the film, Gilda earns the dominant role by virtue of her physical strength; however, in the second half, the power relationship is justified and enforced on the basis of the information imbalance between the two characters. Gilda has a faster and more reliable network than Lin, which enables her to get accurate information in a timely fashion. Before

Lin finds herself in danger, Gilda already knows about her fatal plight. When Lin still believes that her lover Michele is just a normal businessman, Gilda has already discovered his real identity and criminal record. After Lin kills her lover out of anger, Gilda is able to immediately make a plan to help Lin escape to a shelter overseas. Because of Lin's lack of access to the information that is critical to her decision-making, she has to follow Gilda's lead in order to survive. This plot undoubtedly reinforces the power relationship between the two characters, highlighting the superiority of Gilda and the backwardness of Lin.

To sum up, because of the Chinese female characters' innate passivity and submissiveness, the white heroes assume the dominant roles in their respective relationships. After discovering their Chinese partners' troubles, Vincenzo, Bepi and Gilda all provide their Chinese damsels with acceptance and a chance to escape from the anguish of life. Although the three stories of rescue have different endings, both the success of Vincenzo and Gilda and the failure of Bepi serve to highlight the submissive nature of Chinese females, which in turn justifies the dominance of the westerners.

### **An Exception among the Chinese Damsels**

An exceptional Chinese female character is Lian, a supporting female character shown in *Shun Li and the Poet*. As Shun Li's roommate, Lian is a taciturn and secretive young woman. When Shun Li just arrives at the dorm, Lian does not seem to be very enthusiastic in greeting the new comer. However, as the story develops, Lian turns out to be a kind-hearted, considerate person who helps Shun Li in various ways. When Shun Li shows interest in the landscape pictures taken by Lian, Lian generously allows her to pick what she likes. When Shun Li is exhausted after a hard day of work, Lian helps her relax, giving her a back massage. When Shun Li feels upset and stressed due to the pressure over her interracial relationship with Bepi, Lian gives her hugs and comforts her. When Shun Li is forced to leave Chioggia and has to pay the Chinese brokers all over again, Lian pays the debt for Shun

Li so that Shun Li can be liberated from the indenture system and reunite with her son. Although Lian plays a pretty important role in the plot, the film never directly tells the audience her life story. Lian is only shown walking somewhere every night to work and performing tai chi alone by the water during her spare time. Tai chi is a type of Chinese martial art widely known for its benefits in enhancing psychological health and helping people find inner peace. Hence, Lian's practice of tai chi in the film actually hints at her own struggle with inner trauma. Moreover, Lian's struggle is also expressed in her sad statement that some water is stuck in laguna and will never be able to return to the ocean. At the end of the movie, when Shun Li returns to Chioggia looking for Lian, the latter has left the town and no one knows where she went. Eventually, Shun Li can only sit on Lian's bed, softly strokes Lian's pillow, saying thank you to the air. Despite the stereotypical self-scarifying ending, Lian is depicted in the movie as a very independent woman who handles plight all by herself and never seeks help from others. Although Lian is also a victim, her portrayal is not associated with the weakness or passiveness assigned to the other Chinese female characters. Instead, Lian's character is linked with strength, determination, and selfless redemption.

Even though this exceptional character still contains some stereotypical traits, the characterization of Lian reflects the filmmakers' valiant attempts to portray the Chinese in ways that challenge the prevalent depictions. However, in the recent Italian movies on Chinese themes, such attempts are still so rare and outnumbered by the frequent use of stereotypical depictions.

### **Section 3.2: Male Villains**

Regardless of their marked stylistic differences, the recent Italian movies on Chinese themes released between 2006 and 2011 interestingly share a similar pattern of characterization that repeatedly cast Chinese actors as Hollywood-style "Evil Chinaman".

The characters assigned to Chinese men in recent Italian movies generally turn out to be copies of early-year Hollywood negative stereotypes of the Chinese, such as Fu Manchu in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), and Henry Chang in *Shanghai Express* (1932). The Chinese male villains in recent Italian movies either remind the audience of Fu Manchu's cruelty, wickedness, and hatred for the West, or recall memories of Henry Chang's image of the lascivious, predatory, and misogynist male chauvinist.

In addition to duplicating the prototypes of Fu Manchu and Henry Chang, the movies under discussion often associate the less villainous Chinese male characters with undesirable qualities or/and disastrous endings, presenting them as stereotypical troublemakers who bring about problems and misfortune.

Despite the utilitarian necessity of filmmakers' use of stereotypes in their art, attention should be brought to the misuse of stereotypical imagery and its delimiting and social impact, because such system of delimitations prevents dimensional development and aesthetic continuity in the creation of Asian characters (Wong 10). Additionally, repetitiveness of stereotypes can maintain unfavorable images, whereby the consistency and authority of the stereotypes are assumed to be almost like a biological fact (Lippmann 93). Hence, the repeated negative representations of Chinese men in the recent Italian movies are worthy of concern, as to support, justify, and reinforce the yellow peril prejudice against the Chinese.

### **“Fu Manchu” Style Evil Chinaman**

As one of the earliest and most durable Asian arch-villains in motion picture, Fu Manchu “represented the incarnations of the yellow peril in the Oriental crusade to conquer the world” (Xing 57). In the movie series of Fu Manchu, the opposition between West and East is set up as a conflict between good and evil, and Fu Manchu is presented as evil incarnate, with his cruelty, his hatred of Westerners and Western civilization, as well as his

hunger for wealth, power, and world domination.<sup>74</sup> According to Richard Oehling, Fu Manchu symbolized three main strands of Westerners' racial fears: Asian mastery of Western knowledge and technique; his access to mysterious Oriental "occult" powers; and his ability to mobilize the yellow hordes (Oehling 204).

Among the Chinese villains recently portrayed by Italian filmmakers, Mr. Wang in the Manetti brothers' *The Arrival of Wang* is the most similar to the Fu Manchu prototype, in terms of their shared characteristics and symbolic meanings. While Fu Manchu possesses three degrees from top European universities in chemistry, medicine, and physics, Wang can apply advanced alien technology. Although Wang cannot hypnotize his victims with his eyes as Fu Manchu does, the Chinese-speaking alien is a highly competent deceiver capable of convincing his Italian translator Gaia and many spectators in cinema of his kindness and benevolent mission. Moreover, like Fu Manchu, whose evil ambitions are supposedly supported by the large population of Asians, Wang also relies his conspiracy to conquer the Earth on the military support from other aliens from his planet. In a word, despite Wang's appearance as an extra-terrestrial figure with green skin and tentacles, this Chinese-speaking alien invader has many similarities with Fu Manchu. In order to blur Wang's racial identity and avoid direct reference to the Chinese, the Manetti brothers take advantage of the science-fiction genre, and transform the body of Chinese actor Li Yong, who plays the role of Wang, into a computer graphic alien figure in post-production. However, the Manetti brothers also seem to worry that the audiences may overlook Wang's allusion to the Chinese, so they deliberately highlight Wang's highly recognizable, racially inflected traits, including his name and language, in the movie's title and plot.

The importance of linguistic traits in racial identification cannot be overestimated. The influence of the dehumanized Chinese-speaking Wang is comparable to that of the animated

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<sup>74</sup> See Peter Feng's Screening Asian Americans and Michael Richardson's Otherness in Hollywood Cinema.



animal characters speaking with foreign accents in Hollywood animation movies. As early as 1997, American writer Rosina Lippi-Green has identified Disney animated features as a device for teaching children to discriminate ethnocentrically on the basis of regional or foreign accents.<sup>75</sup> Sociolinguistic studies have since supported Lippi-Green's argument that children who view negative portrayals of characters enhanced by character accents are likely to adopt negative attitudes towards those who possess the accents portrayed.<sup>76</sup> Research also shows that the misrecognition can have long-term impacts on viewers.<sup>77</sup> Certainly, children are not the major audience of *The Arrival of Wang*, but the power of media inputs in shaping social conception is not confined to the youth. One important feature of visual imagery is its power to spark free association or mental leaps from concept to concept without the viewer's conscious effort or even awareness.<sup>78</sup> Hence, Wang's highly recognizable, racially inflected traits, including his name and language, are very likely to prompt viewers to associate the character with the Chinese people. By associating a scary, evil, and disgusting alien villain with a Chinese name and the Chinese language, *The Arrival of Wang* encourages the audience to incorporate negative perceptions of Chinese-speaking group into their cognitive schemas. The racial misrecognition can be recalled during future processes of identity formation, attribution, and social comparison.

The underlying connections between Wang and the Chinese make it necessary to decode the movie's message about Wang and his racial identity. As the movie reflects the Manetti

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<sup>75</sup> See Rosina Lippi-Green's Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States.

<sup>76</sup> Research findings are included in the following articles: Anjali Pandey's Ph.D. thesis "Articulating prejudice: A linguistic perspective on animated movies" (1997), Julia Dobrow and Calvin Gridney's "The Good, the Bad and the Foreign: The use of Dialect in Children's Animated Television" in Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (1998), John Edward's "Refining our understanding of language attitudes" in the Journal of Language and Social Psychology (1999), and John Baugh's "Racial identification by speech" on American Speech (2000).

<sup>77</sup> See Stephanie Lindemann's "Who speaks broken English?: U.S. undergraduates' perceptions of nonnative English."

<sup>78</sup> See Scott Coltrane and Melinda Messineo's "The Perpetuation of Subtle Prejudice: Race and Gender Imagery in 1990s Television Advertising."

Brothers' thoughts on the issue of trust,<sup>79</sup> the determined ending of the film demonstrates the conclusion of their exploration. By revealing Wang's real nature as a cunning subversive who has disguised himself to win over the kindhearted Gaia, the ending of the movie seems to teach the audience not to trust the Chinese-speaking aliens/foreigners. This xenophobic message also contains another layer. As the ending appears to legitimize the government agent Curti's cruelty toward Wang, the film implies that civilians should not criticize or defy the government's seemingly arbitrary actions and policies against the aliens (foreigners), because the authorities know these outsiders' evilness and destructiveness better than civilians do, and fight against these "others" for the sake of civilians. By presenting the division between "us (Italians)" and Chinese-speaking others as a dichotomy between good and evil, the plot of *The Arrival of Wang* echoes the prototypical storyline of the Hollywood Fu Manchu series in the 1930s.

Although the characters of the main Chinese villains in *The Missing Star*, *Two Tigers*, and *Shun Li and the Poet* are not ambitious enough to come up with conspiracies to dominate the world or control the Earth, they share with Fu Manchu many traits, such as his cruelty, wickedness, and hunger for wealth and power.

In *The Missing Star*, Xu Xing, the Chinese broker who bought the Italian furnace from Vincenzo's factory and resold it to a Chinese steel plant, is portrayed as a greedy and cold-blooded businessperson who values economic profits more than anything else. After knowing the purpose of Vincenzo's visit to China, Xu Xing does not help Vincenzo find the new owner of the furnace, but strives to retain the hydraulic power pack that Vincenzo wants to deliver. With no concerns about the safety of steel workers, Xu Xing just attempts to conceal the issue from the new owner of the furnace, so that his company may avoid compensating for the quality problem of this sold equipment. As Vincenzo insists on delivering the mechanical

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<sup>79</sup> See Alice Zampa's note of Manetti Brothers' interview with Italian website "Best Movie": "Manetti Bros.: Ecco a voi l'alieno Wang, primo 'Gollum' made in Italy."

component immediately to the new owner, Xu Xing deliberately provides misleading information, which complicates Vincenzo's journey and directs the Italian technician to many dead ends.

As leader of local Chinese criminals, Wang Hua in *Two Tigers* is depicted as the underground ruler of Shanghai. With the movie's setting of an imaginary Chinese "sin city," even the Western detective McWilliam, who chases the assassin Gilda to Shanghai, has to seek support and information from Wang Hua and his thugs. However, the movie later reveals that the cunning Wang Hua and his Chinese gang never sincerely help McWilliam capture Gilda, but rather take advantage of the Western detective's source of information, trying to accomplish their own mission of killing Gilda. Although Wang Hua's conspiracy is eventually discovered by McWilliam and defeated by Gilda, the character's devious and untrustworthy image recalls the villainous qualities of Fu Manchu.

Other than their villainy, the two characters, Xu Xing and Wang Hua, also imitate the appearance of Fu Manchu. They are both portrayed as gaunt, enigmatic, middle-aged Chinese men who speak with a voice dripping with sarcasm and a wicked smile.

The prototype of Fu Manchu is also duplicated in Segre's drama film *Shun Li and the Poet*, where the arch-villains' cruelty, wickedness, and hatred of the West are mainly epitomized by Shun Li's two malicious Chinese bosses. At the beginning of the movie, Shun Li's boss in Rome, an unnamed Chinese garment factory owner, abruptly transfers her to Chioggia without any explanation. Only later in the film is Shun Li informed that, once sent to a new workplace, the indentured worker has to repay all the debts from the very beginning. In other words, her boss in Rome has fooled her, cruelly exploited her, and intentionally made her work for him for free. After moving to Chioggia, Shun Li's fortunes do not change. Her new boss, Mr. Zhao, is cold and selfish. On their first meeting, he only gives her a perfunctory greeting and leaves her looking for her dorm alone with her heavy luggage.

Another day, when Shun Li asks for a half-day off to buy a birthday present for her son, Mr. Zhao refuses as quickly as possible so that he can start enjoying his ice cream sooner. Along with his coldness, Mr. Zhao is depicted as a major cause of the Chinese community's self-isolation in Chioggia. With his strong feeling of xenophobia, Mr. Zhao detests communicating with local people, and forbids his Chinese employees to socialize with Italians. As a result, Mr. Zhao's assistant, a Chinese young man who speaks Italian fluently, never builds any friendship with local residents. Even the regular customers of the tavern do not know his name and have to keep calling him "Cina (China)" or "Cinese (Chinese)". When Shun Li develops a bond with the local fisherman Bepi, Mr. Zhao is very angry and decides to punish her for thwarting him. He threatens to make Shun Li start over again in another place if she does not break up with Bepi. Pressures from Mr. Zhao put an abrupt end to the interracial relationship, resulting in Shun Li's departure and Bepi's tragic and lonely death. To sum up, Shun Li's two Chinese bosses both function as victimizers who keep Shun Li's life miserable, so as to create an environment in which the Western hero Bepi's intervention becomes not only necessary but also urgent. Additionally, Mr. Zhao also serves as an obstacle that Bepi must confront and overcome in his rescue of the Chinese damsel.

### **"Henry Chang" Style Chauvinists**

The Hollywood myth of the evil Chinaman was also played upon Henry Chang in *Shanghai Express* (1932). As Chinese warlord, Chang has in common with Fu Manchu the cruelty and hatred for the West: Chang's special forms of punishment are branding or blinding those who thwart him; as a half-breed, Chang says he is not proud of the white side of his parentage. However, unlike Fu Manchu who is famous for his hunger for wealth and power, Chang is best known for his lust and disrespect for women. In *Shanghai Express*, Chang's pursuit is rebuffed by Shanghai Lily who seeks to rekindle her old romance with the British officer, Doc Harvey. In a rage fueled by sexual frustration and wounded pride, Chang

vents his anger by raping Lily's beautiful and defenseless Chinese companion, Hui Fei. Later in the movie, with the threat to blind Harvey, Chang eventually forces Lily to offer herself in return for her lover's safe release. Chang's prototypical image of the lascivious and predatory Chinese male chauvinist was copied and reinforced in other early Hollywood movies, such as *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) in which General Yen, a powerful Chinese warlord, kidnaps and beguiles Megan Davis, a white woman. As Jonathan Friedman remarks, in Hollywood movies, sexual aggression against white women has become a metaphor for the racial threat posed to Western culture by the "other" (115). Underscoring the racist association of sexual coercion with the Asians, Gary Hoppenstand gives it an added dimension:

The threat of rape, the rape of white society, dominated the action of the yellow formula. The British or American hero, during the course of his battle against the yellow peril, overcame numerous traps and obstacles in order to save his civilization, and the primary symbol of that civilization: the white women .... The yellow peril stereotype easily became incorporated into Christian mythology, and the Oriental assumed the role of devil or demon. The Oriental rape of the white women signified a spiritual damnation for the woman, and at the larger level, white society. (281-282)

The Hollywood sexual coercion narratives also found their way into recent Italian filmic representations, reproducing the lustful and misogynist stereotype of Chinese men, and perpetuating the racist myth of Chinese sexual threats to women, and most importantly, to white women.

George in *Two Tigers* is probably the most faithful Italian copy of Henry Chang. As a Chinese thug in Wang Hua's gang, George stages all his encounters with Gilda, in order to worm his way into her favor, and to keep her under surveillance. Beguiled by the seemingly gentle and humorous George, Gilda eventually brings him home and has sex with him. However, the sexual relationship with Gilda does not grant George to be more charming than Henry Chang, whose pursuit of Lily was repulsed in *Shanghai Express*, because *Two Tigers* presents the bond between Gilda and George as a gender-inverted version of the relationship

between James Bond and the Bond girls. For Gilda, sleeping with George turns out to be nothing more than a sexual adventure, a casual and temporary deviation with very little emotions involved. As a result, when Gilda decides to leave China, she does not inform George. When George finds out the truth, he takes off his disguise, points a pistol at Gilda, and starts beating her cruelly. He does so, partly to prevent her from resisting and escaping, and partly to punish her for not taking him seriously, and for having hurt his pride. In a word, like Henry Chang, George in *Two Tigers* is depicted as a villainous predator of white women, whose deception and coercion pose sexual threats to Western womanhood, and may cause danger of undesirable miscegenation.

*The Missing Star*, and *Shun Li and the Poet* also incorporate in them Chinese male chauvinists who are less lustful than Henry Chang and George, but share with them a misogynist attitude. In *The Missing Star*, when an unnamed Chinese man catches Liu Hua putting her hand on Vincenzo's chest in a dimly-lit hallway, he assumes Liu Hua is a prostitute serving a foreigner, and starts verbally insulting her. Shun Li in *Shun Li and the Poet* is also ill-treated by her Chinese male co-workers. In the opening sequence of the movie, when Shun Li is floating candles in a bathtub as a simplified ceremony to celebrate Poet's Day, a drunk Chinese man comes into the bathroom. He laughs at Shun Li's persistent enacting of Chinese conventional ceremonies, and starts using the toilet in the bathroom regardless of Shun Li's presence. The camera captures Shun Li's face pinch in distaste at the sound of the man urinating not far behind her back. Although these Chinese male villains in *The Missing Star* and *Shun Li and the Poet* commit no physical assault in the movies, they are also presented as threats to all the women, as their misogynist attitudes and behaviors can potentially turn into violence against women.

### **Chinese Troublemakers**

Admittedly, a few Chinese male characters portrayed in the recent Italian movies

produced in 2006-2011 may not be wicked or misogynistic enough to be qualified as copies of Fu Manchu or Henry Chang; however, most of these less villainous characters still fit in a more general objectionable stereotype as Chinese troublemakers.

At the beginning of *The Missing Star*, as the Chinese buyers tour the Italian steel plant, Vincenzo stops a Chinese technician from smoking in the factory, and explains to him the plant's rules against tobacco. Nevertheless, as soon as Vincenzo leaves, the Chinese man immediately takes out another cigarette. Although this habitual Chinese rule-breaker fortunately does not cause an accident in the Italian steel plant, his presence foreshadows the difficult journey awaiting the cautious and self-disciplined Vincenzo in China.

In *The Right Distance*, the Chinese actors are only extras whose roles have very little to do with the movie's main plot. However, the film still takes a sequence of shots to present several supposedly illegal Chinese immigrant workers being taken out from a workshop by the Italian police. Even though the scene is not accompanied by any comment on the situation, the imagery reinforces prejudice against Chinese immigrants, encouraging the viewers to label them as the "clandestini" whose influx in Italy causes social and economic problems.

Matteo Garrone's *Gomorrah* portrays a Chinese entrepreneur, Xian, who hires Pasquale, a very talented Italian tailor working for a Camorra-controlled factory, to secretly train the Chinese workers in his garment workshop. In the movie, Xian is depicted as a skillful businessperson good at using underhanded methods to achieve his goals. For instance, in the two's first meeting, Xian carefully approaches Pasquale at night, and clandestinely tempts the latter to accept his offer by showing high respect and offering a considerable payment. After Pasquale accepts the lucrative offer, Xian requires the Italian tailor to hide in the truck while traveling back and forth to the factory. Nevertheless, despite his devious and prudent nature, Xian is doomed to be a troublemaker, a reason for misfortune. Xian's underhanded

cooperation with Pasquale soon ends up putting both of their lives in danger. Although Pasquale eventually survives the Camorra assassins' drive-by shooting that kills Xian, the Italian tailor has to quit his job in the garment industry and put himself in exile, in order to get out of the reach of the Camorra criminals.

In brief, the recent Italian movies often associate the less villainous Chinese “troublemaker” characters with undesirable attributes or/and tragic endings, prompting the viewers to avoid contact with the ill-fated Chinese.

### **Section 3.3: Chinese Characters on DVD Covers**

It is also interesting to see how the Chinese characters and their power relationships with western co-stars have been represented on the movies' DVD covers. Like the movie posters, the DVD covers are advertisements that highly rely on visual imagery. The presentation of promotional materials (such as major characters and plot) primes the audience to internalize the advertisers' claims about the film. For instance, characters positioned toward the front or center are perceived as the more important figures in the film, so viewers are guided to pay closer attention to these characters. In the same vein, if characters are already framed as heroes or victims on the cover, audience normally starts watching the movies thinking of them as such.





Figure 1 - DVD cover of *The Missing Star*

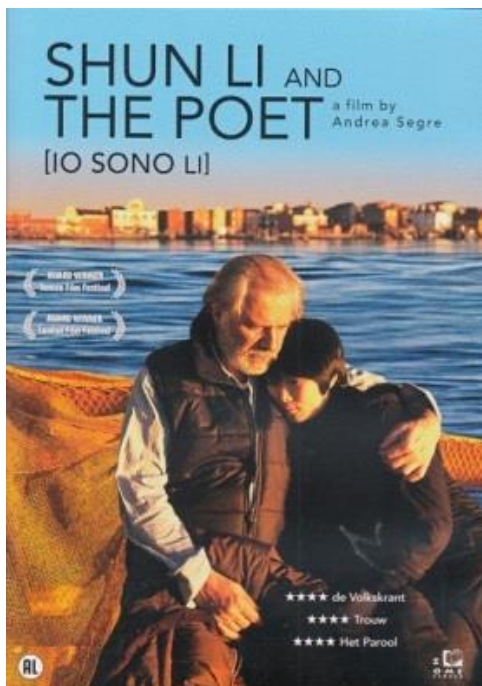


Figure 2 - DVD cover of *Shun Li and the Poet*

The pictures on the DVD covers of *The Missing Star* and *Shun Li and the Poet* share many common traits. With each film's leading actor and actress figured embracing in the

bottom half, the two pictures advertise the common theme of an international romantic relationship between a white man and a Chinese young woman. Both white male characters' faces receive prominent placement in the center of the pictures. The arrangement hints at the male characters' significant role in the plot as well as their dominant power in the relationships. Such power relationships are also illustrated by the poses and facial expressions of the characters. The positions of Vincenzo and Bepi's hands suggest that they actively pulled their female partners towards them, while Liu Hua and Shun Li seem to rest peacefully in their male protectors' cuddle. On the cover of *The Missing Star*, the dark backdrop of repeated and interwoven title treatment signifies the difficulties that the two characters encounter on their journey. Surrounded by darkness, Liu Hua's closed eyes and calm face show a sense of security, which seems to derive from the company and protection of Vincenzo, whose eyes are instead wide open and staring at something behind the audience with a glint of determination. Rather than opt for a melancholy tone, the cover image of *Shun Li and the Poet* employs a brighter hue, presenting the film's two main characters snuggling on a raft floating in the sea. Bepi sits upright in the middle, while Shun Li sits by his side and leans against his chest. An obscured but colorful cityscape looms behind them in the distance. Its mirage-like image serves as a visual metaphor for the wished-for happy ending that the interracial couple can never achieve. Although both characters seem in a daze with their heads lowered, Bepi's actions of hugging and comforting, juxtaposed with his female counterpart's static position, suggest that the male character possesses higher confidence and determination to deal with crisis than his damsel partner, an impression that is echoed in the plot of the film. These DVD covers, used to attract potential customers, evidently portray a relation between a dominant white male and a dependent Chinese female that the studios believe the audience will not only accept but also find palatable.



Figure 3 - DVD cover of *Two Tigers*

On the DVD cover of *Two Tigers*, the white heroine Gilda also occupies the central place. She directly faces the audience, with Lin standing behind her shoulder. The arrangement reflects the two characters' heroine-sidekick relationship, which is reinforced by other agencies in the picture, such as their clothes and weapons. Gilda's body is completely covered by her black dress which blurs her sexuality, while Lin wears a tight shirt and low-slung jeans, exposing her waist and showing the curve of her body. Gilda holds a rifle in hand, preparing to shoot, while Lin is barehanded, raising her fists in a defensive posture. Gilda's professional outfit and powerful weapon endow her with dominant, asexual traits; while the portrayal of Lin highlights her feminine sexuality and her relative weakness. In a word, Lin's standing position, provocative attire and lack of arms guide the audience to perceive her as a secondary character and focus their attention on her costar.

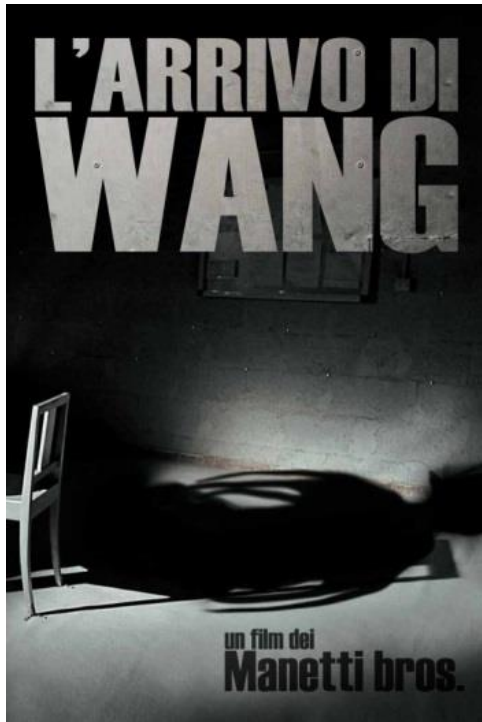


Figure 4 - DVD cover of *The Arrival of Wang* (Italian Version)



Figure 5 - A still from *The Arrival of Wang*



Figure 6 - DVD cover of *The Arrival of Wang* (English Version)

With the complete absence of Chinese male figures on the DVD covers of these Italian movies on Chinese themes, Mr. Wang is the only character played by a Chinese actor that is presented on the movie's cover. On the Italian version, Wang seems to sit outside the picture but casts his squid-like shadow on the floor of a dull interrogation room. The cover intends to create an eerie feeling in the audience. The design of the English version is instead based on a still from the movie. In the scene, government agent Curti is leading the blindfolded Gaia going downstairs to the underground interrogation room. The picture shows Gaia's profile in front, with agent Curti standing by her side, facing the audience, and staring at her with wrinkles in his brows. When the studio transforms the still into the DVD cover, agent Curti's figure is replaced by Wang's alien face looming behind Gaia's profile. The replacement echoes the development of the plot. Although in most part of the movie agent Curti seems to be a cruel, paranoid and annoying person, the twist-ending of the film shows that Wang is the real villain in disguise. Moreover, on the cover, the brightness of Gaia's image and the dark tone of Wang's face serve as a visual metaphor that hints at Gaia's kindness and Wang's

evilness. Both versions of the DVD covers evidently intend to provoke xenophobia in the audience against the Chinese-speaking alien villain.

The DVD covers, considered as simulations of the movies they advertise, have the effect of mediating the consumers' expectations about a film and their experience while viewing. The similar stereotypical portrayals of powerless and submissive Chinese women alongside their strong and dominant western partners on the DVD covers reflect the filmmakers' repeated incorporation of hegemonic patriarchy and Eurocentrism in their movies. At the same time, the representation of a scary Chinese-speaking creature on the cover serves to reinforce the villainous traits of Chinese men.

### **Section 3.4: Behind the Filmic Stereotypes**

In order to organize their knowledge about the world, people tend to create cognitive schemas by sorting and simplifying the information they receive. One of the most common types of schemas used for orientation within the social environment is the stereotype. Internalized and agreed upon by members of a certain group, stereotypes are often considered to be representations of other groups' most typical and fundamental properties. However, a general description of any social, racial, or cultural group runs the risk of overlooking intragroup differences and presenting incomplete and sometimes false images. Accordingly, we must be aware of the limits of stereotypes and continuously examine and challenge the existing ones. Unfortunately, as shown in the previous sections, the stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese have been repeatedly incorporated in recent Italian movies. This phenomenon is worthy of concern, as movies not only give people entertainment, but also affect social life by informing people's perception of normalcy:

Media images provide a diffuse confirmation of one's world view, promote acceptance of current social arrangements, and reassure people that things are the way they ought to be. In social psychological terms, media images become incorporated

into cognitive schema and heuristics, and are called up during processes of identity formation, self-evaluation, attribution, and social comparison. (Coltrane and Messineo 364-365)

As American sociologist Andrea Press notices in her audience studies, viewers do not automatically mimic what they see in movies; however, the imagery they observe does tend to facilitate specific forms of understanding, interpretation, and experience.<sup>80</sup> Psychological studies also show that the more frequently or recently an idea, concept, or word has been encountered, the more likely an individual is to use that piece of information in future decision-making tasks.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the perpetuation and transmission of stereotypes about the Chinese in the recent Italian movies has implications beyond the trends in the movies, as they serve to support and maintain the hegemonic gender and racial ideologies.

Regarding the gender stereotype, the movies highlight males' superiority over females. The patriarchy impacts both Chinese and western female characters. In *The Missing Star* and *Shun Li and the Poet*, Chinese women are portrayed as powerless victims passively waiting to be rescued by their strong male partners. In *The Arrival of Wang*, although Gaia is strong enough to knock down a special agent, she is portrayed as a naïve and less reliable decision-maker as she trusts the evil alien Wang. On the contrary, the special agents, who see through Wang's trick, and the government leaders in headquarter, who organize resistance against alien invasion, are all male. The movie seems to imply that men have better discernment and higher ability in dealing with crisis than women, granting men the leading and dominant positions. Even in *Two Tigers*, the heroine Gilda is not portrayed as completely independent. She must turn to her male supervisor for critical information and seek help from her male mentor, Colin. Although Colin only comes on stage briefly at the end of the movie, the character clearly reveals the filmmaker's patriarchal mindset. First, after highlighting Gilda's

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<sup>80</sup> See Andrea Press's Women watching television: Gender, class, and generation in the American television experience.

<sup>81</sup> See Shelley Taylor and Susan Fiske's "Salience, Attention, and Attribution: Top of the Head Phenomena."

superior power and intelligence over Chinese criminals and Western police, the movie emphasizes that the heroine's knowledge and skills all come from her wise male mentor, Colin. Second, at the end of the film, the two femmes fatales survive the chase of police and criminals, and both come to Colin's sheltered villa where they finally relax under the protection of this reliable white man. The ending scene suggests that the two female "tigers", Gilda and Lin, cannot handle the crisis all by themselves and have to turn to more powerful males. Such characterization and plots are rooted in the patriarchal archetypes in which men play the roles of financial providers, assertive leaders, and strong protectors of the household, while women are dependent followers. However, as feminists point out, the traditional traits of gender characters should not be ascribed once and for all. Today in particular, many families are based on partnership rather than on patriarchy, and women have gained more rights and greater power both at home and in the labor market. In this new social atmosphere, liberated, strong, and independent women definitely deserve the spotlight.

The patriarchy tradition is not the only factor that leads to the characterization of Chinese "damsel in distress" in these recent Italian movies: racial stereotype also plays an important role. Taking *Two Tigers* as an example, the movie has established a racial hierarchy between Gilda, as powerful heroine, and Lin, as her side-kick, which epitomizes the power relationship between a white, superior West and a yellow, backward East (China). Seen in this light, the Chinese "damsel in distress" can also be understood as symbols of Chinese inferiority. Repeatedly, portrayals of Chinese women's weakness serve as foils to the superiority of the Western characters and justify Western dominance. The notion of Chinese inferiority may be attributable to Eurocentrism, which has influenced Italians' perceptions of the Chinese as far back as 1901, when Italy received its colonial concession from the Qing government. In the five decades from 1901 to 1949, Italian diplomats' and journalists' writings about their observations of China and the Chinese generally followed a common



pattern to create a dualist and orientalist discourse that justified Italy's colonial presence in China.<sup>82</sup> On one hand, these influential Italian authors depicted the Chinese as a backward and inferior race; Italian journalist Roberto Suster even concluded in his reportage that Chinese people could not be civilized (36-40). On the other hand, the authors elevated to supremacy the white race, especially Italians, whom they perceived as the direct heirs of Roman civilization. The authors claimed that Italy should revive the glorious Roman Empire by expanding its colonial possessions in China. Notwithstanding the question of whether the writings of Italian colonists faithfully represent the reality of the early twentieth century, China has gone through dramatic social changes and experienced decades of rapid development since the end of the colonial period. Nowadays, the country is regularly hailed as a potential new superpower of the twenty-first century. In this context, it is surprising to see that recent Italian movies still frequently base their plots upon the shopworn power relationship of Westerners-as-superiors and Chinese-as-inferiors.

It is also interesting to see that, in the patriarchal plots, male superiority and dominance are reserved for western men. The Chinese male characters are excluded from dominant positions; they are portrayed either as lacking the ability and intelligence to lead, or as lacking the moral fiber to hold power, that is, as cunning villains who threaten society. The different treatment of white and Chinese men is another instance of racial inequality, which is based on a dichotomy between the good Western men, who build and protect the advanced civilization, and the evil Chinese men, also perceived as "yellow peril", who would attack and wage wars with western societies and eventually wipe them out.

As Edward Said observes, no form of representation is created apart from a political and social context. Although the recent Italian movies on Chinese themes apparently narrate private

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<sup>82</sup> The writings of these Italian diplomats and journalists during Italy's colonial presence in China are mainly texts in descriptive and expository genres, including memoir (Giuseppe Salvago-Raggi's *Ambasciatore del re*), reportage (Roberto Suster's *La Cina repubblica*), diary (Daniele Varè's *Il diplomatico sorridente: 1900-1940*), and travel notes (Luigi Barzini's *Nell'estremo Oriente* and Mario Appeli's *Cina...*).

stories, they still manage to metaphorize the public sphere, where the micro-individual is doubled by the macro-nation, and where the personal and the political, the private and the historical, are inextricably linked as a racial myth, or an “ethnic allegory”, as coined by Fredric Jameson.<sup>83</sup> Such discourses of ethnic or racial representation inevitably involve issues of historical perspective and power relations (Shohat 246). Therefore, a critical analysis of the recent Italian filmic representations of yellow peril ideology requires historicizing the question and evolving articulations of cultural and political power.

Historically, the yellow peril was “rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and the Mongolian invasion of Europe” (2), as Gina Marchetti highlights at the outset of her seminal study on the subject of yellow peril. However, for centuries, China only remained as a remote and imaginary threat with no direct conflicts with the West, so the fear of yellow peril did not rise or become as prevalent as Europe’s widespread terror for the immediate military threats from the Middle East. Compared to its ancient origin, the yellow peril’s several waves of revival in Italy since 1900 are more relevant to the cases analyzed in this article.

In Italy, the first wave of yellow peril’s modern resurgence is associated with the country’s colonial expansion in China. By the end of the nineteenth century, the newly unified Kingdom of Italy was attempting to follow the colonialist trend of the modern European countries surrounding it. When the young state turned its attention to China in 1898, it experienced humiliation at first, as its demand to occupy China’s Sanmen port was turned down by Qing authority. However, the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion in China and the perceived menace of the yellow peril caused by the uprising gave Italy a good chance and excuse to achieve its colonial goal, and restore its international reputation. In 1900, motivated by proto-nationalist sentiments and opposition to foreign imperialism, the Boxer rebels besieged foreign diplomats and civilians in the Beijing Legation Quarter for 55 days. During

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<sup>83</sup> See Fredric Jameson’s “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.”

the time, media coverage of the event caused xenophobic panic among the public in Western countries. In Italy, the Italian diplomats and journalists' accounts and reportages, such as Luigi Barzini's *Nell'estremo Oriente*, Daniele Varè's *Il diplomatico sorridente*, and Giuseppe Salvago-Raggi's *Ambasciatore del re*, also repeatedly highlighted the Chinese rebels' savagery and destructiveness. These depictions justified the Italian authorities' decision of sending two thousand soldiers with the International Expedition to China in the name of suppressing the revolt. Upon the victory in 1901, Italy successfully established its colonial presence in China, and received spoils including a part of Tianjin (China's third largest city), commercial claims in Shanghai, the reconstruction of the Italian Legation in Beijing, and a huge monetary indemnity (Smith 19).

Although Italy took advantage of the revival of yellow peril at the beginning of the twentieth century and fulfilled its colonial ambition, its armed aggression and expansion in China may have later intensified its fear of yellow peril. As Richardson remarks, the yellow peril ideology is an inverse extension of the West's fear of itself, a superstitious dread that its colonial crimes will turn back against it once the power relation between East and West is reversed (56). As a matter of fact, as early as 1900, even before Italy's invasion in China, Barzini has clearly expressed his worries about the rise of a modernized China, believing it would be a menace to the West:

Ma lasciamolo dormire in pace questo immenso popolo sonnacchioso e divertente; sarà tanto meglio per noi. Guardate i giapponesi che cosa hanno saputo fare in poco tempo! I cinesi sarebbero capaci di ammazzare in cinquant'anni tutte le nostre industrie e quelle americane. ... Troveremmo il "made in China" persino in fondo alle nostre mutande. (16)

Although the Western industries still remain strong, the "made in China" tags are already ubiquitous in the world market, as predicted by Barzini. The gradually rising China can provoke and intensify some Western countries' fear of China's potential revenge for their colonial crimes decades ago. In this vein, the representations of the yellow peril theme in

recent Italian movies, especially the invasion of Mr. Wang, may partly reflect Italy's haunting feeling of guilt for its previous colonial expansion.

Due to its involvement in the two world wars, Italy did not pay much attention to China during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC), led by Mao Zedong, regained control of all the foreign concessions in mainland China except Hong Kong and Macau. Despite the ending of Italy's colonial presence in China, the years between 1949 and 1960 were characterized by affection on the part of Italian left-wing intellectuals who considered Mao's China as a Red Utopia. During the period, the Italian visitors' travel accounts about China (such as Gaetano Tumiati's *Buongiorno Cina*, Franco Fortini's *Asia Maggiore*, and Curzio Malaparte's *Io, in Russia e in Cina*) generally depict the PRC as a beautiful, vibrant, and progressive country, where a kind, modest, and diligent people is led by some brilliant, incorruptible, and determinant leaders to construct cooperatively an advanced socialist civilization. In 1957, Italian director Carlo Lizzani also took his camera to document Mao's China, and presented very positive images in *La muraglia cinese* (*Behind the Great Wall*, 1959).

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Italian representations of China and the Chinese changed dramatically. The transformations can be exemplified in Goffredo Parise's *Cara Cina*, Alberto Moravia's *La rivoluzione culturale in Cina*, and Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary movie *Chung Kuo*. These three Italian intellectuals, who visited China in 1960s and 1970s, do not present China as a good or healthy country, but openly question the virtue of the Chinese authorities, criticize the country's corrupted bureaucratic system, and denounce the deification of Mao, and the overly politicization of Chinese society. By emphasizing the oddity in Chinese society, Parise, Moravia and Antonioni destabilized the utopian image of Maoist China previously constructed by earlier Italian visitors.

There are several major reasons for the transformation of Italian representations of the

PRC and the Chinese before and after 1960. First, from late 1950s to 1976, China suffered from the undesirable consequences of a series of radical reforms, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Thus, it was not surprising that Italian intellectuals viewed the Chinese otherness as less acceptable, and travelled in China with a greater sense of suspicion and willingness to dissent. Second, after Khrushchev's speech on Stalin's cult of personality, and the Soviet military intervention in the Hungarian uprising, doubts arose among Italian intellectuals, and made them more critical of the communist course and of members in the Eastern bloc. Third, during the Sino-Soviet ideological split, Italian communist leaders supported the Soviet line, and openly condemned Maoist thoughts on class struggles and world revolution. The conflicts damaged relations between Italy and China and the association between the two countries' communist parties. Due to the tensions, Chinese authorities were inclined to place restrictions and surveillance on the Italian visitors' trips, which caused inconvenience and inevitably provoked criticism from the Italian visitors.

Nevertheless, the huge differences between the depictions of China and the Chinese before and after 1960 inevitably caused a crisis of confidence among the Italian intellectuals, who used to believe in Maoist social transformations, making them feel betrayed and deceived. The disillusion of the Chinese Utopia in the 1960s and 1970s also gave birth to conspiracy theories and provoked another wave of yellow peril's revival. Paul Hollander uses Moravia and Parise's accounts of the Cultural Revolution-era China as a standard to undermine the credibility of Italian travel notes of the 1950s. He denounces Western intellectuals' admiration for communist countries, dismissing all their positive depictions as results of the communist countries' "techniques of hospitality" and brainwashing propaganda (Hollander 347). Neglecting the dramatic changes in historical context and regarding China as a static entity, Hollander's argument actually reflects an Orientalist mindset and the ideological dichotomy of the Cold War era. Hollander contributes a new layer on the yellow

peril myth by presenting China as the Oceania in George Orwell's *Nineteen eighty-four*, a novel, an untrustworthy dystopia running on oppression and thought manipulation.

In addition to accusing China of being deceitful and devious, the wave of yellow peril's resurgence starting in 1960s also branded China as a threat to world peace. At the height of the Cold War, the Chinese authorities' persistence in the revolutionary project of Marxism-Leninism worried not only the Italian Christian Democratic government, but also the Italian communists who tended to realize social transformation through reforms rather than military struggles. Agreeing on Khrushchev's theme of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West, the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) Palmiro Togliatti criticized Mao's "simplistically revolutionary interpretation of Marxism" (Drake 220) and officially accused China of being warlike in his concluding speech at the tenth congress of the PCI, held in December 1962 (Griffith 79).

In brief, this wave of yellow peril revival labelled China as an untrustworthy, manipulative, and violent nation with no regard for the rights and lives of its people. It echoes the accounts of Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni whose works all criticize Chinese authorities for being a threat to their citizens' well-being and inborn virtues.

In the recent Italian movies on Chinese themes, these perceived conflicts between a strong state and its helpless people have been manifested as oppressive relations between deceitful, devious, and violent Chinese male villains and the kindhearted but powerless Chinese damsels in distress. Moreover, in this type of movie, such as *La Stella*, *Two Tigers*, and *Io Sono Li*, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni's worries about the Chinese people have been eased by Western heroes' concrete attempts to rescue the Chinese damsels in distress. The Western heroes' redemptions of the Chinese victims serve to maintain a moral hierarchy between Italy and China, keeping Italy on the moral high ground, and justifying its decisions and actions regarding Chinese issues.

After Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* was banned as an anti-China movie in 1974, China and its people seemed to vanish from the sight of Italian filmmakers for three decades, with the exception of Bertolucci's 1987 movie *The Last Emperor*. Nevertheless, in 2006, the situation changed with the staging of the "Year of Italy in China," a year-long cultural gala in major Chinese cities. Proposed by former Italian President Carlo Ciampi, the "Year of Italy in China" aimed to open a window through which the Chinese people could view Italian art, music, and design. The project brought many Italian experts in cultural fields to China, and re-stimulated some Italian filmmakers' interest in China and its people. As a result, two movies with Chinese settings were produced: *La Stella* and *Two Tigers*. Revolving around Westerners' adventurous journeys in China, these two movies focus on presenting exotic aspects of China and Chinese life.

Starting in 2007, Italian filmmakers switched their focus from presenting exotic Chinese setting to portraying Chinese immigrants in Italy. *La Giusta Distanza*, *Gomorra*, *Io Sono Li*, and *L'arrivo di Wang* are all related to the issues of Chinese immigration. This thematic switch was likely triggered by the protest in Milan's Chinatown in April 2007, which was "the first major violent protest by a single ethnic minority group against the police authorities in contemporary Italy" (Zhang 22). The conflicts between Chinese protesters and Italian police manifested the growing tensions between Chinese immigrants and the local community.

The major Chinese immigration to Italy can be traced back to the 1980s.<sup>84</sup> From 2001 to 2007, the number of immigrants of Chinese origin has increased by 209% in Italy, growing from 46,887 to 144,885.<sup>85</sup> The rapid influx of Chinese immigrants to Italy has caused many

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<sup>84</sup> See IDOS report "La collettività cinese in Italia."

<sup>85</sup> See ISTAT reports "La popolazione straniera residente in Italia al 1 gennaio 2004," and "La popolazione straniera residente in Italia al 1 gennaio 2007."

controversies. On the one hand, Italian business leaders “blame the Chinese migrants flooding into Italy’s factories” for the hard economic knocks that Italy has suffered, so the Italian authorities stepped up raids on Chinese communities out of the belief that “up to a third of Italy’s Chinese immigrants could be illegal” (“Italy Struggles”). On the other hand, Chinese immigrants felt they had been treated unfairly. In Milan, “more than 100 Chinese shopkeepers and members of their families, many waving the national flag, massed in the street claiming racial discrimination” (Willey). It is also reported that the authority of Treviso ordered Chinese-run businesses to take down their lanterns because they looked “too oriental” (“Oriental décor”). The hot topic even spread across the Atlantic Ocean and drew attention from American media. In September 2010, the *New York Times* published a report entitled “Chinese remake the ‘Made in Italy’ fashion label”, which outlined the complaint that, in the context of Italy’s weak institutions and high tolerance for rule-bending, the influx of Chinese immigration into the textile industry of Prato had blurred the line between “Made in China” and “Made in Italy”, and blemished Italy’s cachet and reputation in the high-end fashion market (Donadio A1).

With strong impact on Italian economy and textile industry, the Chinese immigrants in Italy once again recalled the fear for yellow peril in the Italian collective memory. This time, the media dissemination of yellow peril in Italy has many similarities with the American anti-Chinese propaganda at the end of the nineteenth century, which was also triggered by massive Chinese immigration. The American anti-Chinese movement relied heavily on the imputation that the Chinese entered the Western world in the form of a uniform and infectious invasion, as well as on the allegation that the Chinese were incapable of and unwilling to fully integrate into any other foreign body politic.<sup>86</sup>

The major channels of Italian mass media have repeatedly associated Chinese

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<sup>86</sup> See Ruth Mayer’s *Serial Fu Manchu: the Chinese supervillain and the spread of Yellow Peril ideology*.



immigration with the concept of invasion. For instance, a news report on *Il Sole 24 Ore*, an Italian national daily business newspaper, portrayed the Chinese community in the Italian city of Prato as being comprised of robotic Chinese workers, cunning Chinese businessmen, and dangerous Chinese criminals, thus rationalizing the campaigns and raids led by mayor Roberto Cenni against the “Chinese invasion”.<sup>87</sup> Another important Italian national daily newspaper, *La Repubblica*, labelled the development of Chinese-owned businesses in Italy as part of a Chinese invasion, describing Chinese entrepreneurs as an army and comparing their rapidly growing businesses to fungi.<sup>88</sup> Not to mention a number of books published around 2010, which highlight the threats of Chinese immigrants to Italy and exacerbate the widespread anti-Chinese xenophobia among Italians.<sup>89</sup> The fear of Chinese invasion is also fueled by the China Threat Theory. In the past three decades, China’s stunning economic growth has convinced the West that it is just a matter of time until China becomes a world superpower. Since the 1990s, the country’s ideological orientation and growing military strength have been a source of open concern for some foreign scholars and political leaders. In their eyes, China’s rise poses a challenge to the existing Western-led international order and geopolitical landscape.<sup>90</sup> It seems natural for the West to nurse such views as the China Threat Theory because historically the rise of most great Western capitalist powers has been accompanied by the use of force and wars. For instance, the rise of the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Japan all followed similar paths of wealth accumulation, military build-up, and military expansion. Despite China’s recent efforts to present itself as a

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<sup>87</sup> See Elysa Fazzino’s “I cinesi di Prato che lavorano giorno e notte ormai dettano legge sul marchio made in Italy.”

<sup>88</sup> See Vladimiro Polchi’s “Immigrati, l’invasione cinese imprese come funghi: +232%.”

<sup>89</sup> See S. Pieraccini’s L’assedio cinese. Il distretto senza regole degli abiti low cost di Prato and C. Capri’s Lanterna nostra. La Cina è vicina e Cosa Nostra lo sa.

<sup>90</sup> Many of the sentiments of the China Threat are expressed in Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro’s provocatively titled The Coming Conflict with China.

responsible great power and in the service of world peace and stability, the China Threat Theory widespread in western countries still reinforces the existing yellow peril stereotype of Chinese invaders.

Another media-diffused myth revolves around the Chinese immigrants' incapacity and unwillingness to communicate and integrate. On a web-TV report entitled "Chinatown today, la Cina è vicina", Dario Cresto-Dina, the vice-director of *La Repubblica*, comments on the Milan protest, saying that incommunicability prevented the greater integration of the Chinese in Milan.<sup>91</sup> It is a clear reference to the myth that Chinese immigrants are too busy to learn the Italian language and to adapt to Italian culture (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 32). Recent Italian movies also present Chinese characters as incapable or unwilling to communicate and integrate, exemplified by Mr. Zhao in *Io Sono Li*.

In this latest wave of yellow peril resurgence, the trends to depict Chinese immigrants as villainous invaders or self-isolated people can be interpreted as a psychological defense mechanism called projection, "whereby we attribute to other people behaviors and attitudes that we are unwilling to accept in ourselves" (Kornblum 312). In other words, while the Italian people are not ready or not willing to embrace or communicate with the Chinese immigrants, they attribute these undesired thoughts and feelings onto the Chinese, because these thoughts and feelings are deemed as socially unacceptable for the Italians to express. By imaging the Chinese immigrants as evil or incommunicable, the Italian people can avoid the feeling of guilt for not accepting or welcoming these aliens. When the interactions between Chinese and Italian communities gradually increase over time, the psychological defense process of projection may activate less frequently.

Moreover, other than the creation of Chinese villains, the ideology of the yellow peril is also embodied in the portrayals of interracial relationships. Echoing the sexual anxiety of

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<sup>91</sup> See "Chinatown today, la Cina è vicina" on TG, first broadcast in 2007.

yellow peril historically caused by white pride and fears of racial contamination, the selected Italian movies present the interracial relationships between the Chinese and white people in an unfavorable fashion. In *The Missing Star*, the Chinese guide Liu Hua does not bring much help in Vincenzo's search for the furnace. At the end, the male protagonist sends her home and finds the factory by himself. In *Shun Li and the Poet*, because of his interracial relationship with Shun Li, Bepi becomes an outcast to his former friends, keeps running into conflicts with local people, and eventually dies in loneliness. In *Two Tigers*, Gilda runs into conflicts with her boss to protect her friendship with the Chinese call-girl Lin, and falls into fatal crisis due to her relationship with the American-Chinese George. In *The Arrival of Wang*, Gaia's sympathy and support for Wang put the whole human race in danger. By associating the relationships with undesirable consequences, the movies actually reinforce the social taboo of interracial relationships. The conscious or unconscious attempts to maintain racial purity is based on the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that the white race is superior to others. In other words, the motives perpetuate the concept of white superiority by avoiding racial contamination.

The representations of Chinese inferiority and yellow peril in recent Italian movies can be understood as instances of Orientalism. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is less about the Orient, the geographical area, than it is about the historical experience of confronting and representing the other. Said points out that the Orient was "made Oriental" (1979, 6) and that "the Orient helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience" (1979, 2). As a Eurocentric idea, Orientalism promotes the differences between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them"). Under the East/West, Self/Other polarity, Oriental and Westerner are binary categories defined always in reference to each other. Applying the conventional dichotomy, many of the selected Italian movies present Chinese and Westerners in hierarchical

relationships, thereby reinforcing the discursive subordination of the Chinese.

The perpetuation of negative stereotypes of the Chinese in recent Italian movies is also due to the homogeneity of the spectators. In the 2000s, we see relatively few Italian films outside Italy (Wood 1), most Italian movies only show in that country. The lack of diversity in the audiences makes the Italian film industry less cautious about the use of ethnic/racial stereotypes than Hollywood. With their deep involvement in global communication, Hollywood filmmakers are aware that, in a contemporary world where cultural circulation is multi-vocal, it is becoming more and more inappropriate to corral human diversity into confining categories (Stam 269). Spectators come to cinema equipped with a sense of the real rooted in their own social experience, based on which they can accept, question, or even subvert a film's representations.

Although films are on one level powerful machines which produce an "effet du reel," this effect cannot be separated from the desire, experience, and knowledge of the historically situated spectator. The cultural preparation of a particular audience, in this sense, can generate counterpressure to a racist or prejudicial discourse. (Stam 254)

From this perspective, more active participation in the global market may prompt the Italian filmmakers to carefully re-examine their use of biased stereotypes, urging them to embrace ethnic/racial diversity and create more multi-dimensional roles.

The stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese people are exemplars of a social construction rooted in traditions of Eurocentrism and yellow peril. As social construction, the stereotypes can be challenged and overcome by revealing and critically analyzing their manifestations. By examining the stereotypes and the mechanisms of their construction, I would like to raise audiences' awareness of the issue in recent Italian movies and call for more multi-dimensional film roles for Chinese people. I believe that, if Italy and China give up their prevalent racial stereotypes, the two nations can achieve more accurate mutual understanding and more equitable cross-cultural interactions in the future.

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