

Through East Asia to the sound of ‘Giovinezza’: Italian travel literature on China, Korea and Japan during the Fascist *ventennio*

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During the Fascist *ventennio*, prominent Italian writers and journalists, such as Mario Appelius, Raffaele Calzini, Arnaldo Cipolla, Arnaldo Fraccaroli, Roberto Suster and Cesco Tommaselli, reported from China, Japan and Korea for *Il Popolo d'Italia*, *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*. Their travel narratives were crucial for the creation and diffusion in Italy of the dominant representation of China and Korea as remote, decadent and exotic societies; and of Japan as a progressive society resonant with Fascist Italy. The narrativisation of these countries in Italian travelogues from the Fascist *ventennio* was part of a widespread discursive practice by Italian intellectuals willing to subscribe to, and actively disseminate, the guiding principles of Fascism. When emphasising China's and Korea's irreconcilable difference from, and Japan's affinity with, Fascist Italy, these intellectuals extolled the Italian race and culture, justified Italy's position in geopolitical dynamics, and propagandised the exceptionality of the Fascist ideology.

Keywords: Fascism; China; Japan; Korea; travel literature; *italianità*.

The main pillar of Fascism is *italianità*, that is, we are proud to be Italians, even if we go to Siberia, [and] we intend to yell out loud: We are Italians ... Now we are claiming the honour of being Italian, because in our marvellous and adorable peninsula, the most prodigious and wonderful history of the human race took place.

(Mussolini quoted in Gentile 2009, 147)

Introduction

The gaze on China, Japan and Korea by Italian intellectuals during the Fascist *ventennio* was redolent of a colonialist attitude of positional superiority, even in the absence of either an extensive colonial territory or a fully developed diplomatic and economic infrastructure in these countries. While the Italian concession in Tianjin, China, was a marginal sideshow in Mussolini's imperialist ambitions, the Italian statesman had been greatly interested in Japan since the early 1920s, and he aptly maintained that the country would have a leading role in the geopolitical dynamics of the twentieth century (De Felice 1988, 110–112). Mussolini's interest in East Asia and his pro-Japanese feelings increased both as a consequence of the military mobilisation of Japan in Manchuria (1931) and China (1937), and the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis alliance in 1937.

At the same time, the depictions of China, Japan and Korea in these years are not structured according to the long-debated mutual relations between discourse, empire and travel narrative; nor did they serve primarily as a tool to reinforce colonial rule and expansion. Rather, the

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representation of these countries by fascist writers and journalists was primarily intended for the consolidation of a fascist sense of national identity, as well as to extol among the Italian readership the significance of Fascism as a uniquely Italian model of development. As Derek Duncan has argued, the Italian writers and journalists reporting from abroad during these years all shared a ‘discursive framework, or repertoire of imageries, in which to situate their perceptions’, and most importantly, ‘the overall intention of the writer/traveller[s] was to stabilise and consolidate the meaning of Italy’ (2002, 50).

The reimagination of China, Japan and Korea by these authors was also a transnational and transcultural process that depended on the diplomatic relationships of Fascist Italy in East Asia. Shaped by a framework of contrasts and comparisons, the representation of those countries was deeply influenced by the fascist political agenda and the geopolitical dynamics of the time in the region, which culminated with the Tripartite Pact on September 27, 1940. Since the 1930s fascism had been developing as a transnational phenomenon, deeply affecting the relationship between Italy and the East Asian region, especially Japan, and leading to the formation of the Axis.¹ The globalisation of fascism led to Japan’s fascination for Italy as a result of a complex process of identification and disillusion which followed both the geopolitical views of Japan and its reactions to the international policy-making of Fascist Italy (Hofmann 2015a).

In their travel narratives, well-known authors such as Mario Appellius, Roberto Suster, Arnaldo Cipolla, Raffaele Calzini and Cesco Tomaselli regarded China, Japan and Korea as ‘significant arena[s] in which to articulate a nationalist discourse centred on the celebration of Italian genius and the emphasis of Italy’s historical mission to “civilise”’ (De Giorgi 2010, 575–576). Consequently, these authors juxtaposed their representations of the countries with the image of a great Italy rejuvenated by the First World War conflict and by fascist ideology. They celebrated the uniqueness of the Italian civilisation and race, and the prominence of Italian historical and cultural contributions to the development of Western civilisation. They explored the possible and reputedly imminent centrality of Italy’s future role in the development of diplomatic and economic relations with the Chinese and Japanese civilisations. In such a process, which it was believed would provide Italy with a place among the great powers, the idea of being Italian was regarded as foundational. Being Italian became the exclusive cultural, social and racial human condition – the myth symbolising fascist superiority (Gentile 2009, 149–150). Enraptured by that ‘state of collective excitement’ that generated Fascism from the ashes of the First World War (Gentile 2009, 147), these journalists and writers made a profession of spreading Fascist pride about being Italian, in order to yell their *italianità* out loud.

This myth of *italianità* and the consequential sense of the uniqueness of the Italian civilisation and race, related to the idea of the conquest of modernity and the regeneration – national and social – of Italian society after the First World War, which Fascism had inherited from the Risorgimento tradition and changed according to its own ideological principles (Gentile 2009, 144), is therefore the main criterion of comparison that the Italian writers and journalists from the Fascist *ventennio* applied in all their narrations of China, Japan and Korea.²

The Chinese counter-type

We arrived in Shanghai standing at attention with our arms held out straight in front of us for the Roman salute, while being sprayed and enveloped by the joyful notes of ‘Giovinezza’ ... At dawn, our anthem is a kiss from our far fatherland among the Chinese boatmen’s hysterical cries ... and the tricolour, a most lively extremity of Italy itself.

(Suster 1928, 127)³

The travel writing on China from the Fascist *ventennio* depicted the country as an exotic, far away space in place and time. Poverty, decay, backwardness and overpopulation were regarded as the key features of the country. After the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1912), China was greatly affected by regional militarism and civil wars (1916–1928), and then by the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1941), and two decades of conflicts between the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which lasted until the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Italian journalists visiting China during these years described it as a country that had reached a critical historical juncture characterised by moral decadence and social turmoil.

In these narratives ordinary Chinese people were depicted as silent objects. They were stereotypically described as short-witted, servile, xenophobic and beastlike figures. A constant entry in the narratives was that of the rickshaw puller, described as a 'beast of burden' by Cesco Tomaselli (1936, 11) or as a 'draft man' by Raffaele Calzini (1937, 246). A female counterpart was that of the Chinese prostitute, described as ethereal, gracious, well-dressed ladies and labelled as 'diamonds' by Arnaldo Cipolla (1931, 196), or as tender, soft, imperfectly white 'human ivory' by Raffaele Calzini (1937, 123). The Chinese culture was described as different from and largely incompatible with Italian culture, and, at times, even unintelligible to Western minds. Similarly, the Chinese natural and architectural landscape was regarded by Italian writers of the time as the expression of an irreconcilable difference between the West and China – with the exception of the Western colonial architecture located in Hong Kong, Shanghai and, of course, the Italian Concession in Tianjin, which were regarded as symbols of Western modernity, colonial power and even as evidence of the Western civilising mission (Marinelli 2007, 139–143).

Chinese civilisation was regarded by Mario Appellius as the product of a continuous interaction between the Chinese 'race' and the Chinese landscape through millennia, in a self-contained environment immune to Western culture's external stimuli, and therefore resulting from a different historical and cultural development (1926, 214–216 and 245). Such a syncretistic notion of race as a coexistence of people, nation and ancestry, embodying the same history, language and tradition, served as the basis for a comparison of the Chinese and Italian civilisations.⁴ The author drew on this notion to explain the origin of Chinese people's reputed xenophobia and hostility to Western people, particularly Christian missionaries (1926, 217). Similarly, Roberto Suster found the sociological origins of Chinese civilisation as the reason why, for nearly two millennia, Chinese society has been organised according to the Confucian doctrine, which Suster regarded as responsible for social immobility, the rigorous perpetration of tradition and a reluctance for social change (1928, 18–19). However, the idea of a static China generally served as a negative comparison with the progressive, modern and technological nature of Western expansionism, and more importantly, in opposition to the myth of fascist society as anti-conservative, modern and dynamic.

On the basis of the presumed Chinese difference and backwardness, Suster also justified the existence of the Unequal Treaties, which were imposed on China after its defeats in the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), and which granted Western countries a series of privileges, such as open ports, extraterritoriality and the presence of foreign missionaries in China. Suster maintained that these privileges were justified by the irreconcilable differences between the Western countries and China: 'The treaties are unequal? Let us admit that they are disadvantageous for the Chinese. Even so, how can it be possible to make them absolutely equal, when not only are the two races unequal, but their moral sense is antithetical, their way of thinking is opposite, and their civilisations are poles apart?' (173). Furthermore, Suster argued that Western nations had mismanaged the handling of the 'Chinese prey' by recognising the right of Yuan Shikai's Republic of China to be represented at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919–1920, as well as by granting the German concessions of Qingdao and

Yantai to Japan instead of to Belgium and Italy (1928, 41–42). Clearly, as argued by De Giorgi (2010, 580), the criticism of Western colonialism in the country expressed the political ambitions of Fascist Italy in the East Asian region. The travel narratives also extolled the diplomatic channels as well as Mussolini's policies on China (Suster 1928, 195), and supported the intention of the Italian government to increase its economic presence in China by taking advantage of the political fragility which characterised the country in these years (Cipolla 1931, 247). Furthermore, they argued that fascist ideology and *italianità* were fundamental to the fulfilment of Italian commercial ambitions in China (Cipolla 1931, 250).

Anti-Bolshevism being a component of fascist ideology since its origins, the Italian journalists and writers travelling in China expressed negative views on Chinese socialism, and belittled or demonised the influence of the Soviet Union in China. Appelius minimised the influence of Soviet socialism, and maintained that communism was a decaying model of development, insisting that 'China is definitely not prone to communism because of the characteristics of its economy and the mentality of its people' (1926, 51). In addition, Mario Appelius regarded the Chinese nationalist movements as not worth noticing, if it were not for those odd aspects of the Chinese wars that the author described as 'the typical expression of the Chinese race and country' (1926, 220). Similarly, Cipolla blamed the Soviet government for fomenting xenophobia and belligerence in the country (Cipolla 1931, 150), and he regarded the Chinese communist troops as bandits mainly engaged in pillaging for their own material benefit, and therefore uninterested in gaining political control (128). Along with the denigration of political ideas contrary to fascism, such accounts also criticised Chinese war strategies and Chinese generals, and expressed the glorification of the militarist, masculine and violent character of fascist ideology. Arnaldo Cipolla comically asserted that he had witnessed a conflict between Chiang Kai-shek and Feng Yuxiang that ended with the arrival of rain, which caused the return of all Chinese soldiers to civilian life (1931, 169). Appelius depicted Chinese generals as cunning, unprincipled profiteers (228), and sophisticated feminine figures with parasols, bracelets and fans (Appelius 1926, 223–224). In the years immediately following the Chinese communist troops' strategic retreat of about 6,000 km in order to avoid the Guomindang's army – later known as the Long March – Raffaele Calzini depicted the Chinese soldiers as marching corpses, 'miserable when their Asian appearance is compared with European uniforms and weaponry' (1937, 179–180).

Italian journalist and writer intellectuals travelling to China during the Fascist *ventennio* dedicated particular attention to the overt celebration of great Italian historical figures such as Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci, and the Italian tradesmen, missionaries and diplomats living in China in those years (De Giorgi 2010, 578–579). When touring the Buddhist Hualin temple in Canton, at the time known as the Temple of the Five Hundred Genii, Appelius identified a statue of a Buddha as Marco Polo, since it seemed a 'thinner and manlier [sculpture], dressed according to the fashion of a sixteenth-century Italian man'; he considered it a 'Western Buddha', which paid homage to the 'powerful races of the West' (1926, 130). His discovery culminated in nostalgic praise for the motherland: 'How beautiful is the motherland's voice, when singing to the hearts of her faraway sons!' (131). Clearly, the profuse celebration of Marco Polo as the archetype of *italianità* served well to glorify the greatness of the Italian civilisation, which Appelius incidentally described as the cradle of the Roman Empire and of the Catholic religion, as well as the birthplace of the best explorers, artists and scientists (132). The use of Italian historical figures was followed by praise of Italian migrants in China, serving mainly to emphasise the exceptional quality of Italian civilisation and Italian people over other Western (British, American and French) migrants, especially because of the lack of a consolidated Italian governmental infrastructure in China (De Giorgi 2010, 579).

In addition to the celebration of Italian historical figures and Italian migrants in China, the travel narratives discussed here placed emphasis on the missionary activities of Jesuits, Franciscans, Salesians and Canossians, in order to praise *italianità*. The Italian friars were therefore praised for keeping Italian excellence alive in the sciences and humanities, spreading the Catholic religion among the Chinese and, of course, educating the Chinese in fascist ideology. Appellius interviewed the Salesian Father Cucchiara, who proclaimed himself an enthusiast of the new Italy because it was Fascist, Roman and Catholic (Appellius 1926, 293). He described him as an ‘anonymous soldier of Western civilisation, which is Roman and Catholic’ (296–297). Consequently, Appellius wrote of an exclusive relationship between Fascist Italy, *italianità* and Catholicism, symbolising the greatness of Western civilisation: ‘Wherever the Italian tricolour hovers over Christ’s crucifix, as in the Salesian missions, the Italy-Catholicism binomial is perfect in its historical splendour. No other emblem can symbolise the greatness of Western civilisation with the same efficacy’ (Appellius 1926, 301). Similarly, Calzini praised the industriousness of the Italian missionaries, for being capable of building factories, churches, schools, orphanages and cinemas, and especially, for helping the Chinese to achieve *progresso*, and overcome the Chinese natural disposition to inactivity (1937, 144). In reference to a Salesian industrial school in Shanghai, the author even described the coexistence of the Chinese and Italian cultures as a ‘daily miracle’ (146):

In the institute, children welcomed me in the Italian way – singing ‘Giovinezza’, but then they also cheered me in the Chinese way. The classrooms were filled with thunder and lightning, and then with an acrid smoke. Among the fumes a cloud of small Chinese with shaved heads performed either the Roman salute or somersaults at will. (Calzini 1937, 146)

Rifles and spades: in search of the fascist ethos in Korea and Japan

The consolidation of a fascist sense of national identity recurs also in the characterisation of other East Asian countries in relation to both China and Fascist Italy, particularly Japan and Korea. The Japanese Empire was, on the one hand, portrayed as a model of authoritarian modernity, antithetical to France and England, in the belief that modernity required new forms of authoritarianism (Gentile 2003, 6). On the other hand, in Italy there was a widespread feeling of enmity and even racial hatred towards Japan, especially in the years of the great depression, because of the military, colonial and commercial behaviour demonstrated in East Asia. On the occasion of a speech from Trieste delivered on 6 February 1921, Mussolini had argued that Japan was ‘destined to ferment the whole yellow world’ (quoted in De Felice 1988, 111–112). However, while using the rhetoric of Japan’s racial diversity, Mussolini had discouraged expressions of anti-Japan sentiment, and he had proved to have a ‘soft spot’ for the country since the early 1920s (110–112, 121). Such contradictory attitudes were also visible in the ranks of the Fascist intelligentsia, where the Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano and the economist Alberto De Stefani would have preferred to improve Italy’s relationship with the Chinese Nationalist Party rather than with Japan.⁵ Korea, on the other hand, stood as an example of Asian civilisation in decline because of the long-lasting socio-political, religious, cultural and artistic influence of Chinese civilisation on the country and its people. In addition, Korea and the Manchurian region, both under control of the Japanese Empire during the 1930s, stood out as proof of the civilising mission of the Japanese Empire in Asia.

The attention given to Japan and Korea acquired a particular significance when described in contrast to China, emphasising again the greatness of the fascist ideology and of the leadership of Benito Mussolini. In the 1920s, Roberto Suster regarded Japan as a model of development for China, because of its rapid development in compliance with Western civilisation, along with the revaluation of its own cultural and religious tradition. In this regard, Suster argued that

China should follow the example of Japan concerning the question of unequal treaties, accepting their conditions and working – fighting – their way up towards parity with Western nations and races (1928, 206–211). Suster's fascination with the Japanese Empire and its culture was also imbued with fascist values. Suster praised *bushido*, which he defined as the 'cult of heroism' (232). He praised the Japanese sense of moral pride that enabled Japan to achieve the 'continuity of the race' as well as a place in the 'great struggle for global supremacy' (233–234). Suster also expressed his enthusiasm for the Japanese annexation of Korea (1910), and he defined it as 'the most tangible evidence of the Roman virtue of the [Japanese] people and of the mission that the [Japanese] rejuvenated race has set as a goal in the Middle East' (Suster 1928, 285). Furthermore, he praised Japanese colonial policy, particularly its civilising role in turning Korea – which he regarded as an agonised, forgotten and neglected nation – into a calm Japanese province, by means of fighting bandits, promoting hygiene, building infrastructures and reclaiming land. Japan was therefore elevated to a symbol of the possible future for Asian nations and states, and often described positively as reminiscent of Fascist Italy (heroic, racially pure, rejuvenated, colonialist, courageous/heroic, etc.). Suster even explored the possibility of developing a fascist movement in Japan based on the Italian model in the years to come (223).

The evolution of the diplomatic and cultural ties between Fascist Italy and the Japanese Empire contributed greatly to the increase in interest in the latter that culminated in the 1930s.⁶ The importance of such a relationship for both countries was manifest in the first friendship mission of the National Fascist Party (PNF) to Japan in 1937, later extended to Korea and China. The mission was organised by Ciano and the PNF party secretary Achille Starace at the direct request of Mussolini, and led by the East Asia expert and president of the Istituto Luce, Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli. As a non-governmental event, the mission had an unofficial and informal character and it did not have a big mediatic impact in Italy at the time. However, Mussolini and Ciano were both enthusiastic about the mission and they both personally welcomed back the Italian delegation, since it brought to international attention the global relevance of the Fascist revolution (Hedinger 2017, 2021).⁷

Similarly to Suster, in 1937 Calzini compared Japan to China and concluded that Japan was exemplary for its modernising process, while China was noteworthy for its decadent state (Calzini 1937, 334). According to the author, Japan was in good health in fascist terms, whereas China was not (271–272). In Calzini's view, in Japan there was a deep-rooted knowledge of Fascism and of Mussolini, whereas in China there was none (272). According to Calzini, Japan even looked similar to Italy: Osaka was described as the Venice of Japan (361), Kobe was like Genoa (379) and Miyajima reminded the author slightly of Portofino (394). Such comparisons also included political figures such as the Japanese prime minister Prince Konoe Fumimaro, who was described by Calzini as a 'Japanese Mussolini' (376).⁸ More importantly, in Calzini's narrativisation of Japan and China, it is already possible to see how the change in geopolitical dynamics affected the narration for propaganda purposes. Events that caused a twist in the narration are the Mukden incident, causing the annexation of Manchuria by Japan in 1931; Italy's annexation of Ethiopia in October 1935; and the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact on 25 November 1936, joined by Italy on 6 November 1937, thus forming the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis.

The Italian-Ethiopian war in 1935 and Mussolini's defiant attitude towards the League of Nations had a deep influence on the diplomatic relationship between Italy and Japan. In retrospect, the conflict had confirmed that the Japanese annexation of Manchuria and exit from the League of Nations was a correct move. However, in Japan it caused a widespread anticolonial and anti-Italianist sentiment since it was perceived as an act of aggression on Ethiopia by a white,

imperialist Western nation. Moreover, Italy's annexation of Ethiopia was also used in Japan to propagandise its pan-Asian military, political and economic foreign policy in the East Asian region, which was justified by the need to free the continent from Western imperialism.⁹ The annexation of Manchuria by Japan and the Italian-Ethiopian war were also indirectly connected to the end of the cooperation between Fascist Italy and Chang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. Chang Kai-shek, in fact, openly compared the Italian annexation of Ethiopia in 1935 to the Japanese annexation of Manchuria in 1931, and consequently, on 5 November 1935, as a member of the League of Nations, he approved Italy being sanctioned by the organisation.¹⁰

Relations between Italy and Japan rapidly improved in the following years, thanks to a series of diplomatic agreements. On 18 November 1936, the emperor of Japan officially recognised the dominion of Italy over Ethiopia, and in November 1937, Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact and officially recognised Manchukuo. Such changes implied a development in the representation of Italy and Japan in the two countries. In Japan 'official and public discourse [on Italy and fascism] shifted from one of apprehension and hostility during the invasion of Ethiopia to one of support and sympathy in the years after 1937' (Hofmann 2015a, 111).

Whereas in the 1920s a fundamental aspect of the fascist discourse of Suster was the dismissal of fears about a pan-Asian coalition and the consequent invasion of the West, in 1937, Calzini's aim was to emphasise the power of Italy's new ally and its function in the global race to supremacy. In 1937, Calzini praised the imperialist mission of the Japanese Empire, which he also recognised as anti-communist, in line with the Anti-Comintern Pact. Calzini described the Japanese as proud and disciplined like the Romans after the Punic Wars (343), and as anti-American and anti-British by nature (244). The emphasis on Japan's anti-British and anti-American positioning was indicative of the prospective Allies vs Axis alliance systems of the period leading to the Second World War. Most importantly, according to the Italian author, Japan and Italy had similar political guidelines:

Japan's guidelines for internal and international politics match those of Fascist Italy. The ideal aims of Japanese fascism are twofold: to provide an antidote to communism; ... and to be a barrier against England and the United States of America, the foremost among the world's capitalist bullies. Analogously to Japanesism, fascism relies on the same renovating principles: safeguarding hierarchies, supporting the poor nations' expansionism, abolishing the struggles of class, defending the family and the nation. Not even the violent transplantation of Westernism in all national activities and forms can alter such a characteristic. (Calzini 1937, 272–273)

Similarly to Calzini, Mario Appellius praised the warlike character, discipline and patriotism of the Japanese (1941b, 108–109), as well as their 'national-socialist, and therefore ultimately fascist nature' (140). He expressed his admiration for the Japanese fleet and army, which he regarded as the best of Asia (98–99). Pursuant to the geopolitical developments characterising the late 1930s, Appellius praised Japanese Pan-Asian expansionism and dismissed the 'yellow peril' rhetoric against Japan, which he described as a direct result of anti-Japanese propaganda diffused by France, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and the United States in order to promote their own diplomatic and political interests on a global scale (279). Appellius referred to the Japanese annexation of the Manchurian region, its transformation into the Manchukuo, and the Sino-Japanese War, started in 1937, as salvific acts of liberation and renovation of China (284). Consequently, he disregarded the fact that the Chinese Nationalist forces were on the side of the Allied powers, which they officially joined after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Moreover, Appellius justified the Japanese expansionism in East Asia as a necessary act to preserve the country's own 'vital space', just like Italian expansionism in the Mediterranean area and Germany's in Central Europe (286). Furthermore, in line with

Mussolini's ideas on the genuinely Italian and non-exportable nature of Fascism, Appellius considered fascist ideology as a Western theory not transferable to Asia. The Italian journalist, however, depicted Japan as capable of achieving a 'sui generis version of Asian fascism' (142), which would be, on the one hand, in line with the presumed universal nature of the fascist principles and fascist evolution of modern world; and on the other, with the specific characteristics of Japanese society and culture.

Korea also served as space for the exaltation of the Italian self, as a space in which to compare the backwardness of China and the progressiveness of Japanese Empire with Fascist Italy. In a narrative dated October 1923, Cipolla already regarded the Korean capital, Seoul, as a sign of the positive and efficient character of Japanese modernity, and therefore of the righteousness of the civilising cause of the Japanese Empire in Asia: 'Seoul offers unquestionably the most convincing evidence to the world of Japan's high standard as a modern and organising nation' (1928, 184). More importantly, Korea served as a vehicle for praise of the Japanese imperial attitude: 'Korea stands as the Asia Minor of the Far East. In fact, Korea has had the fortune of being on the opposite shore from Japan, which is another Italy. And this other Italy managed to land in Korea with the surplus of its population and the ingenuity of its initiatives' (188). Calzini also saw in 1930s Korea a symbol of the technological and military power of the Japanese Empire. The port of Busan was described as characteristic of the 'cold geometry of the rational port made of corrugated iron roofs, crane arms and asphalted quays. A port guarded by small sentinels with deployed bayonets' (Calzini 1937, 403). The image of the rational, technological and secure port of Busan was regarded as opposite to the 'sadness' of the Korean capital, Seoul, characterised by 'urbanistic chaos' and 'bastard luxury' (404). Calzini's closing considerations reinforce the contrast between Japanese modernity and efficiency, and the threatening backwardness of Korea and China, whose populations are regarded as 'human scum': 'The perfect efficiency of the Nippon-Western civilisation ends right beyond the great door. But how far does the human scum which besieges the Japanese colonisers and seeks to devour them extend?' (404).

In the same years, Arnaldo Fraccaroli negatively characterised the Koreans as a lazy and indolent 'relaxed people' (1938, 16), curiously dressed in white, like ghosts or nurses (21), wearing ridiculously small hats on their big heads (22). Fraccaroli asserted that Koreans were a weak people as a consequence of the millennial influence of Chinese civilisation. Consequently, Fraccaroli asserted that Korean people were unlike their new 'colonisers', the Japanese, who were like Italians and supposedly believed in the same principles: 'soldiers and migrants. Rifles and spades. It is an enlightening fascist theory that Japan also puts into practice' (4). Mario Appellius also characterised the Korean people as 'submissive, meek, feeble, feminine and inherently not belligerent' like all the peoples in the proximity of China, and therefore populated by 'a bastard people descending from the Han [Chinese]' (1941a, 216). In addition, Appellius specified that the feminine and peaceful nature of the Korean people was a result of racial selection (the influence of Chinese blood on the Korean people) and behavioural selection (the influence of the isolating Korean landscape on them) (221). Appellius also criticised Korea for resisting modernity and obstinately preserving Korean traditions (221), and he referred to the country as a backward, rural province of the Japanese empire (1941b, 105 and 119). To the Italian author, Korea stood as an example of a country that, unlike Italy, had been incapable of achieving its national and social regeneration – its *Risorgimento*:

Korea brings to mind the sentimental image of a most ancient civilisation that was not able to *rise again* [author's emphasis] in time. And because of its long, long decline, Korea is now suffering foreign domination. (Appellius 1941a, 215)

Conclusion

The exaltation of *italianità* and Fascist ideology was the determining factor that influenced the process of acquisition and narration of data on China, Japan and Korea, their people and their cultures, histories and political developments. The major elements of the Fascist ideology that Burdett (2007) has outlined in his study of Italian travel writing during the Fascist *ventennio* all recur in the narrativisation of these countries by the Fascist Italian intellectuals addressed in this research. Examples include the use of imperial rhetoric and racial hierarchism; reference to the cults of militarism, violence and masculinity, reputedly central in the Fascist ideology; the Fascist reinterpretation of the history of Italy and of Italian people, with emphasis on the memory of Imperial Rome, the sacrifice of the First World War and the regeneration of Italy under Fascism; and the presence of anti-communist propaganda, directly connected to the promotion of the Fascist regime as a model of human development distinct from American capitalism and Soviet communism.¹¹ Difference from China and Korea, and similarity with Japan, were essential to the consolidation and diffusion of a patriotic portrait of the Fascist nation and a specific idea of Italy, through a process of Othering of these countries. In such a process, the demarcations of identity and difference, familiarity and unfamiliarity, and distance and proximity all vary according to the specific ideological beliefs of the narrators, as well as the geopolitical dynamics within which Italy, China, Korea and Japan moved. While still characterised by a positive/negative dichotomic process, the depictions of these countries all reinforced the authors' own fascination for Italy. Their depictions of spaces for the exaltation of *italianità* had the 'fundamental redemptive and self-reflective function' of 'highlighting, primarily at the domestic level, the dream of the strong nation on which Mussolini's imperial project was founded' (Marinelli 2007, 142).

At the same time, the encounter with the alterity of these countries emerged from a globally interconnected scenario and resulted from specific transnational diplomatic, socio-political and economic dynamics. If on the one hand, fascism had proved to be a transnational phenomenon influencing policymaking in the East Asian region, particularly in Japan, on the other, the encounters with China, Korea and Japan resonated with the fascist political agenda in East Asia. Italian travel writing on these countries was substantially dependent on the specific historical dynamics operating in the East Asian region. Italian authors were certainly conscious of such dynamics, particularly those aspects concerning the international collocation of China, Korea and Japan in relation to Italy. They used such knowledge to contextualise events that they witnessed in Chinese, Korean and Japanese societies in order to improve the understanding of the national and international events of their times, such as the emergence of Chinese nationalist movements and Japanese pan-Asianism.

By undermining the same ontological stability of these countries under the gaze of Italian writers such as Appellius, Suster, Calzini, Cipolla and Tomaselli, such self-referentiality motivated the reimagination and rewriting of both Italy and China, Japan and Korea, as well as of the past and present historical cultural and diplomatic ties between them. While instrumental to such ideological discourse, the travel narratives of these authors were ultimately inter-relational and 'textual'.¹² The salient features characterising fascist culture and society were projected onto the narrativisation of these countries by 'chiefly inverting features observed at home – and to a much lesser degree by observing the others in question' (Todorov 1993, 265). China, Korea and Japan were, therefore, not only regarded as but were also written as subjects for texts – texts combining both the real and the imaginary, inscribed in the precise historical and political context in which they gravitated.

In the years following the Fascist *ventennio* and the end of the Second World War, the Fascist depiction of China, Korea and Japan was substituted by a contrasting discourse in which China

would be regarded as the new, proximate, progressive and culturally similar nation to Italy. Following the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (1949) and the success of Maoism in the country, the change in representation was marked by a comparison between the Chinese revolutionary experience and the Italian Resistance, as well as by the collocation of Italy and the PRC in relation to the Cold War dynamics of the 1950s. In the case of post-Second World War depictions, the – mainly leftist and pro-Maoist – political orientation of the authors proved to be a determining factor in the shaping of the narration of these countries, particularly of China.¹³

Notes

1. For the concept of global fascism and its influence in Japan, see Hedinger 2013 and 2017, Hofmann 2015a 105–125, and Young 2017.
2. The representation of China, Japan and Korea in the first decades of the twentieth century is a subject yet to be fully addressed by the scholarship in the field. For an outline of the historical background of the period and representation of China in the early 1900s see Smith 2012, 21–42 and 43–77. See also Lombardi 2006, 68–70.
3. All the quotations from the travel narratives discussed here were translated by me from their original Italian versions.
4. Ben-Ghiat argued that in Fascist Italy 'the term race was used as a synonym of people, nation, ancestry ... The shift between the terms race and ancestry was particularly common; in fact, many fascists regarded race as a spiritual identity based on the community of history, language and traditions, rather than on the community of blood'. (2000, 242).
5. Ciano and De Stefani had pro-Chinese views because of their personal experiences in the country, and relationship with Chiang Kai-Shek. The former had lived in China from 1927 to 1933, and had served as general consul in Shanghai from 1930 to 1935. The latter had served as a high-level adviser for the Chinese nationalist politician in 1937 (De Felice 1988; Smith 2012, 99–132). Nevertheless, in 1935 Ciano was among the promoters of a pact with Japan. According to Hedinger, Ciano was deeply impressed by Japan's exit from the League of Nations in 1933 and expansionist attitude towards China (2013, 158).
6. The Japanese interest in fascism prevailed throughout the whole Fascist *ventennio*, and was understood in different, even contradictory, ways in relation to both the international and national political dynamics of the two countries: see Hofmann 2015a. On the topic, see also Hedinger 2013 and Hofmann 2015b.
7. For more details on the friendship mission to Japan and its reception in Italy and Japan, see Hofmann 2015a, 113–117; and Hedinger 2017, 2006–2023.
8. According to Suster, the 'Japanese Mussolini' was the Japanese politician Kato Takaaki (Suster 1928, 226).
9. For a detailed study of the consequences of the Italian-Ethiopian War on the diplomatic ties between Italy and Japan in 1935–1936, see Hofmann 2015a, 90–108.
10. See Fatica 2014, 100.
11. In line with Duncan's argument (2002), I am aware that some authors during the Fascist *ventennio*, such as the journalists and writers Giovanni Comisso and Luigi Magrini, used their travel narratives to implicitly criticise the Fascist regime. However, such authors are not analysed in the present essay, since they did not represent the dominant discourse on those countries.
12. In the past decades academic scholarship has regarded the analysis of the function of the experience of Other spaces, and specifically China, as an interrelational and textual epistemological phenomenon, thus focusing on the processes of representation rather than on its political significance. See Saussy 2001, Hayot 2003, and Hayot, Saussy and Yao 2008.
13. On the topic see De Giorgi 2017, Lombardi 2010 and Polese Remaggi 2010.

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Italian summary

Durante il ventennio Fascista, alcuni tra i più importanti giornalisti e scrittori italiani (Mario Appelius, Raffaele Calzini, Arnaldo Cipolla, Arnaldo Fraccaroli, Roberto Suster and Cesco Tommaselli) viaggiarono in Cina, Corea e Giappone per *Il popolo d'Italia*, il *Corriere della Sera* e la *Stampa*. Le loro narrative di viaggio furono determinanti per la costruzione e diffusione in Italia delle rappresentazioni predominanti della Cina e della Corea come società esotiche, lontane e decadenti, nonché del Giappone come una società progressista e affine all'Italia fascista. Questi resoconti di viaggio furono dunque parte di estese pratiche discorsive, promosse da intellettuali italiani che si riconoscevano nel fascismo e ne disseminavano i principi guida. Attraverso l'enfasi posta nell'irriducibile differenza tra l'Italia fascista, la Cina e la Corea, nonché nell'affinità tra essa e il Giappone, costoro elogiarono la razza e la cultura italiane. Inoltre, essi propagandarono l'eccezionalità del fascismo e giustificarono l'orientamento politico della nazione italiana nelle dinamiche geo-politiche del tempo.