

Introduction

THIS BOOK CONSIDERS THE centuries-long exchange between Italy and China as background for the examination of China and its inhabitants in documentaries, historical fiction, and fictional narratives by Italian filmmakers. *Orienteering Italy* recognizes the historical bonds that link the two cultures, whose locations—Mediterraneo (middle of the earth) and Chung kuo (Middle Kingdom)—declare their centrality in their respective worlds. An examination of the intersections of these two cultures that see themselves as inhabiting the center, rather than the margins, expands the contemporary discussion about East and West. This book invites a consideration of the cultural sensitivities inherent in cross-cultural representation in film. It continues a line of inquiry regarding the West's perception of the East with a special focus on Italian cinematic representations of China and its people at home and abroad in selected works of Italian filmmakers Carlo Lizzani, Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Gianni Amelio, Stefano Incerti, Andrea Segre, Riccardo Cremona, and Vincenzo De Cecco.

The original meaning of the word “orient” is to cause to face or point toward the east, in the direction of the rising sun. In this way, the East serves as a lodestar for the West's understanding of itself. For centuries, the East, as both a place and an idea, has offered the West a sense of its location in the world. The East orients the West relative to the land where the sun rises, but more importantly, in addition to determining physical location, the Orient has represented the exotic other, providing a counterpoint to the Occident. Western fascination with China and the East has resulted in both presumptively authentic portrayals and mere imaginary constructs; this attraction has engaged theorists from both East and West, including Giambattista Vico, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Rey Chow, Wang Ning, and Longxi Zhang. The term “Orientalism,” the

title of Said's groundbreaking 1978 text, refers to how Western writers and artists imitate or depict what they consider to be representations of the cultures of the East, including those of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. While focusing on the distinction between East and West, this perspective contends that the West applies its own subjective views to the East. By extension, this theoretical framework suggests that the West's perspective on the East is an Orientalizing, essentially demeaning one based on the West's dominance over the Other, the East. As Adam Shatz (2019) notes in a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, Said in his seminal text defined the term "Orientalism" forty years ago when global political realities were quite different. At its core, Orientalism suggests an imbalance of power in which Western impressions, real or imagined, reveal and confirm their influence over the East. Today, there are new realities in the relationship between East and West.

As Wang Ning (1997) points out, Occidentalism, by which Eastern cultures vilify the West, and the United States in particular, is a potential response or antidote to the Orientalizing, colonizing phenomenon. Yet, he asserts, such an approach has distinct limitations in a world of cultural dialogue (63). Rather than an oppositional approach, Ning favors an examination of the intersections between East and West.

We may ask how one part of the world might look at another part of the world without applying its own, inherently subjective, perspective. In *China and Orientalism* (2012), Daniel Vukovich sees an evolution of the relationship between China and the West as the two cultures move toward greater similarity. His Sinological-Orientalist paradigm examines the evolving relationship between China, as it becomes more open, liberal, modern, and freer in comparison to the Maoist period, and the West. Rey Chow offers another perspective. As she explains in "China as Documentary: Some Basic Questions (Inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni and Jia Zhangke)," the most fertile ground for the examination of two cultures is at the intersections they share rather than the distance between the native informant (Chinese) and foreign observer (Italian filmmaker). Speaking of Chinese cinema, Chow explains her approach: "The gap between these positions is what interests me, and where I would locate the future of a visual research area such as Chinese cinema in the age of hypermediality. Paradoxically, this widening gap is the result of globalization, when increasingly close contact between the two sides has not only become constant, but is virtually unavoidable. As bearers of specific attitudes and perspectives, so-called native informants and foreign observers are partners in a long historical relationship, the

complexity of which lies not in either position alone but rather in their entanglement” (Chow 2014, 17). It is precisely this “entanglement,” to use Chow’s term, that this volume seeks to elucidate as it examines how Italians have imagined China and its people in film.

To date, there are no books that examine the cinematic relationship between Italy and China; Stefano Bona wrote a dissertation on “Italian Filmmakers in China after 1949: Transnational Cinema and Its Cultural, Economic, and Political Implications” (2018) that examines several of the films discussed in *Orientalizing Italy*.

While this book focuses primarily on the cultural conversation between the two cultures as portrayed in film, political ideology as well as economic circumstances have informed these representations. In the past, more traditional forms of examination of Italy and China have focused on historically important figures such as Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, and Giuseppe Castiglione. Other studies have considered this relationship in terms of international relations, mass media, building projects, commercial transactions, and cultural difference. Former diplomat Marco Filippo Pini’s *Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro/Italy and China, 60 Years between Past and Future* (2011) traces the relationship between Italy and China primarily from a diplomatic perspective, from the formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 until 2009. Gaoheng Zhang examines media representations of the Chinese presence in Italy in *Migration and the Media: Debating Chinese Migration to Italy, 1992–2012* (2021). In *Imperial Designs: Italians in China, 1900–1947* (2012), Shirley Smith studies the Italian colonial impact on China in the Italian communities in Beijing, Tianjian, and Shanghai. In *Italia e Cina/Italy and China* (1966), Giuliano Bertuccioli and Federico Masini chronicle the encounters between the Chinese and the Italians from the Han and Roman Empires to 1911, when the imperial system in China ended. Homay King’s *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (2010) identifies the enigmatic signifiers that pervade the East/West relationship in visual terms; her chapter on Antonioni and other filmmakers who sought to depict Asia in film is particularly relevant to this study.

Italy and China: A Long History of Exchange

Long before Carlo Lizzani traveled to China in 1957 to film his documentary *La muraglia cinese/Behind the Great Wall*, Italian merchants had participated in a robust exchange fueled by trade. Materials such as silk

and steel implements from China traversed the Silk Road, a series of routes approximately seven thousand miles long that connected Xi'an in China to the Mediterranean, with the first period of vigorous trade most likely beginning in the second and third centuries AD. As Valerie Hansen (2012, 5) points out, the name Silk Road (coined by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, a prominent geographer who worked in China in the nineteenth century) is a double misnomer since there was not one road but rather a series of meandering trails that linked one trading post to another along which many goods—including chemicals, spices, saddles, leather products, glass, and paper—were traded in addition to silk. Later, in the thirteenth century, the merchant Marco Polo ventured to China where he lived for over twenty years. His extensive observations of that fantastic place appeared in *Il Milione/The Travels of Marco Polo*, a text that he dictated to the Pisan writer Rustichello when both were imprisoned in Genoa. This manuscript by Polo, who had returned to Italy in 1295, circulated sometime between 1298 and 1299. The travelogue, originally composed in Rustichello's Franco-Venetian dialect before being translated into French, Italian, and Latin, was an enormous success. During Marco's decades in China with his father Niccolò, he befriended the emperor Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, learned four languages, and traveled extensively as the emperor's ambassador. Admirers of Polo found his tales of China so fantastic, most likely due to embellishments from Rustichello's romantic sensibilities, that they implored the author to confess to his fabrication even on his deathbed in Venice in 1324. He refused, claiming to have seen everything reported with his own eyes. Polo's text exerted enormous influence on later explorers as well, inspiring Christopher Columbus to chart a new route to the East. For his westward sea journey, the intrepid traveler consulted a heavily annotated version of Polo's account of his travels to the East. Thus, the discovery of the "new world" in the fifteenth century resonated with the European preoccupation with the East. *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which was extraordinarily popular in its day, established the connection between Italy and China in the literary imagination. Its enduring fascination resonated with Italo Calvino whose novel *Le città invisibili/Invisible Cities* (1972) revisited those tales of adventure in Cathay (northern China) and Manji (southern China). The text also engendered several films, including an early American version, *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938), directed by Archie Mayo and starring Gary Cooper, as well as an Italian adaptation featuring an international cast, *L'avventura di un italiano in Cina/Marco Polo*, directed by Piero Pierotti in 1962.

The sophisticated civilizations of Italy and China exchanged artistic techniques and technological expertise as well as goods. Among the many learned Westerners who traveled to China, two Italian Jesuits, cartographer Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and portrait artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), who was also known by his Chinese name Lang Shining, embodied the intellectual and artistic exchanges of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively. Ricci, a talented mathematician and linguist, brought two mechanical clocks with him when he traveled to China in 1582. He installed the larger one outside his residence and gave the smaller one to the emperor for his private use. In China, the Jesuit Ricci collaborated with a Mandarin artist to create a map of the world with Chinese characters that offered a new view of the West to the Chinese. He became fluent in Chinese and adopted the local dress, exemplifying cross-cultural sensitivity.¹ The Jesuit lay brother Castiglione, who was in China from 1715 to 1766, also exhibited a profound appreciation for Chinese culture. He taught fellow Chinese artists about perspective while developing his own style, which combined Western and Eastern aesthetics. Castiglione's presence had a profound impact on Chinese painting while his own painting demonstrated the successful amalgam of Western and Eastern themes, composition, and technique.²

Europe's fascination with the East resulted in the phenomenon of chinoiserie, a cultural appropriation by the West of Chinese style, whether real or imagined, that was particularly popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The phenomenon of chinoiserie, which extended beyond decorative design to include gardens, architecture, music, and theater, reflected both the increased trade with the Far East and the fascination with the culture of those faraway lands. In Italy, Chinese artistic styles grace regal palaces on the peninsula from north to south. Decorations in Turin in the Villa della Regina, which was originally built in the seventeenth century for the House of Savoy, are representative of the enormous popularity of chinoiserie in Piedmont. Today, one can see vestiges of Chinese silk panels covering the walls of the palace. In the south of Italy, the strikingly ornate and colorful Palazzina cinese sits on the edge of Palermo's Parco della Favorita. Architect Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia received a commission in 1799 from the Bourbon king Ferdinand I to renovate the *palazzina* or "little palace" that had originally been designed for the lawyer Benedetto Lombardo. The salmon-colored palace, also known as the Real Casina alla cinese (Little Royal Chinese Style House), is a notable example of Chinese style from

its gated entrance and exterior facades to interior furnishings and vividly painted wall decorations.

Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, written in 1924 but completed by Franco Alfano in 1926 following the composer's death, reveals the Italian penchant for Asian culture in music as well as design. Based on Carlo Gozzi's earlier (1726) play of the same name, *Turandot* derives from an ancient Persian collection of seven stories, one for each day of the week. Puccini decided to shift the setting of his opera from Persia to China where Princess Turandot, daughter of Turan the ruler, plays a high-stakes game of courtship that threatens to ruin even her true love for Prince Calaf. With this opera, Puccini attempted to achieve some musical verisimilitude by adopting traditional Chinese themes and motifs. *Turandot's* melodramatic tale has resonated with the Chinese as evidenced by the collaboration of conductor Zubin Mehta and Chinese director Zhang Yimou on a live production of *Turandot* in 1998, first in Florence and then in Beijing's Forbidden City. This cross-cultural artistic partnership is chronicled, with all its challenges and successes on display, in Allan Miller's documentary *The Turandot Project* (2000).

International conflicts also brought the two civilizations in contact. Early in the twentieth century, Imperial China granted a concession zone in Tientsin (now Tianjin) to the Kingdom of Italy; it was one of nine foreign concessions awarded first for the purposes of trade and later for assistance in quelling the antifoignier Boxer Rebellion.³ These concessions of land in port cities were widely hated by nationalist Chinese. In 1919 the student-led May Fourth Movement rebelled against concessions to Japan and called for the modernization of China. Some of the May Fourth leaders later founded the Chinese Communist Party. Administered by an Italian official from Rome for almost fifty years (1901–47), the Italian zone was finally returned to Nationalist China after the conclusion of World War II. The Italian-style buildings, now renovated externally, serve as a reminder of the European presence in China.⁴ In the new millennium, Chinese developers have created imitations of Paris and Venice in the provinces. New towns such as “Venice Water Town,” which features a replica of St. Mark's Square, appeal to Chinese who find charm in the imitation of Western European monuments and architectural style. These buildings represent a phenomenon that the architectural historian Maurizio Marinelli (2019, 417) describes as “fascination for Italy, for a ‘real-unreal’ Italian-flavoured atmosphere.” Examples of such “Italianerie,” as Marinelli calls them, are found today in a chain of upscale outlet malls throughout China that bear the name “Florentia Villages.”

The Drama of Chinese History on Film and in Reality since the Mid-Twentieth Century

China is the most populous country on earth and has been so for centuries. China in the twentieth century probably went through more dramatic and historic changes than any other country: from the feudalism of Qing Empire China that lasted until 1911, through the struggle between capitalist nationalism and Chinese Communism up to 1949 for what kind of modern society would replace feudalism, and after 1949 through the sometimes cataclysmic changes in Maoism and communist rule. Communist China evolved from the initial attempts to mobilize the peasants in the early 1950s through the disaster of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, in which tens of millions died in a politically induced famine, through the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, and finally to the turn of China toward capitalism in the last forty years. And, after 1980, a new wave of Chinese immigrants settled in Europe and especially in Italy, engaging in new industries and employment not typical of earlier Chinese immigrant communities.

Italy, too, has seen a lot of drama during this same period, from World War I and twenty years of fascist rule under Benito Mussolini, through the Italian armed Resistance to fascism during World War II, through all the economic, political, and social changes of the postwar era, including the rebellion of youth and workers in the 1960s and '70s. Yet these changes were not as vast or as tumultuous as what the Chinese people experienced. And Italy after 1980 has evolved from a country from which people emigrated to one to which millions of people from many parts of the world, including China, have immigrated.

This book examines new forms by which Italians have continued the long tradition, which started with Marco Polo, of representing what they see in China and in their interactions with Chinese people (most recently in Italy itself). Films by Italian directors, both documentary and fiction, have generated new images and impressions of China and the Chinese people. And the Italian films covered in this book, with the singular exception of Bernardo Bertolucci's sweeping *The Last Emperor*, are not on the epic scale, nor necessarily informed by ideology, that the communists who rule China might prefer. Instead, these Italian directors have preferred to portray people more intimately, focusing on stories and details of individuals and ordinary life. This is true both for the movies filmed in China and the documentaries and fiction films about Chinese immigrants in Italy.

China's political and social movements motivated revolutionaries around the world in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s Mao's political thought exerted enormous power over the global imagination as Julia Lovell outlines in her ambitious and thorough study, *Maoism: A Global History* (2019). The revolutionary ideas of Chairman Mao Zedong and the ideology behind the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s—despite the chaos and violence of that movement, which was largely hidden from observers at the time—appealed to European intellectuals and activists who wished for change in the hierarchical, capitalist, and elite cultures of the West. After World War II, Marxism and the goal of socialism had wide support in Italy, partly because the Italian Communists had been prominent in opposition to fascism before World War II and in the armed Resistance to the Nazis during the war. The communists were the second most popular party after the Christian Democrats. Yet the Italian Communist Party in the 1960s was still tied to and supportive of the Soviet Union. Lovell explains the shift in perspective from the Soviet Union to China by the left: “Since the quashing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and with the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet Union no longer represented an emancipatory alternative to the forces of capitalist oppression. The People's Republic of China—bigger than Vietnam, more remote than Cuba, more radical than them both—looked the best option” (276). In addition, the U.S. war in Vietnam, the most violent international conflict since World War II, generated widespread opposition among leftists and others throughout the world, and thus sympathy for the Chinese Communist backers of the Vietnamese revolutionaries. In addition, the fact that Mao, leader of the most populous country on earth, was calling for young people to rebel struck a chord with those who saw much that was wrong with their own societies. Especially in the turbulent 1960s, Italian students and workers embraced Maoist politics, which were embodied in his *Little Red Book* (officially titled *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*) as well as in his seemingly ubiquitous portraits. Yet almost none of them knew much about the realities of Maoist China; they were responding to Maoist ideology and a simplified and appealing vision of the Cultural Revolution.

When the time came for China to open its doors to foreigners, the government invited foreign directors who sympathized with Maoism, such as Dutchman Joris Ivens (1898–1989) and, later, the Italians Carlo Lizzani (1922–2013) and Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), to film documentaries of the country. Unlike Ivens's propagandistic films, which were praised in China, Italian documentaries failed to impress Chinese

authorities. Antonioni's *Chung Kuo—Cina/Chung Kuo—China* (1972) was only screened in China in the new millennium while Lizzani's *Behind the Great Wall* (1958) has yet to be shown in that country. These two documentaries, however, mark an important juncture in the dialogue between China and Italy; they also preserve images of China before the extraordinary political, economic, and social changes that occurred there in the late twentieth century.

An Italian Eye on China and Chinese Immigrants

This book begins and ends with a consideration of the documentary, a genre that suggests impartiality but often projects a decidedly subjective view. Within that genre lies an important aspect of cultural difference between East and West regarding the purpose of art. Additionally, these films demonstrate that Western artists, including film directors, insist upon representing the individual while the Chinese appear to view art as a collective experience. The first chapter of *Orienting Italy* examines Lizzani's *La muraglia cinese/Behind the Great Wall* (1958), the first Italian cinematic documentation of China. Lizzani, who was part of a larger movement of Italian directors traveling abroad to film in exotic lands beginning in the 1950s, spent ten months filming throughout China in 1957. *Behind the Great Wall* won awards in Italy and abroad; it premiered in New York in 1959 with Chet Huntley narrating and AromaRama, a new sensory gimmick, providing smells to accompany the images. Due to a lack of distribution rights, the film is no longer available for public viewing; there is no record of its projection in China. This film, which is narrated in Italian by Giancarlo Vigorelli, was subjected to constraints imposed by Chinese government handlers as well as to stipulations made by Italian censors.

The second chapter focuses on a much better known documentary about China, *Chung Kuo—Cina/Chung Kuo—China*, a three-and-a-half hour film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1972. At the height of its Maoist revolutionary period—and following the visit by US secretary of state Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon—the Chinese government selected Antonioni to film a documentary in collaboration with Italian national television (RAI, or Radiotelevisione italiana). The Italian director spent five weeks filming in cities such as Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Shanghai as well as in rural villages in Hunan Province. Government handlers carefully controlled the director's movements and

access. The resulting documentary, shown first in three episodes on Italian television in early 1973, was not screened in China until 2004. With this work, Antonioni had stepped into a minefield of intercultural representation and of factional infighting among the leaders of Chinese Communist Party. The seemingly innocuous documentary, narrated in Italian by Andrea Barbato, provoked the Chinese authorities and resulted in attempts by the Chinese government to prohibit its release in Italy, Greece, Sweden, France, and Germany.

The third chapter analyzes Bernardo Bertolucci's sweeping tale, *L'ultimo imperatore/The Last Emperor* (1987), which portrays a critical shift in China's history as it recounts the eclipse of the empire and the rise of communism. This historical tale represents far more than a mere chronology of cataclysmic change in China; it points to larger issues in cultural representation. Two literary works inform the film's narrative, which is told in flashback: *From Emperor to Citizen*, a purported autobiography of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi (1906–67), the last emperor of the title, who was crowned before he reached the age of three in 1908, and *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, a memoir by Pu Yi's Scottish tutor, Reginald Fleming Johnston. Initially published in 1964, Pu Yi's autobiography was culled from diaries that he kept during his ten-year imprisonment at the Fushun War Criminals Management Center for betraying his country by abetting the Japanese; he had served as emperor of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo from 1934 to 1945. With *From Emperor to Citizen* as his guide, Bertolucci headed to China convinced that only by going to that country could he begin to understand it. A third text, Mao's political bible, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, also informs our understanding of this historical epic. Technically an Italian film on account of its director and crew, *The Last Emperor*, winner of nine Academy Awards, features dialogue in English.

Gianni Amelio's fiction film *La stella che non c'è/The Missing Star* (2006), which portrays frictions between Italy and China in the new millennium, is the subject of the fourth chapter. *The Missing Star*, an adaptation of Ermanno Rea's novel *La dismissione/The Decommissioning* (2002), highlights the influx of Chinese workers and capital into Italy and the rapid industrialization of China. In this film, a newly unemployed Italian laborer, Vincenzo Buonavolontà, embarks on his quest to alert the new owners of a factory in China of a potentially dangerous defect in the machinery they purchased and then shipped home from Italy. Viewers see the vast Chinese countryside and populous urban centers through the eyes of the protagonist who personifies the "good will" of

his surname. As this film illustrates, shifts in trade patterns inform the relationship between China and Italy in the 2000s. As viewers wend their way through China with Buonavolontà, a contemporary Marco Polo on a benevolent mission, they may consider possible parallels between his experience and that of the large numbers of Chinese immigrants in Italy today. The relationship that develops between Vincenzo, who speaks little Chinese, and his translator Liu, who speaks Italian, reveals Amelio's optimism about intercultural understanding.

Chapter 5 reflects a marked shift in the way in which Italian filmmakers represent the relationship between China and Italy in film. Whereas Amelio's *La stella che non c'è/The Missing Star* (2006) addresses the tensions created by China's ascent and Italy's manufacturing decline, the two films analyzed in this chapter, Stefano Incerti's *Gorbaciof* (2010) and Andrea Segre's *Io sono Li/Shun Li and the Poet* (2011), focus on how such tensions, which are both global and profoundly personal, affect the lives of Chinese living in Italy, and more specifically of Chinese women who have relationships with older Italian-speaking men. These films reflect a contemporary reality: several hundred thousand Chinese have settled in Italy because of the entrepreneurial possibilities that country offers. That phenomenon is illustrated also by the way that Italian directors, like Incerti and Segre, have focused on filming the Chinese in their adopted Italy. Both of the fictional female characters come to Italy for economic reasons: in *Gorbaciof*, Lila migrates to the south of Italy (Naples) with her father, while in *Shun Li and the Poet*, Shun Li emigrates alone to a town on the Venetian lagoon in the north of Italy, leaving a young son in the care of his grandfather in China. These two tales of friendship between an older male who knows Italian and a younger Chinese female who cannot speak the language of her adopted country are inscribed in a larger conversation about race and immigration in contemporary Italy. Silence, brought on by the linguistic limitations of both the characters and the actors who play them, characterizes both these films. These films, in which visual imagery takes precedence over dialogue, underscore the narrative power of cinema.

The final chapter returns to the documentary genre to consider the radical change in the relationship between Italy and China in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In addition to reviewing a history of Italian documentaries about the Chinese presence in Italy over the last twenty years, *Orienteing Italy* examines the documentary film *Miss Little China* (2009), an investigation by sociologists Riccardo Cremona and Vincenzo De Cecco of Chinese youth and intergenerational differences

in contemporary Italy. The directors allow Italians to reveal their prejudices, fears, and ignorance about Chinese culture against the backdrop of the beauty pageant of the film's title. The young female contestants and their mothers speak both in Italian and Chinese, engendering a sense of authenticity that also serves to familiarize the Italian audience with the voice of another culture, signaling a new, more nuanced direction in this cross-cultural exchange. While the films analyzed in this chapter reveal Italian xenophobia and the Chinese awareness of it, the genuine expression of these sentiments demonstrates how the art form of cinema can effectively address such issues.

This book introduces an important cultural dialogue to an English-speaking readership through translated excerpts from films currently available only in Italian. *Gorbaciof* and *Miss Little China* do not have English subtitles, *The Missing Star* DVD is not available in a US format, and *Chung Kuo* recently became available with English subtitles on DVD only in the European format. *Behind the Great Wall* is not available for viewing; the Centro sperimentale di cinematografia in Rome holds the only extant copy. Since non-Italian-speaking audiences may have limited or even severely restricted access to many of the films in this volume, *Orienting Italy* provides detailed descriptions of these works. It is my sincere hope that this book will elicit interest in this subject, and perhaps result in greater accessibility of the films under consideration.

Orienting Italy is of topical importance given that, in 2020, Italy and China were inextricably linked by the deadly contagion COVID-19. The forces of globalization brought China and Italy together in a menacing fashion as the epidemic that began in Wuhan, in the central Chinese province of Hubei, left its mark on Lombardy, the first European epicenter of the disease. That region in northern Italy famously provided the setting for another plague in Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi/ The Betrothed* (1842), the first historical novel in the Italian tradition. This epic love story of a contested marriage between Renzo and Lucia tells of oppression and foreign dominance under Spanish rule. The novel also describes the bubonic plague of 1630 and its impact on the lives of Manzoni's humble protagonists. Confusion reigned as bungling authorities tried to calm the residents of the region while also expounding false narratives about *untori* (plague spreaders) who purportedly spread the disease with nefarious powder throughout the city of Milan. Renzo, who recovers from the plague, hears that Lucia is languishing in the *lazzaretto*⁵ where victims of the contagion were left to meet their fate. In the end, the two lovers overcome obstacles beyond the plague, including arrest warrants

and a vow of celibacy, in order to finally marry. The marriage of Renzo and Lucia serves as a metaphor for the Italian people who struggled to unify their country in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather than create unity, the coronavirus has heightened tensions between Italy and China. This latest convergence of the two cultures, borne of disease, is bound to make its way into film.

Historically, plagues have arrived in the West from the East (Manuagh and Twilley 2021, 20). Before the coronavirus, a variation of the Hong Kong flu first circulated throughout the United States and Europe in 1967–68, taking hold in Italy in 1969. Nicknamed by Italians the “Moon Flu” because it began to spread about the same time as Apollo 12 returned to earth, this disease had infected approximately 28 percent of Italians by December 1969, prompting an unnamed diplomat to say, according to *Time*, “I haven’t seen anything like this since America’s first flu epidemic of 1918.”⁶ Early in the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, representation in the media of the emerging illness in Italy emphasized the deadly connection between the two countries. Suggestions were made that the coronavirus outbreak in Lombardy might be connected to the region’s close business ties with China. Photographs in the *New York Times* showed nearly deserted streets in Milan’s Chinatown (Goodman and Maines 2020). Located in the center of that ethnic enclave is Via Paolo Sarpi, the street that was the site of Chinese protests against unfair and prejudicial treatment by Italian authorities in 2007.⁷ Fittingly, the historical figure of Paolo Sarpi embodies the longstanding relationship between Asian language and culture and Western culture that this volume seeks to observe and analyze in Italian cinema. Born in 1552, Sarpi was a Venetian patriot, scholar, and church reformer who entered the Servite order, a minor Augustinian congregation of Florentine origin, at the age of thirteen. He then studied mathematics and Oriental languages in Mantua before going to Milan, where he served as an adviser to Cardinal Carlo Borromeo (another figure in Manzoni’s novel), before being sent back to Venice. Now his name is synonymous with Milan’s Chinatown, a locus of conflict between native and migrant, Italian and Chinese, communities.

The important and timely dialogue between China and Italy in film, begun by *Orienteering Italy*, does not end here, of course. Current immigration patterns as well as the increasingly globalized film industry suggest a bright future for collaborations between these two nations. Filmmakers will undoubtedly remain in dialogue as China continues to exert a profound and sustained influence on the Italian imagination.