ITALIAN LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINA
NARRATING CULTURAL IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the case of Italian literary representations of China, this article explores the mechanisms at work in the process of getting to know and describing a cultural Other. Literary materials from medieval and modern times are analysed and compared with an emphasis on the constructive role of narrative in the synaesthetic experience of realities around us. The texts presented reveal an interplay between cultural identities: while guiding and inspiring people's imagery of Chinese territories, inhabitants and culture, they reflect and define Italian cultural traits.

Keywords: China, Italy, Self, Other, perception and representation, experience, literature

Introduction

The early European awareness of China as a mysterious, far-away realm is characterised by the scarcity of tangible cultural manifestations and direct experience of this remote geographical and cultural identity. The few luxury goods that, at first, made their way from China into Europe—most prominently silk—were determinant witnesses of the existence of their distant producers. Nonetheless, their quantity and variety was not enough to suggest more details about Chinese land and culture. For this reason, literary descriptions—especially in the long period from Roman times to Renaissance—mirrored a preoccupation with the representation of the distant oriental Other rather than with the perception of its concrete manifestations. The paucity of phenomenal participation and experience created the basic need to, first of all, physically construct China. For this purpose, imagination was used as equivalent to knowledge, in order to complement the meagre and not always reliable notions available. At the same time, the stranger and unknown was made understandable by association with and in conformity to the local and familiar. From a heterogeneous mixture of historical references, travel accounts, tales and myths, new suggestive realities emerged. These aroused bewilderment, curiosity, interest or even scepticism and fear in the audience, who had not the possibility to otherwise verify the information provided.

In this article, I illustrate how literary descriptions and narrations provide contexts, references and hints that contribute to shaping ideas of cultural realities and putting these ideas in a dimension beyond the circumstances of specific representations. I therefore look

at literary texts as 'written cultural products' that take part in the creation and re-creation of identities (Archetti [ed.] 1994: 13). The expression of the individual author becomes meaningful in anthropological terms as the perceptions and experiences reflected in the text are related to a world beyond that of the text itself: as they are incorporated in the set of 'collective representations' that, as Durkheim (1973: 160) puts it, 'originate only when they are embodied in material objects, things, or beings of every sort—figures, movements, sounds, words, and so on—that symbolize and delineate them in some outward appearance'. The complexity of representative relationships is highlighted by Mitchell (1986, 1994), as he analyses image and text and draws on considerations such as Foucault's observations on the 'infinite relation' of language to painting (Foucault 1970: 9) and de Certeau's theory of the 'heterology of representation' (de Certeau 1986). He observes that the boundaries between different types of representations are often blurred and states that the heterogeneity of representation is not limited to formal and structural characteristics but includes as well matters of perception and experience of Self and Other (Mitchell 1994: 4–5).

In the sections below I take into consideration three medieval texts—*Historia Mongalorum* by Giovanni dal Pian del Carpine (1182–1252), *Il Milione* by Marco Polo (1254–1324) and *Relatio* by Odorico da Pordenone (1265–1331)—that represent important landmarks in the evolution of notions of China in Italy and in the West in general. Produced by Italian travellers for an Italian audience, these texts were circulated across Europe and translated into other languages, so that the Italian experience was integrated and became influential in a wider discourse of cultural Other. As their legacy has lived on through the centuries, I analyse each text in relation to a modern Italian literary text inspired by it. I do so bearing in mind the role of discourse in the representation, transmission and fashioning of cultural traits. In fact, I treat text as a 'fragment of discourse' from whose context 'participants in a culture' extrapolate, thereby making it culturally coherent and 'durable' (Silverstein and Urban [eds] 1996: 2). As this process of entextualisation becomes clear, Silverstein and Urban (1996: 14) explain, 'an architecture of social relations' and the many possible 'metadiscursive projections' are also revealed. Consequently, the point made in this article is not about the faithfulness and inaccuracy of the descriptions provided in the texts under examination, nor about the differences between the straightforward character and the metaphorical implications of such descriptions. What matter here are issues revolving around practices of representing the Other that are mediated and affected by a more-or-less conscious exercise of Self identification and affirmation. Ideas of China constructed and displayed through narration in literary texts are examined in the way they reflect the 'fascination of "otherness"', the popularity of 'representing difference' and continuity and change in the 'repertoires of representation around "difference' and "otherness"' (Hall 1997: 225). In particular, I look at the development of intricate relational systems involving perceptions of a cultural Other through Self-awareness as well as perceptions of the Self through the construction of cultural difference.

Shaping textual China: an early attempt in Historia Mongalorum

After limited and probably indirect trade during the first and second century AD, any contact between the Roman world—including the Italian peninsula—and the people inhabiting the eastern regions beyond the Red Sea gradually came to a halt as travelling eastward was made more and more difficult. The Persians strengthened their role as intermediaries along the northern route, while the expansion, first of the Axumites, and then of the Arabs from the seventh century, blocked the southern route. For a long time—well into the Middle Ages—'Europe almost completely lost sight of the East' (Lach 1965: 22). It was only under changed international socio-political circumstances in the thirteenth century that Europe had a new opportunity to establish direct connections with the East. This was the time when Chinese territories and European territories seemed to become closer to each other as the Mongols conquered a big part of the lands of Central Asia and Eastern Europe before becoming rulers of China itself in 1279. The Mongol empire, in fact, stretched so far west as to reach the Adriatic Sea by 1241. At this time Italy played a pivotal role in the development of this new relationship and in the propagation of new ideas and images of China.

Besides a few literary references to a tentative identification and location of China and the Chinese in Roman times, such as brief mentions in the geographical works by Pomponius Mela (fl. 43 AD ca.), Strabo (63/64 BC–24 AD ca.) and Ptolemy (active in the second century AD), the earliest account in Europe to cast light on the peoples living in the far eastern regions was the *Historia Mongalorum* (History of the Mongols). This text was written by the Franciscan friar Giovanni dal Pian del Carpine in 1247, on his return from his diplomatic mission to the Mongol Great Khan Kuyuk (reign 1246–1248). As a matter of fact, Pope Innocent IV (1195–1254) looked with worry at the Mongols' incursions in Dalmatia, in the area around Wien and, most dangerously, just outside Udine, a town in the north-eastern part of Italy. It was feared that the belligerent invaders would pour into the Italian peninsula, eventually occupying the Papal State. Hence, in an attempt to avoid this risk, in 1245 the Pope sent Friar Giovanni to the Mongols as ambassador. The papal envoy had the task to negotiate peace with the Mongols and to try to divert their military efforts against Islamic territories.[1] In the end, Friar Giovanni's embassy was superfluous and unsuccessful. Infiltration of Italy would have never happened: the Mongols retreated in 1242 because of the internal political crisis following the death of the Great Khan Ögödei (1185–1241) and no further incursions on the far western borders were planned afterwards. Furthermore, rather than hostility Kuyuk Khan showed indifference towards the Pope's requests: he considered the Papal State on the same level as all other 'barbarian' countries that were expected to pay tributes and remain in a subservient position to the Mongol empire.

Despite being a diplomatic failure, Giovanni's expedition had at least one positive outcome, namely the production of his report, an illuminating source of information on the Far East for the Europeans of his time. Lach (1965: 32) summarises the novelty and merits of such a literary work: 'this book marks something of a transition in medieval literature on Asia, for it is primarily an itinerary and factual description of what he [Giovanni] and his companion [Friar Benedetto of Poland] saw, heard, and surmised'. What makes Giovanni such a special narrator is the fact that he was the first educated

European with knowledge of other countries and cultures—at least within Europe—to reach the heart of the Mongols' homeland on an official mission, having been received by the Great Khan in a settlement just south of the capital Karakorum. From his privileged point of view he was able eventually to provide details well beyond the previous scanty, uncertain notes on the exotic products and the location of lands at the eastern frontiers of the known world. It is immediately clear that the author deliberately gives the structure of a treatise to the first eight chapters of the *Historia Mongalorum*. In the initial part, in a sequence of four chapters, he describes geographical features, population, religion, customs and habits. The data provided had been acquired through meticulous direct observation and had been purposely collected by Giovanni during his journey. It is likely that all the information was just stored somehow in his mind. For this reason, he drafted a first version of his account soon after his return to Lyon, in order to transcribe as many details as possible while they were still fresh in his memory. Only later he rearranged the materials in a more organic and literarily adequate form. In the final sentences of the work, the author himself writes (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 333, my translation): 'after taking some rest, we have corrected and polished it [the account], improving it from the previous [version], left incomplete'.

Although it is no doubt too hazardous to consider Giovanni as an 'ethnographer' *ante litteram*, it is plausible that the compilation of a treatise on the Mongols was part of the instructions given by the Pope. As a matter of fact, by knowing more about the mysterious, fierce people who were threatening Italian territory, it would have been easier to predict their moves and confront them in battle in case of an attack. This is clearly expressed by the author (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 228, my translation): 'once their [the Mongols'] will and intention was truthfully acknowledged, we could reveal this to the Christians, so that in case of a sudden attack, they would not find themselves unprepared'. This underlying strategy explains why the first four chapters are followed by another four discussing, in this order, the Mongols' political organisation, war methods, government policy in conquered lands and even possible ways to wage a war against them. It is only in chapter nine—the last one, amounting to almost a third of the whole text and added at a later stage—that Giovanni eventually narrates his journey, thereby leaving the format of the treatise for one closer to travel writing. If travel intended as 'the transversal of space' incites memory through physical movement with the intent of exploring and knowing, travel writing as 'the temporal inscriptions of views and scenes' allows identities to be shaped and the 'cultural relations motivating such accounts in the first place' to emerge (Stewart 1996: 134, 137).

By analysing the way in which the author makes himself visible or invisible throughout the *Historia Mongalorum*, it is possible to understand how he relates himself to the Other he is describing. Apart from the initial statement in the prologue, in which Giovanni briefly presents his mission, the circumstances and the aims, he almost completely disappears in the descriptive part. This choice shows a sense of detachment from the people he had found himself amongst. One gets, therefore, the impression that despite the genuine effort to acquire and report accurate information—'*facta*' (facts), as the author says (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 229)—about the Mongols, Giovanni cannot really comprehend a culture that he perceives as utterly alien from his own. Yet he realises that knowledge is the only means to overcome the fear of the invaders from the East.

Apprehension towards the unfamiliar foreign menace is a recurrent motif. Giovanni specifies from the beginning that the Mongols he talks about are known as Tartars in Europe (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 227, my translation): 'Here begins the history of the Mongols whom we call Tartars'. This latter name, which he constantly uses throughout the text, derives from the Tatar, another population of Mongolian ethnicity. Europeans adopted it to indicate by extension all Mongolian peoples. Induced by the similarity of the sounds, they transformed it into Tartars, by association with *Tartarus*, the infernal regions of classical mythology. At a time when the Mongols were ravaging across Central Asia and Eastern Europe, this name seemed to suit their reputation as cruel demons (Daffinà 1989: 422–423). In this regard, we read in the prologue (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 227, my translation): 'It was in fact feared that because of them [Mongols] God's Church would have been soon under the threat of a serious danger'. This is why, in his function of authoritative informer, the friar makes his presence manifest especially in the chapters about military issues. As the only one to know something about the Mongols, he feels directly involved and responsible for the protection of his homeland. One of Giovanni's main preoccupations is precisely that of being believed by his readers. He reiterates this concern with formulaic expressions in the prologue (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 227, my translation): 'thus, if, in order to inform the readers, we write things that are not known where you are, you must not call us liars for this, since we report to you what we saw ourselves or what we heard as true from others whom we consider trustworthy'. He does a similar thing in the last chapter (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 330, my translation): 'so that nobody may doubt about our journey to the Tartars, we write the names of those we met'.

As a consequence, in chapter nine the attention shifts towards Giovanni's personal narrative. By attaching the mark of direct experience to his account, the author intends to confer credibility on all the factual data on the Mongols that he has provided in the previous sections. As he introduces the chapter, Giovanni (1989: 302, my translation) specifies that: 'finally (…) we will talk about the route we went along, of the position of the territories we passed through, of the arrangement of the emperor and his princes' court'. If we consider this emphasis on space, place and location in the context of the whole account, it emerges that this means much more than the mere specification of geographical coordinates and spatial orientation. Tracing itineraries, circumscribing places and delineating boundaries are rather ways of configuring the unknown and fixing it into something more tangible and more manageable for the senses. The division of space works as a means to identify and define more easily a different culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 6). In this particular case, Giovanni is trying, first of all, to represent the Mongols with reference to the space they live in, they occupy, they conquer. This space thus not only encapsulates but also embodies, or even stands for, their cultural identity. In the words of Gupta and Ferguson (1992: 8), what makes this space a distinctive place is in fact 'the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organised spaces with its cultural construction as a community or locality'. It is not by chance that the author chooses to start his report on the Mongols dedicating the first chapter to '*De terra Tartarorum et situ et qualitate ipsius et dispositione aeris in eadem*' (The territory of the Tartars: its position, characteristics and climate). Furthermore, in chapter seven he also includes a section in which he mentions all the territories that have been subjugated

and those that oppose resistance (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 284–291). What makes these spatial configurations culturally meaningful is the fact that they are presented as 'placed experiences' (Feld and Basso [eds] 1996: 11). Hence, while space is used to give shape to a certain culture, it is, in its turn, given substance by the dynamic 'experiential and expressive ways'—to quote Feld and Basso (1996: 11) again: 'places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled over'. Yet, all the various parts and emplacement operations in the account are held together and acquire depth primarily thanks to Giovanni's constant presence—whether implicit or explicit—as observer and participant. In fact, he is able to experience different realities and describes them as he physically senses and moves in new spaces. It is especially in the last chapter that 'the crucial interaction between body, space, and *motion*'—as Edward Casey (1996: 23) puts it—appears in its full significance on the perceptual and cognitive level. Everything reported before had been apprehended while Giovanni was moving from place to place, as he travelled from Lyon to the Mongols' land and back, stage by stage through Eastern Europe and Central Asia; staying in the Mongols' homeland; moving within this territory from one settlement to the other.

In the light of the comments above, the fundamental and manifold relevance of the *Historia Mongalorum* in the changing mechanisms of approach to, and perception of, the Far East and its peoples—not only in medieval Italy, but also in medieval Europe—has by now become clear. However, it is still necessary to address the issue of the importance of Giovanni's literary work specifically with regard to the perception and representation of China and the Chinese. As we know from the narration, the friar only reached the settlement just outside the Mongols' capital and never reached China proper. Nevertheless, the text contains a number of references from which it is evident that during his stay with the Mongols Giovanni had the opportunity to come into contact with Chinese people. Even if the information provided about them is not detailed, this mention is the first clear and direct reference to this population in a European account. Moreover, it exercised a crucial influence on the rise of the interest in, and consideration towards, China that started developing shortly afterwards, with particular persistence especially in Italy.

Giovanni identifies the northern Chinese as 'Kitai'. This name derives—through the ancient Turkish 'Qïtay'—from the Mongol 'Kitat', a Manchurian population that, after conquering the north-eastern part of China, founded the dynasty called by the Chinese name Liao (907–1125). Expanding to Turkestan and Siberia, the Liao Empire was the most extensive in East Asia during the tenth and eleventh centuries. For this reason, the ethnonym Kitai prevailed over all the other designations and continued to be used for the people of Northern China even after the fall of the Liao dynasty.[2] The first reference to the Kitai comes early in Giovanni's text, at the beginning of the first chapter. Again, the initial parameter to define them is a spatial one. Yet he can specify their location only in relation to the reality he had been able to experience, namely that of the Mongols' territory. For this reason, he can only ascertain that the land of the Kitai is beyond the eastern borders of the Mongols (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 229). Although Giovanni is not aware of the exact extension of the territory of the Kitai, in chapter five he can inform us that most of it has been occupied by the Mongols (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 256–257). It is from this narration of the military campaign that a portrait of the Kitai people gradually emerges, constructed by comparison with the cultural realities he knows better, those

of the Mongols and his own. The reader thus gets the idea of a brave population that has not easily surrendered but has strenuously fought back, though eventually defeated by the ruthless and cruel invaders. Between the lines, the audience is also left with the impression of a wealthy country, for the capital city of the Kitai is described as very rich. Giovanni (1989: 257–258) must have held the Kitai in great consideration if, right after the account of the conquest by the Mongols, he dedicates an entire paragraph to present all the knowledge he has acquired about them (my translation):

> The Kitai, whom we have discussed, are pagans who have their own [religious] literature, namely a new and an old Testament and they also have the lives of the Fathers and hermits as well as houses with the function of churches where they pray at set hours. They say that they revere some saints. They worship only one God, they honour the lord Jesus Christ and they believe in eternal life, but they are not baptised. They respect and honour our Scripture, they are friendly towards Christians and they often give alms. They seem quite mild and civilised people; they have no beard and in the features of the face resemble the Mongols, though the face is not as wide. They have their own language. In the world there are no better artisans in all the activities usually carried out by men. Their land is rich in wheat, wine, gold, silver and silk as well as in all those products essential to the subsistence of human beings.

In this description that mainly defines the identity of the Kitai through their religious beliefs and practices it is possible to detect an attempt to construct what Anderson (1983: 15–19) would call a religiously imagined community. As the friar relates their religion to that of the Christians, we can also notice early traces of a 'territorialisation of faiths' that started becoming more apparent, Anderson (1983: 16–17) explains, with the exploration of non-European places and cultures from the late Middle Ages onwards.

Another element from Giovanni's references to China that needs to be addressed is the lack of conception of this geographical entity as a unitary country. As a matter of fact, in chapter seven, the list of all the peoples subjected by the Mongols includes the Kitai, while the list of the countries that are still resisting the invasion contains the name Mangia (dal Pian del Carpine 1989: 289–290). The latter refers to the southern part of China that at the time of Giovanni's visit was still under the control of the Chinese Song dynasty (960–1279). The term 'Mangia' is the transliteration and adaptation of the Chinese word '*manzi*', a derogatory appellation used by northern Chinese and adopted by the Mongols to indicate southern Chinese as 'rough people'.[3] From this distinction it appears that Giovanni's idea of the territories actually covered by China fully reflects the Mongols' perspective. Thus, the land of the Chinese is once again assumed to consist of two separate countries, that of the Kitai and that of the Mangi, though nothing is ascertained about their boundaries and their mutual relationship. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the problems and difficulties linked to the physical delimitation and cultural configuration of China are dependent on interlinked issues of perceptions of the Other and the Other's space. Following the need of the human mind to find an order and classify the surrounding world, this process is part of the attempt to create a comprehensive cosmology. Such an operation, Feuchtwang (2004: 20) stresses, is not only a manner of 'finding common concepts, notions of causation, metaphors, distinctive ways of being human, of organising space and of calibrating time in these representations', but also—and not less importantly—a mode of 'observing the physical universe'. The latter

term is here used in the sense of the notion of 'territorial place' discussed by Feuchtwang (2004: 3–30) as a more-or-less circumscribed or open expanse imbued of specificity and particular identity, yet in a wider picture of interactions and associations.

Thanks to Giovanni dal Pian del Carpine, the identity of the Chinese and their territories starts acquiring substance on its own. However, it cannot be denied that this information is full of confusions and misinterpretations. As Bertuccioli and Masini (1996: 49) point out, Giovanni does not recognise and distinguish between Nestorianism, Confucianism and Taoism and assimilates all the signs of these doctrines to the manifestations and practices he is familiar with, namely those of Catholic Christianity. This process is triggered by the lack of any in-depth knowledge of the Kitai's culture and is conditioned by the mental schemata of a medieval Italian friar. What should be rather acknowledged is the pioneering effort to construct a picture—as accurate and complete as possible—of a previously unknown Other. On the basis of this picture the Italians of the Middle Ages and afterwards will, more or less consciously, elaborate their image of China. Hopeful for the favourable attitude and religious affinities assumed, the Popes of subsequent times will be sending numerous missionaries in the attempt to convert the Chinese to Christianity. Likewise, attracted by the prospect of lucrative profits, many merchants will venture on long, dangerous journeys in search for the mentioned plentiful resources of China.

As time has gone by, the literary descriptions of the *Historia Mongalorum* have been detached, under certain circumstances, from the phenomenical elements described. By doing so, the text retains its powerful influence, but the image evoked loses its specificity. In this respect, the textual structure initiated by Giovanni offers itself to analysis in some ways comparable to the Saussurean distinction of language and speech (Saussure 1959: 7–17). On the one hand, the text acquires the autonomy of a language of its own, the original inferences of which are collectively understood. On the other hand, it then becomes instrumental for the individual agent speaker to construct and transmit different images. Such a mechanism emerges, for instance, in the novel *Il deserto dei Tartari* (*The Tartar Steppe*, 1985) by the Italian writer Dino Buzzati (1906–1972), who re-proposes the underlying motif of the *Historia Mongalorum*. Written in 1940, at a time when Italy was about to enter the scene of World War II, the distant memory of the Mongols' threat on the borders of the Italian peninsula seems rather evocative. In this regard, the choice of this specific reference may have been dictated by a certain degree of personal involvement on the part of Buzzati himself. In fact, he was born near Belluno, just north-west of Udine, the town that had directly experienced the danger of an imminent attack by the Mongols. Furthermore, being Venetian on his mother's side, Buzzati must have felt himself to be a legitimate cultural heir of that special link with China that Venice had been claiming since the time of the Mongol Empire. The atmosphere in *Il deserto dei Tartari*—considered to be the author's narrative masterpiece—seems to have been transposed straight from the *Historia Mongalorum*: the anxiety, fear and curiosity triggered by the Tartars coming from unexplored steppes are very much alive throughout the narration. Even the correspondence between the name of the protagonist, Giovanni Drogo, and that of the brave friar, Giovanni dal Pian del Carpine, is more than a pure coincidence. The tension is always palpable in the expectation of something that is suspended between reality and imagination:

> So here there was an unfinished story—what had up to yesterday evening been absurd, a ridiculous superstition might be true then. Drogo seemed to feel them, the mysterious Tartars, lurking among the bushes, in the crevices of the rocks, motionless and silent with clenched teeth. They were waiting for the dark to attack. And meantime others were arriving, a threatening swarm coming slowly out of the northern mists. They had no bands nor songs, no gleaming swords, no fine banners. Their arms were dull so as not to glint in the sun and their horses were trained not to neigh. (Buzzati 1985: 83)

Similar to this must have been the disposition of thirteenth-century people living around Buzzati's native territory: an ideal source of inspiration for an author who is renowned for his technique of drawing from the real world for his stories, which are dream-like, yet never completely alienated from reality. This technique appears all the more significant if it is taken into account that in early 1940s' Italy, Buzzati could not express himself explicitly because of Fascist censorship. Therefore, in *Il deserto dei Tartari*, the vivid memory of the ancient connection between Italians and the empire of the Mongols becomes a timeless and spaceless context to suggest the writer's critical impressions on various aspects of military life.

Il Milione: *unravelling the Other, embedding the Self*

Despite the essential role of Giovanni's experience and account in the conception of the Far East not only in Italy but also in the rest of Europe, the *Historia Mongalorum* as a literary work has always been overshadowed by Marco Polo's *Il Milione*. The popularity of the latter can be justified by a number of rather evident factors, which are discussed below. Dictated by Marco Polo to the writer Rustichello as they were both in a Genoese prison between 1298 and 1299,[4] the account started circulating at the beginning of the fourteenth century in Italy as well as around Europe. Transmitted from copier to copier, it was reproduced in different versions and translated into different languages from the original form of literary French intermixed with numerous Italianisms and Venetianisms.[5]

Whether considered as a trustworthy, illuminating account, as a product of fantasy, or as a mixture of reality and invention, Marco Polo's *Il Milione* has inspired an idea of the Far East that has dominated the imagination of Europeans for centuries and is still alive at various levels in a collective popular culture that moves across linguistic boundaries and 'breaks out of those inertial constraints placed on its motion through space and time' (Urban 2001: 22). The immediate impact of this literary work is in great part due to the fact that it was the first text to report on Cathay and Mangi—as Marco Polo calls the territories of China—as the central topic and as a result of direct experience. In this respect, it has been long recognised that one of the merits of *Il Milione* is its fundamental contribution to a step forward in the geographical knowledge of medieval Europe (Lach 1965: 36; Solmi 1974: IX–X). Furthermore, the way in which the account was structured appealed to both those attracted by the adventure of travel and those interested in compilations with didactic purposes, two trends in literature that developed towards the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance period.

Another key element that explains the quick and wide diffusion of this work can be found in the original title *Divisament dou monde* (Description of the World). As a matter of

fact, Marco Polo himself specifies in the 'Prologue' that the book is directed to the 'people of all degrees who desire to get knowledge of (…) the diversities of the sundry regions of the World', since they will 'find therein (…) the divers histories of the Great Hermenia, and of Persia, and the Land of the Tartars, and of India, and of many another country' (Yule 1903: 1).[6] The accent is, therefore, on difference, on the distinction between the Self and the Others. Marco Polo's use and meaning of difference, and comparison made between his own people and other peoples, have been the focus of scholarly debates, even creating academic controversies. Yet one must be cautious when dealing with this essential element in the author's perception and description of the populations with which he came in contact. In this regard, it is necessary to contextualise—as I do below—Marco Polo's conception of difference and the paradigm on which this is based.

Following Said's notion of 'cultural hegemony' which, he asserts, is at the basis of Europeans' representations of non-Europeans (Said 1978: 7), the emphasis of some scholars is too fixed on politicised and generalised issues of power and superiority. According to Syed Manzul Islam (1996), for instance, Marco Polo emerges as an 'Orientalist' in Said's terms. He claims that peoples' habits and customs are narrated in such a way that aims at constructing the image of a powerless and diminished Other in the light of a biased Western dichotomy between good Christians and bad non-Christians. In his own words, Islam (1996: 165–166) says: 'the making of relative difference, (…) not only dramatises the otherness of others but subjects this otherness to an evaluative judgement. Marco Polo gives his readers a panorama of transgressive topoi with their rude chaos and abomination which deterritorialises other habitudes'. However, it should be noticed that, for an average medieval European man, without higher education or training in scientific rigour, imbued with the unquestionable values of a rigidly Christian society, Marco Polo mostly presents other peoples and their way of life in a fairly neutral manner. Although negative comments can be found in the text, appreciative remarks are not absent either. As John Larner (1999: 98) counters Islam's argument: 'as to diet, it is true that Marco reports unkindly on what was eaten in Quinsai (CLII, 20): "They eat any flesh, that of dogs and any other brute beasts and animals that no Christian would eat for anything in the world". Yet who reading that chapter can doubt but that Marco has the most profound admiration for the city and in many respects for its people?'

If an Orientalist explanation of the discourses of *Il Milione* is unacceptable, the hypothesis that Marco Polo is juxtaposing all the oriental populations he describes with a unitary collective entity of Europeans of which he feels part (Solmi 1974: 10; Gosman 1994: 75–76) also seems inaccurate. Having left for his long journey to the East when he was only seventeen years old, returning to Italy twenty-six years later, it is likely that Marco Polo found himself in a situation in which he felt a foreigner while abroad and never completely re-integrated once back in his hometown. Thus, considering his personal circumstances and the Italian situation of political fragmentation at the time, it appears much more plausible that in the account he tries to re-assert his identity as a Venetian rather than situating himself in a wider collective scenario. In the Prologue he refers to himself as a 'messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice' (Yule 1903: 1). In the course of the narration, he mentions Venice and the Venetians a number of times and at the very end, he defines himself again as 'messer Marco, son of messer Niccolò Polo, noble and great citizen of the city of Venice' (Ponchiroli [ed.] 1974: 225, my translation).

This last observation brings us to reconsider the fact that *Il Milione* is, first of all, the literary product of a Venetian. Therefore, as the bond between the author and his city has been strengthened and perpetuated through the centuries up to our times, Marco Polo's personal experience with the East in general and China in particular has become emblematic of the special connection of Venice as a whole with those same places and their peoples. His representation of the Chinese Other has thus played a fundamental role in the invention of the tradition, as Bhabha (1994: 3) would put it, that has come to characterise the cultural engagement between Venice and China.

At the same time, Marco Polo's achievements and his extraordinary connection with China have also been transformed into elements of national pride according to the process by which local cultural symbols, transmitted in a common vernacular language and circulated through a culturally distinctive printed literature (Anderson 1983; Urban 2001: 20–21), feed a collective Italian cultural identity. This explains the peculiar Italian reactions as far as the consideration of Marco Polo's experience is concerned. In this regard, while from time to time some scholars—especially outside Italy—air their doubts about the truthfulness of *Il Milione*, Italian critics tend to dismiss these claims. The study that has raised most turmoil in this sense among the experts is *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* by Frances Wood (1995). In this publication, the author, inspired by the writings of the German Mongolist Herbert Franke (1966), suggests that the inconsistencies and omissions about China in Marco Polo's account may indicate that he had never actually visited the places he describes. In the concluding remarks of her discussion, Wood strongly holds this sceptical position: 'I incline to the view that Marco Polo himself probably never travelled much further than the family's trading posts on the Black Sea and in Constantinople (Wood 1995: 150).[7] Yet, Bertuccioli and Masini (1996: 52–53, 59–60) are quick to counter-argue, stating that scholarly speculations about *Il Milione* being mostly the fruit of invention or second-hand information have grown in recent years as a fashion or a publicity stunt.

Marco Polo's account owes its fame to the reputation of being the earliest, most specific and abundant source of information about the territories of China though the part concerning China occupies only the middle section of the narration, running from chapter 64 to chapter 136 of the total 183 chapters in the version of *l'Ottimo*.[8] The preceding part contains the account of the Venetian's journey and stay at the service of the Great Khan, information about Central Asia and details on the Mongols' history, policies, traditions and way of life. The final part is dedicated to the islands of the 'Sea of Chin', India and those parts of the Middle East under the Mongols' control. The prominence given to the description of China is linked not only to European audiences' growing interest in this part of the world, but also to Marco Polo's perception through his personal experience. What is essential to stress is the fact that during his long stay in China, Marco Polo was in close contact in particular with the Mongol rulers. For this reason, his view of the Chinese territories and people was strongly influenced by the perspective of the Mongols, as had happened before in the case of Giovanni dal Pian del Carpine. However, in contrast to his predecessor, his appreciative attitude towards the Mongols derives from his cooperative relationship with them in his capacity of administrative officer for the Yuan government. At the same time, his admiration for China developed under the effect

of changed political circumstances. Having finally gained control of the whole of China, the Mongols underwent a process of sinicisation in order to affirm their authority over the Chinese.[9]

Suddenly opened by the westward expansion of the Mongol Empire, contact with China aroused initially fear and subsequently enthusiasm for what appeared as the wonders of Cathay and Mangi. It must have been a difficult task for the author and the readers of *Il Milione* respectively to express and comprehend, by means of a textual description, realities that had not been contemplated before. Thus, the most effective and direct way to transmit and gather a sense of China was through specific empirical data. These would in turn suggest broader and more conceptualised representations, in a chain of analogical and comparative processes. These cognitive mechanisms, made possible by the 'structures of signification of narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding' (Bauman 1986: 5), are at work in the descriptions of the cities of Cathay and Mangi—with their layout, architecture and inhabitants—as Marco Polo accompanies his audience along fictitious itineraries leading from one place to another. In particular, more abundant details are provided about Cambaluc, the seat of the Great Khan, and Chinsai, defined as 'the most noble and best city in the world' (Ponchiroli [ed.] 1974: 149, my translation). Only for these two cities are indications provided about the measurement of their perimeters. This is in both cases exaggerated in order to stress their supremacy in relation to other cities in China as well as in Europe. Just from the physical elements described for each of the two cities, it is possible to construct a precise picture of their respective role in the elaborated structure of Yuan China.

In the description of Cambaluc, in Cathay, the emphasis is on the splendour and opulence of the imperial residence, of which it is said: 'the walls of the halls and the rooms are entirely covered in gold and silver; (…) the main hall is so long and wide that six thousand people can easily eat in it; and there are so many rooms that it is a wonder to believe (…) The external surface is so well varnished that it shines like gold or crystal, so that the palace can be seen glittering from a long distance' (Ponchiroli [ed.] 1974: 81, my translation). Of the city itself, it is highlighted that it contains many impressive buildings and that it is fortified with a thick earthwork. Besides the extraordinary fortification, twelve thousand horsemen protect the court. The image suggested by the words in *Il Milione* is that of a powerful and wealthy capital city, the majestic centre of an effective and sophisticated government.

The presentation of Chinsai aims at providing a completely different picture. Of this city it is said that:

> it has twelve thousand stone bridges (…) And nobody has to marvel at this, since it is all in water and surrounded by water, and this is why there are so many bridges, so to go across the whole land (…) In the city there are many beautiful houses and towers of thick stone where people take their things in case of a fire in the city, which often happens, because there are many wooden houses (…) And all the roads of the city are paved with stones and bricks (…) so that it is possible to run along them by horse and also on foot (…) And I also tell you that this city has even three thousand public baths where men and women enjoy themselves; and they go there very often, since they have it as a habit to keep their bodies clean: and these are the most beautiful and biggest baths in the world, for a hundred people can comfortably use them at the same time. (Ponchiroli [ed.] 1974: 150–151, my translation)

As for its inhabitants, they are said to be mostly skilled artisans and rich merchants, who provide abundant commodities across the country. In fact, 'the Great Khan makes sure that [the city] is well guarded, since it is the main city of all the province of the Mangi, and he gains from it so much profit that it would be barely believable' (Ponchiroli [ed.] 1974: 151, my translation). The city's vibrant commercial activity also benefits from its proximity to the town of Ganfu, a coastal town not identified with certainty. The overall impression of Chinsai is thus that of an efficiently organised and sophisticated city, with political power, economic prosperity and dynamic trade and connections with the rest of the country and overseas.

Apart from these two cases, the description of all the many Chinese cities mentioned by Marco Polo is much sketchier, referring, by means of hyperbolic expressions and formulaic structures, to some essential data on population, economy, products and customs. While recognizing that these representations have played a substantial role in affirming the characteristic, vivid pictures of China still alive in popular imagination, it should be noted that what Marco Polo could share with his audience was only the text as a representation of his synaesthetic experience, but not the actual experience itself. As in the case of *Historia Mongalorum*, the text is hence easily lifted from its medieval context, with the Venetian's descriptions of Chinese cities becoming reflections on the utopia of non-existent cities and the crisis of existing modern cities in *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities* 1997) by Italo Calvino (1923–1985). This literary work, first published in 1972, is presented by the author himself as follows:

> *Le città invisibili* unravels itself as a series of travel accounts that Marco Polo tells to Kublai Khan emperor of the Tartars (…) It was not my intention to follow the itineraries of the lucky Venetian merchant who in the thirteenth century had arrived in China (…) Now the Orient is a theme that has to be left to the experts, and I am not such. However, through the centuries there have been poets and writers who have found inspiration in *Il Milione* as a fantastic and exotic scenography (…) Only *The Arabian Nights* can claim a similar fate: books that become as imaginary continents in which other literary works will find their space; continents of the 'somewhere else', though today, it can be said, the 'somewhere else' does not exist anymore and the whole world tends to become uniform. (Calvino 1993: VII–VIII, my translation)

As Calvino suggests, in our times it is no longer the task of *Il Milione,* or of any literary work inspired by it, to provide images and ideas of China. Other more effective means are now available for this purpose. Marco Polo's China is left with the function of constituting a frame, made of memory and intermingling identities—past, present and projected into the future—to support new contents. It is in this perspective that the China of *Il Milione* appears in Calvino's work, as the conversations between Marco Polo and the Great Khan become the connecting thread between one invisible city and the other. No longer sufficient in its original role, *Il Milione* is nevertheless still necessary. In the opening pages of his own work, Calvino states: 'Only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing' (Calvino 1997: 5–6).

Odorico's Relatio: *a 'personal' account of China*

Another medieval narration influential in Italian and, by and large, European past and present perceptions of China is the *Relatio* (Account)—also known as *De rebus incognitis* (The Unknown)—by the Franciscan friar Odorico da Pordenone. This literary text, written just about thirty years later than *Il Milione*, is the account of the missionary's journey to China during the 1320s and is reputed to be 'second only in popularity to Marco Polo's' (Lach 1965: 41). Besides its relevance as an essential reference work on China especially throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the *Relatio* is particularly relevant to this discussion for its peculiar character, which has determined the modality and the purpose of its modern re-elaboration. Dictated to Friar Guglielmo di Solagna in Padua, soon after Odorico's return from the East, this oral narration almost exclusively contains Odorico's memories of his stay in Mati (Mangi) and Catayo (Cathay) including some information about the Great Khan and his empire.[10] Data on other places visited outside Chinese territories and on the travel to and from China are minimal. Moreover, even if the text's structure roughly follows the convention of describing various cities and important locations encountered en route—as in *Il Milione*—the style of the account is much more personal: the first-person narrator always makes evident his presence in the facts narrated, so that what he tells his readers appears spontaneously as the result of direct experience. This is the case, for example, of the description of a particular technique of fishing with cormorants, which Odorico (1982: 44–45, my translation) witnessed on a river in an unspecified city.

> I arrived in a city, through which this river ran, and I crossed a very big bridge; to the end of it there was a hostel, where I stayed. The landlord, who wanted to be nice to me, said: if you want to see fishing, come with me; and so he took me over the bridge. And from there, I saw cormorants tied to bars in the boats; their owner fastened a thread to the throat of each of them so that they could not swallow the fish (…) and after doing so, released these cormorants, which threw themselves into the water and caught many fishes, putting them into the baskets (…) I ate some of this fish.

Odorico's first-hand impressions of the alien reality of China are also characterised by frequent references to the realities of his homeland with which he is more familiar (Hannerz 1996: 25). He uses this descriptive device especially when mentioning geographical features (da Pordenone 1982: 42–50). As Duncan (Duncan and Ley [eds] 1993: 39) points out, 'difference in the site of the Other is "recuperated" by appropriating it into a categorical framework that is familiar and useful within the site from which the representation emanates'. Hence, in Odorico's account, the size of cities is thus often compared to that of Italian cities known to him (my translation): 'in this province of Mati there are two hundred great cities, which are so big that neither Trevisi nor Vicenza could be numbered among them'. A few lines below, he tells of a city not clearly identified: 'The first city that I found in this province is called Censscanlan, and it is as big as three Vinegie [Venices]'. Further in the text he describes Zaiton 'as big as two Bologne'. He then compares to Venice the city of Cansave—equivalent to Marco Polo's Chinsai—'located in the waters of the Lagoon'. Likewise, he tells of the river Caramoran, namely the Yellow River: 'running through Catayo', it is said to cause 'serious damages when it floods, as the Po does to Ferrara'.

The specific nature of comments and comparisons makes it more difficult than with texts such as *Historia Mongalorum* and *Il Milione* to detach the content of the narration—mainly the description of China—from Odorico's personal experience and from the connection with medieval Italy. This peculiarity accounts for the kind of message and literary re-elaboration that this medieval narration—more strongly than others—has inspired in our times. The work that needs to be considered in this respect is the novel *Il filo di seta* (The Silk Thread) written in 1999 by the Italian author Carlo Sgorlon (1930–2009) from Cassacco, a town in the province of Udine, and we find thus once again—as with Buzzati—a writer who feels close to the theme he treats and the figure he describes. More precisely, he recognises an affinity with Odorico, who was born near Pordenone, a city in the proximity of Udine: fellow citizens of the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, they both belong to those territories once under the threat of Mongol invasion.

While re-tracing, in a novelised format, the friar's life and adventurous travel to China, Sgorlon puts an accent on Odorico's personal perception of, and relationship with, the Mongols and the Chinese as affected by the times and places in which he lived. Initially, the author thus narrates the child Odorico fantasising on the still echoing accounts and tales of the Mongols' military campaigns just beyond the borders a few decades earlier. This is exemplified in the episode of the conversation with an old soldier who tells Odorico that strange creatures like 'the hippogryphs, in case they existed, were (…) in the northern lands, of which very little was known. Those lands had become part of the Mongols' empire'. The soldier then adds: 'and I've known someone who has seen the Mongols and has fought against them' (Sgorlon 1999: 43, my translation). From the man's words, Odorico gathers that: 'the Mongols had an immense thirst for conquest (…) In war they were terrible especially on horse (…) So now there was the peace that they had themselves imposed. But surely they had not given up their imperial dream, and one day they would have returned to Germany, to the French, Spanish and Italian States, and would have completed the interrupted conquest' (Sgorlon 1999: 44–45, my translation). However, years later, Odorico—already a friar—changes his impressions in the light of the new information reported by missionaries: 'the big spell of conquest was over, and Kublai Khan (…) was old and close to death. So, perhaps, a new era was rising at the horizon for the Mongols' empire. It was the time of the wait for the Gospel. The crowds of Cathay and Mongolia were waiting.' (Sgorlon 1999: 104, my translation.)

Another substantial turn in Odorico's views can happen only when he personally experiences the reality of Cathay and Mangi. Sgorlon summarises the direct impact of the latter on the friar's perception, as he describes the arrival in the first Chinese city: 'So he could closely observe the city and get a definite idea of it. The city was very big, clean, tidy (…) Everything recalled the presence of order and careful surveillance.' (Sgorlon 1999: 216, my translation.) Consequently, while travelling across China, Odorico has the opportunity to acknowledge the cultural sophistication of the Chinese and efficient rule of the Mongols.

Overall, through the narration, Sgorlon highlights how Odorico's observations are imbued with a unique value with regard to their contribution to the knowledge of China. A sense of admiration and pride is evident throughout *Il filo di seta*, since the author perceives the friar as a cultural hero of Friuli Venezia Giulia. In fact, Odorico da Pordenone is a perfect protagonist for the novel of a writer who has devoted most of his

literary works to the construction of an epic cycle centred on the history and traditions of his own homeland. This approach towards the *Relatio* leads us to consider the ambivalent function of this medieval literary text. Originally, it owed its fame to its relevance in the construction of an image of China. However, in time, as the latter started taking shape in the Italians' minds through other means and channels, the role of this account has been slowly shifting. As a consequence, Odorico and his experience have nowadays also become meaningful by virtue of their status as intangible cultural property at a local and national level. In 1982, a publication of an Italian and Latin version of the text was sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Crafts and Agriculture of Pordenone. In this regard, the introductory statement by Paolo Musolla (1982: 6, my translation), then president of this institution, is particularly enlightening:

> We owe part of what we know about fourteenth-century China to the *Relatio* by Odorico da Pordenone. It followed only thirty years after the appearance of Marco Polo's *Il Milione*, the information of which it mostly confirmed. Although different as to purposes, literary results, narrated experiences and authors' routes towards Asia, the two works contribute to offer an extraordinarily vivid picture of the Chinese realm and to bear evidence of the exceptional presence of people from Italy, and most of all from the Venetian area, in Yuan Dynasty China.

Conclusion

As Jackson (1996: 39) points out, 'narrative redescription is a crucial and constitutive part of the ongoing activity of the lifeworld, which is why narrative plays such a central role in phenomenological description'. The examples presented have allowed an unravelling of the complex system of connections between the perceptions and descriptions of the Other passed on by texts of different times. Following this intricate itinerary, it has been possible to trace parallel literary patterns and other interlinked processes in the development of ideas of the Chinese Other and of the Self in relation to this specific Other in the Italian experience. To quote Elias (1978: 7) on this point, concepts and representations of culture cannot be detached from 'the group which uses them' and from 'historical situations', but, as they are passed on generation after generation, a specific collective history and identity crystallise and resonate in them.

Bringing to the readers' attention the relationship between accounts of journeys of discovery and narrations of metaphorical and contemplative, I have exposed the mechanisms that take place in the gradual shift of balance from the preoccupation with recognition, constructions and visions of the Other to the evocation of cross-referential issues of identity. As I have been following the routes from the uncovering of the Other to the definition of the Self and from descriptive to evocative exercise, it has been particularly helpful to refer to literary cases which focus on travelling, either in space towards distant lands, or in time through life. Thus, the progressions that I analyse acquire both a factual and a symbolic connotation. Quoting Jackson (1996: 39) again, the reciprocity of journey and narrative should be noticed, inasmuch journey is the content to be narrated and, at the same time, narration re-proposes 'the structure of journeying' that can be applied to the whole variety of experiences.

The close link or even interdependence between 'real' and 'discourse' (de Certeau 1988), between 'a theory of narration' and 'a theory of practices', between discourse and non-discursive elements (de Certeau 1984), accounts for the essential function of literary texts, such as those considered here, in the process of acknowledgment, representation and relation when narrating and describing cultural difference. As discourse 'makes sense of the community' that produces it and in which it circulates (Urban 1996: 251), it becomes representative of the culture of that specific community. Under these circumstances, literary cultural representations fashion and expose the unavoidable and more-or-less intentional assemblage, re-combination, overlapping and dialogue that take place between cultural traits of the represented Other and the representing Self in a dimension that ultimately transcends space and time.

NOTES

[1] In the thirteenth century, at the same time as some European Christian princes allied with the Papal State were fighting the Muslim Turks over control of the Holy Land, the Mongol armies were trying to occupy the Middle and Near East.

[2] An exhaustive explanation of the name 'Kitai' is given by Paolo Daffinà (1989: 407–408) in his notes to the *Historia Mongalorum*.

[3] This etymological explanation is provided by Giuliano Bertuccioli and Federico Masini (1996: 36–37) and Paul Pelliot (1959: I, 264, 274); the word '*mán*' is nowadays used as an adjective meaning 'boorish', 'rough' (Wu 1997: 1095).

[4] They had been captured on 7th September 1298 during a naval battle between the Venetians and the Genoese. They were then released after the peace ratified on 1st July 1299.

[5] For a critical summary of Rustichello's involvement in the writing of *Il Milione* and of the history of the various versions and translations of this text see a recent study by Stephen G. Haw (2006: 41–45).

[6] Rustichello's text has been lost. Thus, in this article I refer to the renowned Italian translation written by the Tuscan Niccolò Ormanni, usually called *l'Ottimo*. About the translator, we know that he died in 1309; therefore, his text was written only shortly after the original. For the same passage from the Prologue in this Tuscan version see the publication edited by Daniele Ponchiroli (1974: 3).

[7] A detailed response to Wood's theory has come recently from Haw (2006). In general, he states that 'many of the criticisms of Marco Polo have been highly ill-informed and are commonly totally anachronistic' (Haw 2006: 1).

[8] The number of chapters varies from one version of *Il Milione* to another. Here, I always refer to the numbering adopted in *l'Ottimo*.

[9] The Mongols' process of legitimisation of their rule over China included moving the capital from Mongolia to China in 1272 and the adoption of Chinese dynastic names. Temür Khan (reign 1294–1307) was the first Mongol emperor to take a Chinese dynastic name, being also known as Emperor Chengzong.

[10] Odorico stayed at the imperial court in Cambaluc for three years and the Great Khan he met was Yesün Temür Khan, also known as Emperor Taiding (reign 1323–1328).

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