China in the Frame

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Materialising Ideas of China in Italian Museums

By

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Scholars
Publishing

To my daughters Medea and Maia

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INTRODUCTION

Museum displays of artworks produced or inspired by cultures different from that of the host environment provide much more than just an enjoyable aesthetic experience. The information that they transmit goes well beyond the specific narrative proposed to the visitors. The items presented and the ways in which they are arranged disclose an array of attitudes towards and relations to the Other. They are as telling of the represented culture as illuminating on the representing one. It is from this perspective that my research focuses on the dialectical connection between the circulation, reception and perception of Chinese artistic goods in Italy and the ever-evolving Italian representations of ideas of China. The critical presentation of this topic allows me to analyse in an original, effective way the processes of materialisation of cultural identities. More in detail, the distinctive characteristics of the history of material and cultural exchange between Italy and China as well as the peculiar Italian cultural reality, with its regional particularities, unifying factors and influences from other European cultures, will show in this research how representations of a cultural Other are often entangled with phenomena of cultural self-expression. In other words, as the title suggests, this book explores representations of ideas of China as they are arranged and perceived within a structure of multiple frames, namely the frame of the various materials in which they are embedded, the frame of the display context and circumstances and the frame of the wider cultural environment where they take shape and perform their function.

This project, originally born as a PhD thesis, was inspired by the iconographical and technical analysis that I carried out in my previous studies on the Chinese export watercolours in the collections of the British Museum. Mainly depicting various Chinese motifs and scenes, these paintings are part of the Chinese export art produced in workshops in Canton for western markets from the late seventeenth century well into the nineteenth century. While few art historians (Jourdain and Jenyns 1950; Crossman 1972, 1991; Clunas 1987; Jackson 2004) have recognised the significance of the artistic production for export in the history of Chinese art and East-West relations, the role of these travelling objects and images in the affirmation and manifestation of certain ideas of China in the West has not been given the scholarly attention it deserves. For this reason, I

started to explore the socio-cultural implications behind the circulation of artistic goods and its impact on the ways the recipients make sense of and relate to the distant producers. Following such a line of investigation, it became evident that the analysis of the issues at stake required the adoption of an anthropological perspective based, to begin with, on theories concerning the social life and involvement of things (Appadurai 1988; 1990) and the agency of art objects (Gell 1998) both as carriers of meanings, knowledge and ideas (Tilley 1990; 1991) and as mediators in the transcultural exchange through commodity networks (Miller 1998). A preliminary examination in these terms therefore led me to conduct the research of which this book is the outcome, intended as a contribution to the field of material culture studies.

In order to achieve an understanding as full as possible in the pursuit of this goal, I decided to concentrate my attention on instances and materials already familiar to me through my expertise in the history of Chinese art, my involvement in activities for the public at the British Museum, and my personal Italian cultural background. According to these criteria, I identified a number of representative contemporary permanent and recent temporary exhibitions of Chinese artefacts and Italian *chinoiserie*, namely works of art produced in Italy—as well as all over Europe—following a "Chinese inspiration" especially during the eighteenth century. I chose to focus my investigation on the context of public displays because the latter offer an ideal ground for the observation of cultural phenomena and evolving cultural characteristics. I hence regard the museum in the sense specified by Robert Lumley (1988: 2) "as a potent social metaphor and as a means whereby societies represent their relationship to their own history and to that of other cultures". The close, essential link that binds together dynamic cultural, intercultural, social and historical elements is particularly evident in the development of museum conditions in Italy. "The Italian museum reality"—Antonella Huber (1997: 13) explains—is conditioned by "the widespread environmental historicization and its outstanding heritage", which, more than elsewhere, has favoured "the adaptation of historic spaces to museographic developments". This has consequently resulted in "a laborious search for a balance between monumental buildings and new uses, between ancient collections and new users", mirroring, in other words, the struggles of cultural transitions and social changes.

The selection of examples to analyse was predominantly dictated by two principles. On the one hand, I chose as destinations of my research in the field Naples, Rome, Florence, Venice, Genoa and Turin. These cities all share particular past and present links and contacts with a China that is

perceived by Italians to be a whole, all-comprehensive Chinese entity. They are also characterised by peculiar traits of local cultural identity embedded, at the same time, in what is recognised as a complex and variegated Italian national identity. On the other hand, the museum collections and displays considered had to provide, through curatorial practices and the public's responses, clear indications of old and new Italian attitudes not only towards Chinese arts, but also towards China as a cultural entity. In this regard, I point out that in my research I have taken into account Chinese artistic manifestations of various natures, types, and times as well as different kinds of Italian artistic re-elaborations of Chinese themes and products. As a matter of fact, I quickly realised in my fieldwork that all these "things Chinese" or *cineserie*—as I call them in this book, adopting the colloquial term commonly used by Italians themselves—played and still play their part in the multifaceted materialisations of ideas of China. On the basis of the available materials and initial assumptions described so far, I then set off to cast light on two main problematic issues, as I explain below.

On a general level, through my case study I intend to illustrate to what extent and according to what mechanisms the interaction with "foreign" artefacts—circulated through different times and routes, assimilated, adapted, transformed and displayed by the recipients—affects the acquisition, transmission and elaboration of ideas and knowledge of "stranger" cultures. This will be achieved more immediately and directly by observing the techniques of display and the choices of spatial arrangement of artistic objects executed or inspired by Others in museum contexts. At the same time, considering the same set of data, it will be necessary to look more closely at the life history of the collections and of the objects themselves. Cognitive processes will in fact become more understandable if patterns in the transfer and adoption of "exotic" technologies and in the integration and interaction of "exotic" elements in "local" cultural environments can be recognised.

On a particular level, I aim at proving the specificity of the case of Italian phenomenological experiences and epistemological approaches to China under investigation in this research. Already in the early stages of my fieldwork, an inextricable link emerged clearly between the peculiarities of the Italian context and the modalities of reception and perception of a diverse range of artefacts representing China in different ways. Hence, examining the variety of examples in this book it will be possible to ascertain how different local exhibitive attitudes and circumstances contribute to typical Italian modes of elaborating visions of a Chinese cultural Other. Similarly, it will be considered whether these

elaborations are in effect self-representations of Italian local identities realised in relation to the construction of difference.

Underlying issues

Especially at the beginning of my research, I referred to an indicative literature of studies conducted by specialists in various fields on the themes of Sino-Italian relations and Chinese artistic products in Italy, so crucial for my investigation. These texts guided me to better identify significant phenomena and circumstances on which to concentrate my analysis. They also alerted me to look for a number of key elements that have been so far neglected by scholars dealing with the topics of my interest.

The seminal and extensive work *Asia and the Making of Europe* by Donald F. Lach (1965) has proved an enlightening historical study inasmuch as it emphasises the dynamic and mutual character of the relations between China and Europe through the context of East-West contacts over many centuries. The fundamental consideration that also emerges from Lach's work is the fact that material exchange by means of trade has had a substantial impact not only on the way Europeans have, at different times, perceived and known oriental cultures, but also on the way Europeans have been perceiving and developing their own cultures.

The "culturally inflected dynamics of relationships between moments of production, circulation and consumption" (Hughes and Reimer 2004: 3) of goods, already at work in the economic and cultural networks of the past, have nowadays become more evident in a globalised world where people and commodities can travel with their cultural baggage farther and faster than ever. My research, thus, arrives timely, at a moment when the awareness and understanding of distant Others is a crucial issue as previously far-removed cultural realities move closer through people's migrations and distribution of commodities in unprecedented proportions. This is the situation that applies to the relationship between Chinese and European cultures in our times. As a matter of fact, China as a cultural entity has gradually become part of the everyday life of many societies in Europe, as Chinese communities establish themselves in cities and towns and a huge variety of mass-produced Chinese products are consumed. Such a phenomenon triggers questions about how much and what information about China is actually available to the general public in European countries, how this information reflects new circumstances, and to what extent it is a legacy of contacts in the past.

It is worth noticing that the long tradition of contacts between Italy and China has inspired a rich corpus of informative literature. Travel accounts including descriptions and observations on Chinese geography and landscapes as well as on the customs of Chinese people were produced already from the thirteenth century onwards and, in increasing quantity, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, as travelling from Europe to Asia intensified thanks to more direct and reliable maritime connections. The wealth of documentation on China produced in Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, as catalogued by the sinologist Hartmut Walravens (1987) for an exhibition at the Herzog August Bibliothek in the Lower Saxony town of Wolfenbüttel, is very telling in this respect. These sources demonstrate that at the time when travel conditions to China via sea-routes were just improving, people from various socio-cultural and professional backgrounds, missionaries to traders, to leisure travellers, shared the interest in acquiring and divulgating information about that distant land. Taking into account the abundance of these more or less accurate data from ancient sources and the easy access to more objective and precise data through modern advanced information technology, I try in my research to reconcile these two approaches to knowledge of the Other, which still appear to overlap and complement each other in contemporary general conceptions of China.

In the light of these observations, what I am mostly concerned within my study is how material things—in my case predominantly artefacts—act in the definition and recognition of socio-cultural relations and expressions of identities at all times. The 2004 exhibition *Encounters. The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London highlighted this concept, as it emerges from the catalogue and collection of essays curated by Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer (2004). It showed in fact that the interaction of European peoples with Asian decorative and applied arts has played through the centuries an instrumental role in the development of European attitudes towards and interest in the cultural realities of the East. In addition, it cannot be ignored—and the reader will be reminded of this throughout this book—that the process of making sense of the cultures of the Others through materiality is accompanied by the mirror process of making use of the same materiality to express—with a variable degree of intentionality—one's own culture. This point is stressed by Virginia Dellino-Musgrave (2005: 219-243) in an article from the *Journal of Material Culture*. In this piece, analysing the patterns of production and consumption of the cargo on an eighteenth-century Royal Navy shipwreck, she illustrates how Chinese export porcelain and English

Chinese-like pottery can be seen as embodiments and manifestations of "British identities".

The ambivalence in the interaction between people and material culture adds complexity to the mechanisms and results of cultural representations. This is particularly evident if we consider the phenomenon of eighteenth-century *chinoiserie*, which originated from fanciful perceptions of Chinese art and developed into European artistic products. These artefacts not only reflected an approximate acquaintance with and an idealised vision of Chinese reality, but also manifested traits peculiar to European cultures. The overview of the artistic implications of *chinoiserie* in Europe by Oliver Impey (1977) and more specific studies such as the one by Helen Espir (2005) on the eighteenth-century European practice of applying *chinoiserie* decorations on Chinese porcelain well exemplify this cultural stratification. The discrepancies noticed by art historians such as Craig Clunas (1998) and Catherine Pagani (1998) in the reception of Chinese art and the notions of Chinese culture in Britain between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries have been so far mostly explained in terms of colonialist discourse, namely as a consequence of an imperialist attitude that dismisses Chinese culture as inferior, nonetheless appreciating the exoticism of Chinese art (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 1-8). This interpretation can be at least partially accepted in the light of the historic unfulfilled colonising ambitions of the British Empire over China and a certain British reluctance—in the nostalgia for the colonial power of the past—to abandon even in our times the diminutive stereotypes towards a now technologically advanced and economically powerful China. However, I argue in this book that such a view cannot constitute a generalisation in all cases. Recuperating the argument exposed above, what seems to be a contradiction or inconsistency in the intersection between self-affirmation and the perception of material culture, knowledge, and representation of the Other can be rather considered from the perspective of the constant dialectic tension between people's interaction with materiality and cultural encounters.

The Italian case study that I have chosen for my research lends itself to the discussion of this point in the chapters that follow. As a matter of fact, it can be said that, on the whole, the relationship between Italy and China has not been historically characterised by conflicting political interests in terms of an Italian colonialist project over China. Even the period of the small Italian concession in the city of Tianjin (1901-1947) — as Giorgio Borsa (1961; 1994 239-291) explains in detail—saw a climate of diplomatic, economic and technical cooperation between Italian and Chinese political authorities, which deteriorated only at the time of Italy's

alliance with Japan and Germany during World War II. Italy had acquired a half-square-kilometre leased zone in Tianjin following its participation with other foreign forces in the defeat of the Boxer Uprising of 1900-1901 against the intrusion of foreigners in Chinese affairs. However, the Italian presence in the concession was minimal and Italy lost control of this area to the Japanese in 1940, before the territory was officially returned to China after World War II by peace treaty. Apart from this episode, it can be said, instead, that the balance between the two parts has shifted to the side of China on a number of occasions through the centuries. It is known that Marco Polo (1254-1324) served the emperor Kublai Khan (1215-1294) as diplomatic functionary during his stay in China from 1274 to 1291 and that Italian artists and men of letters—especially Jesuit missionaries— were at the imperial service at the peak of Qing dynasty's splendour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As for Italian proselytising Christian missions, their impact on the Chinese was, on the whole, neither consistent nor substantial. Furthermore, China, seen as an emerging power on a global scale, is today considered in Italy as a sought-after partner in entrepreneurial and cultural activities.

Besides detaching itself from the application of post-colonialist theorisations with respect to representations of the Other, the Italian instance proves to be peculiar also in the fact that Italy does not present itself as a unitary entity. This is due to historical circumstances under which—Franco Ferrarotti (1997) explains—Italians share a strong and ancient socio-anthropological identity, but their political national identity is still young, weak and incomplete. The history of Italy, since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, has been, in fact, characterised by various forms of political divisions, such as the medieval and Renaissance independent city-states and the regional States in the hands of Italian aristocrats and the Pope or subordinated to foreign—French, Spanish, Austrian—rulers from the sixteenth century up to the country's unification in 1861. In this unstable environment, a common cultural development and an idea of Italy as a geographic and historical entity co-existed in the collective imagination side by side with regional differences and rivalries. The outcome of this situation is the ambiguity of what Aldo Schiavone (1998) illustrates as a fragmentation in many local cultural identities, which, at the same time, make up a collective Italian identity. Thus, the question that remains to be answered in the context of my research is whether the multivocality of Italian self-perceptions and self-representations translates into original multivocal Italian representations of China.

As for the history of contacts and relations between Italy and China, this has been variously outlined in extensive works such as *Italia e Cina*

by Giuliano Bertuccioli and Federico Masini (1996), in more limited and specific studies like the collections of essays *Venezia e l'Oriente* edited by Lionello Lanciotti (1987), and in research anthologies with a wider scope as *Firenze, il Giappone e l'Asia Orientale* by Adriana Boscaro and Maurizio Bossi (2001). Yet, despite the long-established and still intense relationship between Italy and China, an anthropological analysis of this cultural encounter and exchange has not yet been carried out. Moreover, with regards to Italian interactions with Chinese artefacts and the link between these material perceptions and knowledge and representations of Chinese cultural identity, information is available mostly from an art historical point of view in the more or less detailed catalogues of museum collections including Chinese art and Italian *chinoiserie* and temporary exhibitions on Chinese themes. An example of this kind is the catalogue of oriental porcelain in Genoese civic collections edited by Laura Zenone Padula (1992). In this publication, the long tradition of trade contacts between Genoa and China, the popularity of Chinese porcelain and the taste for *chinoiserie* among Genoese people especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are highlighted. The most recent in-depth research on Italian *chinoiserie* has been conducted by Francesco Morena (2009) and has been published both in Italian and in English with the title *Chinoiserie. The Evolution of the Oriental Style in Italy from the 14th to the 19th Century*. This work undoubtedly has the merit of being the first to follow the whole history of Chinese-inspired decorative arts as they developed with local variations throughout Italy. However, what is still lacking is a critical investigation with the aim of treating the material culture of Chinese art displays from a phenomenological point of view that considers ways of perceiving and presenting these exhibitions as manifestations of ways of relating to and elaborating ideas of the culture that produced them. It is in this gap in scholarly output that I position my research, trying to tackle these unexplored issues in detail. The purpose of this book is thus that of encouraging a response and opening a debate in which finally anthropologists and not only historians and art historians have their say.

Fieldwork: method and experience

Having established that the main task in my fieldwork would be to understand the thought and the workings behind Italian contemporary permanent displays and recent temporary exhibitions of *cineserie*, I came to the conclusion that in order to carry out this project effectively, I should work most of all with curators. From them I could gather an insight into

museum histories, collections histories, and management and exhibition planning. The bulk of the fieldwork in museums, chiefly looking at permanent displays, took place between October 2006 and June 2007. During these months, I spent some time—from one to three weeks—at each of the institutions I had selected following the activities of the curators and studying the collections directly in their daily interaction with museum staff and visitors. After this period, I have kept in contact with most of my informants so as to be up-to-date with the state of the collections and any new projects until December 2008. The fieldwork regarding more specifically temporary exhibitions has developed according to a different pattern, depending on the events scheduled over approximately the same time span, up to November 2008, when the last exhibition included in my investigation closed. Even though I do not treat in this book temporary displays that have been taking place after this date, I have nevertheless kept myself informed about later events.

For the purpose of this research, fieldwork has been an essential phase and a determinant exercise that has allowed me to collect all the empirical data necessary for the subsequent analytical evaluation. In the tradition of anthropological studies, fieldwork is, in fact, the direct observation of specific cultural phenomena taking place in a defined cultural environment. Although it is generally agreed that a research design, namely a logical basic plan, is indispensable before going "into the field", it must be recognised that the reality of the research in the field is always more complex than a neat and linear scheme. In particular, Simon Ottenberg (1990: 141) points out that "the early field situation resembles childhood in many respects". Fieldwork—he continues—is thus a learning process whereby "as we acquire knowledge and experience, we have a sense of growth, of adolescence, of maturation, much as children do". Such observations very well apply to the circumstances of my fieldwork, as with this project I have conducted for the first time a thorough anthropological research. In particular, my first trip into the field resulted into an exploratory work that allowed me to rebalance my original plan and to correct my research techniques and procedures in the rest of the fieldwork.

As I already realised at an early stage of my investigation, fieldwork cannot be bound to fixed formulae and pre-established hypotheses. On the contrary, it requires an approach open to the totality and variety of information, and characterised by an initial set of generally framed aims. The latter becomes more and more precise as the materials collected are interpreted on the basis of phenomenological experience. In a combination of "action" and contemplation, "empirical certainty" and "intuitive reminders" (Okely 1994: 32), the continuous dialogue between evidence,

ideas and theory makes it possible to refine, reassess and reformulate hypotheses as the fieldwork proceeds.

My research design originally took into account broader issues concerning the relations between the circulation of objects/images and cultural flows. However, it later embraced a more specific analysis of peculiarities and patterns of reception and perception of things and elaboration of ideas of China. In order to organise my fieldwork, I selected sites, places to visit as well as informants to meet, bearing in mind the fundamental aspects that I needed to discern and compare: collecting of Chinese artefacts, characteristics of *chinoiserie* production, museum display policies, scholarly and curatorial approaches, historical connections with other cultural realities, relationship between local cultural traditions and Italian national identity.

When considering fieldwork locations, it is important to remember—as emphasised by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997: 35-39) —that even if the fieldworker operates within circumscribed geographical spaces, the "field" intended as social, cultural and political space has much more flexible and shifting boundaries. Furthermore, since space is empirically experienced and phenomenologically understood, the sites of anthropological research are not only the background against which fieldwork takes place, but also constitute a lively, concrete element that needs to be taken into account as part of the research practice itself. As a matter of fact, I deemed it essential to be aware of the dynamics occurring between the objects and the people under exam in their spatial settings intended as enclosed places—such as museums and palaces—and geographical locations, namely the Italian cities chosen as representative destinations. At the same time, given the subjective nature of fieldwork, I could not avoid taking into consideration my own perception of the places and sites I visited.

The type and quantity of data gathered also depended significantly on the kind of relationship I established with my informants—mainly curators and scholars, but also members of the general public—according to their disposition towards my research and their availability. Hence, in the most favourable circumstances, informal interviews based on open questions had the advantage of helping to build a better rapport with my interlocutors, contributing to the freedom and spontaneity of the answers. However, such a method was only possible when plenty of time was available and the interviewee was willing to provide data in a varied and detailed way. Otherwise, I mostly had to adopt the format of semi-structured interviewing, which H. Russell Bernard (2002: 205) particularly recommends "in situations where you won't get more than one chance to interview someone", and "you are dealing with high-level

bureaucrats and elite members of a community". As a matter of fact, this technique proved suitable and efficient with the majority of my informants, whom I could meet just once or would only grant me a limited number of semi-official and relatively short meetings. In such circumstances, semi-structured interviews require a certain level of interviewing skills, as the interviewer has to follow a pre-established set of questions in a specific order, trying, at the same time, to maintain a degree of free-wheeling in the conversation. As stressed by Abraham Naftali Oppenheim (1992: 65), some basic abilities in interpersonal relations are essential for the correct and successful handling of an interview: "putting the respondent at ease, asking questions in an interested manner, noting down the responses without upsetting the conversational flow, giving support without introducing bias".

As I have been able to observe during the whole fieldwork experience, the results of an interview depend not only on the informant's attitude and personality, but also on the interviewer's self-presentation and impression on the respondents. It is, therefore, necessary to quickly detect and manage these elements, especially when meeting people for the first time. In fact, sometimes I could win over the initial scepticism by being patient and trying to emphasise the aspects that might attract the attention of my interlocutors, for example providing them with information on topics of common interest.

In some cases, I was lucky to find helpful respondents who would demonstrate spontaneous curiosity towards my research and genuine interest in the results that my study would have eventually produced. Besides answering my questions, they were assisting me to find useful reference materials and to approach other informants, thus contributing to the expansion of my network of contacts. In other cases, the operation of getting hold of informants and interviewing them was a frustrating experience. Lack of cooperation was usually due to indifference, scepticism or resistance towards my investigation. However, I always tried to put my personal resentment aside in order to acquire as much data as possible and not to influence the interviewee's answers with my behaviour.

As it is generally the case in a qualitative research like mine, there is the disadvantage of having to handle a large amount of comprehensive data, usually collected following only partially structured procedures and criteria. However, this gives to the researcher the chance to explore unlimited theoretical and pragmatic possibilities, which will be selected and circumscribed at a later, more advanced stage of the inductive analytical process.

In the attempt to regulate an overwhelming flow of information generated throughout the fieldwork experience, fieldnotes are an indispensable instrument. In my written notes I tried to be as precise and detailed as possible, articulating the fieldnotes into observations on the spot, descriptions of events, impressions and perceptions on the day and on specific situations. A crucial part of my notes is constituted by the instantaneous transcription of the interviews. I had decided beforehand not to use tape recorders, because I deemed it would have made the kind of informants I was going to address uneasy and ill-disposed, jeopardising the spontaneity and straightforwardness of their answers. Thus, I followed the practice of transcribing the conversations with my informants simultaneously as they happened. Looking at the experience retrospectively, this decision seems to have been effective as it allowed me to build up a satisfactory rapport with a number of respondents in a relaxed, informal atmosphere, whereas it has made some difficult interviews in tense circumstances sustainable. The only piece of equipment I always carried with me was my camera, so as to document objects and spaces in different contexts as well as the general settings for my case studies.

While analysing fieldnotes after the fieldwork, it is important to bear in mind that these notes are characterised by a personal nature. A certain degree of bias, based on the researcher's personal preferences and preconceptions, must be taken into account. In addition, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that the dialogue between fieldnotes and what Ottenberg (1990: 144-148) calls "headnotes" continues after the field experience, throughout the writing-up process. In this respect, Ottenberg stresses that the memories of field research, though richer than written notes, may undergo alterations in time, causing a change in the interpretation of the written materials themselves. For this reason, in order to avoid major misconstructions and to verify the correspondence of mental impressions, written records and actual facts, it might be useful, during the writing-up phase, to return for a short period to some of the locations already examined.

The peculiar relationship between fieldnotes and headnotes reflects the direct involvement of the researcher, whose inevitable immersion in the field—as emphasised by George J. McCall (2006: 3)—entails the "inclusion of the observer in the subject matter itself" and produces a phenomenon of "reflexiveness". The task of disentangling the data keeping separate objective observation and subjective perception becomes even more challenging when, as in the case of my research, the distinction of the field as a space of cultural otherness cannot be applied. Carrying out fieldwork in cultural settings I belong to has put me in the ambivalent

position illustrated by Robert G. Burgess (1984: 16-29). On the one hand, sharing the language and a certain cultural background with my informants has allowed me—in most occurrences—to obtain more detailed and direct information. Moreover, the familiarity with social, cultural and ethical circumstances has helped me to recognise and understand specific behaviours and situations. On the other hand, the lack of a detached, neutral approach makes it problematic, at times, to judge which aspects need to be given priority, and which issues require full coverage. This is why in the process of analysing the information collected, particular attention has been paid to check the validity and reliability of my material by linking the results of observation and interviews and to look at the records critically by comparing from different perspectives the data derived from my case studies.

Structure of the book

The main principle that I follow in the structure of this book is to present and analyse, in as exhaustive a way as possible, the various types of materialisation of ideas of China observed during my fieldwork in Italian museums and exhibition halls. By identifying certain patterns in this process, I have grouped together representations derived from and obtained through materials of the same nature.

Before treating directly the data collected in the field, in the first chapter I will deal with the pivotal theories that constitute the leading threads running through and supporting the whole book. While I illustrate the scholarly works I have referred to while conducting my investigation, I will also spell out my own theoretical position, which I have developed in the course of this research and which I propose to the attention of the academic and museum communities and especially of experts in studies of material culture and intercultural communication. In particular, I will emphasise how the different modes of Italian representations of ideas of China considered in this book are manifestations of processes of cultural flows, perceptions, and interactions. I will also explain that these materialised views of the Other come into being thanks to a mimetic practice. In this regard, while delineating how I define the concept of *mimesis*, I will carefully clarify that this is not intended as passive imitation but, rather, as a creative operation that results from the active involvement in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge of the Other. In connection with this argumentation, I aim at redefining the concept of material and cultural appropriations integrating their function in the recognition of the Other and expression of the Self through the

construction of difference. In a similar way, I will suggest to treat Orientalism as a phenomenon that leads to the questioning of the Self in relation to different cultures in the process of observing and representing the Other.

Chapters two and three are constructed not only with the aim of describing all my case studies, but also with the intention to present the displays of artefacts *per se* as materialised representations of cultural identities. Linked to the specific history and features of Italian museums, the distinctions and peculiarities in the treatment and display of *cineserie* will be made evident. Large quantities of these objects were moved from the private space of rich residences to the public space of newly re-organised museums as a consequence of Italy's political unification in the second half of the nineteenth century. These two chapters will highlight how the bond of the museums themselves with the immediate geographical and socio-political surroundings as well as with local cultural traditions exercises a strong influence on the way the Chinese and *chinoiserie* artefacts are perceived and displayed both in the context of permanent installations and in that of temporary exhibitions. Not only will I argue that a museum view of China has in time emerged in Italy, but I intend to stress also that different ideas of China are on show nowadays in specific museum settings. I will keep permanent and temporary displays separate because, as it will be possible to notice, they are each characterised by a different approach in terms of curatorial attitudes and expectations of the public. Permanent displays of *cineserie* tend to be arranged in relation to the territory and environment of which the museum is part. For this reason, their techniques and criteria remain more conservative. Differently, temporary displays appear more flexible and susceptible to socio-cultural changes, intellectual trends and aesthetic fashions, thus providing more up-to-date pictures of the evolving connection between materiality and cultural attitudes. However, it will eventually emerge that in all cases the engagement of the exhibits with the surrounding elements determines the construction of representations of China embodying the sense of history, memory and identity that each venue aims at conveying.

As I proceed to analyse more closely the various types of *cineserie* in the displays selected, in chapter four I will look at the wide range of objects presented, with particular attention to porcelain artefacts and lacquerware. More precisely, particular attention will be devoted to the ways in which Italian consumers—both in the public space of museums nowadays and in the private space of the houses of the artefacts' owners in the past—interact and interacted with these objects. It will be, thus,

possible to observe that the sensorial perception of a material reality not only opens up numerous opportunities of representation of the Other, but allows also familiarising, engaging with and ultimately appropriating cultural traits of the Other. This explains why—as we shall see—the material and cultural exchange with China triggers two co-existing and mutually-affecting phenomena that are not in general unique to Italy, but, nevertheless, present peculiar features conditioned by specific Italian cultural circumstances. Therefore, I will point out that Chinese artefacts arrived in Italy at different times across the centuries appear in today's displays, on the one hand, as means of approaching, experiencing and relating to China and, on the other hand, as stimulating factors for the production of original manifestations of Italian local cultural identities. In order to illustrate this aspect I am going to refer to some particularly representative instances. Among these there is the case of sixteenth-century Chinese porcelain in Renaissance Florence. Also significant in this respect will be *chinoiserie* pieces of furniture and decorative articles inspired by and used in combination with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Chinese artefacts. Overall, how all these objects come to represent or suggest ideas of China and how they are arranged in a specific space reveal peculiar attitudes and modalities of integrating or alienating Chinese and Chinese-like elements, depending on local cultural features.

Chapter five will deal with another category of exhibits, two-dimensional images, which even if through different mechanisms, fulfil the same functions of representation as those observed for three-dimensional objects. It will emerge from my examples that images are not the protagonists of displays as often as objects. More precisely, I will propose that the relevance of images and objects has been shifting from one to the other over time, according to the various stages in the process of getting closer to and more aware of Chinese reality. In this regard, I will draw attention on the fact that the early knowledge of China and the Chinese as mysterious entities, far away from the Italian territory was characterised by the scarcity of tangible cultural manifestations and the difficulty of direct experience of this remote geographical and cultural reality. Thus, Italians of the Middle Ages, who were in the forefront of the exploration of Asia for missionary and trading purposes, could only elaborate approximate maps to physically define Chinese territories. Vague Chinese elements—such as Far-Eastern-type figures and early Chinese porcelain—in paintings of the time were just hints at an obscure Chinese Other. However, it will be shown that while ancient cartography is still taken into account in some temporary exhibitions specifically referring to the Italian history of travels to China and contacts with the

Chinese, early pictorial appearances of Chinese elements are completely dismissed in this sense. Such details have been absorbed as mere ornaments in the wider context and purpose of the painting itself. My case studies, hence, will illustrate that the great quantity and variety of Chinese artefacts that later poured onto European markets quickly took over the descriptive role of representations of China, a role that they firmly retain in today's museum displays. I will, in fact, point out that in the cases analysed, Chinese scenes and motifs decorating Chinese artefacts and freely re-elaborated on *chinoiserie* artefacts are usually ignored as independent features, since the formal, stylistic, technical and material qualities of the objects attract most of the consideration. Yet, I will also highlight an exhibitive trend emerging in the last few years, according to which evocative images of China have been increasingly gaining relevance. Works by contemporary Italian artists, but most of all by contemporary Chinese artists, are being looked at with great interest both by experts and general public and have already been dedicated a number of temporary exhibitions. It will emerge that as accurate facts and information about China can these days be acquired through other more direct channels, what raises attention is the creation and reception of impressions of China that reflect contemporary social moods and conditions of the Chinese themselves and of the Italians in their current cultural dialogue with China.

In chapter six, I will focus on more unusual and rare types of exhibits, as I turn to discuss literary representations of China. For this purpose, I will first concentrate on the only specific example of this kind encountered during my fieldwork. I will therefore present the case of an exhibition in Venice in which China was represented through a display dedicated to Marco Polo's account of his travels and experiences in Asia. This emblematic starting point will allow me to illustrate how a literary narrative can exercise, like objects and images, a function in the representation of the Other and how a museum display can highlight this function. At the same time, it will also give me the opportunity to open the discussion to other literary texts of different times and genres that, even if not directly presented in museum displays, constitute an implicit background of knowledge and assumptions influencing and informing perceptions of China as exhibited in Italy today. While I pinpoint complementarity and correspondences between literary representations and the other means of representation examined in my research, it will finally emerge that the development of the former follows the same trend as the one noticed for the latter. As a matter of fact, I will show how in their own way, literary texts gradually replace the didactic intention of

representing a Chinese entity with the realisation of impressions suggested by ideas of China.

After presenting in detail all the data collected and examined, I will finally conclude with some remarks on the main issues of the variability and specificity of Italian cultural representations of China through materiality. Besides comparing the cases illustrated in the previous chapters, I will still introduce some fresh materials—from both a permanent display and a temporary exhibition—that exemplify recent developments with regards to the matters treated in this book. I will do so in order to show how, with such a dynamic situation and topical subject, there are the opportunity and the need to continue and expand the debate opened by my research.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Before illustrating and examining in detail my case studies, it is necessary to spell out the theoretical models that guide my analysis and that the reader should bear in mind while considering the specific observations and findings of this research. The whole book unravels around the principle that the materialisation of ideas of the Other involves at the same time the materialisation of cultural self-expressions. In other words, the dialectic tension and dynamic system characteristic of material production, circulation and presentation allow cultures to perceive and represent each other's identity as well as their own identity in relation to the construction of difference. Such an argument recalls the point made by Marcel Mauss in a 1920 manuscript published posthumously in 1953 in the journal *Année Sociologique*. In the extract selected by Nathan Schlanger (Mauss 2006: 44-48), Mauss poignantly links the notion of civilisation to the circulation among societies of their goods, techniques, knowledge and customs. In this respect, Mauss states that: "Societies live by borrowing from each other, but they define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing than by its acceptance" (Schlanger 2006: 44). In other words, he stresses that while civilisational elements are constantly exchanged, societies tend to define their identity highlighting the cultural differences—and not the similarities—between one another. Such a process does not take place in an accidental, spontaneous way, nor happens in a dimension void of time and space. It is rather regulated by and dependent on socio-cultural conditions, historical situations and geographical circumstances. It follows cross-cultural trends and triggers phenomena and manifestations already potentially existing in a certain cultural context. We are, hence, faced with a situation in which the multifacetedness of cultural relations mirrors the complexity of culture itself, or, as Ulf Hannerz (1992: 7 and passim) defines it, the complexity of the "externalisation" and "distribution" of cultural meanings.

     In order to shed light on the ways in which cultures relate to each other through exchange of materials and knowledge, in the following sections, I will focus on certain pivotal aspects of the constructive discourses of cultural flows and interactions as they emerge from some interlinked theoretical assumptions.

Mimesis: dialectics of identities

All the mutual mechanisms related to the perception and representation of the Other and the Self, briefly mentioned in the introduction above are intrinsic to people's nature and essential for the occurrence of interpersonal and intercultural communication. Thinkers of all times have been trying to explain them through the concept of *mimesis*, usually translated from the Greek as "imitation" or "representation by means of art".[1] A vast philosophical, anthropological, and sociological literature is nowadays available on this topic.[2] Yet, this abundance of materials often tends to exasperate and confuse rather than contribute to the clarification of the issues at stake. What emerges from the comparison of the numerous, often ambiguous definitions and contrasting discussions about *mimesis* is the fact that they share the same roots: they all draw on a discourse originated in ancient Greek thought, more specifically in some of the writings by Plato (427-327 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). In particular, for both philosophers *mimesis* is a form of representation. While Plato in the *Republic*[3] looks at it in its ethical implications as merely appearance detached from what is represented, Aristotle in the *Poetics*[4] considers it in aesthetic terms, as re-creation of what is represented. These original sources are—in a more or less explicit way—constantly used as references, reinterpreted and re-elaborated in the overwhelming majority of subsequent studies up to date. For this reason, while considering various definitions and approaches, they still constitute indispensable documents, essential in order to cast light on the notion of *mimesis* that will gradually come into view in this book.

     Drawing on the original broad notion of *mimesis* as re-presentation of something as something else that leads to some form of knowledge—deceptive for Plato, edifying for Aristotle—the definition of *mimesis* that I elaborate here is in large part based on the evidence collected from my case studies: acquisition of knowledge and construction of difference through imitative practices. That *mimesis* is part of the natural behaviour and formative needs of human beings, as already stated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (IV. 2)[5], has been epitomised in more recent times by Walter Benjamin (1986: 333-336) in his short essay "On the Mimetic Faculty".

Starting from this assumption, scholars usually aim at describing how *mimesis* functions, what its uses are, and what effects it produces. For this purpose, a specific vocabulary in relation to the mimetic faculty has been developed, even though some terms are at times still employed arbitrarily, acquiring variable meanings and nuances. According to the definition of mimesis suggested above, which links imitation to the processes of knowing and differentiating, I thus investigate the mimetic process and analyse its components.

It is, first of all, important to point out that in the present study *mimesis* is connected to different types of materialisation and denotes situations of coming-into-being, becoming, *in fieri*. As a matter of fact, it implies the agency of someone who, having received and perceived something, intentionally engages in a creative operation in order to transmit or reproduce the given thing. The productive element is underlined by Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf (1995: 9) when, recalling Plato's and Aristotle's use of the words *poiesis* and *mimesis*, they stress their meanings of "making" and "once-again making", respectively. The most immediate product of the mimetic exercise is something else in the sense of image, if by image it is meant—recovering Plato's definition—the produced appearance of something's form or idea.[6] This product of *mimesis* has to be intended not only as a tangible, visible, three-dimensional thing, but also as any other form of manifestations, such as the ones I deal with in my research, namely museum displays, interior designs, pictorial depictions, literary descriptions and so on. If we take into account this meaning of image, it is then understandable why the use of this word and of "representation" in the discussion of *mimesis* can be ambiguous and interchangeable at times. This is what is suggested by statements like that by Thomas Docherty: "An 'idea', however, is already a representation: *eidos, eidolon,* an image" (1996: 23). On these grounds, it cannot be denied that the concepts of image and representation are very closely related and interdependent. This correlation also emerges in this book as I follow the definitions that W. J. Thomas Mitchell elaborates in *Iconology* (1986) first and then reiterates in *Picture Theory* (1994). Thus, without forgetting that image is primarily the result of an "act of representation" and that it includes "the whole realm of iconicity" (Mitchell 1994: 4n), I use the term "image" mainly in the sense of two-dimensional visual representation.

As Kendall L. Walton (1990: 112) has scrupulously attempted to describe, "representing is a kind of referring": a representation provides elements and prescribes characteristics that typify certain aspects of a thing. Bearing in mind this function of representation, it becomes evident

that by "producing objects", as described above, *mimesis* also substantially contributes to the construction and consciousness of identities, and to the grasping, apprehension and comprehension of Otherness and Self. Cognition, in these terms, is seen by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1955: 791, 793) as an escalating process which can only take place through the awareness of the relatedness of the thing and the Self and culminates in the "reconciliation of consciousness with self-consciousness". The enlightening connection between being-perceived and perceiver, not-yet-known, or being-known, and knower is of a sensible nature. Sensorial dialectic and synaesthetic experience allow recognising the relations of the identity of everything with those of everything else in a cosmos where a unifying system gradually leads to abstraction, namely—according to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002: 6, 8-9)—the cognitive instrument of enlightenment. It is, in fact, in the causal process of making something physical intelligible to the perceiver's mind, by translating it into an immaterial form, that cognition actively takes place.

Although this operation can be carried out more or less consciously and with different degrees of spontaneity, it is never unconditioned and is performed by means of a complex sensorial and mental exercise. The perceiver's interaction with the perceived and her/his consequent elaboration depend greatly on her/his cultural background and individual sensibility. In this regard, David Howes (1991: 188, 186) describes perception itself as a "cultural and moral *act*" and points out that "how people think they perceive can influence what they perceive". Furthermore, while it must be recognised that all senses jointly contribute to the phenomenological and epistemological experience, different cultures tend to give more weight to the significance and role of certain senses rather than others. In particular, when examining the perceptive and cognitive mechanisms in western contexts, it is essential to bear in mind that—as I will try to explain—in these cases the privileged, most influent sense is the visual one.

The origins of this specific phenomenological scheme can be traced back to the tradition of ancient Greek thought. Once again, Plato's legacy is recognisable. In the simile of the cave, in book VII of *The Republic* (VII. 514-517), he explains the ascending process that leads man from the perception of the visible world to the knowledge of the intelligible world. On the one hand, he associates the visible world with the prisoners in the cave who see the shadows of puppets projected on the wall by the fire; on the other hand, he compares the intelligible world to the man who escapes from the cave and sees real things outside.[7] Plato's explanation not only

clarifies the distinctions among the various level of sensible experience, but also shows that all these different levels are somehow connected to each other. In my study, for example, the analysis of displays of objects from China cannot be separated from the examination of displays of objects produced in Italy following a Chinese model; furthermore, the process leading from the Chinese objects to the production of what we might call Chinese-like objects needs to be addressed as well. Besides illustrating the aim of a true philosopher's education—to which commentators such as Desmond Lee (Plato 1979: 40, 265) refer—it is not always clearly highlighted that with the allegory of the cave Plato is also making another crucial statement by stressing the essentially visual aspect of the cognitive exercise.[8]

On such grounds, it becomes then appropriate to speak of "visual cognition". The latter is the underlying theme of numerous studies that investigate from different perspectives the relationship between visuality and knowledge. Robert L. Solso (1994: 73-99), for instance, meticulously describes all the phases and mechanisms of "seeing and understanding"– the expression he uses to explain the meaning of "visual cognition"—from a basic sensorial perception to the mental processing and interpreting of the sensible data. While Solso adopts a neuro-psychological approach to the matter, Roland Barthes deals with a substantially similar issue drawing analytical keys from the disciplines of semiotics and linguistics. Following this attitude of mind, he thus stresses the connection between visual images and the "ontology of the process of signification" (Barthes 1977: 32).

Having analysed the links between visual perception and cognitive practices the jump to the examination of the associations between visual arts and mind is short indeed. Many scholars have been tempted along this path, considering the interconnectedness of aesthetic fruition and acquisition/construction of knowledge. On this point there is widespread agreement across disciplines, no matter whether visual images are treated as "visual documents" in an art-historical sense (Gombrich 1988: 62), or they are anthropologically presented as agents interacting with other objects and people, and actively contributing in the dynamics of intercultural exchange and cross-cultural identifications (Mason 2001).

While perception is undoubtedly fundamental for the purpose of acquiring knowledge, it is not enough in itself. As already stated above, the efficacy of a mimetic process depends on the active role of the perceiver, who is engaged in a productive, creative effort. For instance, Erich Auerbach (1953) would argue that something could be grasped and known only through the imitation of it, or rather through the imitation of