

Sinophone Comics

Comics Studies

Aesthetics, Histories, and Practices

Edited by

Jaqueline Berndt, Patrick Noonan, Karin Kukkonen,
and Stephan Packard

Editorial Board

Daniele Barbieri, Nandini Chandra, Karl Ian U. Cheng Chua, Felix Giesa,
Felipe Gomez, Jan-Noël Thon, Anne Magnussen, Christina Meyer, Ann Miller,
Katalin Orbán, Wendy Wong

Volume 2

Sinophone Comics



Histories, Identities, Medialities

Edited by
Adina Zemanek

DE GRUYTER

ISBN 978-3-11-143689-0
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-143818-4
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-143830-6
ISSN 2940-7583
DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111438184>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
For details go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) not original to the Open Access publication and further permission may be required from the rights holder. The obligation to research and clear permission lies solely with the party re-using the material.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025945964

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2026 the author(s), editing © 2026 Adina Zemanek, published by Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston, Genthiner Straße 13, 10785 Berlin
The book is published open access at www.degruyterbrill.com.

Cover image: fragment of the book *Primavere e Autunni* by Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte (Padova: Beccogiallo, 2015). © Ciaj Rocchi + Matteo Demonte, reproduced with permission from the artists
Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyterbrill.com
Questions about General Product Safety Regulation:
productsafety@degruyterbrill.com

Contents

Adina ZEMANEK

Introduction — 1

Section 1: **The Politics Of Naming And Distinction**

Jaqueline BERNDT

Chapter 1

What's in a Name: *Manhua*, *Manga* – ‘Manghua?’ — 25

John A. CRESPI

Chapter 2

Independent Comics in China: The Making of an Indefinite Art — 45

Nick STEMBER

Chapter 3

Naked Bodies: Acceptability and Legibility in Chinese Art Comics — 69

Section 2: **China And Its Margins: Contested Belongings And Legitimacies**

Piotr STRZAŁKOWSKI

Chapter 4

**Winnie and a Bun: The ‘Mandate of Heaven’ and the Two Visualizations
of Xi Jinping in the Works of Chinese Dissident Cartoonists — 95**

Chia-yu LIANG

Chapter 5

**Comics Adaptation as Resistance to ‘All-under-Heaven:’ A Case Study on
How Hong Kong Comics Engage in the City’s Political Movements — 117**

Shih-wen Sue CHEN and Phyllis Yu-ting HUANG

Chapter 6

‘Taiwan’s King of Comics’ Liu Xing-qin and Sinophone Culture — 143

Section 3: **Routes and Roots**

Martina CASCHERA

Chapter 7

Sinophone Comics as a Thirdspace. Two Case Studies from the Italian Context — 167

NGOI Hui Chien

Chapter 8

The Obscured Chinese Suffering during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya: An Analysis of Eddie See Yew Lee's *Three Years and Eight Months* — 211

Corrado NERI

Chapter 9

Sonny Liew and His Double: Exploring Pan-Asian Metacomics — 241

Section 4: **Reaching Outwards – Taiwan and Global Connections**

Teri SILVIO

Chapter 10

Autobiographical Cartoon Characters and Artist Personae: Modeling the Labor of Self-Branding in Taiwan — 267

Norbert DANYSZ

Chapter 11

Contemporary Comic Reviews in Taiwan: Towards a New Editorial and Aesthetic Paradigm? — 289

Adina ZEMANEK

Chapter 12

Are Comics a Serious Matter? Materiality, Remediation and Status of Comics in Taiwan — 313

About the Contributors — 337

Index — 339

Adina ZEMANEK

Introduction

Abstract: The introduction highlights the twofold intervention this volume aims to make: to showcase comics production not only from China, but also other Sinophone locations (Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Italy, the US), and to account for recent transformations within and beyond the Sinophone cultural sphere by exploring comics and related issues grounded in the twenty-first century. First, it defines the Sinophone and other concepts relevant for this book and argues for the usefulness of the Sinophone as central framing, with the ‘Sinosphere’ and ‘Pop Culture China’ providing complementary insight. This section is followed by a discussion of recent global trends in media and comics reflected in this book: the platformization of cultural production and rise of digital comics, the global popularity of Japanese manga which spurred official projects of building soft power through comics in other Asian countries, and graphic novels’ strengthened legitimacy as cultural field for exploring identities, social and political issues. This section also explores Taiwan as a site where all these trends are manifested, which accounts for its prominence in this book. After outlining this volume’s contribution to comics studies, the introduction provides an overview of its structure, with emphasis on the core themes of histories, identities and medialities.

Comics have been claimed to be a global medium, inherently susceptible to crossing national and cultural boundaries due to its visual-verbal interface, and shaped by transnational aesthetic, political, social, economic and cultural flows (Denson, Stein and Meyer 2014, 13, 19). Recent studies have also argued that comics have acquired the status of world literature, and comics studies has become an established academic discipline across the globe (Hodapp 2022, 2). On the other hand, these authors are equally quick to point out the centers and margins, powerbrokers and gatekeepers inherent in the ‘global’ production, dissemination and study of comics – visible, for instance, in hegemonic forms such as the graphic novel borrowed by global south comics to achieve international circula-

Acknowledgements: I would like to express my gratitude to Jaqueline Berndt, without whom this book would not have been created, for all the support and inspiration she provided throughout this entire journey, thus being the closest to a mentor that I have ever had. My thanks also go to the series editors and two reviewers for their suggestions that made this book a better version of itself, and to the publishing editors: Myrto Aspioti, Eva Locher and Katrin Hudey, for their patience and expert guidance.

Martina CASCHERA

Chapter 7

Sinophone Comics as a Thirdspace. Two Case Studies from the Italian Context

Abstract: This chapter employs David Der-wei Wang's post-loyalist conceptualization of the Sinophone (2014) as “a critical interface” to investigate the sentiment towards China and Chineseness expressed in Matteo Demonte, Ciaj Rocchi, and Yi Yang's graphic novels published in Italy. Demonte and Rocchi's semi-autobiographical work, *Primavera e Autunni (Springs and Autumns)*, (2015), retraces and problematizes the story of a man from Zhejiang – Demonte's grandfather – who establishes roots in Italy. *Easy Breezy* (2021), Yi Yang's first graphic novel as the main author, is a fictional work that tells the story of two young adults running for their lives in a small Chinese town. The first part of the chapter proposes a theoretical reflection on the concept of ‘Sinophone comics’ as articulated through the notion of Thirdspace (Bhabha 1994, Soja 1996), which, in my contention, helps to integrate the postcolonial approach associated with the notion of Sinophone and Thirdspace on the one hand, and with visual and multimodal (i.e. comics-specific) methodologies on the other. The following sections of my contribution aim at applying this theoretical framework to a comparative analysis of the two graphic novels, to explore how Sinophone creators can narrate and elaborate on multifaceted, non-monolithic notions of China and Chineseness.

Introduction

While Shu-mei Shih's Sinophone is “against diaspora” and in favor of *luodi shenggen* (落地生根, establishing roots) (2013, 25), David Wang's ‘post-loyalist’ is somewhere or somewhen else, but not willing to let their Chineseness go (2013; 2014). Post-loyalism as “a critical interface” (Wang 2014) to investigate the sentiment that many authors seem to maintain towards China and Chineseness, proves appropriate to examine the works of Matteo Demonte, Ciaj Rocchi, and Yi Yang. The former two are Italian graphic designers and animators who have been working together for more than a decade, specializing in reality-based comics and animations that investigate the Chinese diaspora and its impact on the Italian society, economy and culture. In 2015, they started a journey to discover Demonte's family roots through the character of Wu Lishan, based on Demonte's grandfa-

ther. A semi-autobiographical graphic novel, *Primavere e Autunni (Springs and Autumns*, following the Chinese classic *Spring and Autumn Annals*),¹ retraces and problematizes the story of a man from Zhejiang who establishes roots in Italy. The volume was published by BeccoGiallo, a small yet renowned publisher specializing in *graphic journalism*, i.e., comic books that are “mainly focused on the narration of real, often historical, facts” (Peterle 2017, 142). Due to this editorial framework, the reader expects this work to be a reality-based, if not a documentary comic book.

Yi Yang (杨一, b. 1994) is a Chinese comic artist working for Bao Publishing, one of the most prominent Italian comic book publishers, specializing in authorial graphic novels. She arrived in Bologna to study art conservation and restoration, but then changed to a comic art curriculum at the Fine Art Academy. *Easy Breezy* (Bao Publishing, 2021), her first graphic novel as the main author, is a fictional work that tells the story of two young adults running for their lives in a small Chinese town. The book is inserted in the *Bao* (宝, “treasure”) series, dedicated to Chinese publications, so that the reader expects it to be created by an author of Chinese origin who writes and draws about China. The novel tells the story of Li Yu and Yang Kuaikuai, two teenagers who accidentally save a younger girl (Yun Duo) from a cruel kidnapper and then try to return her to her family. During the escape, they hit many locations, looking for a safe place for Yun Duo, and while conflictive at the beginning, the two boys ultimately develop a solid friendship. Very successful in Italy, *Easy Breezy* was also translated into French and Spanish.

In the first part of the present contribution, I will propose a theoretical reflection on the concept of ‘Sinophone comics’ as articulated through the notion of Thirdspace (Bhabha 1994, Soja 1996), which, in my contention, helps to integrate the postcolonial approach associated with the notions of Sinophone and Thirdspace on the one hand, with visual and multimodal (i.e. comics-specific) methodologies on the other. When applied to comics, the concept of Thirdspace allows to reflect on the need of postcolonial subjectivities to create a space of marginality, of “radical openness” (Hooks 1989, 19), where to live and thrive. In the specific case of Sinophone comics, it proves useful for analyzing how Sinophone subjectivities are textually expressed and mediated, i.e., how the authors’ relationship with Chineseness is staged – literally, since the comic book page rebuilds spatio-temporal coordinates through its layout. The following parts of the contribution aim at applying this theoretical framework to the analysis and comparison of *Pri-*

1 The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a historical record of the State of Lu, where Confucius was born, covering the period from 722 to 481 BCE.

mavere e Autunni (henceforth *Primavere*) and *Easy Breezy*, to explore how Sinophone creators can narrate and elaborate on multifaceted, non-monolithic notions of China and Chineseness.

‘Sinophone Comics:’ Thirdspace as a Space for the Sinophone

In the increasingly globalized world of the last decades, postcolonial issues started to emerge, influencing the course of Chinese studies. In 2013, Shu-mei Shih inflamed a still ongoing debate on the notion of ‘Sinophone,’ asking for post-colonial adjustments in the newly born ‘Sinophone studies’ (*huayu yuxi*, 华语语系), with the aim of fostering “the study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness” (2013, 25), i.e., “communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted” (2013, 30). Shih’s “against diaspora” stance means refusing to maintain an attachment to an ideal motherland and establishing roots in the adopted country. Other scholars, such as Wang (2013, 2014), maintain that Sinophone studies should also tackle authors who live in China and write in Mandarin, as well as authors who do not speak Chinese but are not ready to relinquish their Chineseness (Wang 2014). Wang thus proposed ‘post-loyalism,’ a more inclusive literary construct that focuses on the Sinophone as a psychological condition rather than political identity (Shi 2021, 313). The psychological emphasis implied by the post-loyalist approach helps it depart from what Shih sees as unavoidable unless the subject stands against diaspora: “the politics of homeland, cultural authenticity, ethnocentrism” (Chen 2015, 53). Thus, the post-loyalist articulation of the Sinophone could be used as “a critical interface to question the tenacious idea,” the “morbid sentiment” many authors share towards China and Chineseness (Wang 2014). As Wang explains, while the loyalist “pines deeply for a home now destroyed” and the inhabitants of which are now “long dead but still haunt his consciousness,” the post-loyalist “thrusts these specters onstage” (2013, 101). The stage, in the present case, is the comic book, and the label ‘Sinophone comics’ contributes in recognizing the heterogeneity of Sinophone cultural production.

The Sinophone brings an inclusive framework to the field of comics studies, enabling to compare works that resist strictly national or linguistic labels while still retaining features shaped by specific socio-cultural contexts. ‘Sinophone comics’ define works from the “margins of China and Chineseness” (Shih 2013, 25), as well as post-loyalist oeuvres previously defined as diaspora or migrant literature.

Therefore, Sinophone comics can include comics written in Sinitic languages as well as Anglophone, Francophone and Italophone works which show a considerable amount of Sinitic language (mainly Mandarin) ‘incursions,’ made by authors of Chinese origins or descent (i.e. the products of Chinese diasporas). I argue that, in the polycentric context of global literature, the post-loyalist Sinophone could be employed as a critical tool to study the specters and explore the specific temporal and spatial condition of their onstage performance.

To explore and explain the way Sinophone post-loyalist comic artists convey their negotiations through a specific form of world-building, the concept of Thirdspace comes to hand. Space and language constitute the “two main axes that provide the coordinates for Chinese migrant literature” (Codeluppi 2020, 194). What Soja defines as Thirdspace, however, is a peculiar kind of space that incorporates Homi Bhabha’s reflection on the need of a critical thirthing that “draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories” (Soja 1996, 5). Bhabha’s Thirdspace is a space for hybridity “where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of modernist political concepts [. . .] cease to hold” (Buden et al. 2009, 201). Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, it presents the idea of negotiation or cultural translation. The space born out of this negotiation can be interpreted as “both Western and Other and also properly neither, something that falls in-between” (Buden et al. 2009, 201). Similarly, Soja’s Thirdspace is a “recombinatorial and radically open perspective,” a critical strategy of “thirthing-as-Othering” that responds to binarisms by “interjecting an-Other set of choices” (Soja 1996, 5). It is a counter-hegemonic space of negotiation, contestation, and rearticulation (Sibley 2001).

Additionally, Soja describes the Thirdspace from a geographical perspective “as a creative recombination and extension” that builds on a Firstspace, focused on “the ‘real’ material world,” and a Secondspace perspective, which “interprets this reality through imagined representation of spatiality” (Soja 1996, 10). The Thirdspace is a “fully *lived space* [original emphasis], a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency” (Soja 2000, 11). Therefore, the Thirdspace of Soja includes but exceeds a strictly geographical perspective: being both imaginative and real, it represents a form of spatial awareness that can be applied to the analysis of textual spatialization and to the textual representation of intradiegetic space. Spatializing textual phenomena have been discussed for literary genres such as short stories and novels (Bhabha 1994). This essay will show how the concept of Thirdspace can be applied to other textual forms of fiction, such as comics, which play with space in a particularly complex way.

A reflection on spatializing strategies in comics could start from the reader’s relationship with the text allowed by the page layout. While the readers of a

novel are bound to follow a precise (word) order to make sense of it, in a graphic novel they can travel the page to make sense of the text. Guido Ostanel, one of the owners of BeccoGiallo publisher, believes that “when the author of a comic book proposes a sequence to his/her readers, s/he always leaves a wide margin of responsibility to them” (Peterle 2014, 140).

Will Eisner, who defined comics as ‘sequential art,’ again discursively binding it to both time and space, also maintained that, even though “the artist must [. . .] secure control of the reader’s attention and dictate the sequence [. . .], there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first” (1990: 40). The described freedom of the reader is possible because comics is a ‘spatial medium’ (Horrocks 2004): comic artists actually rebuild the space, both within and between the panels. Scott McCloud stresses the spatial dimension of time in comics, where “both past and future are real and visible and all around us” (1994, 104). Dylan Horrocks maintains that the aim of comic artists is not only telling a story, as it is undertaking a process of world-building. For him, “it’s about making a place in which to explore ideas, experiences and their meanings” (2004). Sometimes even intradiegetically, ‘embedded’ authors comment on the very process of world-building they are involved in, including the audience in this process. The readers too have the opportunity to explore the newly created space, letting their eyes wander on the page. A theoretical link between this comics-specific concept of space, the postcolonial stance embraced by Bhabha and Soja and the features of the Sinophone is provided by the field of ‘comic book geographies’ (Peterle 2017, Dittmer 2014).

‘Comic book geographies’ conceive the comic book, especially its recently defined form of graphic novel, as a “‘place of mediation’ among authors [. . .], subjects/protagonists of the story and readers” (Peterle 2017, 124). This postcolonial perspective posits that comics do not offer solutions but open discussions that take shape through medium-specific world-building. In this essay, embracing Soja’s concept of Thirdspace in the framework of the postcolonial critique proposed by ‘comic book geographies,’ implies addressing the spatial features of comics-making on the representational level, with the objective of exploring and mapping Sinophone post-loyalist authors’ world-building through comics. I will show how the comics-specific peculiarities of Sinophone post-loyalism take shape through visual strategies mostly related to panel and page layout, and the inherent linguistic choices.

Methodology

Scholarly and general interest in the European Chinese diaspora “has steadily increased over the last two decades, corresponding to the evolution of international migration” (Chang 2012, 179). As a wider phenomenon, Chinese migration to Italy proves difficult to analyze because “Chinese migration to Europe, as a whole, lacks a central narrative” (Chang 2012, 179)². The selected case studies epitomize this complexity and well represent the condition of the Sinophone. Matteo Demonte, Cjaj Rocchi and Yi Yang (the narrating subjects) are all situated in Italy but belong to different subgroups. Demonte is an Italian citizen of Chinese descent, while Yi Yang is now part of the educated elite coming to Italy for their studies (Ceccagno et al. 2008, Pedone 2014, 2018). Defining both Demonte (an Italian author of Chinese descent) and Yi Yang (a transcultural author) as Sinophone authors allows unifying diasporic and transcultural approaches and retrieving the tools to compare these works. From a sociological perspective, the narrated Sinophone subjects belong to different subgroups too. The first is a migrant worker from a little town in Zhejiang province, and his life and deeds have been framed in a wider context of the vast Zhejiang community in Italy. He is portrayed as speaking both Chinese and Italian. Conversely, Yang’s young Chinese characters are (still) completely immersed in a mainland China scenario. They speak Italian, though, since the graphic novel was originally published in Italy and written in Italian. The Sinophone Thirdspace is articulated as a locus of expression of these hybrid identities, and visually represented for the reader.

To explore this (third)spatiality, my textual analysis focuses on framing, a notion that allows to understand the comic book as an organized nested system of ‘spatio-topical’ entities (Fisher Davies 2018), the broader and most comprehensive one being the multiframe. Even though Groensteen defined it as the way a “page divided up into a certain number of framed subspaces” (2013, 135), the multiframe is more than just ‘a page:’ “[t]he strip, the page, the double page, and the book are multistage multiframe, systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive” (2007). (Re)framing is a kind of textual spatialization that shapes discourse levels, also called ‘laminations’ or ‘enclosures,’ so that different subjectivities, temporalities and spatialities can coexist in the same multiframe. According to Fisher Davies, “[e]nclosures project the discourse of the creator: into enclosures the creator draws the world, the strip of experience, that the comic represents and within that, the characters project their own worlds, thoughts, memories, in a rich lamination of experience” (2018, 286).

2 For a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, see Thuno et al. (2025), Liu and Wang (2020).

Analyzing the representation of the intradiegetic space is deemed necessary in Sinophone comics. In the context of ‘comic book geographies,’ the spatial element in postcolonial world-building is considered from an intra-diegetic standpoint by “focusing on the representation of spatial phenomena in the contents” (MacLeod 2014). Being a situated³ analysis, the following addresses the representation of landscapes and architectural elements related to ‘China’ (the motherland) or ‘Italy’ (the present location of the narrating/narrated subject). I will take into account both single panels and sequences to explore the way authors frame the experiences and re-create ‘Chinese,’ ‘Italian’ and ‘Sino-Italian’ spaces, consequently engendering a Sinophone Thirdspace.

Given that individual panels can also be “contextually read as spatiotemporal references” (Natsume 2010, 41), the two functions of the frame, selection and organization (Moerneaut et al. 2020), are explored through an analysis of the graphic rendering of spatial features and the selection and spatial organization of culturally charged elements therein.

Within the panels, I will analyze angles, viewpoints and enclosure ‘nesting’ that engender discursive laminations, since it is crucial to understand the author’s communicative intentions by looking at the adopted perspective and the subjects and objects foregrounded, backgrounded or omitted (Moerneaut et al. 2020). The selection and organization of culturally charged elements in the comics page is another pivotal aspect to take into account while dealing with Sinophone authors, since the integration of ‘Chinese’ elements can be considered as a strategy of “projecting text-worlds” into the text (Fisher Davies 2018, 290). Authors choose what to locate and the salience of represented objects in their newly built world, despite any claim of truthfulness: both authors and readers are aware that “representation necessarily involves selection, perspective and interpretation” (El Refaie 2010, 167). When the ‘text-worlds’ projected are ‘China’ in ‘Italy’ or ‘Italy’ in ‘China,’ the authors’ choice of displaying specific objects and symbols and their salience between the panels concurs in building for the reader a Sinophone (third)space.

As for the sequences, which are “a series of scenes linked or connected by a single idea” (Field 1995, 86), dynamic changes in spatial representation in panel transitions are hereby considered as a way of delimiting lesser narrative units within a sequence (i.e. the scenes). Comics creators work with the gutter (the space between the panels) to suggest and disrupt temporality and enhance emo-

³ The term ‘situated’ is used according to Shih, as “a situated literature in a given time and place,” “a place-based practice” (2013, 717).

tional response (McCloud 1997) and may deliberately manipulate panel arrangement to (mis)guide the pattern of reading (Fisher Davies 2018, 290).

In this (Third)spatial construction, the reader is constantly interpellated to participate in performing, negotiating, or resolving a psychological identitarian struggle. To address the way the authors prepare the stage for readers to experience their Thirdspace, the analysis also focuses on visual modality. Michael Halliday (1977) states that language is organized around, as Sindoni efficiently summarizes, “a small number of discrete cluster systems with strong internal interconnections” (Sindoni 2011, 40), which are what he will later call ‘metafunctions,’ a term “adopted to suggest that function was an integral component within the [Functional Grammar] theory” (Halliday and Mathiessen 2004, 31). The interpersonal metafunction is “language as action” (Halliday and Mathiessen 2004, 30). It enacts social roles and constitutes social experience (Sindoni 2011, 40), while ‘modality’ describes the “interpersonal metafunction whereby the speaker expresses his or her judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he or she is saying” (El Refaie 2010, 164). In visual socio-semiotics, this notion is employed to investigate “the degree to which a representation is to be taken as true or real” (van Leeuwen 2005, 160), an important factor to consider in the case of (semi)autobiographical accounts (*Primavere*) and fictional works that carry subjective projections (*Easy Breezy*). To measure visual modality (i.e., the degrees of representational realism), I will focus on markers such as contextualization (background representation), depth, color differentiation, saturation, modulation, and illumination (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 160–162).

Lastly, the interrelation between words and images (which informs the language of comics) is deemed a crucial locus of Sinophone representation. Words are therefore treated as an integral part of the panel and page layout.

Referentiality, Spatial Symbolism and Subjectivity

Primavere represents the beginning of a journey to discover Demonte’s family roots and routes. Based on documentary evidence, the real-life Wu Lishan launched different activities and started a family in Milan, thus seemingly succeeding in establishing roots. Did he stop looking back at his motherland? Rocchi/Demonte give their own answer. They appear to tell Wu’s version of the story, but as the reader discovers on the last page, the story is retold by Demonte’s grandmother. Therefore, Rocchi/Demonte force “absence” into “presence” (Wang 2013, 102). Unable to capture Wu’s first-hand experience of the ‘homeland,’ the authors are “still able to fabricate one, creating an affinity to a historical—nay, de-

sired—object that [they] seek to recover or restore” (Wang 2013, 102) for the sake of storytelling and the restoration of memory. In this nested recollection, the intra-diegetic subjects’ first-hand diasporic thoughts and memories are unrepresentable. Their spectres can be animated in the comic book ‘space,’ turning it into a Thirdspace. While Wu Lishan re-builds his motherland in his dreams, Rocchi/Demonte are in fact rebuilding his dream-like fantasy and remapping his life path, which unravels itself connecting China and Italy. I agree with Scibetta that *Primavere* is a “mixture between historical and fictional reconstruction [. . .] given the historical accuracy of the authors’ research at the basis of their work,” but I don’t think that the fictional part is “a minor aspect” (2023, 63). In fact, I maintain that the very balance between reality and fiction, carefully constructed linguistically and visually, is what allows us to define this text as a Thirdspace. The authors make “claims to verifiability and referentiality” (Suleiman 2000, 544) that are grounded on individual experience and documentary evidence, but the “coercive fictitious content of comics reportage” (Ahrens 2019) is easily detectable.

In the initial pages, the first-person narrator establishes himself as a personally involved, intra-diegetic voice, even though Demonte appears only twice throughout the book, as a baby held by his grandfather (2015, 121) and grandmother (2015, 128). This stance is further strengthened by the conclusion, which provides Demonte’s testimony on the origins of this graphic novel. The paratexts that follow (2015, 128–137), i.e., one post-scriptum, three essays, and many photographic documents, provide the documentary ground on which to define this work as a reality-based biography. As for the framing, the adopted frontal perspective (subjective angles and canted framing do not occur) would suggest an “objective” stance (Moernaut et al. 2020), and the choice of using real photos as the basis for character designs enhances indexicality. For example, Wu Lishan’s portrait, often inserted in the novel, is based on a photographic document also exhibited on the book’s last pages as proof of the authors’ documentation process.

Nevertheless, symbolism often intrudes and steadily guides the choice of culturally charged elements. Historicity and the documentarian attitude are disrupted through redrawing and re-contextualization of the photographic elements, allowing them to acquire a subjective aura. Architecture is detailed and shaded, but also projected against flat backgrounds, and its color is unmodulated. A similar process of balancing occurs with the choice and the arrangement of culturally charged objects and scenarios that possess or acquire a strong symbolic power: the ‘motherland,’ Qingtian, is rendered as unreal, suspended in time and isolated in space, painted in bright colors that both convey a feeling of (post-loyalist) enchantment. The marginality of the represented village (Figure 1) gives shape and colors to the liminal condition of the migrant and the subaltern (Hooks 1989, 19).



Figure 1: Depiction of Qingtian (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 12). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (top to bottom):

He left Qing Tian, a small mountain village in Eastern China (It.);
Qingtian (Ch. and It.).

In Figure 2 there is another creative use of the mono-frame panels where a *real-and-imagined* space is accurately rebuilt. China is represented as a dream-like place, both suspended in time and rooted in history. This balance between historicity and fiction is also displayed by the relationship between text and image.

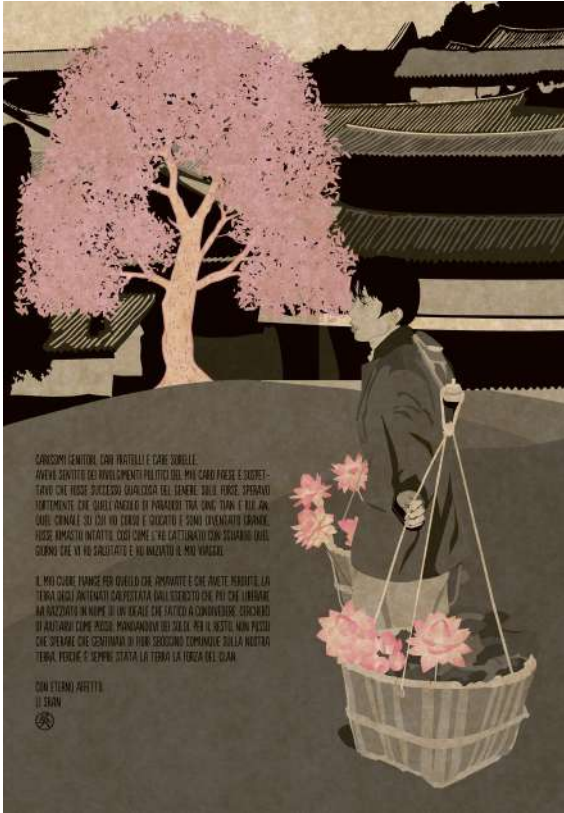


Figure 2: Wu Lishan's letter to his family (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 87). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (top to bottom):

Dear parents, brothers and sisters. I'd heard about the political changes in my dear country, and I suspected that something like this was happening. Maybe, I had just hoped that the corner of Paradise between Qing Tian and Rui An, that edge where I ran, played and grew up, stayed intact. That remained as my eyes caught it when I said goodbye to you and started my journey. My heart cries for what we loved and lost, for the ancestors' land stepped over by the army that did not free it, but sacked it instead, in the name of an ideal that I find hard to share. I'll try to help you as I can, by sending you money. Besides this, I cannot but hope that hundreds of flowers blossom on our land, because the clan's strength has always been the land.



Figure 3: Wu Lishan sails to Hong Kong and Europe (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 8 and 9). ©Rocchi and Demonte.



Figure 3 (continued)

Translation:

Page 8: He sailed to Hong Kong.

Page 9: Then, from there he left for Europe.

The evocative symbols of Spring, youth, immortality and purity are arranged in an idealized rural setting. In this panel, concrete and abstract visual elements dialogue with the romantic and nostalgic tone of Wu Lishan's letter to his parents. Notably, the land Wu mentions in the closing sentence occupies more than a half of the entire frame and is thus stressed both visually and verbally as a crucial component of Wu's China. Other splash-pages dedicated to the re-construction of 'China' show a combination of flat and tridimensional elements, so that the naturalistic rendering of landscape is disrupted by the didactic and emotive necessity of displaying cultural symbols. The 'Chinese' spaces thus acquire a Thirdspace quality: they are both real and imagined, lived and remembered by the narrated subject.

Movements and distances are also represented symbolically, both within the panels and in sequences. In the scene-to-scene transition shown in Figure 3, Wu travels from Qingtian to Hong Kong and from Hong Kong to Europe. This kind of transition, which "transports us across significant distances of time and space" (McCloud 1994, 71) consists in the juxtaposition of two panels where tridimensional renditions of 'traditional' vessels dialogue with the bidimensional graphic styles of the waves and the low visual modality of the background. Notably, the differences between the vessels, the overall organization of the represented space (the object placement and the orientation), and, most of all, between the color palettes succeed in recreating the feeling of a major shift in time and space.

Rocchi/Demonte's tension between subjective, dream-like, symbolical and factual representations of China is expressed by the concomitant use of architectural elements and maps. Map-like Chinese territory recurs when the narrator lectures the reader on the historical events occurring while Wu was living in Italy. During the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Civil War (1946–1949), China is represented as a flat territory colored in sharp blue for regions ruled by the Nationalist Party (KMT), and red for the zones led by the Communist Party (CCP). Figure 4 exemplifies the recurring visual rendering of China-as-a-map: the saturated, unmodulated bright colors of the map serve as a bi-dimensional background for characters/objects that possess a higher visual modality. This specific splash-page represents the consequences of the Anti-Japanese War and stands as an example of visual narration within the panel.

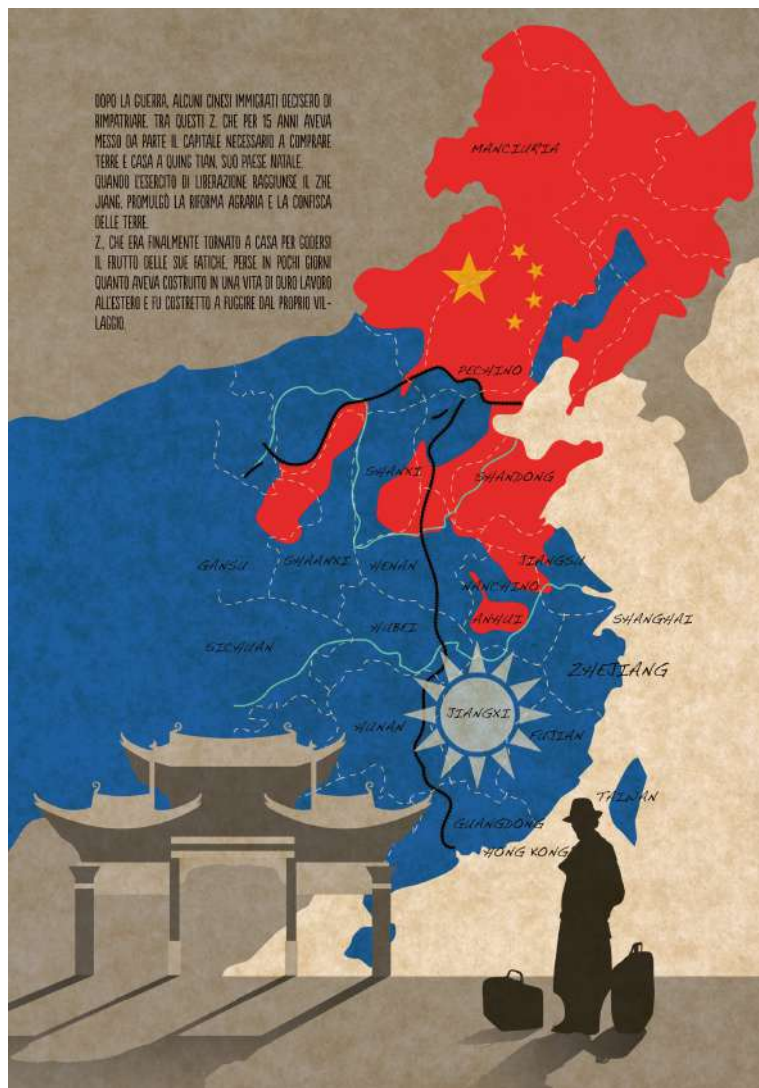


Figure 4: Chinese map with architectural and human (Mr Z.'s) silhouettes (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 65). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation:

After the war, some Chinese migrants decided to go back to China. Among them, there was Z. who, for 15 years, saved money to buy land and a house in Qingtian, his hometown. On reaching Zhejiang, the Liberation Army promulgated the land reform and land confiscation. Z., who had finally come back home to enjoy the fruits of his work, lost in a few days all he had built in a life of hard work abroad, and had to flee from his village.

Here, the relationship between verbal and visual is one of enhancement (Martinec and Salway 2005), since the text provides additional circumstantial information to the image, i.e. more details on both the history of China during the 1950s, and the story of Mr Z. Besides narrating historical events, the visual component exploits the Thirdspatial function of the comic book: it stages the liminal condition of the Sinophone by letting Mr Z. hang on the edge between two pages and two worlds.

Cartography and urbanistic views recur through the pages of *Primavere*. The authors often combine tridimensional photographic elements and bi-dimensional spatial rendering, also recurring to the insertion of city maps. Figures 5 and 6 allow the comparison of different approaches to spatial representation.



Figure 5: Milan railway station (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 14). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation:

In 1931, Milan was a fast-growing city. The new railway station was inaugurated that very year. It was a monumental building. Those who arrived in Milan had the impression of reaching a great international capital.



Figure 6: Wu Lishan's encounter with Mr Z. (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 12). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: That should be my fellow countryman. (Ch. and It.)

Panel 2: Mr. Z. lived in a *casa di ringhiera* in Canonica street n. 35.

Panel 3: Do you want some tea? (Ch. and It.)

Panel 4: Mr Z. had arrived during the 1920s. He had established the first Chinese community in Canonica street. Text 2: Milan's Chinese were all fellow countrymen from the district of Qingtian. They were the most active in peddling fake pearls, before, and silk ties, later.

When the panel shown in Figure 5 appears, young Wu does not know the metropolis well, thus the space is (re)presented to the reader both as a tridimensional reproduction and as an icon. To this iconographical representation, a radical attachment to Chineseness is affixed and expressed through the insertion of the sinograms that surround the date '1931' and work as an anchorage to the Sinophone reader. The Italian spaces are consistently represented in an accurate and/or naturalistic way. The typically Milanese housing style called *casa a ringhiera*, working-class two-roomed apartments with shared balconies with railings, is a case in point (Figure 6). Conversely, the precise rendering of Qingtian's borders, its cartography, or architectural specificities, are never displayed: in the last frame of the panel in Figure 6, the village of Qingtian appears as a dream-like blurred territory. This symbolic attitude is unavoidable, since the real space is unrepresentable.

In *Easy Breezy*, a fictional work, referentiality and symbolism are represented differently, leaving greater room for subjectivity. Yang operates a triple distancing from the narrated events (in space, in time, and in language), and this choice impacts referentiality. The author sets the story far from where she is (in Italy), but exactly where she used to be (in China), thus proposing a spatio-temporal reconstruction of her youth. However, and notably, the fact that her Chinese characters speak Italian projects the diegesis onto the present, dismantling consistency (and referentiality), and building up hybridity. The choice of setting the story in China, guided by both the desire to portray a familiar place and the feeling of awkwardness towards setting a story in Italy (Yang and Caschera 2021, Yang and Bonzi 2023), results in the creation of a Sinophone Thirdspace for the Italian readers. While applying framing analysis on panel/page layout, with a focus on spatial features such as landscapes and architecture and on the selection and organization of culturally charged visual elements, an analysis of the salience and frequency of visual elements has been carried out with the aim of clarifying what the author deems significant in her newly-built 'China.' Referentiality, in this case, is based on first-hand memories. The unnamed, imagined Chinese city

where the story is set is thus both real and imagined. It serves as a composed space of negotiation of a relationship with China and Chineseness that is complicated by the author's choice to study, live, and pursue a career in Italy, as well as to write and draw for Italian readers.

In *Easy Breezy*, the variety of angles and distancing choices, from the bird's eye to the bottom-up view, the deforming perspective, and the close-ups, inform the cinematic quality of the text. In many sequences, the author quickly changes the reader's location in the space she is creating, shifting from a more objective to a decisively subjective perspective. This enhances the text's emotional power, while carrying away from cultural reflection (or even shock). The whole plot roughly follows the conventions (Umberto Eco would say the 'intertextual frames') of a road movie so that the author can display dynamic changes in spatial representation: in many sequences, what the reader mainly sees is the landscape surrounding the vehicle the protagonists are travelling in and its interior. In these sequences, Yang willingly accelerates and decelerates the rhythm of narration by employing 'action-to-action' as well as 'aspect to aspect' panel transitions. The latter are "most often used to establish mood or a sense of place [. . .], time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations [. . .] Rather than acting as a bridge between separate moments, the reader here must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments" (McCloud 1994, 79).



Figure 7: The crew on their way to Yun Duo's home (Yang 2021, 77). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (top to bottom):

Panel 1: You'll see . . .

Panel 3: Where are we going?

Through the panel shown in Figure 7, it is possible to acknowledge Yang's switching from interior to exterior spaces. Thanks to the alternation of high and low visual modality techniques (e.g. the presence or absence of background and depth that affect referentiality), the interior can be perceived as both narrow and large. It changes depending on the characters' mood: inside the van, the crowded space is emptied by projecting the character onto a monochrome backdrop, a technique that lowers visual modality and is frequently displayed in manga. As for the exterior, the expressionist (deformed and curved) lines define urban architecture's lower visual modality and concur in evoking an emotional or sensual response. At the same time, the author sets up a very articulate landscape, which suggests that this Thirdspace represents a combination of many realistic Chinese spots. A technique employed in the road movie sequences to enhance readers' emotional response is what McCloud defines as 'subjective motion.' Observing an object in motion is involving, but being that object (i.e., being in the driver seat) is even more so (1994, 114). From a car window, the reader experiences a city provided with a river, many bridges and skyways, and those construction sites (Figure 8) that typically crowd Chinese cities.



Figure 8: Running from the kidnapper (Yang 2021, 39). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: How much do you weigh? You're light as a feather!

Panel 2: I'm good.

Panel 4: Men at work (Ch.); Honk honk (Ch., onom.)

Aspect-to-aspect transitions allow the comics author to manipulate the narrative pace and enhance discursive complexity. The specific multiframe shown in Figure 9, which occupies an entire page and recurs twice in the book, functions as a mood setting and as a metaphor of spatial movement and temporal discontinuity among intertwined plotlines. The inclusion of other kinds of landscapes, as this bird-eye view in Figure 9 shows, further clarifies the features of a multifaceted Sinophone space. This objective angle on a medium-sized city full of typically Chinese traditional architectural elements combines natural referents in low visual modalities and culturally charged ones rendered in a higher visual modality, thus displaying a dialogue between referentiality and subjectivity.



Figure 9: 'Chinese' landscape as a recurring frame (Yang 2021, 20). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (top to bottom):

Panel 1: Yeah ...

Panel 2: Crack (Ch. onom.)

Yang's ability and penchant for articulating both interior and exterior spaces reveal the idiosyncrasies of her world-building. This Thirdspace is fresh and alive under the reader's eyes, not merely functional to the main narrative but ever-changing according to the emotive needs. For this reason, in *Easy Breezy*, some locations are significant *per se*. Enclosures, such as balloons and panels, are employed to communicate this salience. If arranged in a multiframe, they perform the task of projecting the discourse of the creator and, at a second level, the discourse of the characters (Fisher Davies 2018, 287). The 'cemetery sequence,' partially shown in Figure 10, is a case in point. When the girl asks to visit her grandmother, the boys agree, deeming it a safe place. In the cemetery scene, however, they discover that Yun Duo brought them to her place of eternal rest.



Figure 10: Everybody singing on the hill (Yang 2021, 114). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 2: This ...

Panel 3: night ...

Yun Duo's enthusiasm 'drags' the other characters up a hill, where the grandmother is supposed to live. When the characters reach the top and discover her tomb, the narration pace slows down to the point it is perceived as suspended. The characters are then portrayed as singing all together (Figure 10). Through an 'aspect-to-aspect' panel transition, Yang displays their subjectivities (each character is driven by different thoughts and memories) and stages their becoming a family. This type of panel transition also causes an effect of 'momentaneity,' "a multi-layered reception of the [...] space and the characters as located both in the same temporality and apart at the same time" (Natsume 2010, 42). This sequence stands out for letting the readers pause and enjoy a Sinophone Thirdspace where human and natural elements dialogue, based on a syncretic conception of human-nature relationships. After climbing the hill, the little conflicts among characters are resolved, and they are portrayed as close to each other, unifying their voices together with the wind, a culturally charged element representing a Daoist and Buddhist reference. The way the spatial features are rendered and the (human and animal) characters are arranged, is crucial to convey this message of unity and hybridity: the bottom-up movement towards the top, allowed the characters to ascend to a *utopia* where city life is far away, time is suspended and barriers are lifted.

Framing Cultural and Linguistic Chineseness

Interspersed throughout the novels, there are many visual 'cultural elements' referring to Chineseness. These elements, which include linguistic signs, inform the very nature of the Sinophone Thirdspace and are inserted in both abstract and lived spaces. In *Primavere*, the 'lived' cultural elements represent the way Wu's bonds are built through spatialized performances (eating), which also convey a sense of place attachment. The Chinese restaurant *La pagoda* (The Pagoda) and the factory are spaces that visually tend to satisfy the post-loyalist tension towards something the protagonist cannot reach, and the reader can only experience through hybrid representations. In a sequence dedicated to Wu's life at the workplace, the central, most significant frame shows the very heart of Chinese conviviality: food. Here, the sinogram meaning 'food' is juxtaposed to the plate, full of rice and condiments. At the end of the sequence, Wu's family appears: his wife rendered as a silhouette, her dark space superimposed on a bright scene. The men at the workplace are speaking Chinese while eating Chinese food as a way of preserving their heritage and keeping the bond alive, when she disrupts the scene both visually, with her silhouette, and linguistically, conveying an Italian greeting. Through food and language, this scene stages the will to maintain an attachment to the past while rooting in the present.



Figure 11: Chinese food in Milan (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 97). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

In 1962, *La Pagoda*, the first Chinese restaurant, was opened in Milan, in Fabio Filzi Street, by Jiang Fuiming, one of the most successful Chinese wholesalers and Wu Lishan's associate in bag production.

Braised dumplings, steamed dumplings, spring rolls, grilled dumplings (It. and Ch.).

The restaurant was an efficient means to let the migrant Chinese population into Milan culture. As part of the food habits of Milan citizens, the Chinese restaurant favored the inclusion of the Chinese community in the city.

The choice of opening The Pagoda is visually framed as a desire to connect China and Italy. Through the splash-page shown in Figure 11, Rocchi/Demonte arrange this symbolic unity by creating a Thirdspace where typical Chinese dishes are floating above Milan's postcard-like skyline. Here, the representation of Milan is realistic, while food's arrangement in space seems to be more 'romanticized' in visual style, suspended out of time. The cultural elements are explained through tags for the non-Sinophone reader to understand and for the Sinophone to recognize. Notably, enclosures are employed to carry sinograms. Rocchi/Demonte's display of isolated didactic elements makes it easier to detect what represents an explicit reference to Chineseness.

Conversely, for *Easy Breezy* which is set in China, everything in this Thirdspace should be acknowledged by the reader as a re-construction of a Firstspace, i.e. first-hand experienced space. Food culture occupies a salient position as in *Primavere*, but in just a few scenes and to communicate a casual, familiar vibe, a sense of ease: Rocchi/Demonte use food as a collective ritual whilst Yang uses it as an authenticity enhancer.

The specificity of Yang's diegesis is her distancing the narrative in time, since, as in many Sinophone post-loyalist texts, temporality is strictly linked to memory. Therefore, what could be deemed in the analysis as an undoubtedly culturally charged element is what she extracts from the precise chronotope of her youth. *Easy Breezy* is set in late 1990s China, when there were no smartphones and small shops offered telephone services; Mickey Mouse backpacks were common, and Casio watches were a hit for young boys. The 'consumerist nostalgia' of these global brands/logos could be easily acknowledged and shared by the Italian reader, but there are many objects they would not be able to recognize (e.g., a tin of soya milk, a common drink in China but not in Italy). These culturally charged objects, as well as the untranslated inscriptions disseminated throughout the texts, prove the author's unwillingness to explain the context to the reader, who is left to directly experience her Thirdspace. Here, according to Buddhist sensitiv-

ity, there is no clear separation between the species, especially from an emotive standpoint. The salience of animal characters and references is confirmed by the frequent verbal and visual continuity between species. The evil antagonist addresses the boys as 'kittens' and 'bunnies,' while describing himself as a wolf. As for the visuals, Yun Duo and Yang Kuaikuai are portrayed as sharing or projecting their feelings and desires onto different animals (i.e. penguins and swallows).

The presence of sinograms as part of the panel and page layout is the most visible feature of the Sinophone Thirdspace. Rocchi/Demonte insert non-simplified characters in almost every panel and their presence should be considered as part of the whole layout. Preferring the traditional characters signals the intention of recreating an authentic linguistic scenario, since Wu and his co-villagers left China when the linguistic reforms were only being preliminarily discussed. Besides, it is a way of textualizing the temporal and political distance from the contemporary PRC. In *Primavere*, each person or cultural item is provided with both their Italian and Chinese names, and the sinograms are regularly inscribed in enclosures that produce multiple laminations. By means of the textual sections, not always inscribed in a frame but often superimposed on the background, the apparently objective narrator aims to explain Chinese culture to the readers, thus disrupting the main narrative. Chineseness enters the represented Italian space through objects, symbols and sinograms, which are located in hybrid spaces framed and re-framed by geometrical patterns. Notably, superimposition itself is very consistent with traditional Chinese spatial imagination. This process of spatio-temporal construction can well be detected if the frames are not considered in isolation, but as meaning-making enclosures inhabiting the entire page.



Figure 12: Wu Lishan arrives in Milan (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 13). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation (left to right, top to bottom):

Panel 1: Do you need a taxi, Mr Chinese? (Milanese dialect)

Panel 2: Let me see ... (Milanese dialect)

Panel 3: Yes, it's at *Scigolatt* district.

Panel 4: Mr Zu, Italy, Milan. Address: no. 35 Canonica Street.

Panel 6: At that time, Canonica street was part of a district located just outside the city walls, known as “*Scigolatt* district” [district of the onions], the greengrocer district, a working-class area traditionally populated by artisans and merchants. The district's feature, its old courtyards, its *case di ringhiera*, the small workshops, the old and affordable prices, facilitated the integration of Chinese migrants

(*Scigola*: onion, in Milanese dialect. *Scigolat*, onion sellers, greengrocers)

In Figure 12, the central round frame is nestled among rectangular ones, subverting the relationship between the sky (round) and the earth (squared) in Chinese traditional symbolism. The object portrayed in this central frame is a piece of paper with few lines written in Chinese. The paper, folded for a long time, now shows orthogonal lines that give a sense of paper-related materiality and act as frames. The (material) lines that time left on the paper are visually matched by those of Milan's city-map reproduced in the frame below: Wu's rickshaw, projected on the map as the Chinese characters are on the folded page, is both real and imagined. The Chinese writing system is pervasively present in this double-page spread in Figure 13. Here, the reader can experience multiple laminations, represented by the organization of people, objects, and textual enclosures and sinograms.



Figure 13: Wu Lishan's letter to his family in Qingtian (Rocchi and Demonte 2015, 20–21). ©Rocchi and Demonte.

Translation:

Dear parents, brothers and sisters, I write to you from Italy, where I finally settled. Now I have a house and a job, and I have met other fellow countrymen who came here before me. I've learned Italian just as much as I can now to make myself understandable and move around this city so different from Qingtian. Despite this news, I always think of you and I try to picture you in a New China that is quickly changing. News of the advancement of the Revolutionary Army reached this distant place, so that I sometimes wonder whether with this Nationalist passport I could go back to my homeland and find you all! Or whether, instead, the political turmoil changed my little life once and for all. I wanted to convey my affection and let you know that, despite the distance, I always carry you in my heart.

Zhejiang's cartographic rendering is enclosed in the upper right, but Chinese territory is just one of the elements chosen to remind the reader about Wu's origins. The 'cultural elements' (Qing era⁴ robes on his ancestors, traditional architecture, an envelope letter written in Chinese) carry a symbolic but also a documentary

4 The Qing dynasty lasted from 1644 to 1911.

value: the letter as well as Wu's portrait are also shown in the paratexts as evidence of a first-hand relationship between the authors and the narrated material. This reference to the pre-PRC times indexes to non-modernity and can be interpreted as an attachment to an unretrievable past. In this multiframe, Rocchi/Demonte show how a migrant is never a blank slate. The process of negotiation between past and present, Chinese and Italian identity is highlighted by building a Thirdspace where multiple discursive laminations coexist: the Italian language text, enclosed in a white rectangle, tries to give justice to both the real (China, Chinese culture) and the imagined (re-enlivened through memories and synthesized for the Italian reader).

In *Easy Breezy*, sinograms in the inscriptions carry the most important deictic value. Two languages, Italian and Chinese, had to be integrated in order to make sense and make the story credible (readable) in the media context of its reception. Chinese characters speak Italian and their dialogues are framed by speech balloons, a second-degree lamination. In the 'outer space,' the first-degree lamination (the creator's 'direct' discourse), all the linguistic components are in Chinese. Onomatopoeias, always written in Chinese and not translated, are also integrated in the landscape and superimposed on characters, objects, and architecture. This requires an additional effort from the reader, who is called to infer and actively (re)create the sound in their own language. Besides onomatopoeias, sinograms are inserted in any kind of inscriptions, from billboards and shops to traffic signs, thus informing and constituting the landscape (Figure 14). In these inscriptions, the verbal and visual dimensions completely overlap, and the linguistic element becomes untranslatable. This absence of translation contributes in communicating truthfulness and referentiality, while also signifying the inaccessibility of this Sinophone Thirdspace.



Figure 14: 'Chinese' cityscape (Yang 2021, 96). ©Bao Publishing.

Sinograms take part in the spatial organization and in its saturation. Furthermore, cooperation between logographic script, panel layout and images builds a subject-specific spatiality. As shown in Figures 8, 9, and 14, inscriptions and onomatopoeias are handwritten: hand drawing not only modalizes the text as personal (Fisher Davies 2018, 291), but also emphasizes its being mediated and therefore, ‘translated’ by the Sinophone author. The subjectivization of the space is carried out through Chinese script and different kinds of laminations. Besides onomatopoeias and inscriptions, language as perceived by the characters informs an additional kind of lamination that textualizes Sinophone issues. A case in point is Yang’s use of the ‘nerdy’ Yang Kuaikuai, to let the reader see the world through the mediation of his glasses. When Yang Kuaikuai’s glasses are shown reflecting the object he is looking at, i.e. a book of *Yuwen* (语文, ‘written language’ or ‘language and literature’), the sinograms are translated in Italian with the word *Cinese* (Chinese) in a dialogue on the next page, even though the original phrase bears no reference to Chineseness. It is possible to infer that the space occupied by the glasses on the comic book page – which is, in fact, a frame – serves as an enclosure through which Yang shows the Italian reader her world and her youth. The choice of not superimposing a translation onto those sinograms, again, enhances the indexical effect and the aesthetic value of the oeuvre, but does not favor intercultural communication. Not able to make sense of these signs, the sinograms could cause a sense of estrangement in the reader, leaving them lingering on the threshold.

While sinograms carry an explicit cultural weight, it is not so easy to decipher the Sinophone post-loyalist value of the omnipresent lines (rounded, crooked, chaotic) that are able to fill the representational space, as they do with the shadows in Figure 15. Yang’s space is crowded by these signifying lines. This ‘saturation anxiety’ concurs in creating a highly personal Sinophone (Third)space and works in the opposite direction of the sinograms, provoking an emotional response in the reader.



Figure 15: At the scrapyard (Yang 2021, 51). ©Bao Publishing.

Translation:

Here we are!

Conclusions

The examined case studies, which differ in genre and style, have been chosen to test whether the theoretical framework of Sinophone post-loyalism and the analytical tools of framing analysis and visual socio-semiotics allow for comparison and for making sense of various communicative choices. Besides having been created by an author of Chinese descent (*Primavere*) and of Chinese nationality (*Easy Breezy*), these works share the intention of indexing China/Chineseness by creating a Thirdspace where relevant issues engage in dialogue. Rocchi/Demonte's work was edited and published as a historically accurate and socially significant reality-based comic book, a genre that programmatically draws on facts and representation of real places. Therefore, their China tends to convey objectivity as well as maintain a distance from the facts, even though (re)told by a relative. Nevertheless, the analysis has shown that the authors disrupt verisimilitude and referentiality through graphic strategies that help represent a subjective truth and create a dream-like effect. *Primavere*'s Thirdspace is well-balanced, tidy, wide and bright. A general stiffness of composition, rendered by 'rational' and 'timeless' lines (McCloud 1994, 124–125), characterizes the relationship between verbal and visual resources, too.

As a work of fiction, Yi Yang's book provides a different perspective on the Thirdspace. It is an entertaining graphic novel that does not make any truth claim, but its spatio-temporal features draw from first-hand memories and actual experiences of China in the 1990s (and beyond), spatio-temporally distant from the context of publication. Compared to Rocchi/Demonte's narrative, Yang's is shorter and faster: while *Primavere* spans five decades, the whole plot of *Easy Breezy* unravels in a few hectic days. The cinematic quality contributes to accelerating the novel's rhythm, reducing the reader's opportunities of pausing on the images, if they are not 'compelled' to do so through aspect-to-aspect transitions. Yang visually includes readers in the frame, guiding their attention by employing a wide range of angles and distancing techniques, not afraid of displaying a highly dynamic subjective style.

In *Primavere*, multiple 'voices' and realities are created by different kinds of laminations, which underscore the role of displaying the Sinophone nature of the text. The story is mostly narrated through the authors' voice, and the re-enactment of the past through dialogical scenes, although present, does not have a substantial narrative role in the economy of the text and does not reduce the distance between readers and text: it is a space where history is narrated while a story is staged. Sinograms in the texts and their translation are mainly inscribed in explanatory enclosures, and the apparent boundaries of these texts reveal the aim of clarifying (or even controlling) the Sinophone element. These choices re-

flect a precise and conscious aim to transform the comic book into a space for negotiation of identities and cultures that the reader is welcomed to observe or even study, but rarely invited to enter. The marginal space reconciles and synthesizes the two souls of the graphic novel: its being a post-loyalist product that carries an emotive weight, and at the same time a documentary work, a socio-cultural testimony that stands alone as historiographical material for the readers to study. Conversely, Yang's authorial voice can't be heard through enclosures, but pervades the space through her handwriting and drawing style, which also enhances the readers' emotional response. She chooses to exclude them linguistically, by reserving the diegetical (Third)space to Sinophone readers.

The culturally charged elements inserted, sinograms included, are displayed and employed in different ways. Rocchi/Demonte's work includes didactic and educational 'cultural elements': sinograms are translated, and culturally charged objects are contextualized with short explanatory tags and notes. Yang's references to realia draw mainly on a shared East-Asian imaginary – typical of a post-eighties generation socio-linguistically defined as *balinghou* (八零后) – that does not need further explanations. This signals a resistance against assimilation and domestication: her (generational) memory and the insertion of her actual experience in a text is exactly what the Sinophone means, an unsolved discussion with 'Chineseness.'

China as rebuilt in both selected graphic novels (only in a few panels, in *Primavere*, and as the only setting of the story, in *Easy Breezy*) is obviously not the actual China (Firstspace), but is not a merely ideal China (Secondspace) either. By the same token Italy, as represented in *Primavere*, is not 'just' Italy. Besides and notably, more than Italy and China, *Primavere* tends to represent very specific localities, Qingtian and Milan, since the book emphasizes Milanese regional elements (housing styles and dialect), thus signaling that the narrated hybridity is not only in between two countries, but also in between two specific regions.

The analyzed Thirdspaces are places where Italy and China visually and linguistically meet, combine, discuss and produce meaning. It is possible to see China and (regional) Italy dialoguing through the pages of *Primavere*, due to the parallel use of Chinese and Italian sentences in dialogues and tags, written with a digitized font. One cannot experience any trace of Italian Firstspace in *Easy Breezy*, and the way the author deals with the typeset Italian language and the handwritten sinograms on different laminations does not communicate an intercultural aim. The complexity of Yang's relationship with China and Chineseness as an author situated in Italy has to be read considering her intra- and extra-diegetical spatial dislocation. Yang's 'China' is dismantled and re-arranged through the lens of memories and finally staged for the Italian readership, thus it becomes a composite Thirdspace. This staging leads to the 'collective' aspect of

the Thirdspace – which is, I recall, a “locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency” (Soja 2000, 11). Clearly, *Primavere* has a socio-cultural (if not a straight political) aim: it is framed as a reality-based work despite the weight of symbolism. Rocchi/Demonte choose to rebuild the hybrid space of the diasporic subject while making a step towards an inter-generational resolution of identitarian conflicts. The Thirdspace of this comic book is a locus of knowledge exchange and communication, within the Sino-Italian community and between this community and the others. In Yang’s work, the collective is subordinated to the subjective intention of finding her own path as a transcultural author (Dagnino 2013). Being the most prolific and successful Chinese comic artist working in Italy, her graphic novels factually represent a place where other Sinophone post-loyalist subjectivities may feel represented and not exhibited. In *Easy Breezy*, the contradictions of a Sinophone post-loyalist identity and their possible solutions can be experienced *in action*, as issues well integrated in an entertaining fictional narrative and not as problems artificially stressed.

References: Comics

- Rocchi, Ciaj and Demonte, Matteo (wri/art). 2015. *Primavere e Autunni*. Padova: Beccogiallo.
 Yang, Yi (wri/art). 2021. *Easy Breezy*. Milano: Bao Publishing.

References: Other Sources

- Ahrens, Jörn. 2019. “Joe Sacco and the Quest for Documentation in Comics.” *ImageText* 11.1: *Graphic Realities*. <https://imagetextjournal.com/joe-sacco-and-the-quest-for-documentation-in-comics/> Accessed 15 January 2023)
- Bao, Hongwei. 2022. “The New Generation: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Diaspora.” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 9.1&2: 3–17.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Buden, Boris, Stefan Nowotny, Sherry Simon, Ashok Bery, and Michael Cronin. 2009. “Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses.” *Translation Studies* 2.2: 196–219.
- Ceccagno, Antonella, Renzo Rastrelli, and Alessandro Salvati. 2008. *Ombre cinesi? Dinamiche migratorie della diaspora cinese in Italia* [Chinese Shadows? Migration Patterns of the Chinese Diaspora in Italy]. Rome: Carocci.
- Chen, Lingchei Letty. 2015. “When does ‘Diaspora’ end and ‘Sinophone’ begin?” *Postcolonial Studies* 18.1: 52–66.
- Chang, Angela. 2012. “20th Century Chinese Migration to Italy: The Chinese Diaspora Presence within European International Migration.” *History Compass* 10.2: 179–190.
- Codeluppi, Martina. 2020. “‘The Limits of My Language Mean the Limits of My World’: Translated Migrations in Xiaolu Guo’s Novels.” *Diaspore 12 L’altro sono io | El otro soy yo*, 193–206.

- Dagnino, Arianna. 2013. "Global Mobility, Transcultural Literature, and Multiple Modes of Modernity." *Transcultural Studies* 2: 130–160.
- Dittmer, Jason, ed. 2014. *Comic Book Geographies*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- El Refaie, Elisabeth. 2010. "Visual Modality versus Authenticity: The Example of Autobiographical Comics." *Visual Studies* 25.2: 162–174.
- Eisner, Will. 1990. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac: Poorhouse Press.
- Field, Syd. 1995. *The Screenwriter's Workbook*. New York: Dell Publishing Company.
- Fisher Davies, Paul. 2018. "Goffman's Frame Analysis, Modality and Comics." *Studies in Comics* 9.2: 279–295.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2007. *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2013. *Comics and Narration*. Trans. Ann Miller. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Halliday, Michael A. K. 1977. "Text as Semantic Choice in Social Context." In *Grammars and Descriptions*, edited by Teun A. van Dijk and János S. Petőfi, 176–226. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Halliday, Michael A. K., and C.M.I.M. Mathiessen. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Hodder Arnold.
- Horrocks, Dylan. 2004. "The Perfect Planet: Comics, Games and World-Building." In *Writing at the Edge of the Universe: Essays from the "Creative Writing in New Zealand"*, edited by Mark Williams. Canterbury: Canterbury University Press, <http://www.hicksville.co.nz/PerfectPlanet.htm>. Accessed 10 January 2023.
- Hooks, Bell. 1989. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36: 15–23.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2nd ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Liu, Yue and Wang, Simeng (eds.). 2020. *Chinese Immigrants in Europe: Image, Identity and Social Participation*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- MacLeod, Catriona. 2014. "From Wandering Women to Fixed Females: Relations of Gendered Movement through Postcolonial Spaces in 'Letters D'Outremer' and 'Le Bar du Vieux Français'." In *Comic Book Geographies*, edited by Jason Dittmer, 75–90. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Martinec, Radan, and Andrew Salway. 2005. "A System for Image-text Relations in New (and old) Media." *Visual Communication* 4: 337–371.
- McCloud, Scott. 1994. *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Moernaut, Renée, Jelle Mast, and Luc Pauwels. 2020. "Visual and Multimodal Framing Analysis." In *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, edited by Luc Pauwels and Dawn Mannay, 484–499. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Natsume, Fusanosuke. 2010. "Pictotext and Panels: Commonalities and Differences in Manga, Comics and BD," translated by Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto. In *Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale* (series Global Manga Studies, vol. 1), edited by Jaqueline Berndt, 38–49. Kyoto: International Manga Research Center, Kyoto Seika University. <https://imrc.jp/images/upload/lecture/data/040-054chap3Natsume20101224.pdf>
- Pedone, Valentina. 2014. "La nascita della letteratura sinoitaliana: osservazioni preliminari" [The Birth of Sino-Italian Literature: Preliminary Observation]. In *Atti del XIII Convegno dell'Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi (Milano, 22–24 settembre 2011)*, edited by Clara Bulfoni, Silvia Pozzi, 309–319. Milano: Franco Angeli.

- Pedone, Valentina. 2018. "Il favoloso mondo di Chen Xi. Narrazioni pop nell'epoca della fluidità culturale. Presentazione" [The Fabulous World of Chen Xi. Pop Narratives in the Era of Cultural Fluidity. Presentation]. *LEA – Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente* 7: 3–17.
- Peterle, Giada. 2017. "The Comic Book as a 'Place of Mediation': Encounters between Codes and Perspectives in Etenesh. *L'odissea di una migrante* by Paolo Castaldi." *From the European South* 2: 123–143.
- Romeo, Caterina. 2015. "Remapping Cityscapes: Postcolonial Diasporas and Representations of Urban Space in Contemporary Italian Literature." *Semestrale di Studi e Ricerche di Geografia* 2: 101–113.
- Scibetta, Andrea. 2023. "The Life of Mario Tchou in the Graphic Novel *La Macchina Zero*. A Transnational Sino-Italian Scientist." In *Words and Visions around/about Chinese Transnational Mobilities 流动*, edited by Valentina Pedone and Miriam Castorina, 61–79. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Shi, Flair Donglai. 2021. "Reconsidering Sinophone Studies: The Chinese Cold War, Multiple Sinocentrism, and Theoretical Generalisation." *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* 4: 311–344
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2011. "The Concept of the Sinophone." *PMLA* 126.3: 709–718.
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2013. "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production." In *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, 25–42. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sibley, David. 2001. "The Binary City." *Urban Studies* 38.2: 239–250.
- Sindoni, Maria Grazia. 2011. *Systemic-functional Grammar and Multimodal Studies. An Introduction with Text Analysis*. Pavia: Ibis.
- Soja, Edward. 1996. *Thirdspace*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Soja, Edward. 2000. *Postmetropolis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Storey, John. 2018. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (8th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Tabachnick, Stephen E. 2017. "Introduction." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*, edited by Id., 1–7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thuno, Mette, Simeng Wang, Emilie Tran Sautede, and Yu-chin Tseng (eds.). 2025. *Handbook of Chinese Migration to Europe*. Leiden: Brill.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2005. *Introducing social semiotics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wang, David Der-wei. 2013. "Post-loyalism." In *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, 93–116. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wang, David Der-wei. 2014. "Sailing to the Sinophone. On Modern Chinese." Video recorded lecture, May 20, 2014, by the Centre for research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge. Youtube, 1:10:27 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2F5ZdEyMgA8&ab_channel=CRASSHCambridge (publ. 21 May 2014, acc. 10 January 2023)
- Yang, Yi, and Andrea Bonzi. 2023. "Una fumettista cinese sotto le due torri" [A Chinese Comic Artist under the Two Towers]. *Il resto di Bologna*, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3F2uaRsFYA0IsNAzemSdpq> (publ. 11 January 2023, acc. 15 January 2023)
- Yang, Yi, and Martina Caschera. 2021. "Storie, volti e prospettive del fumetto cinese in Italia. Una chiacchierata con Yi Yang" [Stories, Authors and Perspectives of Chinese Comics in Italy. Chatting with Yi Yang]. Video recorded interview, November 20, 2021, by Milan University Confucius Institute. Facebook, 54:58, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=216151573873354> (publ. 20 November 2021, acc. 10 January 2023).
- Zemanek, Adina. 2020. "National History and Generational Memory: Taiwanese Comic Books as Lieux de Mémoire." *positions: asia critique* 28.2: 389–420.

