

Marco Polo returns to China: Giuliano Montaldo's TV series (1982)

Chiara Lepri

Abstract: In 1982, the Italian television network RAI produced a TV series by Giuliano Montaldo on the travels of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo. Broadcast in forty-six countries, the Emmy Award-winning cinematic project, which involved partners from the United States, Japan, Germany, and France, stood as the first film co-production between Italy and China and represented a relevant step in the consolidation of the Sino-Italian friendship after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1970. This paper aims to research the transnational dynamics enacted by *Marco Polo* during the Sino-Italian co-production and presents the making of the TV series in China from ideation to distribution. The study includes an original interview with the director Montaldo (2022).¹

Keywords: Marco Polo, Giuliano Montaldo, TV series, film co-production, Sino-Italian transnational relations.

1. Introduction

In 1982, the Italian television network Radio Televisione Italiana (RAI) participated in the production of a TV series on the travels of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, which was filmed by the director Giuliano Montaldo (b. 1930) (*Sacco e Vanzetti*, 1971; *L'Agnese va a morire*, 1976; *Gli occhiali d'oro*, 1987) and broadcast in forty-six countries (RAI 2022). The cinematic project, which also involved partners from the United States (Procter & Gamble and the National Broadcasting Company – NBC) and Japan (Tokyo Broadcasting System – TBS) and received funding from France and Germany, stood as the first film co-production between Italy and China (China Film Coproduction Corporation – CFCC, *Zhongguo dianying hezuo zhipian gongsi* 中国电影合作制片公司). The resulting series, titled *Marco Polo*, represents an important step in the consolidation of the Sino-Italian friendship, uniting the two countries after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1970.

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to director Giuliano Montaldo for sharing his memories of the filmmaking of *Marco Polo*. This endeavor would not have been possible without Maria Barbieri and Susan Xu, to whom I dedicate a heartfelt thanks for their precious insights on the series.

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With reference to the RAI series, which has been filmed in several countries, such as Italy, Morocco, and China, the Chinese journal directed by Xinhua News Agency *Liaowang* 瞭望 issued two articles, “*Make Boluo chongfan Zhongguo* 马可·波罗重返中国” (“Marco Polo returns to China,” Yang 1981) and “*Make Boluo chongyou shijie* 马可·波罗重游世界” (“Marco Polo travels again the world,” Ren 1982); these titles suggest the transnational essence of the project bound with the figure of Polo. In fact, with the 1982 TV series the Venetian merchant made his ‘return’ (*chongfan* 重返) to China, the place where he and his story belonged to a certain extent, and from there ‘traveled again the world’ (*chongyou shijie* 重游世界). From this perspective, Montaldo’s series has spun the wheel of Polo’s multi-dimensional journey both in time and space, giving birth to a new product within the tradition of adaptations of Polo’s story. Being the first TV series to cover this topic, Marco Polo’s travels up to the 1980s had only been adapted into literary or audiovisual forms, which are worthy to be mentioned here.

As far as literature is concerned, the travel of the Venetian merchant to the court of Kublai Khan was first transformed in the travelogue collated by Rustichello da Pisa *Il Milione* (circa 1298), whose Franco-Venetian version known as *Devisement dou monde* was translated into many European languages. Hence, it inspired literary adaptations by different authors (Akbari and Iannucci 2008). Italo Calvino himself recognized the debt owed to the travelogue when writing *Invisible Cities* (1972), also recalling Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Kahn*, Kafka’s *An Imperial Message*, Buzzati’s *The Tartar Steppe*, as well as *The Arabian Nights* (Calvino [1972] 2012, VIII). With reference to the audiovisual dimension, prior to 1982, there had been quite a few cinematographic adaptations of Polo’s story, such as *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938) directed by Archie Mayo, and Piero Pierotti’s *Marco Polo* (1962), which was supervised by Hugo Fregonese. The theme was central also in the Afghan-Egyptian-French-Italian-Yugoslavian co-production *La Fabuleuse Aventure de Marco Polo* (1965) by Denys de La Patellière and Noël Howard, and in the Australian animation *Marco Polo Junior* (1972) directed by Eric Porter. The latter was reedited in 2001 as *Marco Polo: Return to Xanadu* (*Make Boluo hui Xiangdou* 马可·波罗回香都) and broadcast on Chinese television at the end of the year. Among the Chinese-language products there is also *Make Boluo* 马可·波罗 (1975), the Hong Kong *wuxia* film directed by Chang Cheh.

In this context, the present paper aims to research the transnational dynamics enacted by the production of RAI’s Emmy Awards-winning *Marco Polo*, with specific reference to the Sino-Italian co-production (as per Di Chiara 2014; Bona 2016, 2018; Fu and Indelicato 2017). By investigating the filmmaking of the series in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), from production (ideation and realization) to distribution, *Marco Polo* is thus presented from a transnational perspective.

As for the theoretical framework, this work elaborates on the concept of ‘transnational cinema’ and the relative debate around it (Lu 1997; Berry 2010; Higbee and Lim 2010), enhancing a ‘critical transnationalism,’ which “interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels—

from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation's image of itself" (Higbee and Lim 2010, 18). The term 'transnational' embodies here the plurality of filmic discourses created through the negotiation and constant mediation of values between two or more cultures, business models, and film production practices.

Along with Chinese-language sources on the 1982 production of *Marco Polo*, namely academic papers and journalistic articles of the time, this chapter is based on archival material from the National Museum of Cinema of Turin and on interviews with Chinese cinema experts and filmmakers that took part in the *Marco Polo* project, like Maria Barbieri and Susan Xu.² Excerpts from an original interview with the director Giuliano Montaldo (2022) are included in the following paragraphs. The semi-structured interview, which was conducted in Rome on June 16, 2022 (duration 1-hour, Italian language), stands as historical and first-hand testimony of *Marco Polo's* transnational filmmaking. It provides precious insights on ideation, filming, and circulation of the 1982 TV series behind the Great Wall.

2. Sino-Italian co-productions and the ideation of *Marco Polo* (1982)

On November 5, 1970, the representatives of the Italian and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) ministries of foreign affairs signed in Paris a joint communiqué for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The agreement took effect on November 6, thus paving the way for the strengthening of bilateral economic relations (Samarani and De Giorgi 2011, 136). To this extent, culture represented a strategic field to enhance Sino-Italian cooperation. However, it was only after the launch of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and opening-up policy at the end of 1978 that the relationship between Italy and China became more intense, particularly after the visits to Rome in 1979 by the Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (1921–2008), and to Beijing in 1980 by the Italian President of the Republic Sandro Pertini (1896–1990) (Samarani and De Giorgi 2020). In this framework, cinema stood as one of the most efficient cultural areas to develop the friendship between Italy and China.

Previously, except for the case of Amerigo Enrico Lauro (1879–1937), who founded in Shanghai his own production company at the beginning of the 20th century (Bernardini 1982; Fu and Indelicato 2017), there have been some documentary-genre limited works by Italian filmmakers who stayed temporarily in China. Specifically, Mario Craveri (1902–1990), an Italian cinematic propaganda 'Istituto L.U.C.E.' camera operator who went to China in 1926 and 1932

² Both Maria Barbieri and Susan Xu, who worked as interpreters for the production teams of *Marco Polo*, have dedicated their careers to Chinese cinema since the late 1970s. Maria Barbieri, together with Maria Ruggieri, is programmer and consultant of the Chinese section at the Far East Film Festival (FEFF) of Udine. Susan Xu (Xu Shujun 徐淑君) is vice-president of China Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC). For details about the interviews see note 10.

to film newsreels on the geopolitical situation (Craveri 1936; Savio 1956), and Carlo Lizzani (1922–2013), director of the first travel reportage by Italian filmmakers during the Maoist era *La muraglia cinese* (*Behind the Great Wall*, 1958) (Bonzi 1959; Lavagnino 2003; Bona 2016, 2018; McDonald Carolan 2022).

After the establishment of Sino-Italian relations in 1970, the first experiment of collaboration in the cinematic field was set. In July 1971, the Italian national radio and television network RAI promoted Michelangelo Antonioni's (1912–2007) visit to China (Di Chiara 2014, 385). The award-winning director of *Deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964, Golden Lion) and *Blow-up* (1966, Palme d'Or) was supposed to film a documentary about post-Mao PRC. The output was a four-hour-long documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (*China*, 1972), which premiered on United States' TVs in 1972. However, the film did not gain positive reviews from critics. As Marco Dalla Gassa (2014, 70) stated, one of the main reasons for the “lukewarm, if not negative, reception” of the documentary was due to the conflict that the film had “with the authorial idea that has become intertwined with Antonioni's name.” The documentary did not win any national or international prizes in Europe or in US, falling short of the expectations bound with Antonioni's filmography.

A similar fate awaited *Chung Kuo* in China. The documentary was heavily criticized for its misrepresentation of the country. As stated in an article issued by the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 1974, 7): “[it] puts together many viciously distorted scenes and shots to attack Chinese leaders, smear socialist New China, slander China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and insult the Chinese people. Any Chinese with a modicum of national pride cannot but be greatly angered on seeing this film.” The article led to a political campaign against Antonioni (Brezzi 2010; Liu 2014), and the documentary was thereafter banned from Chinese screens—but for appearing again as part of the documentary *I Wish I Knew* (*Hai shang chuanqi* 海上传奇, 2011) by Jia Zhangke (b. 1970) in the China Pavillion at 2010 Shanghai's EXPO. Despite the critical reception, *Chung Kuo, Cina* marked an important step for the development of Sino-Italian film co-productions, paving the way for *Marco Polo*'s (1982) transnational project.

The idea of producing a film on Marco Polo's story to enhance Sino-Italian relations, equally for political and cultural reasons (Montaldo 2022), originated from the visit of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Arnaldo Forlani (b. 1925) to Beijing and the province in 1977 (June 12–17) (Ministero degli Affari Esteri 1979, 161–67; Gambetti 1983, 100). As recalled by the producer Vincenzo Labella (Gambetti 1983, 47), it was thanks to the “increasingly warm and enthusiastic interventions” of the Italian Ambassador in China Marco Francisci that the work started to take shape.³

³ According to Giuliano Montaldo (2022), Ambassador Marco Francisci exerted a central role in the promotion of the *Marco Polo* project on several occasions throughout the whole production process. Francisci not only worked on Sino-Italian relations from a diplomatic and political perspective but also enhanced the bilateral cinematic collaboration by providing practical help on production issues. Recalling the preliminary discussions on the

Up to now, forty years since the first broadcast of the series (US premiere May 1982),⁴ the reason why Marco Polo's travels were chosen as the main topic of the Sino-Italian collaboration has become part of the storytelling about the very production of the film. On one side, it seems to be embedded within the formula used to toast during the diplomatic meetings in China in the 1970s: “*Ganbei Marco Polo*” (Cheers to Marco Polo!). To this extent, the director Giuliano Montaldo wrote:

At a dinner at Angelo Guglielmi's, a wonderful friend and legendary TV presenter of Rai Uno, he told us that a delegation of Italian members of the Parliament, visiting China for the first time, had been impressed by the beauty of the country and the warm welcome of the Chinese hosts. Many of them had noticed that the phrase “*Canbè Marco Polo*” was often repeated. They discovered that it was a heartfelt thanks to the great Venetian. At the end of his story, Guglielmi announced that the director of Rai Uno [Mimmo Scarano] would have called me to study how to portray that character (Montaldo 2021, 91).⁵

As stated by the film director, during the late 1970s, Marco Polo was perceived in China as the symbol of Sino-Italian friendship. Surprisingly, even more than in Italy. To this extent, the Venetian merchant represented the perfect character for a new film co-production project, promoting PRC and Italy's political and cultural relations.

On the other side, according to the words of the assistant of RAI Uno's director Umberto Andalini, sixteen flights in three years (1977–1979) between Italy and China were needed to find an agreement about the co-production. The RAI delegates needed to convince the Chinese partners to produce a series about Marco Polo set in China, as they were wondering why a film on Marco Polo, and why in China, indeed (Gambetti 1983, 100–1). The transnational project was realized *also* in China, however, thanks to the close collaboration of the Italian Ambassador Marco Francisci with the vice-director of the Film Bureau of PRC Ministry of Culture Ding Qiao 丁峤 (1924–1995) (Gambetti 1983, 100–1), who promoted the strengthening of bilateral relations through diplomatic dialogue and the cultural liaison of Marco Polo.

filmmaking, Montaldo (2022) stated: “Back then, there was a delicate moment, because the Chinese partners had found an American price list for which they were asking for very high compensation, for example, 30 thousand dollars to shoot on the Great Wall. ‘This time, the film cannot be made anymore!’ we thought. We went to the Italian Ambassador, and he helped us to find a common language. We tried to lower the prices, and finally, we found an agreement. We were the first foreign troupe to shoot inside the Forbidden City and we received a lot of help from our Chinese partners. They gave us everything we needed.”

⁴ For further details about the distribution of *Marco Polo* see paragraph 4.

⁵ Where not else indicated, the following translations from Italian and Chinese into English are by this paper's author.

While Vincenzo Labella, Giuliano Montaldo, and David Butler edited the treatment elaborated by Anthony Burgess⁶ and completed the script of the eight-episodes-long *Marco Polo* (Gambetti, 1983, 48), the preliminary and crucial diplomatic dialogue activated in 1977 led to the formalization of the Sino-Italian cinematic collaboration. After a long process with many discussions on production issues (*The New York Times* 1982), several visits to both famous and remote Chinese sites for the location scouting (Bona 2018, 141–42), and the approval of the script (Di Chiara 2014, 387), the first co-production agreement was signed on December 12, 1979, by RAI and the China Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC, *Zhongguo dianying hezuo zhipian gongsi* 中国电影合作制片公司).⁷ The latter was founded in August 1979 thanks to the intervention of Chinese authorities (Huang 2000, 30) with the specific purpose of enhancing international collaborations in the cinematic field, thus abiding with the opening-up policy⁸ and “marking an important momentum in the development of Chinese film industry” (*woguo dianying chanye fazhan dailai qiangda houjin* 中国电影产业发展带来强大后劲) (Huang 2014, 4).

The co-production agreement was followed at the end of 1979 by a note containing Ding Qiao’s observations on the script, and by another one from Beijing Film Studio (*Beijing dianying zhipianchang* 北京电影制片厂), which was selected for the practical filming of *Marco Polo* in PRC (Gambetti 1983, 102–7). The two notes underlined a few aspects of the scenario that misrepresented historical elements of Polo and the Chinese Empire.

This December 1979 document, the first in a series,⁹ formally started the Sino-Italian project and broadened the extent of the *Marco Polo* TV series as a transnational co-production, wherein the filmmaking choices were negotiated by the production teams through the filters of intercultural dialogue.

3. The transnational filmmaking of *Marco Polo*: production practices and filming in PRC

Marco Polo was created as an Italian-based transnational film project that soon involved partners from the United States, China, Japan, France, and Ger-

⁶ *Marco Polo* was but the first Anthony Burgess’s work on a TV drama screenplay co-produced by RAI. The writer of the novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), of inspiration for Stanley Kubrick’s homonymous film (1971), had already participated in writing the script of the British-Italian TV series *Gesù di Nazareth* (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977) together with the director Franco Zeffirelli and Suso Cecchi d’Amico.

⁷ The agreement was signed by RAI television’s first channel director Mimmo Scarano and the Vice Minister of Culture of PRC Wang Lanxi 王闾西 (Gambetti 1983, 101–2).

⁸ The first film co-produced by CFCC was *Tenpyō no Iraka* 天平之甞 (1980), the cinematic adaptation of the homonymous novel by Inoue Yasushi 井上靖 (1907–1991) directed by Kumai Kei 熊井啓 (1930–2007).

⁹ From December 12, 1979, the Chinese and Italian production teams of *Marco Polo* signed several agreements, dated May 10, 1980, July 7, 1980, and July 21, 1981—to mention some.

many. As far as Sino-Italian co-production is concerned, the TV series activated transnational filmmaking practices, both for the production and practical filming in PRC. The 1979 agreement between RAI and the CFCC, discussed above, marked the establishment of a doubled and mirror-like production structure, which included different professionals from both Italy and China.¹⁰

On the Italian side, RAI was represented in China by Paolo De Andreis and Paolo Pioggia; the former was in charge of the production and administrative procedures, while the latter worked on the set—Lucia Pinelli was assisting the production team from Italy. The production was in the hands of Vincenzo Labela and Franco Cristaldi. Cristaldi's company, Vides International, replaced Sky Cinematografica after the economic problems that occurred in the first months of 1981, when the troupe was filming in Morocco (Di Chiara 2014, 390).¹¹ Alfredo Bini¹² was the executive producer, sent to China by Cristaldi to follow the set and the negotiations with CFCC; as of July 21, 1981, a new co-production agreement was signed (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino n.d.). Mario Mariani was the production supervisor, who substituted Mario Cotone.

On the Chinese side, CFCC managed the bureaucratic work, supervising both the production (accommodations for the Italian troupe included) and the set. A relevant figure in the CFCC delegation was Xu Chunqing 徐春青, an interpreter and officer of the Ministry of Culture who was fluent in Italian. CFCC was also represented by Zhang Liangbin 张良彬, while Mariani's counterpart production supervisor was Cai Rubing 才汝彬 from Beijing Film Studio. The latter was directed by Li Weicun 李惟存 and represented by the vice-director Shi Ping 史平.

¹⁰ Where not else indicated, the following paragraphs are based on the interviews with Maria Barbieri (2022, semi-structured interview, Rome, duration 2 hours, Italian language) and Susan Xu (2022, e-mail interview, English language), who worked for *Marco Polo* as interpreters and production assistants.

¹¹ The production of *Marco Polo* was in the hands of Sky Cinematografica. However, a change occurred when filming in Morocco. During the first months of 1981, while the filmmaking expenses kept rising due to inflation, no extra funds were provided by the production company (Montaldo 2022). Sky Cinematografica went over budget, and the *Marco Polo* project was suspended for two and a half months (Di Chiara 2014, 390). The troupe was stuck in Morocco and the flight tickets to Italy had to be paid with the money collected from the actors and the professionals on the set (Gambetti 1983, 69). Later on, thanks to the intervention of Franco Cristaldi, Vides International took the place of Sky Cinematografica, and production resumed.

¹² Alfredo Bini (1926–2010) had worked also on the sequel of *Marco Polo*, “Il ritorno di Marco Polo. Il viaggio delle meraviglie” [The Return of Marco Polo. The Wonder Voyages], a film and a seven-episode mixed-technique animated TV series about the return of Polo to China, which had never been filmed. The production papers dated 1994 are available in the Alfredo Bini fund at the National Museum of Cinema's historical archive (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino – Archivio Storico n.d.). As far as sequels to *Marco Polo* are concerned, there is another cinematic project which to some extent resembles Bini's subject. In 2006, the concept of a Chinese-French-Italian co-production animated series was presented at the Festival of Annecy; in 2013, however, the project was still in the making (Di Chiara 2014, 392).

The Sino-Italian mirrored production structure worked very efficiently¹³ and granted the filmmaking team the authorization from the Chinese authorities to film inside the Forbidden City (Montaldo 2022)—the first time for a foreign troupe since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. However, the doubled intercultural production impacted several aspects of the practical filming of the series, regarding both the transnational troupe formation and its management.

In an original interview conducted for this paper, director Giuliano Montaldo confirmed the *Marco Polo* TV series was conceived as a ten-hour-long film. Montaldo noted “[...] for me it is a film, not a television series” (2022). With this aspiration, the troupe and filmmaking team were created according to the best practices of cinema. In the nearly all-Italian *équipe*, Montaldo was assisted by his wife Vera Pescarolo, beloved companion to many cinematic adventures, and by Fabrizio Castellani. The Oscar-awarded Pasqualino De Santis (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1968, d. Franco Zeffirelli) was the director of photography, while Luciano Ricceri and Enzo Sabatini were the art director and the costume designer (respectively). The editing had been assigned to Nino Baragli, and John A. Martinelli, while the music was composed by maestro Ennio Morricone.

In China, the troupe was merged with a production team from Beijing Film Studio composed of 86 people, whose roles were defined by Annex 3 to the “Additional protocol between RAI and CFCC,” August 22, 1981 (Table 1). The Italian troupe members were appointed supervisors of the different departments (photography, sound, lights, etc.) and paired with their counterparts from Beijing Film Studio, while the staff was composed of workers from Beijing (Barbieri, 2022). Table 2 shows the names of the Chinese troupe members credited in the *Marco Polo* TV series, as per the version in two parts available on the streaming platform Tencent Video (2022a, 2022b).

Table 1 – “Additional protocol between RAI and CFCC”¹⁴

Department	Number of members
Administrative	2
Directing	4
Production	8
Sound	1
Make-up	3
Hair Stylists	3
Special Effects	2
Armorer-Acrobat	2
Track and dolly	5

¹³ See note 3.

¹⁴ August 22, 1981, Annex 3 (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino n.d.).

Electricians	5
Drivers	16
Set designers	7
Costumes	8
Doctor	1
Choreographer or Musician	1
Interpreters	16
Various Assistants	2
Total	86

Table 2 – Chinese troupe members credited in *Marco Polo*¹⁵

Department	Chinese troupe	
	Name	Chinese characters
Directing		
Film directors	Du Min	杜民
	Yang Chengchun	杨成纯
First assistant directors	Li Hongsheng	李洪生
	Wang Biao	王彪
	Luo Hangmin	骆航民
	Ren Shen	任申
Screenplay and dubbing		
Translators and Editors	Ai Min	艾敏
	Ying Ruocheng	英若诚
	Yi Xin	一新
	Xu Chunqing	徐春青
	Shanghai dianying yizhichang	上海电影译制厂
Production		
Production supervisor	Cai Rubin	才汝彬
Production	Yang Keping	杨克炳
	Zhang Liangbin	张良彬
	Wang Yuchang	王玉昌
	Song Bingzhen	宋炳振

¹⁵ Tencent Video (2022a, 2022b).

	Zhang Yuming	张玉明
Make-up artist		
Make-up artists	Sun Yuemei	孙月梅
	Wu Yan	吴燕
	Liu Qiuchun	刘秋春
Set design		
Assistant set decorators	Yang Yuhe	杨予和
	Song Hongrong	宋洪荣
Costumes		
Assistant costume designers	Gong Zhanjing	弓占经
	Sun Huanxiang	孙焕香
	Wang Keyi	王可意
Editing		
Editing	Fu Zhengyi	傅正义
Sound		
Sound technicians	Lan Fan	兰帆
	He Zukang	何祖康
Lights		
Lights	Xu Heqing	徐和庆
Props		
Property master	Ma Qiang	马强
Assistants	Xu Xiaoqing	徐晓青
	Zhang Xianchun	张先春
	Ma Shouyi	马守义
Fireworks	Wu Zhensheng	武振声
	Yang Jingguo	杨敬国
Construction		
Manufacturers	Wang Zesheng	王泽生
	Wang Chunbu	王春补
	Cui Xiurong	崔秀荣
	Zhang Ruihe	张瑞和
Choreography and music		
Choreography	Jia Zuoguang	贾作光
Choreography and music	Mo'erjifu	莫尔吉夫

Marco Polo was filmed in English; thus, the actors were chosen to abide by this standard. Kenneth Marshall, Anne Bancroft, Leonard Nimoy, Denholm Elliott, and Burt Lancaster, to name some of the film stars that acted in the TV series, were part of the agreement with the US partners, while the Chinese actors were chosen on-site. In this context, a relevant figure was the actor and translator of Manchu origins Ying Ruocheng 英若诚 (1929–2003). In fact, before being appointed vice-minister of Culture of PRC (1986–1990), Ying was “a perfect Kublai Khan” (Montaldo 2022) in the *Marco Polo*’s series, bringing his experience of theatrical translations of Shakespeare’s and Miller’s plays from English into Chinese onset,¹⁶ and helping with the casting of Chinese actors in Beijing and Shanghai (Gambetti 1983, 136). His contribution, together with that of Chinese and Italian students trying their hands at translations in this vast cinematic production, was crucial for the troupe management to overcome the difficulties of a transnational working environment that could resemble the Tower of Babel.

On set, there were speakers of different languages, mainly Italian, English, Chinese (standard language and dialects), and Mongolian. In addition to the background actors, provided by some sections of the PRC army, many of them were chosen from groups of Mongolian-language-speaking shepherds, who happened to be close to the set when filming on the Mongolian plateau. As a consequence, despite the combination of several languages with multiple communication strategies (acting skills, facial expressions, and hand gestures included), a few misunderstandings due to cultural differences took place, too. Among these Montaldo recalled:

[...] the worse part [of the filmmaking] was the enlistment of the Mongols, the locals. We had no choice. There was a huge plateau, where you couldn’t see anything. [...] It was immense, just immense. We built our camp behind a little hill, otherwise, we would have slept on the ground or inside the yurts. We began to look for some Mongols. My girlfriend [Vera Pescarolo], who was my collaborator, went riding along with the Mongol women looking for where they lived, where they were... Looking for them even far away. Finally, after a few days of searching, we arrived at 300 background actors, as many as we needed to do the battles. Then a tremendous thing happened.

There was a big tent where there was the tailoring team. A Mongolian went in, the first one. The women started to undress him, alas! Beastly screams! He wanted to leave. A complete mess! Anyway, some men started working on the tailoring and the situation was calmed again. That Mongol had never seen a

¹⁶ Ying Ruocheng was suggested to Vincenzo Labella to play the role of Kublai Khan by Arthur Miller. After seeing Ying acting at People’s Art Theater in *Measure for Measure* and meeting him backstage, Labella stated, “His mind is so rich with ideas that it became a pleasure to work with him. It was my best act of casting and my most difficult” (*The New York Times* 1982). Thanks to Ying’s brilliant performance in *Marco Polo*, he was then selected by Bernardo Bertolucci for *The Last Emperor* (1987), and *Little Buddha* (1993) (Ying and Conceison 2009, 169).

mirror before. After he had seen himself in the mirror, dressed up and bearded as the Mongols probably were, and as somehow, they still are, with the sword, and everything... *Ah!* [Montaldo mimics the actor, surprised and satisfied] He came out and showed the dress to the group. *Ooh!* Everyone wanted to get in then. After a day of hard work, they were all ready. However, they jumped on their horses and left abruptly. They wanted to show the dress at home. They were gone for three days! I cried like a calf: “The film is finished!” Then they returned. After three days. One, two, three... they all came back.

This is to tell you about some of the adventures we had, but the one of three days without the Mongols... believe me, the film was over! Gone were the Mongols, gone were the clothes: everything! Make-up, clothes, everything! It was tough! (Montaldo 2022).

The result of the formation and management of a transnational troupe, which also included herds of animals such as horses, camels, cows, and sheep, and sometimes was even doubled into second units, was a huge group that traveled through China to film *Marco Polo*—from the mountains of Inner Mongolia to Beijing (Forbidden City, Summer Palace, Ming Tombs, Great Wall), Hebei (Chengde Temples), and Guangxi (Guilin), to mention some of the set locations. With reference to the huge scope of production, Alfredo Bini (2018, 102) wrote: “At the time, no one, not even the Chinese, was allowed to travel freely through the country; we crossed it with sixty-two trucks, thirty caravans, three field kitchens, six generator sets, workshop trucks, cranes, and tractors.”

Except for the location scouting, which took place in the second half of 1979 (Gambetti 1980, 13–37), the filming of *Marco Polo* in China lasted almost eight months, from July 13, 1981, to February 18, 1982 (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino n.d.). It was one of the biggest transnational film productions in which PRC ever participated.

4. Marco Polo on screens and its reception in China

After the conclusion of the shooting, the editing, and the post-production work, completed between Italy and the United States, *Marco Polo* was ready for the broadcast. The eight episodes and ten-hour-long TV series premiered in the USA, with a four-day TV marathon by NBC (May 16–19, 1982) (Shales 1982). The epic was later broadcast in more than forty countries, winning the Emmy Awards for best miniseries and best costumes in September 1982. The Italian airing on RAI TV was from December 5, 1982, to January 23, 1983. However, the Chinese distribution of *Marco Polo* followed a different, slower path. While the filmmaking of the series was accompanied by several articles in the *People's Daily* and film journals, and by the commercialization of posters and photo-novels (*lianhuanhua* 连环画) inspired by the movie, three years had passed before the series was screened in PRC.

Dubbed in Chinese by the Shanghai dianying yizhichang 上海电影译制厂, department of Shanghai Film Studio (*Shanghai dianying zhipianchang* 上海电影制片厂), the series was edited into four episodes (tot. 318 minutes):

1. “*Gaobie Weinisi* 告别威尼斯” (Farewell to Venice);
2. “*Zouxiang dongfang* 走向东方” (Towards the East);
3. “*Dadu dao Yangzhou* 大都到扬州” (From the Capital to Yangzhou);
4. “*Zuihou de lücheng* 最后的旅程” (The Last Journey).

As Montaldo noted, some scenes regarding religious issues (e.g., the sequences in the first and second episodes about the papacy and the Blood of Christ) were removed from the final version (2022).

Marco Polo was then screened for the first time in Beijing at the end of January 1985 in a shortened two-episode version. The event was organized by the PRC Ministry of Culture and was attended by an Italian delegation composed of Ambassador Raffaele Marras, Cultural Attaché Sandra Marina Carletti, Emanuele Milano (director), Umberto Andalini from RAI Uno, and the film director Giuliano Montaldo (Andalini 1985, 36).

Even though *Marco Polo* was created for television, little information is available on the actual commercial airing and projection of the series on Chinese TVs or in movie theatres in the 1980s. As reported by oral history (Xu 2022), *Marco Polo* was screened as a cultural exchange program in schools, universities, and public institutions—e.g., in the auditorium of Beijing Foreign Studies University in May 1985. As far as contemporary China is concerned, the TV series is now available in two parts (four episodes total) dubbed in Chinese language on the streaming platform Tencent Video (2022a, 2022b).

Despite the limited data on its availability and reception in China, *Marco Polo* was and still is regarded in PRC as a project which helped to “strengthen China’s relationship with the West” (*jiaqiang Zhongguo tong xifang de guanxi* 加强中国同西方的关系) (Ren 1982, 45) and “a milestone event for Chinese film and television” (*Zhongguo yingshi de lichengbei shijian* 中国影视的里程碑事件) (Zhou 2019, 86). Together with *Tenpyō no Iraka* 天平之薨 (1980, d. Kumai Kei) and *Mikan no taikyoku* 未完の対局 (1982, d. Satō Junya and Duan Jishun) (Huang 2014, 4), *Marco Polo* remains one of the first yet most relevant transnational cinematic co-productions of post-Reform and opening-up policy China. Moreover, it stands as “the greatest testimony of the friendship between Chinese and Italian filmmakers” (*Zhong Yi liang guo yingren youyi de zui hao jianzheng* 中意两国影人友谊的最好见证) (Zhou 2019, 86), which enhanced China-Italy cinematic projects, of which Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1987) was the next successful example.¹⁷ *Marco Polo*’s experience paved the way for more Sino-Italian film projects in the first decade of the 21st century (Di Chiara 2014; Fu and Indelicato 2017) and led

¹⁷ Originally, *The Last Emperor* was meant to be filmed by Giuliano Montaldo, who refused the offer due to the hard work connected with the production of *Marco Polo*. The filmmaking was then assigned to Bernardo Bertolucci, who “made a beautiful, stupendous film” as per Montaldo (2022). However, Bertolucci’s movie shared with *Marco Polo* many elements of the production in the PRC, including some members of the teams and the shooting material, which was left on site in 1982 (Barbieri 2022).

to the signing on December 4, 2004 of the “Agreement on Film Co-production between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People’s Republic of China.”

5. Conclusion

Giuliano Montaldo’s *Marco Polo* (1982) was a huge film production in terms of investments and international resonance, marking the first successful cinematic project to strengthen the friendship between Italy and China after the formal recognition of the PRC in 1970. Moreover, as far as the Sino-Italian co-production and the filming in China are concerned, the series also stood as a fruitful project which was characterized by the enhancement of transnational practices through the different phases of filmmaking, from production (ideation and realization) to distribution.

Firstly, as far as the preliminary coordination work is concerned, the *Marco Polo* project was shaped as a Sino-Italian co-production thanks to the close cooperation between the diplomatic and cultural public authorities of Italy and China. This diplomatic dialogue was crucial for organizing part of the filming in PRC, and for the collaboration between RAI and CFCC, which was finalized in 1979 with the signing of a bilateral agreement (the first in a series). Such positive and historic diplomatic collaboration led to great results for Sino-Italian cultural relations, giving birth to one of the first yet most relevant transnational cinematic co-productions of post-Reform and opening-up policy China. This led to a great result for Italian film history and international cultural relations with PRC, as the *Marco Polo* team was the first foreign troupe to be allowed by Chinese authorities to film inside the Forbidden City since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 (Montaldo 2022).

Secondly, the filmmaking stage of the series provides a rich archive of transnational dynamics. Within the general co-production, a doubled Sino-Italian organizational structure was created that mirrored Italian and Chinese production teams, which had to negotiate choices about the overall filmmaking. In addition, when in China, the troupe which had worked for the shooting in Morocco was merged with professionals by Beijing Film Studio, and with Chinese and Mongolian actors selected on-site, leading to the formation and management of a transnational filming troupe. This combined multi-cultural and multi-lingual working environment required the definition of strategies for intercultural communication (e.g., interpreters, negotiations of working plans, etc.), both for the production teams and on set.

Thirdly, the distribution stage of *Marco Polo* in China was also defined by transnational practices. After the eight-episode and ten-hour-long English-language original version had been completed for worldwide screening, Montaldo’s TV series was dubbed in Chinese and edited into four episodes by Shanghai Film Studio. This process eliminated some sequences to abide by cultural differences with the Chinese public and led to a delayed release in China. Despite the intention of television broadcast (US world premiere May 1982 on NBC),

Marco Polo was screened in an event for Chinese and Italian authorities in January 1985 and then presented as a cultural exchange program in PRC's public institutions, such as schools and universities, in the first half of the same year. The overall value of the movie was thus shifted from commercial to cultural product, being received in PRC as positive example of Sino-Italian filmic collaboration for the national industry, which had just started international co-productions with *Tenpyō no Iraka*, and *Mikan no taikyoku* after the Reform and opening-up policy.

Finally, the transnational filmmaking (ideation and realization) and distribution of *Marco Polo* in the PRC had important effects not only on the national film industry of the countries which participated in the co-production project, but also on Sino-Italian relations, promoting all-around international cooperation. It reinforced *Marco Polo's* trademark for Italy and China's bilateral collaboration, as seen in the Marco Polo educational exchange program and the Sino-Italian production of *Marco Polo* opera (2018),¹⁸ by China Arts and Entertainment Group and Genoa's Carlo Felice Theatre.

In addition, with specific reference to the cinema, *Marco Polo* paved the way for the shooting in PRC of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) and for the signing of the first co-production agreement between Italy and China in December 2004 (ratified in 2012). The latter version included the production of two comedies (Fu and Indelicato 2017), among which *Caffè* (*Coffee*, 2016. Chinese title, *Kafei fengbao* 咖啡风暴) by Cristiano Bortone was a positive model. The latest Sino-Italian co-production project, which also relates to *Marco Polo's* transnational film legacy, has been produced by Bortone, namely, the romantic comedy *The Italian Recipe* (*Yujian ni zhi hou* 遇见你之后) (2022) directed by the Chinese pop star Hou Zouxin 侯祖辛.¹⁹

To conclude, the co-production of 1982's *Marco Polo* was a milestone in the development of Sino-Italian international relations since the last decades of the 20th century, showing how cinematic cooperation can implement multifaceted collaboration projects within the framework of transnationalism, thus promoting intercultural dialogue. As Giuliano Montaldo noted when filming in China in 1982 and reported in the Chinese journal *Zhongguo minzu* 中国民族:

Already as a boy, Marco Polo, looking out over the harbor of his city, Venice, dreamed of meeting different peoples, civilizations, and cultures. We made this film to tell that today—as then—knowing and getting to know each other is a heritage for friendship and peace (Xiao 1982, 35).

¹⁸ The opera, sung in Chinese, is composed by Enjott Schneider and written by Wei Jin 韦锦, while the *mise en scène* is by the Danish director Kasper Holten (*Xinhua* 2019).

¹⁹ The film was released in China on June 3, 2022, while the European premiere was on April 22 at Udine's Far East Film Festival (FEFF).

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