

The life of Mario Tchou in the graphic novel *La Macchina Zero*. A transnational Sino-Italian scientist

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Abstract: The current contribution aims at describing some key aspects in Rocchi and Demonte's graphic novel *La Macchina Zero*, published in 2021. This is Rocchi and Demonte's third work narrating stories of Chinese migration to Italy, after *Primavera e Autunno* (2015) and *Chinamen* (2017). Differently from the first two graphic novels, *La Macchina Zero* gives back to collective memory a new glimpse on the history of Chinese in Italy, focusing on the role of Mario Tchou, a brilliant Sino-Italian electronic scientist, and his contribution both to the economic growth of the Olivetti enterprise and to the creation of one of the first new generation computers, ELEA 9003. The first part will highlight the main events narrated in the graphic novel. After that, some specific considerations about the structure and style, semiotic aspects and communicative functions of *La Macchina Zero* will also be provided, also in comparison with the previous two works. The third paragraph will specifically focus on Mario Tchou, his life and his crucial contribution, as a transnational scientist, to the ascent of Olivetti worldwide.

Keywords: Graphic novel, Mario Tchou, Sino-Italian scientist, technological innovation.

1. Introduction. *La Macchina Zero*: an original glimpse on the history of Chinese people in Italy

Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte are authors of graphic novels and video-makers. Since the very beginning of their careers, they have chosen to pay particular attention to one specific topic in their works, the history of Chinese people in Italy. Their first relevant graphic novel in this domain is the 2015 *Primavera e Autunno*, published by Becco Giallo. It narrates the personal and familiar events of Wu Lishan, Matteo's grandfather, from 1931, the year of his arrival in Milan, until the birth of his grandson. Two years later, with the same publisher they released *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano*, a graphic novel that aimed at reconstructing the history of Chinese migration to Italy, with specific regard to Milan, through the narration of heterogeneous single and familiar stories of different characters.

Various scholars, mainly in the Italian academia, have emphasized the importance of these two works in order to gain insights into more multifaceted and detailed aspects of Chinese migration to Italy (Scibetta 2019, 2020), particularly as regards the accurate reconstruction of the founding process of a century-long Chinese "community" like that of Milan (Giuliani 2019). Other scholars

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Andrea Scibetta, *The life of Mario Tchou in the graphic novel La Macchina Zero. A transnational Sino-Italian scientist*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0068-4.07, in Valentina Pedone, Miriam Castorina (edited by), *Words and visions around/about Chinese transnational mobilities 流动*, pp. 61-79, 2023, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0068-4, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0068-4

compared the contents of both works with the world-renowned graphic novel *American-born Chinese* (Yang 2006) in terms of (re-)definition of pathways of diasporic identity (Caschera 2020). As regards the genre of *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, both were conceived in contiguity to Sino-Italian literature (cf. Pedone 2014) in a third space (Kramsch and Uryu 2012) where the boundaries between literature of migration and literature on migration become fuzzy.

Rocchi and Demonte's latest relevant work in the history of Chinese in Italy and Sino-Italians is titled *La Macchina Zero* and it was published in 2021 by Solferino. In the same period, as for the previous two works, the authors produced a web book-trailer made public through YouTube.¹ Unlike *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, this novel focuses on the life of Mario Tchou, a Sino-Italian scientist who decisively contributed both to the economic ascent of the Olivetti enterprise² at an international level and to the invention and the commercialization of the first prototypes of modern electronic calculators. As will be extensively discussed below, the main points of originality and innovation of this novel concern the focus on a subject, Mario Tchou, who cannot be understood with the common stereotypical idea of Chinese/person of Chinese descent in Italy, usually associated with a series of negative common representations and distorted hetero-perceptions. First, differently from the characters represented in the other novels, he belongs to a wealthy *milieu*, since he is the son of a Chinese diplomat based in Rome (Tchou Yin). Moreover, he lives a life of mobility between different international social settings since his youth, across Italy and the United States. His life mainly spent in two "Western" countries, albeit with a transcultural background based also on a Chinese symbolic heritage, makes the narration of his story different from those of the main characters portrayed in the other two works. However, like Wu Lishan in *Primavera e Autunni* and the various protagonists of *Chinamen*, the example of his life helps overcome the "orientalizing" stereotype according to which Chinese are "closed to the outside world and self-referential" (Dervin and Machart 2017), as well as the Oriental view of minoritized people coming from other socio-cultural models (cf. Said 1979, and Shi-xu 2014 in the frame of the concept of "othering" in postcolonial studies, with a specific focus on the Chinese context).

2. Main contents of the graphic novel *La Macchina Zero*

This paragraph contains some basic information of the main events narrated in the *La Macchina Zero*. Although the authors based their writing on research carried out by collecting interviews and various authentic materials, readers have to be aware that some specific parts of the graphic novel do not rely on archival

¹ The book trailer can be watched at the following link: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dVHc9AGXHY>>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

² Founded in 1908 in Ivrea (northern Italy), Olivetti has been (and still is) a worldwide famous enterprise specialized first in the production of typewriters and in the past few decades in the production of computers and electronic accessories.

or primary sources, so the work is a balanced mixture between historical and fictional reconstruction (this latter being a minor aspect, understood mainly in terms of re-elaboration of direct speech in the balloons, given the historical accuracy of the authors' research at the basis of their work).

The story starts with the arrival in 1918 in Rome of Tchou Yin (Zhu Ying 朱英), Mario Tchou's father, as one of the secretaries delegated to trade affairs within the Embassy of the Republic of China. Instead, Evelyn Wang, his promised wife, reached him in Italy through the Lloyd ferry via Trieste, three years later.

Mario was born some years later, on the 26th of June 1924. At that time, the Chinese *Guomindang* 国民党 and the Italian Fascist Party were having positive international relations. Afterwards, however, Italian society was subject to serious limitations to freedom and rights due to the gradual affirmation of the fascist dictatorship. When the first groups of Chinese peddlers reached Northern Italy through France, local artisans showed their discontent, blaming the Chinese for unfair competition. This caused a sharp reaction of the Italian government, which declared Chinese merchants as "undesired guests" through specific laws (Brigadoi Cologna 2020).

At the end of the Twenties, Mario and his sisters lived their first experience in China, where they met their maternal grandmother, who welcomed her grandchildren with enthusiasm, praising the choice of their parents to go to live abroad, and reminding them at the same time of the importance of defining themselves as "Chinese" and not "Italian". As reported in the graphic novel, in fact:

For her, those children were the future she had always dreamt of. Growing up abroad, they could well represent China in the West. Other grandchildren were born in America and in Australia. Grandmother Wang saw a favorable future for her lineage. "Grandma, are we Chinese or Italian?" "Chinese, Chinese. You were born in Italy, but you are still Chinese, China is your homeland, you don't have to doubt it, your strength comes from your clan" (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 53).³

They went back to Rome with their mother in 1932. In the meantime, Tchou Yin was nominated Consul for Chinese people in Italy, gaining more importance in his diplomatic role. In 1935, the year during which Galeazzo Ciano (1903–1944), general Consul of Shanghai, went back to Italy from China, together with the pressing Japanese threat to China, things changed very quickly in terms of diplomatic relations between Italy and the Republic of China. Intolerance and racism grew rapidly in Italy during the second half of the Thirties, reaching the point of the institutionalization of racial laws on the 5th of August 1938. From that moment, Chinese became enemies of Italy and the bilateral relationships

³ Original version: Per lei, quei bimbi erano il futuro che aveva sognato. Crescendo all'estero avrebbero poi reso la Cina grande in occidente. Altri nipoti erano nati in America e in Australia. Nonna Wang vedeva un futuro prospero per il suo lignaggio. "Ma noi, nonna, siamo cinesi o italiani?" "Cinesi, cinesi. Siete nati in Italia, ma restate cinesi, è la Cina la vostra patria, non abbiate mai dubbi su questo, la vostra forza viene dal clan."

between Italy and China were totally interrupted by the involvement of Italy in World War II on the side of Germany and Japan.

Mario and his sisters kept attending the well-known “Liceo Tasso” in Rome in those years, whereas most Chinese people residing in Italy were imprisoned in concentration camps in the center (Abruzzo) or in the South (Calabria) of the country. At the end of the war, the Chinese embassy was finally re-established in its original seat in Rome. Tchou Yin did his best to provide Chinese victims of fascist dictatorship and of war with some necessary compensations to start a new life. However, most surviving Chinese decided to travel back to China.

Right after the end of the war, Mario enrolled at the University in Rome, studying industrial engineering. In 1946 he left for the United States, after being awarded a scholarship by the Catholic University of America in Washington. After spending some time with his Chinese relatives and friends, he decided to move to New York, where he accepted a job as a teacher at Manhattan College. At the same time, he enrolled at the Polytechnic Institute of New York to attend a Master of Science.

Mario had to face various hardships in those years due to the lack of money. Therefore, he also started to work as an electrician at night at the Brooklyn harbor. As reported in the graphic novel:

Life started to be hard. Mario used to sleep and eat less, he rationed his earnings to pay the rent and could not afford to heat up his house (...). In the coldest and darkest moments, he used to go out for long walks through the city. Punctually, one of his mothers' common saying used to come to his mind: *Yī nián zhōng zhīyǒu liǎng tiān nǐ néng bù gōngzuò, yī ge jiào zuótiān lìng yī ge jiào míngtiān* “一年中只有两天你能不工作，一个叫昨天另一个叫明天” (“There are only two days during the year, when it is possible to do nothing: one is yesterday, the other one is tomorrow”) (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 69).⁴

After a while, he fell in love with Mariangiola Siracusa, an Italian student of Political Science attending Columbia University thanks to a scholarship, and they decided to start living together in Greenwich. In 1949, the same year in which Mario ended his studies, they got married. In the summer of 1949, they went back to Italy for two weeks, so Mario had the opportunity to introduce Mariangiola to his family. During their trip back to the States, Mario got sick with pneumonia. He had to be treated by a private doctor, because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, institutionalized in 1882, according to which his Chinese passport did not allow him to be hospitalized.

⁴ Original: La vita aveva incominciato a farsi dura. Mario dormiva e mangiava poco, razionava la paga per l'affitto e non poteva permettersi di riscaldare la sua abitazione [...]. Nei momenti più freddi e bui, usciva di casa e faceva lunghe camminate per la città. Puntualmente gli tornava in mente uno dei modi di dire della madre: *Yī nián zhōng zhīyǒu liǎng tiān nǐ néng bù gōngzuò, yī ge jiào zuótiān lìng yī ge jiào míngtiān* “一年中只有两天你能不工作，一个叫昨天另一个叫明天” (“Ci sono solo due giorni all'anno in cui si può non fare niente: uno si chiama ieri, l'altro si chiama domani.”).

In 1952, thanks to the intercession of Enrico Fermi (1901–1954), he started to teach in the Marcellus Hartley Research Laboratory at Columbia University. As written in the novel, in fact, “it was a golden age and the new inventions were rapidly broadening Mario’s universe: transistors, electronics, digital, computers... and he was there, right at the source were the new science gushed out” (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 81).⁵

In those years, during a visit to the Olivetti factories in Ivrea (Northern Italy), Enrico Fermi persuaded Adriano Olivetti (1901–1960) that the future of science was in the development of electronics. For this reason, Dino Olivetti (1912–1976) (Adriano’s brother) decided to inaugurate a laboratory for electronic research in New Canaan, Connecticut. In 1952, Mario Tchou introduced himself to Dino Olivetti in person, and it was the beginning of a long-lasting relationship of mutual understanding. Unfortunately, this was also the year in which Mariangiola had to go back to Sicily to assist her mother and definitively left Mario.

During the Fifties, in Italy attention was being paid to the possibility to design and build an electronic calculator. The University of Pisa decided to invest a significant amount of money, in collaboration with the Olivetti enterprise, which was already worldwide famous for its high-quality typewriters, to this purpose. As reported in the novel,

Olivetti in those years was a worldwide known enterprise. It had seats in London, New York, Buenos Aires. It produced typewriters and calculators, which were famous both for their technology and for their design. In 1952 the MoMa in New York dedicated an exhibition to it, celebrating the aesthetic qualities of the brand and the lesson taught by Olivetti to the industrial world of that time with its first example of coordinated image, a factor that would become central for the communication of all the enterprises. (...). But Adriano Olivetti knew that such a technology had its limits and that the future was in electronics. Its vision was strategic: the matter was not just to switch from mechanics to electronics, but also to switch from isolated machines to integrated systems of elaboration with centers connected with peripheral units (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 88).⁶

Adriano had various contacts with his brother Dino in the US, to define the concrete aspects of his ambitious projects. After some consultations with several

⁵ Original: Era un’epoca d’oro e le nuove invenzioni stavano rapidamente allargando l’universo di Mario: transistor, elettronica, digitale, computer... e lui si trovava lì, proprio alla fonte da cui sgorgava la nuova scienza.

⁶ Original: La Olivetti di quegli anni era un’azienda nota a livello mondiale. Aveva sedi a Londra, a New York, a Buenos Aires. Produceva macchine da scrivere e da calcolo famose tanto per la loro tecnologia quanto per il loro design. Nel 1952 il MoMa di New York gli aveva dedicato una mostra che celebrava le qualità estetiche del marchio e la lezione che l’Olivetti impartiva al mondo industriale dell’epoca con il primo esempio di immagine coordinata, un fattore che sarebbe divenuto centrale per la comunicazione di tutte le aziende [...]. Ma Adriano Olivetti sapeva che questa tecnologia aveva i suoi limiti e che il futuro era nell’elettronica. La sua visione era strategica: non si trattava solo di passare dalla meccanica all’elettronica, ma di passare da macchine isolate a sistemi integrati di elaborazione con centri collegati a unità periferiche.

experts, in 1954 they decided to let Mario go back to Italy to open and manage a laboratory for electronic research, with the financial support of Olivetti enterprise.

After defining the details of his work with Adriano Olivetti, Mario started leading a team of young scientists in Pisa, supported by the University. That period was not only the beginning of a new incredible working experience, but it was also the moment when Mario met Elisa Montessori, a young artist: he fell in love with her and they got married in Rome, at the Chinese Embassy, in 1955.

Mario worked hard with his team of experts in an autonomous laboratory set up for them in Barbaricina, in the suburbs of Pisa. The team was completed at the beginning of 1956 and was composed by physicists, experts in electronic engineering and mathematicians; in any case, regardless of their educational background, they were going to work on something new, constructing a product which required interdisciplinary approaches as well as completely new skills. After three years, the small laboratory of Barbaricina had grown and had new requirements. For these reasons, Adriano Olivetti decided to invest new funds to move the team of experts to a new, bigger and better equipped seat, in the suburbs of Milan.

It was the 12th of April 1959 when the output of years of research and hard work was introduced to the public: it was the ELEA 9003, the first Italian electronic calculator and modern prototype of the personal computer. This instrument was able to put in practice three programs simultaneously, gathering, processing and storing data with an incredible speed. It was so innovative that it could challenge the products of the world-famous American brand IBM.

ELEA was advertised by the Italian national television RAI through specific broadcasting events, as well as by daily newspapers like *Paese Sera*, which conducted an interview with Mario Tchou. After a short time, the calculator was purchased by subjects like the Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank, the car industry FIAT, the hydrocarbon national industry ENI and the national institute for social welfare INPS. The Olivetti enterprise became so famous that Adriano Olivetti asked architect Le Corbusier to design a new worker-friendly factory for him, and decided to buy the American enterprise Underwood, with its 10,000 workers, for 76 million dollars.

A new project was launched at the beginning of 1960 aiming at constructing a new product, ELEA 6001, which would be specifically addressed to universities and research institutes, as IBM was doing in the same period with its "1620" calculator. Unfortunately, Adriano Olivetti died unexpectedly at the end of February 1960: Italy lost one of the most illuminated and talented entrepreneurs of its history, and plans had to slow down because of the need for internal reorganization of the enterprise.

Nevertheless, Mario was able to successfully conclude the work on ELEA 6001 in the same year. He introduced it to the public in April 1961 at the fair in Milan, and he was just ready to start developing a new ambitious project.

At the end of 1961, pretending to spend a holiday with his family in Hong Kong, Mario managed to organize a working trip to China with Roberto Olivetti (1928–1985), Adriano's first son. They planned to cross the border and meet

a delegation of Chinese politicians in Shenzhen, to talk about the possibility of exporting their products to China. It might have been a great opportunity to open a new market in the “place of origin” of Mario; nevertheless, scared by the idea that Mario could be detained in the People’s Republic, Elisa persuaded him and Roberto to abandon their plan. Therefore, they decided to turn down the offer and fly back to Italy.

Despite the failure of the trip to China, in 1961 Olivetti was still one of the most modern and up-to-date enterprises in the world.

On the morning of the 9th of November 1961 Mario had to travel to Ivrea, where the main seat of the Olivetti enterprise was located, and he would have been back home the same day. However, in Santhià, halfway between Milan and Turin, Mario and his driver were involved in a serious car accident and Mario never made it back home to his wife and his daughters. Nobody ever knew whether the accident was just an unlucky event or was the result of a plot. Undoubtedly, Italy lost one of its most talented scientists.

3. General structure and main characteristics of the graphic novel

The graphic novel starts with a flash forward portraying the last moments of Mario’s life in a few pages, ending up with the fatal car accident that caused his death. After that, the work proceeds chronologically from the transfer of Tchou Yin, Mario’s father, to Rome to hold a job within the Chinese embassy, and then narrating the entire life of Mario from his birth.

One graphic detail, which immediately becomes visible to the reader, is the division of different time spans with the use of one chromatic choice in the background. The very first pages, after the initial flash forward, are in light orange and yellow, and focus on the very first information involving the transfer of Tchou Yin to Italy. In the following part, the recurring color is green, as this section is dedicated to the narration of the first period of Tchou Yin in Rome until the birth of his second child, namely the protagonist of the story. Afterwards, a new longer part in light orange and yellow portrays the most important happenings in Mario’s childhood, adolescence and youth. It starts with the first trip to China to visit his grandmother, together with his mother Evelyn and his two sisters, it goes on reporting the hardships lived by Chinese people during the Fascist dictatorship and World War II, and it ends up with Mario’s life and study experience in the USA. We can doubtlessly say that this second orange section is the most “transnational” one, since it deals with a very dynamic phase of Mario’s life, mainly across Italy and the United States. During this time he was able to complete his scientific profile, becoming a very influential scientist, despite the hard times due to the lack of money and to his need to earn a living.

A final, quite long section is represented by a blue background and mainly deals with Mario’s commitment to the Italian project, led by Adriano Olivetti, to create an electronic calculator, his work with a team of experts first in the laboratory in Barbaricina (Pisa) and then in the suburbs of Milan, the creation

of ELEA 9003 and ELEA 6001, his trip to Hong Kong, and the last moments of his young life.

The three images in Figure 1 provide a clear idea of the chromatic difference of the sections present in the graphic novel.

After the end of the graphic novel there is a series of interesting contributions, which include considerations of Mario's colleagues and collaborators as well as remarks about his role as a transnational Sino-Italian scientist.

The first contribution is written by Ciaj Rocchi, one of the two authors, and is entitled "Quell'attimo prima di morire..." ("That instant before dying"): it contains some relevant considerations about the symbolic influence of Mario Tchou. Emphasizing the uniqueness of the personal history of this "unconventional" Sino-Italian, in fact, Rocchi writes that

[...] the history of Mario Tchou is symbolic. He was the very first Sino-Italian, coming from the upper middle class, witness and participant in a time span which was opening to the future without any hesitancy. The encounter with Olivetti was surely fundamental, but the family context, the diplomatic environment, Chinese culture, classical studies, the scientific specialization in the United States are all elements which contribute to define a personality with unique traits, able to learn and bring together different aspects and to experiment (Rocchi and Demonte 2021, 163).⁷

The second one is a contribution of sinologist Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, who also gave his scientific support to the production of *Primavera e autunni* and *Chinamen*. Here, he focuses on the importance of the diplomatic role of Mario's father, Tchou Yin, both in his strenuous opposition to the imprisonment of his compatriots in fascist concentration camps and in the operations of acknowledgment, certification, money compensation and repatriation of Chinese people in Italy at the end of World War II, when most of them were still displaced in refugee camps.

The last two texts belong to Francesco Wu, honorary chairman and founding partner of the Union of entrepreneurs Italy-China, and to Roberto Natalini, Director of the Italian Institute for the Applications of Calculation.

As concerns the visual style adopted in the graphic novel, we can identify very similar visual-iconic patterns with the previous two works. As already reported in Scibetta (2019; 2020), and as Ciaj Rocchi explained in her final contribution in *Primavera e Autunni*, the authors write "we kept distance from comics as we usually understand them, to switch to a hybrid type which uses the graphic sign, but in most cases framing it within a video format. Wide. Horizontal" (Rocchi

⁷ Original: La storia di Mario Tchou è simbolica. È stato il primo italo-cinese in assoluto, di estrazione alto-borghese, testimone e partecipe di un'epoca che si apriva al futuro senza remore. L'incontro con Olivetti è stato sì fondamentale, ma il contesto familiare, l'ambiente diplomatico, la cultura cinese, gli studi classici, la specializzazione in campo scientifico negli States, sono tutti elementi che concorrono alla definizione di una personalità dai tratti unici, capace di metabolizzare e poi miscelare diversi ambiti, di sperimentare.



Fig. 1 – Examples of chromatic choices reflecting the internal articulation of the graphic novel.

2015, 136).⁸ Also in *La Macchina Zero*, the impression a reader can have while consulting the tables is therefore to be looking at video sequences.

As regards the presentation of the contents, particular attention is dedicated to the scientific aspects involved in the works and in the experimentations of Mario. In the section with blue background the reader can learn about specific details related to the construction of a prototype of an electronic calculator. We shall argue that this focus on technical and scientific issues was intentional, to make the readers aware of the complexity of Mario's work and of the primary importance of this aspect in his life.

Moreover, we notice various recurring and important references to historical events throughout the graphic novel, both in relation to Italian history and in relation to the history of international relations from the 1930s to the 1960s. As far as the first aspect is concerned, different tables are focused on historical events, including the persecutions carried out by fascists, the publication of racial laws in 1938, the imprisonment of Chinese people in Italian concentration camps, and, after World War II, aspects involved in the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Italy and economic growth. Other tables concern Italian key figures in the scientific domain (for instance, Enrico Fermi), besides Adriano Olivetti, who can be considered one of the main characters of the graphic novel. As regards international relations, some tables underline the effects of Italy's alliance with Germany and Japan, which implied a total suspension of international relationships with the Republic of China, or the tension between the two blocks during the fifties and the sixties, as well as the role of the People's Republic of China as a third world power besides the US and the Soviet Union. Figure 2 shows two tables reflecting these two aspects: the first one represents the massacre of "Fosse Ardeatine", committed by Nazi soldiers in Rome after 33 of them were killed by Italian partisans in 1944; the second one portrays some key leaders during the Cold War, namely John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Nikita Chruščëv and Mao Zedong.

As extensively done by Scibetta in his two previous essays about "Primavera e autunno" and "Chinamen" (2019, 2020), also *La Macchina Zero* deserves some considerations about its language contents. Once again, in this case there is a visible focus on Chinese language, both from a translation and from a pedagogical perspective, as if the writers were committed to teaching some specific Chinese characters to a wide public. While such a focus becomes evident in the first sections, when describing Mario's work to construct ELEA 9003 and ELEA 6001, the presence of Chinese characters appears instead to be marginal. Despite that, very interesting references to onomatopoeias transcribed in Chinese characters appear to be present throughout the work. As confirmed by Matteo Demonte, the presence of Chinese onomatopoeias is the result of personal

⁸ Original: Ci siamo allontanati dal fumetto così come siamo soliti intenderlo, per passare a un ibrido che usa sì il segno grafico, ma la maggior parte delle volte lo inquadra in un formato video. Largo. Orizzontale.



Fig. 2 – Two tables representing historical events, both at a national and at an international level, contained in the graphic novel.

linguistic research he conducted before writing the novel. A concrete example is provided in Figure 3, where the characters reproducing the sound *peng peng* 砰砰 of clapping hands (used also for representing the sound of something falling heavily on the ground) are added in the foreground.



Fig. 3 – Table representing the Chinese onomatopoeia for clapping hands.

As far as the multilingual dimension of the graphic novel is concerned, further words and/or expressions in other varieties appear on different tables. Besides Italian and Chinese, in fact, it is possible for example to read some short dialogues in Roman dialect. This is especially present at the beginning, when the arrival of Tchou Yin to Rome is illustrated. Furthermore, several pages obviously report short contents in English, especially when dealing with Mario's life experience in the US, and even words in Spanish and Russian appear on some tables (see for instance the one portraying the international tension at the beginning of the 60's in Figure 2).

4. *Primavera e autunni*, *Chinamen* and *La Macchina Zero*, a Sino-Italian trilogy: similarities and points of divergence

As Rocchi and Demonte chose to entitle a public lecture held at the University for Foreigners of Siena in May 2022, their three main works, namely *Primavera e autunni*, *Chinamen* and *La Macchina Zero* can be defined a “Sino-Italian trilogy”. However, if the first two works present similarities in terms of contents and historical contexts, the latest graphic novel has some points of thematic and symbolic divergence with the other two.

As already mentioned in Scibetta (2020), “*Primavera e Autunni*” was published in 2015 with the publisher Becco Giallo. Its title draws its inspiration from

the *Spring and Autumn Annals*,⁹ traditionally attributed to Confucius, and the protagonist of the story is Wu Lishan (originally 吴翼山), Matteo's grandfather, who decided to migrate from Qingtian (Zhejiang) to Europe, arriving in Milan in 1931. The work represents the most important personal, familiar and social events in Wu Lishan's life in Italy, until the birth of Matteo in 1973. A web book-trailer was published to describe the contents of the story with some animations.

The second graphic novel, *Chinamen. Un secolo di cinesi a Milano* (i.e. *Chinamen. A Century of Chinese People in Milan*) was published in 2017, still with Becco Giallo. Although the keyword of the title, namely *Chinamen*, has traditionally approached negative connotations of Chinese migrants, especially in the North American context (Zhang 2019), and thus might appear as semantically ambiguous, the authors' intention is simply to underline that until the fifties Chinese migration to Italy consisted exclusively of men (Rocchi 2017, 142). As in the previous work, also *Chinamen* was published together with an animated book trailer containing the same title and a similar graphic layout compared to the other one. Both the graphic novel and the book trailer were presented with in a special exhibition on Chinese migration to Italy at the Museum of Cultures (Museo Delle Culture – MUDEC) in Milan (Scibetta 2020). *Chinamen* narrates some of the most important events in the history of Chinese migration to Italy, especially to Milan, from the beginning of the 20th century until the Sixties. Both works were translated into Chinese and published and commercialized in China, albeit with some changes in a few tables regarding the history of the People's Republic of China.

By comparing the first two novels with *La Macchina Zero*, the points of major similarity can be detected in the visual part, especially in the technique of structuring the tables, portraying characters and representing dialogues and narrations, as well as in the chromatic choices. As concerns these last aspects, in fact, different tables with one-color backgrounds are present also in *Primavera e Autunni* and in *Chinamen*. Moreover, there are similarities in the use of terms or short expressions in Italian local dialects and in the use of Chinese characters both as a linguistic support to the scripts and to convey culture-specific concepts and ideas. However, this bi-multilingual dimension (mainly composed by Italian and Chinese) is more visible and well distributed in the first two works, whereas in *La Macchina Zero* there are only some hints to Chinese words and brief expressions, especially when the authors deal with scientific and disciplinary contents. Nevertheless, as already mentioned in the previous paragraph, the innovative point in the latest work is because particular attention has been paid to onomatopoeias transcribed in Chinese characters, especially regarding mechanical sounds. References about disciplinary discourses (mainly related to electronics and information technology), in fact, are much more present in *La*

⁹ The book known with the title *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) is one of the five Chinese Confucian classics. It is a historical account of the events that happened in the state of Lu from 722 to 481 BC.

Macchina Zero, whereas they appear more rarely in the other two graphic novels, where they might regard other issues (e.g. the production of textile goods or the management of restaurants).

Besides the aspects highlighted above, the main differences between *La Macchina Zero* and the other two graphic novels concern their contents. Although the time lapses taken into consideration in the three works partly coincide, the main contents of *La Macchina Zero* describe a different history, both in relation with the main character(s) and with macro-historical events. *Primavera e Autunno* and *Chinamen*, in fact, mainly narrate stories of Chinese migrants moving to Italy, as well as stories of people with Chinese descent growing up in Italy, concentrating on multiple aspects involved in their migratory experiences and in their affirmation in Italian society. Examples of entrepreneurial success, like that of Wu Lishan in *Primavera e Autunno* or Mario Tschang in *Chinamen*, of resilience in a new and sometimes hostile environment are portrayed, or stories of integration through marriage of Chinese men with Italian women are mainly described, together with a kaleidoscopic focus on the history of Chinese in Italy, on Italian mainstream history and with a particular glimpse on Chinese-Italian relations. *La Macchina Zero*, however, mainly focuses on one transnational story of personal affirmation in the international scientific field. In addition, the socio-economic conditions of Mario's family (an upper middle-class family, already living in good conditions in China) differ from the ones of the protagonists of the two other graphic novels, since characters like Wu Lishan and others were migrants in search for better life quality.

In any case, regardless of the differences of the lives of the characters described in the three works, one common point doubtlessly links them together. In fact, thanks to the accurate historical reconstruction of the narrated events, as a result of detailed research carried out by the authors, they all contribute to bring back to collective memory events and personalities partly or totally ignored by mainstream discourse and historiography.

4.1 Mario Tchou: a transnational Sino-Italian scientist

As mentioned above, the profile of Mario Tchou is the one which makes the narration of the story contained in *La Macchina Zero* original and unique in comparison with the previous two. Mario, in fact, is an "unconventional" Sino-Italian, because he does not respect the stigmatized (and often distorted) image of Chinese migrants moving to Europe for economic purposes, nor does he reflect the common representation of a stereotyped person with Chinese descent experiencing hardships in his social integration in the Italian environment. Secondly, Mario Tchou might also be considered as a migrant, but his migration experience, conversely to the ones of the main characters of the other two graphic novels, is directed from Italy to the United States. Moreover, it is a migration of the son of an upper middle-class family, who intends to conduct higher-level studies to specialize in the field of electronic engineering. Nevertheless, during his stay in the US, Mario felt several hardships due to the lack of money, bad life

conditions related to his commitment to study and work at the same time, and to the social stigma of people with Chinese descent in the American environment (e.g., the effects of the “Chinese Exclusion Act” on his personal health).

Furthermore, the experiences of Mario in the homeland of his family are limited to a restricted time span during his childhood, together with his mother and his sisters. There could have been a further opportunity for him to bring China back to the foreground of his life during his trip to Hong Kong, which should have kept on within the borders of the People’s Republic: however, in agreement with the worried opinion of his wife, this trip ended in Hong Kong.

In any case, although Mario can be defined as a Sino-Italian, since he was born in Italy and spent the most relevant part of his life there, having also continuous and intense social relations with Italians, he was certainly influenced by his Chinese origins. In fact, especially during his stay in the United States, he systematically put into practice the principles of *chiku nailao* 吃苦耐劳, which means working with resilience without giving up because of various hardships. Moreover, his educational background, which brought together classical studies conducted during high school and scientific studies at the university, resembles a typical Chinese traditional view of the powerful and effective synthesis of complementary opposites.

Lastly, one more issue deserves to be pointed out, which helps us transcend overly static and simplistic views on “Chineseness vs. Italianness” (Dervin and Machart, 2017), especially in relation to Mario’s transnational life. Mario’s contribution to the ascent of Olivetti at an international level, through the experience of the teamwork in Barbaricina, teaches us that science transcends interpersonal differences, including those related to geographical and cultural origins. Mario and his colleagues, in fact, worked as a cohesive team, neglecting and deleting all the differences and highlighting the talent of each member.

4.2 Wu Lishan, Mario Tschang and Mario Tchou: three protagonists, three different transnational experiences

It is possible to identify three main characters in the “Sino-Italian trilogy” composed by *Primavera e Autunni*, *Chinamen* and *La Macchina Zero*, who can represent three different faces of Chinese presence in Italy, namely Wu Lishan, Mario Tschang and Mario Tchou. As concerns the first graphic novel, the main character is doubtlessly Wu Lishan, Matteo’s grandfather, who emigrated to Europe from the city of Qingtian and arrived in Milan in 1931. Married to Giulia Bazzini, a girl from the countryside around Cremona, he had four children who grew up in Italy across two cultural universes. He started from being a peddler, selling simple artifacts on the streets, and fully reached his economic affirmation in the Italian society after the end of World War II, when he was able to found the WLS, an enterprise specialized in leather goods, which even managed to produce leather bags for the Italian fencing national team during the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Within this trilogy of protagonists, he can be understood as a self-made man in the Italian context, counting on his own

resources and being able to establish a network of *guanxi* 关系¹⁰ with his compatriots in Milan.

As regards *Chinamen*, among the different characters portrayed in the graphic novel, Mario Tschang deserves particular attention. Born in Milan in 1933 to a Chinese father and an Italian mother, he can be considered the first Sino-Italian child ever born in Italy. The turning point of his life was in 1963, when he decided to carry out a business trip to Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, with the aim of searching for innovative products that would have contributed to his economic success in Italy. Fascinated by the Japanese stationery products of the famous brand Mitsubishi, thanks to the intercession of the Taipei branch, during his short stay in Taiwan Mario managed to import in Italy marker-pens, ballpoint pens and pencils with innovative designs. His economic activity was so successful that in 1967 he was able to found one of the most distinguished enterprises producing stationery in Italy (still today), i.e., the brand Osama (cf. Scibetta 2020, 105). Thanks to his strong will to restore productive connections with East Asia, Mario Tschang can be considered to be a transnational self-made man. Differently from Wu Lishan, he made his economic fortune not only in Italy, but also, and most of all, establishing transnational economic networks.

Most of the stories of Chinese or Sino-Italians narrated in *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* regard people who moved to Europe from Chinese areas historically involved in international migration (mainly Zhejiang province), to look for better life conditions. The story of Mario Tchou, however, is different from various points of view. First, the *milieu* of Mario's family, both on the father's and mother's side, was already wealthy before Tchou Yin's departure to Italy. This allowed Mario to live in well-off conditions since his childhood. In addition, the story of Mario is also in part a story of emigration, but his destination was represented by the United States. Like Wu Lishan and Mario Tschang, also Mario Tchou managed to achieve full affirmation, not only from an economic but also from a scientific point of view, through his hard work and personal resilience in a foreign country. Furthermore, as in the story of Mario Tschang, also for Mario Tchou the transnational trait is predominant; nevertheless, they tended to move in two opposite directions to make their fortune. In fact, Tschang found the way to his transnational success by moving to the East, whereas Tchou achieved his full scientific expertise in the West, attending courses of specialization in some of the most relevant American institutions.

Besides all the differences between these three characters, it is important to remember that they all built up a kaleidoscopic and multifaceted view on the history of Chinese in Italy and Sino-Italians, which unfortunately has been neglected for too long by collective memory and mainstream discourses.

¹⁰ The term known in Chinese mainstream culture as *guanxi* 关系 (which can be generally translated "relations") reflects the importance to establish positive connections with relatives, friends and compatriots in order to possibly rely on a network of relationships in time of hardship and need.

5. Concluding remarks

On the occasion of the 150-year anniversary of the founding of united Italy, referring to Italian emigration worldwide, Massimo Vedovelli wrote:

1861-2011: 150 anni di storia unitaria italiana, ma nelle molte manifestazioni celebrative che si sono tenute quest'anno sono state poche quelle che hanno avuto come tema l'emigrazione italiana nel mondo. Dimenticanza? Forse, ma più probabilmente, a nostro avviso, rimozione. Si è trattato di una rimozione vissuta in Italia a livello istituzionale e sociale, segnale di un processo che ha coinvolto le zone più profonde della nostra personalità collettiva, là dove si colloca l'essenza generatrice della nostra identità (Vedovelli 2011, 33).¹¹

As Vedovelli emphasizes, in fact, discourses on Italian emigration worldwide have never belonged to mainstream ones. At the same time, we might affirm that most of the discourses on immigration that managed to achieve a certain degree of media relevance reproduce stereotypical representations and prejudices on the “otherness” (cf. Gallissot et al. 2001; Mahmoud and Al Atrash, 2021). Moreover, some pages of the history of immigration to Italy have been too often hidden or even repressed. As specifically regards Chinese migrants and Sino-Italians, Scibetta underlined the symbolic importance of *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen* in giving “back to common knowledge a precise and accurate historical reconstruction of Chinese migration to Italy”, making the readers “aware that such a collective history of migration is the result of many different single histories which, for a long time, had been either repressed or neglected” (2020, 96).

In the case of *La Macchina Zero*, another step has been taken in two directions. First, a personal story of success of a Sino-Italian, who risked being forgotten by public discourses, has been given back to the public. In addition, Mario's story reminds us of the various implications and hardships experienced by Italians emigrating abroad. It is a story about an extraordinary personality, living a transnational life, taking advantage of his own cultural background to shape his existence across different symbolic universes.

As the authors say, it is this co-existence of cultural models (and, in particular, his Chinese heritage) that facilitates Mario's dynamicity in moving across different countries and that allows him to achieve a personal and professional affirmation in different environments. Therefore, it shall be argued that Mario's mobility is multifaceted, since it is not only spatial and temporal, but it is also and most of all symbolic and cultural. In fact, it is an experience of “othering” in a foreign country, where Mario sometimes felt minoritized, whereas it was also the opportunity for him to start his brilliant career. Moreover, it was also

¹¹ EN: “1861-2011: 150 years of history of united Italy, but among the multiplicity of celebrations held this year, just a few were dedicated to Italian emigration worldwide. Forgetfulness? Maybe, but most probably, in our view, it is repression. It is about a repression experienced in Italy at an institutional and social level, sign of a process that involved the deepest areas of our collective personality, where the generative essence of our identity is collocated”.

journey from the West to the West, differently from that of several Sino-Italian characters portrayed in *Primavera e Autunni* and *Chinamen*, who traveled back to China in order to discover their place of origin and to recover part of their hybrid identities.

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