

1930s Shanghai and Beijing Descriptions of Three Italian Writers

Giovanni Comisso, Mario Appeli and Alberto Moravia

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The Shanghai Bund in the 1930s.

In the first decades of the 20th century the general public in Italy knew very little about contemporary China. The great distance between Italy and China, their totally different cultures, the sparse Italian presence in China during the colonial era compared

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to the large British and French colonies, and Italy's propensity toward Classical studies and European humanities somehow did not foster interest in China and Chinese culture. Modern sinology had taken root in Italy only in the second half of the 19th century, and, by the beginning of the 20th century, the study of Chinese culture was still confined to small circles of academics and intellectuals.¹ Yet, Italian travellers, merchants and clergymen had traversed the routes to the East as far back as the Middle Ages.²

The articles that appeared in newspapers in the first decades of the 20th century are the first accounts with direct information on contemporary China, prompting interesting reflections and questions about a totally different cultural reality. In many of those writings we can feel how strongly the extraordinary experience of the journey affected the authors and also their feelings of moral and political responsibility involved in describing China in its different aspects to the Italian readers³.

The memories of Giovanni Comisso⁴ (1895-1969), Mario Appelius⁵ (1892-1946) and Alberto Moravia⁶ (1907-1990) studied herein introduce three different human, cultural and political approaches to China. They also reflect three diverse attitudes toward what is 'culturally different' and the 'different other'. Giovanni Comisso perceives China as a bizarre and curious country, Mario Appelius is mostly moved by curiosity in his strolling around the streets of the Chinese cities; while Moravia feels a sense of moral and political responsibility and tries to provide a description of China that goes beyond all the clichés and stereotypes, making the common reader contemplate a very different and distant reality.

Giovanni Comisso, Mario Appelius and Alberto Moravia, as special correspondents of some leading Italian newspapers, described China and some Chinese cities to the Italians in the 1930s. It is interesting to note how the information provided by these three very different writers in the space of only ten years revealed the rapidly changing mental picture of China, rejected the commonplaces of the 18th and 19th centuries, and represented the basis of a more modern and scientific approach to the growing interest in the East and, in particular, China.

Comisso, whose decadent sensuality, love of esotericism and wonder, and lack of critical judgement and tools, made him swing ceaselessly between the

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two extremes of exaltation and rejection, appeared to be the last to nurture a passion for *chinoiserie* with all its sham paraphernalia of haunted gardens and exotic brothels.

Though Appelius and Moravia came from totally different political and cultural backgrounds, they attempted to establish a critical approach to China based on their greater sense of curiosity in the case of Appelius and more profound knowledge of the country's history and culture in the case of Moravia. Indeed, these two writers examined the real conditions of life in China, and did not merely provide a description of its superficial, sensational and outward appearances.

At the beginning of the 20th century the first persons to travel to China were the officers of the Italian Royal Navy and the Army⁷ who were sent there on missions during the Boxer rebellion (1900) in a period when the vision of colonisation was rekindled in Italy. Some of these officers had published correspondence and articles on China in Italian newspapers, at times collected in travel diaries.⁸ Nonetheless, even as late as the 1950s, there still were many stereotypes related to Chinese culture, most Italians considered it as foreign, mysterious, incomprehensible and even bizarre. In a famous essay written in 1956, the well-known literary critic, writer and poet Franco Fortini said with regret: '... in that period the fact that learned men studied Chinese poetry and thought was considered ridiculous'.⁹

Therefore, in this scenario of scant information and direct news, the important contribution played by the dissemination of knowledge of the contemporary reality of China and news and articles penned by well-known figures published in the newspapers and journals, is evident to all.

In 1930 Giovanni Comisso acted as Milan's *Corriere della Sera* correspondent in China. Italy was under a fascist dictatorship and during this period information was strictly censored and controlled by the regime's propaganda. Radical changes were taking place in China, too. The country was weakened by the foreign penetration and economic policies launched at the end of the 19th century; it was rent by the civil war between the Nationalist



Beijing street scene in the 1930s.



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and Communist parties, and lived under the impending threat of the Japanese invasion.

Comisso lived in China for two months and travelled far and wide. His writings reveal an enthusiastic, frenzied traveller who was always on the lookout for curious and outlandish things to tell Italian readers, things that would catch their attention and novelties at which they would marvel. By and large his rather stereotyped account of China is very similar to the ones written by other special correspondents (such as Arnaldo Cipolla, Renato Simoni and others)¹⁰ during the same period, yet it is noteworthy as it reveals how both Europe and Italy looked down on China's 'exotic and mysterious' culture. Indeed, the country itself was regarded as a world mired in its past.

Comisso lives his adventures in China in a dream-like manner. He describes his visits to the opium dens and the second-hand shops, his walks along crowded streets in cities teeming with people, the boring and never-ending performances in noisy theatres, and his visits to the leper colonies near Canton and Shanghai's leading western style hotels, in a helter-skelter fashion to convey the strong emotions that, as many people of the time were convinced of, could only be experienced in the East.

Like many of his contemporaries, he was enchanted by the unique, hectic lifestyle of the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai that he defines:

A chaotic city, where architectural lines, races, religions and commercial competition clash and overlap. Shanghai is made up of an international concession, a French concession, the old Chinese city and the higgledy-piggledy native quarters in the outskirts. ... there are areas built in gothic style where all the houses boast front gardens like in London, avenues like the ones in Paris and large American tenements, followed by glimpses of Chinese hovels.... Englishmen, Americans, Italians, Frenchmen, Japanese, Germans, Portuguese and Russians live barricaded up within the small space of the city with their clubs, their banks, and their merchandise ... People work a lot, do a lot of sport, but also concentrate on enjoying themselves. Carnival lasts all year round. If there are no fancy dress balls in the clubs, there are balls in meeting-places every evening. ... On Monday everyone goes back to the workplace, initially sluggishly ... everyone

has his own car, waiting at the doorstep, his own messengers running between the office and Stock Exchange. ... Time flies in China, merchants who arrived here thirty years ago say they have aged without realising it.¹¹

In his articles Comisso mainly focuses on the bizarre and extraordinary aspects of a world far removed from him: the beauty and sophistication of the chinaware, the abundance of food, the characteristic stench of China, the roads teeming with often 'ugly and dirty' members of the human race, the chemists' shops stocked with herbs and strange remedies, the courtesans, the ever-present 'Flower Boats' and the prostitutes' bizarre and poetic names (Orchid's Dream, Radiant Cloud, Blue Butterfly) fill his pages and enthral readers of the era.

He resembles one of the many 'colonial' tourists, indeed China with its ancient civilisation, its art and rituals that he knows nothing, or little, about, do not seem to rouse his interest for particularly original observations. His visit to Peking and the sights of the city do not beguile him very much. His unadorned description of the Imperial Palace says 'A square city, surrounded by walls ... it covers an immense area ... [that] ... it looks like an expanse of gardens punctuated by low, shimmering yellow, blue and green ceramic roofs'.¹²

Also the photos in his articles illustrate classical items of colonial iconography: monuments, pagodas, sampans, Taoist monks, beggars, funerals and the portrait of the last empress attired in traditional costume.

Another Italian writer, Mario Appelius, one of the most eminent figures in journalism during the regime, was in China at roughly the same time. In 1925 he had spent a long period travelling in South East Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Macao) and in China on behalf of a newspaper founded by Mussolini, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, that had published several of his articles. He wrote for several newspapers and magazines (*Il Mattino*, *La Nazione*, *L'Illustrazione Italiana*) and returned to China where he worked as a correspondent for two years between 1933 and 1935. He wrote also many popular travel books and novels.

In his letters he declared that he wanted to describe China in a new way, he wished to go beyond common journalistic clichés in order to be 'a faithful mirror of Chinese reality' and to depict the people

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View of the Bund in the 1930s.

in such a way as to give a more human and precise physiognomy to the 'enigmatic yellow race'.¹³

He was strongly influenced by his political ideas, yet he managed to provide a lot of news on the country's past and present, on Chinese culture and society, and also to describe the cities he stayed in living alongside the locals. Faced with the teeming masses that used to amaze and consternate the travellers of the period when they first arrived in China, Appellius strove to go beyond the customary clichés concerning the impenetrability of the Chinese. He writes:

The Chinese scene is dominated by the human element, represented by immense crowds; this multitude has a uniform exterior appearance that makes it even more difficult to try to analyse it. Its characteristic features are industriousness, frugality and patience, plus dishonesty, corruption, love of games, unpredictability, deceitfulness... but also

great pride, self-respect, vanity and shame from *loss of face* in all social, political and private contexts, but above all deeply-rooted courtesy, refinement and grace, a sort of Chinese, Confucian, civil and social 'virtue',... to such extent that all Chinese men are infinitely more refined than their white counterparts from the same social classes.

When faced with the Chinese writings that had fascinated Europeans, Appellius was bewildered and angered by the fact he could not decipher signs and meaning, as he explains in no uncertain terms:

[in the streets] we come across the customary Chinese characters, incomprehensible and astonishing to us, here there and everywhere. They mesmerise and shock us. They bring to mind chickens that have been crushed in various ways and then nailed onto ebony or golden metal tablets.

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Shanghai shrouded in its opulence and modernity appears to him as a 'boorish city', haphazard and frenzied compared with the refined but crumbling Peking that he likens to a 'decomposing body', a symbol of a world that is no longer, a city that is falling to pieces like its monuments.

He defines Shanghai as the 'Babel of Asia' and writes:

Travellers feel dizzy in Shanghai, Montmartre is nothing compared to Fuzhou road. It is a city where you can find all types of commodities and all the luxuries from Europe, it has magnificent hotels, splendid clubs, deluxe shops, opulent cinema halls, elegant meeting-places.

However, Shanghai does not look like a real and proper city, not even in the proud international Bund that purports to imitate London and over overshadow Chicago. More than a city, Shanghai is a never-ending, chaotic bazaar where the Yankee skyscraper rears its head ... amongst thousands of Chinese hovels ... and the more eyesores the architects build ... the more Shanghai is Shanghai and accentuates its particular beauty resulting from the city's sham nature, its mishmash makeup, its jumbled appearance ...

It is bigger than a city but not quite a metropolis ... once you have become acquainted with Shanghai every other city in the world appears drab and grey. All of them are more beautiful, more stylish, harmonious, magnificent and elegant than it. Yet none of them equal its formidable appeal of a joyful and prodigious chick, dolled up in her party clothes for a never-ending ball lasting from January 1 to December 31 (Shanghai, August 1934).¹⁴

Appelius' writings reveal him as curious, perceptive and intelligent; his articles often reported interesting observations on the Chinese political situation, on the errors of colonisation and on the forced modernisation of the country implemented by the colonial powers, and he even wished to see the beginning of political cooperation between the West and China.

The travel correspondence penned by the internationally renowned Italian author Alberto Moravia differs greatly from Comisso's and Appelius' writings. Moravia is famous not only for his novels, also translated into Chinese, but also for the numerous films based on his books (*The Time of Indifference*, 1929;

The Conformist, 1970; *The Woman of Rome*, 1947, and others).

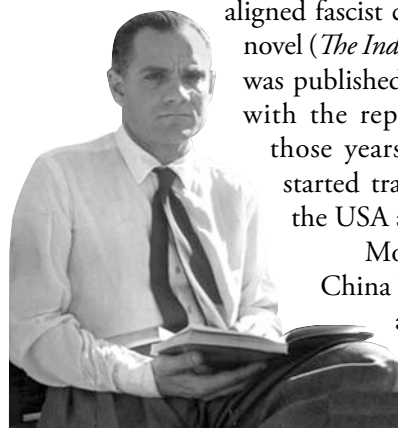
In the 1930s Moravia was a correspondent for several leading newspapers (*La Stampa* of Turin, *La Gazzetta del Popolo* of Turin, *Il Corriere della Sera* published in Milan) and later on he wrote articles for periodicals (*L'Europeo* and *L'Espresso*). He also founded the literary magazine *Nuovi Argomenti* with the writer Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1953. He was a tireless traveller and a gifted, discerning correspondent right up to his death. In 1937 he asked the editor of Turin's *Gazzetta del Popolo* to be sent to China where he spent two months travelling all over the country. Other visits followed: one in 1967 at the height of the Cultural Revolution, then later in 1986, and his articles and correspondence of his visits have come down to us. During his first trip to China he published 27 articles between March and December 1937, and two in the following years.

Not only was he a discerning, curious and informed traveller, he was also extremely cultured and sensitive. He was the first writer of the 1930s who strove to 'see' and describe the country, to understand and grasp contemporary China on the basis of its great history, and to explain the single causes that led to its failings and recent decline.

It is worth mentioning that in the 1930s Moravia distanced himself from the regime that was gathering strength in Italy, and this criticism infused his correspondence with a more independent vision and greater cultural awareness than shown by the other correspondents working in China during the same years. Indeed, the latter were more aligned to the Fascist Party's policies and cultural directives.

He had been strongly attacked by the politically aligned fascist critics after his first novel (*The Indifferent Ones*, 1929) was published and this, coupled with the repressive climate of those years, may be why he started travelling to Europe, the USA and worldwide.

Moravia travelled to China by sea, stopping off at Hong Kong and Macao, Canton, Shanghai, Suzhou,



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Nanking and Pecking, and he even travelled to Mongolia. Once in China, he looked at everything very carefully, pondered over things and provided readers with a series of well-documented information on Chinese history and the real situation of the country. The modern Shanghai with its countless night-life opportunities that drew foreigners like a magnet prompted him to write bitter considerations on, the 'intrusive and rapacious policies of foreign powers', and, on the other hand, on the Chinese regime's inability and failings in dealing with foreigners. He speaks about Shanghai in an article entitled 'Shanghai the American' published in June 1937.¹⁵ He writes that with regard to China it has 'the function of a tumour with respect to the poisoned and debilitated body of an ill person' ... and that 'a large portion of the wealth of the Country has flowed to Shanghai only as a result of the disorders, poor government, civil war'.

The Shanghai that represented most Westerners' idea of the country, the 'Paris of the East', appeared provincial and uncouth to Moravia. According to him, its cosmopolitan nature extolled by many was only

the ephemeral and sad imitation of the opulence and splendour of the luxury western hotels and transatlantic liners. He felt it was really absurd that a country like China with its millennial history and civilisation was represented abroad by a city that only marginally embodied the national spirit.

Hence, he did not feel Shanghai was beautiful, nor were its bars and dancehalls the biggest and the most magnificent in the world. The bright night lights 'with its foreign Concessions governed by foreigners and made up of foreigners' did not appeal to him, because they conjured up the architecture of New York, and because Chinese refinement and taste had been distorted and had lost their identity.

Bleak grey stone skyscrapers with an Assyrian-Babylonian skyline of pinnacles, terraces and roof gardens are built alongside red brick houses like in New York ... the city was not built respecting a regular and clear plan – ... on the Bund ... the large dark granite buildings housing the leading banks and trade and financial companies ... have no artistic distinction ... Shanghai does not want

Festivities in Beijing in the early 1930s.



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daylight that reveals its defects, but the deceiving and ephemerons phantasmagoria of a brightly lit up night ... but every night between sixty and seventy corpses of homeless people who died from the cold and hardship are found.¹⁶

Moravia reports China to his Italian readers in a sombre and abrupt manner, without dwelling on aspects that may have appeared intriguing and unusual to European observers. In his correspondence he punctuates his descriptions of the places he visits with critical comments and observations in an attempt to prompt readers to mull over and understand the Chinese reality – he prefers to do this rather than amuse them. When speaking about Shanghai he focuses on its striking and distinctive contrasts and dissimilarities: the opulence and modernity of the western settlements with bleak grey stone skyscrapers flanked by the poverty and the outdated red brick hovels and shanties in the Chinese quarters; the vast wealth enjoyed by few set against the miserable life of the workers, ‘crushed by the factories’, who have flocked from villages, the children who work twelve hours a day in the unhealthy silk factories, and the fleeting life of the *taxi-girls* who dance for money in the night-clubs.¹⁷

The city of Peking at the end of the 1930s appeared to Moravia as if it were still living in the 18th century, it was ‘still secured to the living conditions of a great civilisation and humanity’.¹⁸ In his opinion this is why the criticisms made by Europeans were incorrect, as they mistook cultural differences for barbarity, and they spoke ‘about China as if it was a Black African state’. According to him, the city’s appeal lay in the ‘feeling of not living in the present, but in one of the most illustrious and civilised pasts in history’; and this is why Europe was moved by the sight of Peking, because it reminds us ‘of how we used to be’.

Peking lives by day, it awakens early and goes to sleep early. During the day it is a beautiful city, at night it shuts down. Shanghai, the American

city, is hideous by day and at night acquires a phony beauty from the lights shining in the dark ... Among all Chinese cities, Peking represents the python among snakes ... its streets are as wide as rivers and stretch to the line of the horizon ... after one has become accustomed to the initial feeling of surprise, one no longer realises one is living immersed in immense and unusual things. Hence, what is colossal, very oppressive elsewhere, blends in and is somewhat exhilarating in this unique city.¹⁹ (June, 1937)

Though the monuments of the city may convey a gloomy and solitary sensation, according to Moravia this is enhanced by the greatness and splendour of a glorious past that ‘is equalled only by cities such as Rome and Paris’. He finds the atmosphere in the foreign settlements forbidding and narrow-minded because it still exudes ‘vanished privileges, inane haughtiness, illicit power’. He declares that ‘all the settlement is a mirror image of post-war Europe, of hypocrisy and humanitarian imperialisms’.²⁰

Many Italian journalists continued to go to China in the years that followed.²¹ With the return of democratic information in Italy in the 1950s, the flow of correspondents and intellectuals on official visits to Mao’s new China intensified. Many of them published their correspondence in newspapers and journals and these letters enable us to continue following Italy’s shift in stance towards this country and its civilisation. The flow continued during the years of the Cultural Revolution and intensified greatly with China’s new policy of opening up that started in the 1980s. **RC**

Author’s note: I presented a paper on this topic at the 5th Sinology Forum, China Exposed Imposed, Proposed, organised by the Portuguese Institute of Sinology (Instituto Português de Sinologia) and held at Lisbon and Oporto in February 2010.

NOTES

1 See F. Masini, ‘Italian Translation of Chinese Literature’, pp. 37-39; R. Lombardi, ‘Analysis of Some of the First Italian Translations of Chinese Poetry and the Dissemination of Chinese Literature in Italy in the 20th century, in C. Buffagni, S. Zanotti, *The Translator*

as Author. Perspectives on Literary Translation (Berlin, Litverlag (April 2011).

2 Apart from the primary sources, there are many fine analysis on this topic, among them: Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent:*

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- China in Western Minds*; Luce Boulnois, *La route de la soie*; Edith Huyghe and François-Bernard Huyghe, *La route de la soie ou les empires du mirage*; Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*.
- 3 In many cases those articles were then collected in volumes, which soon became bestsellers and were reprinted many times.
 - 4 Giovanni Comisso was a well-known novelist and journalist. For thirty years, from 1927 to 1956 he travelled around the world as correspondent for the Italian newspapers *Gazzetta del Popolo*, *Il Messaggero*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La stampa*. Only one of his travel books has been translated into English (*Loves of the Orient*. New York: Bridgehead Books, 1954).
 - 5 Mario Appellius was a novelist and correspondent for Italian newspapers. He travelled in southeast Asia and China in 1925, and later on he spent two years in China (from 1933 to 1935). His memories were then published in volumes: *Asia gialla: Giava, Borneo, Indocina, Annam, Cambodge, Laos, Tonchino, Macao, Cina and La crisi del Buddha: due anni tra i cinesi* Milano: Mondadori, 1935.
 - 6 Alberto Moravia was a very well-known Italian writer, many of his short stories and novels having been translated in English, among them: *Short Stories* (1960); *The Empty Canvas* (1960); *Two Women* (1961); *Mistaken Ambitions* (1955).
 - 7 There is a vast reportage literature on this topic. Among the Army officers who have written memories on China are: Nicola Labanca, *Un italiano nella Cina dei Boxer. Lettere e fotografie, 1900-1901* (Modena: Associazione Giuseppe Panini- Archivi Modenesi, 2000);
 - Vittorio Maltese, *Sensazioni d'Oriente* (Torino, 1905); Mario Valli, *Gli avvenimenti in Cina nel 1900 e l'azione della Regia Marina Italiana* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1905); Eugenio Chiminelli, *Nel paese dei Draghi e delle chimere*; Manfredi Gravina di Ramacca, *La Cina dopo il millenovecento* (Treves, 1907).
 - 8 For a brief summary on reportage literature on China appearing in Italy during the 20th century see Rosa Lombardi, 'Resoconti di viaggio e viaggiatori in Cina nel Novecento', pp. 67-77.
 - 9 Franco Fortini, *Questioni di frontiera*, Einaudi, 1977, pp. 190-236.
 - 10 Arnaldo Cipolla, *Per la Siberia in Cina e in Giappone* (Torino: G. B. Paravia, 1924) and *Nella grande Asia rivoluzionaria* (Torino: G. B. Paravia, 1931); Renato Simoni, *Cina e Giappone* (Milano: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 1942).
 - 11 Giovanni Comisso, *Cina-Giappone*, pp. 48-51.
 - 12 Ibid., p. 98.
 - 13 Mario Appellius, *La crisi di Budda*, p. 13.
 - 14 Ibid., pp 28-29.
 - 15 Alberto Moravia, *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 11 June 1937.
 - 16 Ibid.
 - 17 Alberto Moravia, *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 18 June 1937.
 - 18 Alberto Moravia, *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 25 June and 1 July 1937.
 - 19 Alberto Moravia, *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 25 June 1937
 - 20 Ibidem. The most part of Moravia's reportage writings has been collected in a volume, Alberto Moravia, *Viaggi*, Bompiani, 1994.
 - 21 See R. Lombardi, quoted article.

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