Rescuing “Damsels in Distress”: Chinese Women in Contemporary Italian Cinema

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After the “Year of Italy in China” in 2006, Italian films with Chinese themes witnessed a boom in popularity. This article focuses on three films produced during the period: The Missing Star (2006), Two Tigers (2007), and Shun Li and the Poet (2011). The article analyzes the roles assigned to Chinese women and their western costars, reveals the common patterns with which images of Chinese “damsels in distress” are constructed, and explores the social, cultural, and political factors underpinning such portrayals.

Introduction

After Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary film Chung Kuo (China, 1972) was labelled an “anti-China” film and banned until 2004, China and its people seemed to vanish from the sight of Italian filmmakers for three decades, with the exception of Bernardo Bertolucci’s The Last Emperor, released in 1987. Although that film won nine Oscars at the sixtieth Academy Awards, its success did not motivate Italian filmmakers to produce more films about China or the Chinese people. The situation changed dramatically with the staging of the “Year of Italy in China,” a year-long cultural gala held in many major Chinese cities in 2006. Proposed by former Italian President Carlo Ciampi, the “Year of Italy in China” aimed to open a window through which Chinese people could view Italian art, music, and design. The project brought many Italian experts in cultural fields to China, and re-stimulated Italian filmmakers’ interest in the country and its people.

As a result, the Italian film industry produced China-related films in consecutive years: La stella che non c’è (The Missing Star, Giani Amelio, 2006) and 2 Tigri (Two Tigers, Sandro Cecca, 2007). In The Missing Star, a conscientious technician travels to China to warn the owners of an Italian-made blast furnace about a deadly structural flaw. During his journey, he receives assistance from a young Chinese woman who works as his guide and translator. In contrast, Two Tigers—an erotic femme fatale actioner in
the tradition of *Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990)—tells the tale of a beautiful killer who defies orders to protect a high-class Chinese call girl from being assassinated by an international criminal organization. Finally, *Io Sono Li* (*Shun Li and the Poet*, Andrea Segre, 2011) concerns a problematic romance between Shun Li, a young female immigrant worker from China, and a local fisherman.

Though Chinese female characters play important roles in *The Missing Star*, *Two Tigers*, and *Shun Li and the Poet*, all three films feature “damsels in distress” archetypes and incorporate stereotypical plots of western heroes rescuing their female victims. In this article, I analyze these films’ representations of the Sino-western power relationship, as epitomized by interactions between Chinese “damsels in distress” and their western heroes, and explore the socio-cultural factors that underpin the stereotypical portrayals and their prevalence in recent Italian films.

**White Heroes Rescuing Chinese “Damsels in Distress”**

The protagonists of *The Missing Star*, *Shun Li and the Poet*, and *Two Tigers* face somewhat similar circumstances. Liu Hua, the protagonist of *The Missing Star*, is an unwed mother and college dropout from a remote village in Western China. After losing her job as an Italian-Chinese interpreter, she does odd jobs and struggles to make a living. In *Shun Li and the Poet*, the titular character is also a single mother, suffering a painful separation from her son after moving to Italy. Shun Li always masks herself with a smile, but inevitably feels anxious and powerless when facing exploitation, xenophobia, and cultural alienation. Finally, Lin, the protagonist of the *Two Tigers*, is deeply shamed by her work as a prostitute, and is trapped in a relationship with a swindler being chased by professional killers. All three characters demonstrate minimal will or ability to overcome their personal circumstances, and thus each film stages several encounters between these “damsels in distress” and a male, European hero.

In *The Missing Star*, Vincenzo and Liu Hua first meet in Italy, when he crashes the Chinese delegation’s dinner party to warn foreign buyers that a control unit in the furnace is defective. The power imbalance between them is predetermined by their professional relationship, which is reinforced and justified by Vincenzo’s language proficiency and technical expertise. Impatient with her slow and inaccurate translations, he chastises her, confiscates her dictionary, and communicates directly with the leader of the Chinese delegation. Enduring embarrassment and criticism, she stands up and silently leaves the room. The camera later captures her sobbing alone in the rain outside the building. When Vincenzo later tracks her down in a Shanghai library, Liu Hua is justifiably resistant, pretending to not know him and only speaking Chinese. However, once Vincenzo reveals the
motive of his trip in China, Liu Hua is immediately moved by his genuine concerns.

Vincenzo’s relationship with his Chinese guide deepens as they reach many dead ends in their search for the faulty furnace. At the beginning of their journey, she exhibits a strong desire for control, trying to collect information and make decisions on her own. During their long trip across the country, however, Liu Hua learns more about the humane concerns of Vincenzo, and gradually lets her guard down. When the two are stuck in the Gobi Desert, Liu Hua sits on a mound, sobbing, and candidly discloses to Vincenzo all of her problems. The retrospective confession symbolizes her acceptance of her weakness and her subordinate role. It is also the moment when she completely relinquishes the leading position to Vincenzo, who leaves money in Liu Hua’s bag as payment and sends her home while she is napping on a truck.

The scenario suggests that Vincenzo has no faith in Liu Hua’s capability of making rational decisions, and that he knows better than her what is good for her and her family. Hence, in order for Vincenzo to successfully rescue the ‘damsel,’ he has to make plans for her regardless of her own intentions. When Vincenzo finally completes his quest, he finds Liu Hua sitting demurely at the train station, waiting for him. Here Liu Hua is no longer the stubborn and aggressive figure that she was in the first half of the film. She has become a timid, thoughtful, and soft-spoken woman who appreciates all that Vincenzo has done for her. In the last shot of the film, Liu Hua raises her face and softly asks Vincenzo in Chinese, “Is it very difficult to find the factory?” Without any clue or interpretation, Vincenzo correctly understands her question and answers in Italian: “No, no, it worked out fine. I was lucky.” In this surreal, romanticized scene, even a language barrier cannot prevent Vincenzo from completely understanding his damsel.

In Shun Li and the Poet, the first meeting between Bepi and Shun Li is less dramatic, but still demonstrates the power differential between them. On her first day of work in the tavern, Shun Li fails to understand Bepi’s order due to her poor Italian vocabulary. Bepi patiently goes behind the bar, takes the liquor off the shelf, and teaches her how to make the drink he ordered. Later, when Shun Li comes to collect a debt from customers at the table, Bepi does not show up his fellow fishermen, who pretend that they are not the people whose names Shun Li reads out. Bepi’s tacit cooperation with the local regulars hints at their long-term friendship. Compared with Shun Li, who speaks slow and clumsy Italian, Bepi is not only capable of conversing fluently with Italians, but is also engage in wordplay to entertain his local fellows. In contrast to Shun Li’s alienation and loneliness, Bepi has long been accepted by the local community and is largely assimilated into Italian culture.
The relationship between these two major characters also reinforces the “Chinese damsel” stereotype. At a party, Bepi actively engages Shun Li in a conversation by reintroducing himself as a Yugoslavian immigrant and comparing their common Communist backgrounds. His openness makes her feel comfortable enough to reveal her own loneliness and vulnerability. To ease Shun Li’s homesickness, Bepi invites her to his rented flat so that she can make an international call to her son in China. Knowing that she is from a family of fishermen and loves water, Bepi takes her out to fish on his boat. Moreover, Bepi reinforces their bond through their common passion for poetry. Nicknamed “Poet” due to his penchant for whimsical verses, Bepi writes a love poem full of graceful romantic imagery and tender humane concerns, conveying his poetic affection for Shun Li.

Bepi’s dominant assertiveness is also manifested in his physical contacts with Shun Li. In the progression of their mostly platonic relationship, the two characters only have intimate contact twice, both times initiated by Bepi. When the burgeoning affection between the fisherman and the Chinese barmaid becomes fuel for gossip, both characters face the disapproval of their respective communities. Bepi and Shun Li behave very differently in dealing with the external pressure imposed on their fragile relationship. When Bepi’s fellow fishermen unite with a local bully in publically condemning the interracial relationship, Bepi bravely defends his love. On the other hand, when Shun Li finds herself torn between affection for Bepi and her deep longing to be with her son, she quickly succumbs to pressure and abruptly ends the relationship. The two characters’ different reactions to crisis reflects their distinct personality traits. Bepi is a brave warrior who can face challenges and fight under pressure, while Shun Li is a submissive victim who avoids conflicts by sacrificing herself.

In *Two Tigers*, protagonist Gilda discovers that she can peep into her neighbor Lin’s bedroom, and the camera captures erotic scenes of Lin and her clients. Even though Lin is aware of her gazing neighbor, she continues her affairs as normal, without a hint of embarrassment. Gilda plays the role of audience surrogate, while Lin is objectified as an exotic female body open to the observations and judgments of the viewer. When Lin later comes to Gilda’s apartment looking for company and solace, Gilda holds the submissive Lin in her embrace. The film moves on to highlight Gilda’s power and strength, as she saves Lin from two armed thugs, and later demonstrates her martial arts skills by defeating Lin’s kung fu trainer. Finally, when Lin kills her lover out of anger, Gilda is able to help her escape overseas.
“Damsels” in Sociopolitical Context

Stereotypical portraits of Chinese women in contemporary Italian cinema is a phenomenon of some concern, as films provide not only information and entertainment, but also affect social life by informing people’s perception of normalcy:

Media images provide a diffuse confirmation of one’s world view, promote acceptance of current social arrangements, and reassure people that things are the way they ought to be. In social psychological terms, media images become incorporated into cognitive schema and heuristics, and are called up during processes of identity formation, self-evaluation, attribution, and social comparison. (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000)

Film has the power to define difference, to reinforce boundaries, and to reproduce an ideology that fortifies a certain status quo. Although audience studies reveal that viewers do not automatically mimic what they see in films, the imagery they observe does tend to facilitate specific forms of understanding, interpretation, and experience (Press 1991). Psychological studies also show that the more frequently or recently an idea, concept, or word has been encountered, the more likely one is to use that piece of information in future decision-making tasks (Taylor and Fiske 1978).

As Edward Said observes, no form of representation is created apart from a social and political context (Said 1979). Therefore, a critical analysis of recent Italian cinematic representations of Chinese women requires evolving articulations of cultural and political power. Although the three films under analysis seem to demonstrate a simple and clear dichotomy between dominant western heroes and submissive Chinese women, the cultural, social and political factors underpinning the stereotypical portrayals turn out to be very complex. Seen in the light of gender difference, for example, the films serve to support and maintain hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Chinese women are portrayed as powerless victims passively waiting to be rescued by their male partners, and even Gilda—the western heroine of Two Tigers—is portrayed as a character whose knowledge and skills all come from her wise male mentor. Two Tigers also establishes a racial hierarchy between Gilda and Lin, epitomizing the power relationship between a white, superior West and a yellow, backward East (China). In this vein, although the recent Italian films on Chinese themes apparently narrate private stories, they still manage to metaphorize the public sphere, where the micro-individual is doubled by the macro-nation, and where the personal and the political, the private and the historical, are inextricably linked as a racial myth, or an “ethnic allegory”, as coined by Fredric Jameson (1986). Such discourses of ethnic or racial
representation inevitably involve issues of historical perspective and power relations (Shohat 1991, 246).

These portrayals of Chinese inferiority may be attributable to the Eurocentrism that that extends as far back as Italy's 1901 receipt of its colonial concession from the Qing government. In the five decades from 1901 to 1949, Italian diplomats' and journalists' observations of China and the Chinese generally followed an orientalist discourse in order to justify Italy's colonial presence in China, with journalist Roberto Suster even concluding that Chinese people could not be civilized (Suster 1928).  

Italians, however, perceived themselves as the direct heirs of Roman civilization, who could revive their glorious empire by expanding colonial possessions in China.

Although this Eurocentric, or “Italo-centric,” colonial ideology may serve as the historical root of Italy's depictions of Chinese, subsequent decades saw the reverse of this trend. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the years between 1949 and 1960 were characterized by affection on the part of Italian left-wing intellectuals, who considered Mao's China a “Red Utopia.” Italian travel accounts from the period depict the PRC as a beautiful, vibrant, and progressive country, where diligent citizens are led by incorruptible leaders to construct an advanced socialist civilization. Italian intellectuals also found that the revolution had dramatically changed the status of Chinese women. The marriage law, land reform, and the “equal pay for equal work” policy granted women economic independence in both rural and urban areas. Women's equal participation in the work force was also made possible by the government's mass education program, which was aimed at all levels, from basic literacy to complex technological training. Furthermore, the constitution also guaranteed women's equality in politics. The Party's commitment to women's equality was made clear in Mao's famous lines “women hold up half the sky” and “women can do everything men can.”

In Italian travel accounts from this period, Chinese women are elevated as symbols of the new socialist civilization, and extolled for their advanced physical and spiritual qualities. Curzio Malaparte wrote that Chinese women, regardless of their less evident sex characteristics, have superior body structures to Italian women, basing this judgment on athleticism and physical strength, rather than on its supposed aesthetic value or sexual attraction (1959, 220). Another Italian visitor, Gaetano Tumiati, remarked that the nationwide adoption of the identical, uniform-like tunics, was a remarkable visual indicator of women's equal status to men (1954, 31). Moreover, he noted that social reform made it possible for relationships to be “free from the numerous sexual implications that create pleasures in the Western psychosis” (1954, 111). With their newly achieved independence and social equality, Chinese women did not have to obey or try to please
men, but could live with freedom and dignity. The new character traits of Chinese women were summarized as simplicity, openness, freshness, and progressiveness (Tumiati 1954; Fortini 1956; Malaparte 1959).

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, Italian representations of China changed dramatically, as exemplified in Goffredo Parise’s *Cara Cina* (1966), Alberto Moravia’s *The Red Book and the Great Wall: An Impression of Mao’s China* (1968), and Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary *Chung Kuo* (1972). The works of these three intellectuals, who visited China in 1960s and 1970s, no longer presented China as a benevolent or healthy country, but openly questioned the virtue of the Chinese authorities, criticized the country’s corrupted bureaucratic system, and denounced the deification of Mao and the overt politicization of Chinese society. By emphasizing the idiosyncrasies of Chinese society, Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni destabilized the utopian image of Maoist China constructed by earlier Italian visitors, including their positive depictions of Chinese women.

There are several reasons for the transformation of Italian representations of China and of the Chinese people. First, from late 1950s until 1976, the country suffered the consequences of a series of radical reforms, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Thus, it is not surprising that Italian intellectuals viewed Chinese otherness as undesirable, and travelled to China with a greater sense of suspicion. Second, after Khrushchev’s speech on Stalin’s cult of personality in 1956, and the Soviet military intervention in the Hungarian Uprising in that same year, Italian intellectuals became critical of communism and nations in the Eastern bloc. Third, during the Sino-Soviet ideological split, Italian communist leaders supported the Soviet line, and openly condemned Maoist views on class struggles and world revolution. Agreeing with Khrushchev’s theme of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West, the General Secretary of Italian Communist Party (PCI) Palmiro Togliatti criticized Mao’s “simplistically revolutionary interpretation of Marxism” and officially accused China of being warlike in his concluding speech at the Tenth Congress of the PCI in December 1962 (Drake 2003, 220; Griffith 1964, 79). These conflicts damaged relations between Italy and China, and the relationship between the two countries’ Communist parties. Chinese authorities began to place restrictions and surveillance on Italian visitors, inevitably provoking criticism.

Predictably, Italian intellectuals who had believed in Maoist social transformations felt betrayed and deceived. Disillusion towards the “Chinese Utopia” in the 1960s and 1970s also gave birth to conspiracy theories and provoked a wave of “Yellow Peril” rhetoric. Paul Hollander uses Moravia and Parise’s accounts of Cultural Revolution-era China as a standard to undermine the credibility of Italian travel notes of the 1950s. He denounces Western intellectuals’ admiration for communist countries,
dismissing their positive representations as a result of communist “techniques of hospitality” and brainwashing propaganda (Hollander 1998, 347). Neglecting the dramatic changes in historical context, and regarding China as a static entity, Hollander’s argument reflects an Orientalist mindset and the ideological dichotomy of the Cold War era. Hollander contributes a new layer to the Yellow Peril myth by presenting China as the Oceania in George Orwell’s 1984, an untrustworthy, manipulative, and violent nation with no regard for the rights and lives of its people. He echoed the accounts of Parise, Moravia, and Antonioni, who criticized Chinese authorities for threatening their citizens’ well-being.

The past three decades have witnessed a new phase in anti-China thought in Italy, fueled by the modernization rhetoric in western political culture, and by immigration issues emerging in Italian society. As Daniel Vukovich observes, there is now a “new orientalism” functioning as part of the neo-colonial or imperialist project: “not just the production of knowledge about an ‘area’ but the would-be management” (2012, 1). Whereas Said’s definition of Orientalism turned upon the essential differences between Orient and Occident, this new form turns upon sameness, with globalization identical to uni-polarization, westernization, and global capitalization. Such a world view, which sees China as haltingly but inevitably becoming equivalent to the West, grants precedence to western countries, whose modernization and industrialization began far earlier. By denying the possibility of a multipolar world, this new form of Orientalism avoids placing the West on an equal footing with other important world actors.

Chinese immigration to Italy can be traced back to the 1980s, but from 2001–2007 the number increased by 209%, from 46,887 to 144,885 immigrants of Chinese origin (ISTAT 2005, 5; 2007, 6). In turn, Italian filmmakers switched their focus from “exotic” Chinese to domestic residents of the country. In fact, all China-related films produced from 2007–2011 raise the issue of Chinese immigration. This thematic switch was likely triggered by the protest in Milan’s Chinatown in April 2007, which was “the first major violent protest by a single ethnic minority group against the police authorities in contemporary Italy” (Zhang 2013, 22). Conflicts between Chinese protesters and Italian police manifested the growing tensions between immigrants and the local community. On one hand, business leaders blamed Chinese workers for Italy’s economic woes, prompting Italian authorities to step up raids on Chinese communities out of the mistaken belief that “up to a third of Italy’s Chinese immigrants could be illegal” (Goldsmith 2007). Conversely, Chinese immigrants felt they had been treated unfairly. In Milan, “more than 100 Chinese shopkeepers and members of their families, many waving the national flag, massed in the street claiming racial discrimination” (Willey 2007). It was
also reported that authorities in Treviso ordered Chinese-run businesses to take down their lanterns because they looked “too oriental” (Taipei Times 2007). In recent Italian films, the representation of western heroes rescuing Chinese female victims may be interpreted as a cinematic metaphor of the Italian authorities’ raids on Chinese immigrant communities.

The perpetuation of negative stereotypes in recent Italian films may also be due in part to the homogeneity of the audience. Until recently, most Italian films were released domestically, with very limited international exposure. The lack of audience diversity makes the Italian film industry less cautious about the use of ethnic/racial stereotypes than Hollywood. With their deep involvement in global communication, Hollywood filmmakers are aware that it is becoming more and more inappropriate to corral human diversity into confining categories (Stam 1991, 269). Spectators come to cinema equipped with a sense of the real rooted in their own social experience, based on which they can accept, question, or even subvert a film’s representations.

Although films are on one level powerful machines which produce an “effet du reel,” this effect cannot be separated from the desire, experience, and knowledge of the historically situated spectator. The cultural preparation of a particular audience, in this sense, can generate counterpressure to a racist or prejudicial discourse. (Stam 1991, 254)

From this perspective, more active participation in the global market may prompt Italian filmmakers to carefully re-examine their use of biased gender and racial stereotypes, urging them to embrace diversity and create more multi-dimensional roles. As a social construction, this stereotype of Chinese women can be challenged and overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations. In this article, I have sought to raise audiences’ awareness of the issue. By relinquishing the prevalent gender and racial stereotypes, Italy and China can achieve more accurate mutual understanding and more equitable cross-cultural interactions in the future.

Notes

1 The writings of these Italian diplomats and journalists during Italy’s colonial presence in China are mainly texts of descriptive and expository genres, including memoir (Giuseppe Salvago-Raggi’s Ambasciatore del re), reportage (Roberto Suster’s La Cina repubblica), diary (Daniele Vare’s Il diplomatico soridente: 1900-1940), and travel notes (Luigi Barzini’s Nell’estremo Oriente and Mario Appelius’s Cina…).

2 See Gaetano Tumiati’s Buongiorno Cina (Good morning, China), Franco Fortini’s Asia Maggiore (Greater Asia), and Curzio Malaparte’s Io, in Russia e in Cina (I, in Russia and in China).

3 La Giusta Distanza (The Right Distance, 2007), Gomorra (Gomorrah, 2008), Io Sono Li (Shun Li and the Poet, 2011), and L’arrivo di Wang (The Arrival of Wang, 2011).
References

2 Tigri [Two Tigers]. 2007. Directed by Sandro Cecca. Film.