



Editorial

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The “Asia in the Mirror” Project: Lines of Inquiry

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This special issue is one of the two main outputs of a project titled “Asia in the Mirror: Self-Representations, Self-Narratives and Perception of the Other”, conducted at the Department of Literature, Languages and Cultural Heritage of the University of Cagliari, within the scope of a two-year research project financed by the Fondazione di Sardegna (funding year 2021 – project code F73C22001330007). The present articles, the eponymous collection of contributions – Achilli et al. (ed.) 2025, published by Peter Lang as the fruit of a conference held in Cagliari in 2023, – and, in general, the whole Project set themselves the task of investigating representations of Self and Other in and around Asia. The ultimate goal was to attempt to resort to various methodologies, different time periods, and geographical areas of Asia with the shared purpose of identifying and collectively analyzing conflicting cultural, literary, and linguistic dynamics in the construction of complex identities.

As one can easily imagine, the remote inspiration for this idea stemmed from the fact that the 21st century has been dubbed the “Asian century”, one that was envisioned as a new global phase after the European and the American centuries (19th and 20th centuries respectively – Mahbubani 2022). If “the future is Asian” (Khanna 2019), despite the doubts of some scholars (Pan 2013), Asia’s role as the leading continent calls for a radical rethinking of the Western political and cultural epistemic categories, inviting scholars to build on Mahbubani’s provocative question: “Can Asians think?” (Mahbubani 2001; on this topic see also Bronkhorst 2001a; 2001b).

Our research work moved from Robert J. Young’s reflections on the very possibility of writing history outside Western cultural frames (1990) with the aim of

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engaging in a multifocal reflection that spans from postcolonial studies, and in particular the study of the Eurocentric representation of Asia as the Other (Minh-ha 2011; Mohanty 1988; Guha 2003), to other issues such as self-orientalization and exceptionalism (Franceschini and Loubere 2022), the construction of diverse, fluid geo-cultural identities, and, finally, self-representation to the Other. Rey Chow's work (2004) on the dangers of former colonizers' attempts to represent colonized peoples in an objective manner was also instrumental, especially his reflection on the Asian subject as marked by a radical "ethnic" diversity, and yet also by a remarkable ability to rework and return the gaze to the observer. Crucial for some of the topics we analyze was, ultimately, Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of provincializing Europe, which we saw as an opportunity to escape a Eurocentric perspective and embrace the multiple possibilities offered by a global approach to Asian cultures in their complex and contradictory interactions.

Starting from the questions raised in the past by Bhabha 1994 and Spivak 2008, who critically identified fractures or contradictions in Western discourses on Asia, our project aims to interrogate the global present as the phase in which, as Spivak has recently suggested, "We will be a global community, each one of us globalizable, upstream from politics, an island of languaging in a field of traces" (2021: 26).

The present special issue consists of seven articles, which explore representations and self-representations in and from Asia covering a broad spectrum of languages and cultures, including contemporary China, Uzbekistan, ancient India, the Arab world, and German-language writing. The areas of research and methodological approaches range from literary studies to linguistics and discourse analysis.

Maria Piera Candotti and **Tiziana Pontillo**'s article is titled "Focusing on when and how 'the Brahmins won': the case of *dāksīṇā*- in reformed and non-reformed Vedic sources", hinting at the title of a recent volume (2016) by Johannes Bronkhorst, where the author, among other things, studied the way in which Brahmins "re-invented" themselves at the time of Alexander's expedition. This contribution back-dates the initial moments of this "invention" by analysing some strategies used by the bearers of Yajurvedic culture to transform a fundamental institution – commonly considered an original item – of the Indian sacrificial tradition, namely the *dāksīṇā*, into the well-known "priestly gift".

Valentina Ferrero and **Tiziana Pontillo**'s contribution, whose title is "Anti-historical collective memory of the past' in the Brahmanical interpretation of Vṛatyā doctrines (*Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* 2.53-68)", is focused on "how Asia narrates itself to the Other", and "how it perceives the Other" and concentrates on an ancient case of complex identities in Asia. Through the fresh translation and analysis of an intriguing Sāmavedic Brāhmaṇa passage, this work aims at pinpointing the marginalization and embedding strategies adopted by the promoters of a very

important reform (which placed the values of the priestly class at the top of social hierarchy) in order to deal with other cultures that might actually have coincided with their own in the past.

Cristiana Bozza and **Giuliano Mion**'s contribution, titled "Theoforic Formulae in Spoken Arabic(s). A Trigger for Grammaticalization?", builds upon an in-depth analysis of certain aspects of the concept of "Islamic language" (Bausani 1981). This notion refers to a linguistic system profoundly influenced – graphically, lexically, and even morphosyntactically – by the major cultural languages of the Muslim world, namely Arabic and Persian. The paper focuses specifically on the role of spoken Arabic, examining a set of religious expressions associated with what some scholars have recently termed the *Allāh-Lexicon*. The study investigates whether these religious expressions – highly frequent elements of self-representation – may have triggered processes of structural grammatical change within the spoken varieties of Arabic.

Mittal Trivedi's article, "Tradition Out of Context: Exploring the Polemics of Yoga and Āyurveda in Modern India" reflects on the tension that has arisen between modern medicine and traditional Indian medicine since, on the basis of Chakrabarty's 2008 "capitalist historicism", the former does not consider the latter as a scientific discipline. To map this phenomenon, the study aims to explore the conceptual framework of Yoga and Āyurveda and the ecosystems in which they were originally situated, in order to compare them with their existence in the context of modern Indian society.

Valentina Serra's article is titled "German Orientalism(s) and the challenges of transculturality between past and present with some reflections on the Works of Yōko Tawada and Adolf Muschg" and offers a German perspective on the representations of Asiatic cultures, a perspective completely absent from the discourse developed by Said (1978). Drawing on concepts such as transculturality and cultural hybridity (Welsch 1992; Shen and Rosenstock 2014; Zhang 2017), the paper deals with the image of China and Japan in German-language literature. While 19th-century German Orientalism was shaped by the concrete or vague colonial ambitions of the German and Habsburg empires, the 20th century witnessed its critical deconstruction through the works of authors such as Adolf Muschg and Yōko Tawada who depict a reality characterized by reciprocal contamination and who engage in a self-reflective dialogue that continues to interrogate colonial and postcolonial power dynamics.

Alessandro Achilli's article "Blurred Boundaries in Šamšad Abdullaev's Poetic Prose from Fergana: 'Immobility', World Literature, and the Deconstructing Gesture of Self-Orientalization" analyzes the poetic prose of Šamšad Abdullaev, one of the leading voices of the so-called Fergana School of Poetry from Uzbekistan. Achilli shows how Abdullaev's work features self-orientalizing images that deconstruct

orientalist stereotypes and question the usual representation of both the East and the West. Drawing on Postcolonial, Decolonial, and World Literature Studies, Achilli proposes an interpretation of Abdullaev's work that foregrounds its emancipatory nature.

Emma Lupano's article "Narrating DeepSeek to the Self and the Other: Discursive Constructions of Technological Power in Chinese Official Media" explores Self-to-Self and Self-to-Other discursive construction of China's technological advancement through media coverage of Chinese AI start-up DeepSeek. On the basis of this case study, Lupano's contribution investigates how the company's rise is narrated to domestic and international audiences through a contrastive analysis of *Renmin Wang*, the Chinese online edition of the *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), and *Quotidiano del Popolo*, i.e. its Italian-language version. The comparison reveals discursive asymmetries – international-oriented texts place greater emphasis on China's global competitiveness – and discursive ambiguity – both corpora convey ambivalence, depicting China as a rising power, a cooperative actor in the Global South, and a formerly marginalized nation seeking postcolonial recognition.

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