

## Book Review

**Daniele Brigadoi** *Cologna: Aspettando la fine della guerra. Lettere dei prigionieri cinesi nei campi di concentramento fascisti* [Waiting for the end of the war. Letters from Chinese prisoners in Fascist concentration camps]. Rome: Carocci Editore. 2019. 210pp. ISBN 9788843096282

*Aspettando la fine della guerra* [Waiting for the end of the war] is a compelling book that retraces the events that led to the internment of Chinese subjects living in Italy during World War II and analyses a wide range of letters that describe life in the camps.<sup>1</sup> Crossing different disciplines and multiple theoretical approaches, Daniele Brigadoi Cologna crafts a book that lucidly presents a part of history that, so far, has been almost completely neglected. The book is written in Italian and launches a new series for Carocci publishing house entitled ‘China Labour Studies’.

The book opens with the contextualization of the establishment of the first Chinese community in Italy within a broader migratory journey through Europe and often through Japan. It is in this first chapter that Brigadoi Cologna points out the difficulties he had encountered to recover information on the identities of the prisoners but also on the fascist camps themselves. On the one hand, he had to face the confusion brought both by Chinese migrants using other people’s documents and by careless clerks who superficially transcribed Chinese names that even when appearing in the same document would not match. On the other hand, the author had to deal with Italy’s tendency to, drawing on the expression used by Andall and Duncan to discuss the legacy of Italian colonialism, *displace* problematic memories (Andall and Duncan 2005, 21). As Brigadoi Cologna explains ‘quella dei campi di concentramento fascisti è una memoria storica in gran parte rimossa, quando non addirittura negata, che solo recentemente ha cominciato a essere finalmente oggetto di più intensa attenzione’ [that of the fascist concentration camps is an historical memory that has mostly been removed, if not even removed; it only recently started to receive attention] (37). Nonetheless, Brigadoi Cologna managed to identify 168 out of the 259 Chinese men deemed to be either interned or exiled between 1940 and 1945 (all this information is included in the appendix at the end of the book).

The central chapter concentrates on the establishment of the historical Chinese community in Italy from the arrival of the first migrants, the years preceding the promulgation of the racial laws in 1938, how those laws and more generally the war affected the life of Chinese migrants and their Chinese and Chinese-Italian families. Since 1940, all prefectures had to conduct a census of the foreign citizens that in case Italy entered into war alongside Germany, would have been considered subjects of an enemy country. Given that Italy had signed the Anti-Comintern pact with Germany and Japan, China was one of those countries. It is also in this part that the reader is introduced to a figure that was key during the internment and that will also appear in the letters analysed in the following chapter, Padre Antonio Tchang. Father Tchang was a Chinese friar that acted as an intermediate with the internees. Many of them, however, complained—and this is evidenced in the examples outlined by the author in the

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Italian are my own.

following chapter—that Father Tchang’s real aim was to convert them. Significantly, on August 4th, 1941, 40 Chinese internees were baptized.

In addition to this meticulous historical reconstruction, Brigadoi Cologna also provides, in the final chapter, an engaging philological analysis of six of the letters written by Chinese prisoners to different recipients. Each letter is a story in itself which the author develops clearly and cohesively. Brigadoi Cologna provides, where possible, information about the sender’s life before being interned and the aim and content of the letter but also a photograph of the document, its transcription, the translation of the time and the *actual* translation, the one made at the time. In fact, beyond the content of the letters which provides invaluable insights into life in the camps, it is particularly fascinating to see the work of the different translators who were asked to check them to make sure that they did not contain strategic information. However, only some of the inmates had received an education and were thus able to read and write, thus the source language was extremely challenging to comprehend even for expert translators and, at that time, there were not many Italian sinologists. Due to this, the translations show some inaccuracies, but also debatable, and possible deliberate, choices. A fascinating example is provided by the translation of a letter complaining about the behaviour of Father Tchang. The translator adds religious embellishments and omits criticism against the doctrinal preparation of Father Tchang deleting strong and harsh remarks, almost as if ‘chi traduce volesse evitare che questo scritto potesse avere conseguenze troppo severe per i suoi estensori’ [the translator wanted to avoid that this piece of writing would lead to serious consequences for those writing the letters](149).

Before the afterword and the rich and, from a documentary point of view, crucial appendix, Brigadoi Cologna draws the conclusion to the book, and connects the events surrounding the internment of Chinese subjects to Italian society today. The author emphasizes how, after almost a century, the descendants of those prisoners still struggle to be considered full members of the society, to be allowed the chance ‘di partecipare alla determinazione della società in cui si è cresciuti e si vive’ [to participate in the determination of the society where they grew up and live] (162).<sup>2</sup>

To conclude, this lucidly developed book will be an essential source for researchers in transnational studies, memory studies and historians of the Second World War (and beyond) but also to students of Italian history, of Chinese studies and translation studies. By narrating the story of the Chinese prisoners who were interned in Fascist concentration camps during World War II, Brigadoi Cologna is not only shedding light on a neglected side of the history of Italy’s resident Chinese community, but he is re-narrating Italian history and offers memories of a shared past that paves the way to Italian contemporary multicultural society. According to Lavagnino who curated the preface to the volume Brigadoi Cologna reconstructs ‘una storia precisa, rigorosamente documentata [...] che non è più soltanto “la loro storia qui

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<sup>2</sup> Italian citizenship is granted on the basis of *ius sanguinis*, or is obtained through long and expensive bureaucratic procedures (see Bianchi 2011; Tintori 2018).

da noi” ma è finalmente anche “la nostra storia” [a precise story, rigorously documented [...]] which is not anymore “their story here in Italy” but that is finally “our story”] (13).

### **References**

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