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Fischetti, Alice

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Sino-Italian Activism and the Documentation of Crisis: An Interview with Lala Hu

Alice Fischetti



Fig. 1. Logo of the “4xDecameron” project created by Ningyuan Zheng.
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What strange fate, that of Chinese people in Italy! We had gone from fearing the likely contagion of family and friends in China to worrying about racism and discrimination in our daily lives, and then again, once the pandemic had reached Italy, to fearing contagion for ourselves and our loved ones.¹

In the early months of 2020, Italy became the first European nation to become an epicenter for COVID-19. Global media quickly read the event as a cautionary tale, first and foremost applauding Italy’s resilience and expressing sympathy for the loss of Italian lives. As Italian American journalist Christine Grimaldi reminds us, however, media coverage, especially in Italy, hardly prioritized the invaluable contributions of Sino-Italian communities towards mitigating the crisis, instead augmenting the racialization of COVID-19 by labelling the virus “Chinese”: “We will never experience the racist COVID-19 backlash against Asian American people and their businesses, though the virus overtook *Italy* and traveled from Europe to New York.”² Instead, news of the first cases, far before reaching European soil, brought widespread Sinophobia to both sides of the Atlantic: violent attacks against residents of Asian descent regardless of heritage or national belonging. On February 2, 2020, just days following the first known case in Rome, Massimiliano Martigli Jiang blindfolded himself in the center of Florence

¹ All translations of *Semi di tè* (2020) are mine and reviewed by the book’s author; Lala Hu, *Semi di tè*. Kindle Edition. (Gallarate: People, 2020), 31.

² Emphasis mine. Cristine Grimaldi, “Paesano of Shame: Trump’s Italian American Consiglieres,” *LA Review of Books*, November 2, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-paesano-of-shame-trumps-italian-american-consiglieres>.

and stood in silence, surgical mask equipped, with a handwritten message for Italians in hand: “I am not a virus. I am a human being. Set me free from prejudice,” it read.³

As described by Lala Hu in the above citation, long before reports of cases in Europe, Chinese communities in Italy had closely monitored the emergence of the virus, not only for affective or familial ties but also to anticipate growing prejudices.⁴ By February 2, as Hu’s account recalls, Via Paolo Sarpi in Milan, one of Italy’s most bustling Chinese neighborhoods, had been emptied of its crowds: red lanterns for Chinese New Year celebrations were removed as quickly as they had been hung, shuttered businesses and self-isolated residents now “reigned by a surreal silence.”⁵ Toshio Miyake notes that in the early phase of the pandemic, Sino-Italian communities responded rapidly to news from China, working with the Chinese Embassy to donate large quantities of masks to local hospitals, schools, and residents in gestures of friendship and solidarity.⁶ As Hu also recalls, the People’s Republic of China sent two teams to Italy at the onset of lockdown with the aim of sharing medical equipment and expertise on preventive protocols: “the challenge already faced in China now fell to colleagues of another nation, with whom [Chinese doctors] felt an immediate sense of solidarity.”⁷ And yet, media representation remained largely fixed on divisive narratives, saturating the visual landscape with imagery of brutal attacks on Asian communities and rhetoric pathologizing Chinese culture (“instances of solidarity demonstrated by people of Chinese origin in Italy... were not isolated, even if the media gave more attention to institutional donations”⁸). It was during this first phase of the pandemic, as exemplified by Jiang’s timely performance, that mediatic realities led to unprecedented responses by Sino-Italians, an outpouring of cultural production reading mainstream media as an agent of misrepresentation of Chinese populations in Italy. The imperative, as Miyake also recalls, became that of addressing the myriad forms of violence plaguing these historically marginalized communities—new opportunities to refuse long-endured processes of silencing now enabled by collective crisis.

Lala Hu, Sino-Italian author and marketing professor based in Milan, responded precisely to this call, producing the first written account of pandemic life as felt by Italy’s Sino-Italian communities and Chinese migrants. Released in August 2020, *Semi di Tè* (Tea Seeds) is the only reportage on Sino-Italian life to have documented contagion—both in its biological form and as Sinophobia—concurrently to its spread. Relating nascent prejudice to the anti-immigrant rhetoric that has long plagued Italy—“was this fear of the virus or unjustified hatred towards the other?”⁹—Hu found cause for action within the realm of the literary, narrating both the violent effects of mediatic representation and hopeful counternarratives neglected by mainstream media. By the end of the first lockdown and the slow return to public life, Hu had amended the collective memorialization of pandemic-era relations, documenting the abundance of kinship,

³ See Toshio Miyake, “‘Cin Ciun Cian’ (Ching Chong): Yellowness and Neo-Orientalism in Italy at the Time of COVID-19,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 4 (2021): 501.

⁴ I am grateful to Rhiannon Noel Welch for having introduced me to Lala Hu and her work, and for having ideated this interview and translation as part of this special issue. I am also grateful to Hu for her generous time spent conversing on Zoom and over email, and for so openly and thoughtfully discussing her work. I thank Hu and the volume’s editors for their patience, support, and feedback while collaborating across virtual formats and various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ Hu, *Semi di tè*, 36.

⁶ Miyake, “Yellowness and neo-orientalism in Italy,” 502.

⁷ Hu, *Semi di tè*, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

collectivity, and insistence on care that enveloped migrant communities, as well as the cross-cultural exchanges that lightened moments of utmost distress. As she writes, the display of activism and cultural responses by the Chinese population were unlike anything seen before, and worthy of a dedicated space for remembrance: “a community often described as closed, even invisible, was now finding its voice.”¹⁰

Beyond media coverage, discourses on migration to Italy, particularly those comprising the literary sphere, have seldom celebrated the work of Sino-Italian authors. Despite the Chinese community’s status as the fourth-largest group of foreign residents—trailing behind Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccans—stories of Chinese immigration to Italy, including those of Italian-born Chinese residents, constitute a small fraction of texts within the realm of migration literature, where dominant typologies have largely focused on authors probing the repercussions of Italy’s repressed colonial past.¹¹ Indeed, when examined within the context of established genealogies, the majority of novels by Sino-Italians and Chinese migrants only surfaced in the late 2000s—nearly two decades after what is now considered the incipit of Italian postcolonial or migration literature—preceded by only “exceptional” accounts by authors of Chinese origin. According to Gaoheng Zhang, media hypervisibility following a 2007 protest in Milan (the first major protest led by a single ethnic majority in Italy, no less), marked a substantial turning point for Sino-Italian authorship; it was the combination of pronounced media interest in China-Italy relations and flourishing new generations of Italian-born Chinese, the G2, that sowed favorable conditions for Sino-Italian and Chinese-authored texts.¹² With time, despite its limited critical coverage, these primarily novelistic works have come to occupy the space between the aesthetic and the political, recounting both the experience of migration and the lived prejudice felt by Italy’s Chinese and Sino-Italian populations.

Semi di tè now arguably lives between the national space and what Rosie Goldsmith calls “Europe’s first pandemic literature.”¹³ Praised for its juxtaposition of national perspectives and multidimensional renditions of cultural identity, Hu’s work reads precisely as a product of her dual positioning, weaving together the lives of four protagonists—Italian-born Chinese or Chinese migrants varying in age, origin, and profession—across the cities of Bologna, Prato, Padua, and Milan as they respond to pandemic-induced racist violence through practices of care. As an Italian of Chinese descent raised in Milan, Hu was determined to record the breadth of histories otherwise neglected by mainstream Italian discourse: “a fragmented image not conforming to stereotypes” of individuals linked by their dual cultural belonging, whose actions spurred new ideals for collectivity and belonging.¹⁴ To this end, the text functions as a direct counternarrative to COVID-era media depictions and misrepresentations; Hu’s prose intertwines the poetic and editorial to intimately navigate both Italian and Chinese realities with equal affective charge, offering cultural mediation for a wide readership whilst avoiding essentialist characterizations. From this perspective, the sentiment marking Hu’s first-person narration while

¹⁰ Hu, *Semi di tè*, 12–13.

¹¹ Gaoheng Zhang, “Contemporary Italian Novels on Chinese Immigration to Italy,” *California Italian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013): 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4; The G2 Network defines itself as “a non-partisan national organization founded by the children of immigrants and refugees born and/or raised in Italy” (see www.secondegenerazioni.it).

¹³ As Goldsmith writes in the latest edition of *The Riveter* featuring a translated excerpt of Hu’s book, “Italy was the first European country to go into lockdown. They weren’t only singing from their balconies at that time but also writing Europe’s first pandemic literature”; Rosie Goldsmith, “Why an Italian Riveter?” *The Riveter*, no. 10, April 2022, 10. Many thanks to Hu for bringing this edition of *The Riveter* to my attention.

¹⁴ Hu, *Semi di tè*, 13.

navigating intolerance—"I read terror in her eyes... I wanted to say her, 'Please do not be afraid of me'... But I remained silent"¹⁵—positions *Semi di tè* at the juncture between Italian memoir by a *Milanese DOC* and novelistic account of integration. This hybrid framework, moving between genres and cultures, challenges critical typologies often folding dual nationals, second generation Italians, and migrants within the realm of the foreigner, thereby precluding inclusion within the cultural landscape as "Italian" works. Indeed, as discussed below, the text's scant initial commercial reception confirms its positioning in the cultural "in-between," one that insists on the recognition of heterogeneity, the hyphenated identity, as an indivisible entity in and of itself. As also evidenced by the astounding media silence surrounding the passing of critically acclaimed Sino-Italian author Bamboo Hirst in April 2020,¹⁶ such politically charged texts often risk exclusion from national recognition for occupying the space of hybridity, refusing clear cataloguing on the basis of nation or culture. For such works, however, the challenge of categorization is evidence enough of the necessity of their being, and proof of the revolutionary politics practiced by their prose.

I interviewed Lala Hu on Zoom in November 2021, a post-vaccine, variant-ridden moment of the pandemic's trajectory unlike that chronicled in *Semi di tè*—though quasi-analogous with respect to the uncertainty and attitudes plaguing the global landscape. Despite the difficulties of this prolonged pandemic moment, the author's creative momentum has not slowed since the novel's release: in 2021 alone, Hu published the essay "Frattempi di una città, frattempi di nuovi cittadini" ("Interims of a city, interims of new citizens") in the anthology *Frattempi moderni* (2021, *Modern Interims*), while her short story "In cerca di una Heimat" ("In Search of a Heimat") was awarded second place in the 2021 Concorso Letterario Lingua Madre, a prestigious literary contest for women of foreign origin living and writing in Italy. In this interview, Hu shares her writing process and ideals tied to new models of collectivity, further detailing the socio-historical conditions that inspired the novel's inception and the continued activism uprooting Italy's rigid relational norms.

This interview was conducted over Zoom in Italian, by Alice Fischetti, and transcribed and translated into English by Fischetti and Celine Tan.

AF: *Semi di tè* (Tea Seeds) is your first literary endeavor; you write that it was your own experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, of witnessing more to admire in people than to despise, that led you to record your observations in novel form: acts of humanity, as well as the violence, Sinophobia, and fear towards difference they implicitly contest. Could you tell us a bit more about the process of compiling the personal experiences of your protagonists—Yang, Wudi, Ningyuan, and Wen—figures whom you knew personally? What did you consider when selecting the literary format as that through which to tell their stories?

LH: I decided to write this book during the first lockdown at the start of the pandemic, which took place between March and April 2020. I was moved by the initiatives and acts of solidarity of people I knew personally; they took concrete action, lending a hand to those most in need—

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Valentina Pedone, "(Non) Fai rumore. Il silenzio intorno all'espressione culturale sinoitaliana durante la stagione Covid-19," *Sinosfere*, July 30, 2020, <http://sinosfere.com/2020/07/30/valentina-pedone-non-fai-rumore-il-silenzio-intorno-allespressione-culturale-sinoitaliana-durante-la-stagione-covid-19/>.

the most vulnerable groups of affected populations—and this touched me deeply. I was inspired to gather their stories, convinced that it would be a great loss for history had they remained unaccounted for. I thus tried to capture the stories of average citizens during this historic moment, an effort aimed at rendering these gestures part of our collective memory. I drew from the social reality I know closely, one that I belong to, namely, the so-called Chinese community in Italy. I recounted the reality of ordinary people, everyday people who applied themselves in whatever way possible: helping others at the supermarket, offering aid to neighbors. I interviewed my friends, gathered their testimonials on the phone or through video calls and strove to capture their perspective, to recount this moment from their point of view, since in dominant narratives foreigners are portrayed as the problem, the enemy, and therefore an object of narrative rather than its subject. It is for this reason that I chose the literary form; it is not only what I am most accustomed to, but also best captures my voice, and was within the realm of possibility during the period of confinement.

AF: It is precisely this element of counter-narration and memorialization that emerges from your text's engagement with the Italian media. As you note, in this specific context of isolation, media coverage became our sole contact with the external world. You speak amply of the heightened clout of media at the start of your book, pointing to the rhetoric that led to the racialization of the virus. I am thinking, in particular, of your discussion of the normalization of the term "China virus," even in contexts seeking to contest the spread of disinformation and racial othering, as in your personal experience.

LH: Yes, exactly. I was interviewed by *Il Corriere della Sera* before the virus effectively reached Italy, and the message of my interview was that of encouraging people from different origins to come together, to engage in a greater dialogue. And yet the interview was placed in a section titled "Chinese virus." The virus was given this name for quite some time, Trumpian rhetoric that witnessed devastating effects and consequences. It should be noted that in Italy after the initial period of Sinophobia, of racist attacks, xenophobia was generally contained. There is no present emergency with respect to Sinophobia compared to what happened in other countries, among which the United States. There, anti-Asian sentiment, Asian Hate, or hatred towards people of Asian descent, led to thousands of attacks, even violent ones, which culminated in a mass homicide in Atlanta where six women of Asian descent were killed. The virus was thus absorbed by media narratives describing foreigners as the problem, a security risk for the general population. And this unfortunately resulted in serious, violent acts.

AF: Right, the virus and Asian culture were rendered synonymous in this rhetoric of contagion. Thinking about culture and identification, it has been noted that the authorial voice could be considered a fifth character in your book: you discuss your own childhood as the daughter of Chinese immigrants in Milan, your experience in academia during lockdown, as well as your firsthand encounters with anti-Asian sentiments. You have also been called *Milanese DOC* in the Italian context; considering the many conversations that surround the naming practices of dual identity citizens, do you embrace the concept of a hyphenated identity, *sino-italiana*, as described in the coverage of your book?

LH: Yes; from an identitarian point of view I consider myself Sino-Italian, even if in reality this definition is not yet widely diffused, so not second nature as a term. Terms such as *cinesi d'Italia*

[Chinese of Italy] or *italo-cinesi* [Italo-Chinese] are often used in the media, although *italo-cinese* is not correct in its usage, as it describes a person of Italian origin living in China. This is not the case here: Sino-Italians are Chinese people, or people of Chinese descent, living in Italy. It is also interesting to note that among Sino-Italians themselves, or among Chinese descendants, another term has emerged: “Italian born Chinese,” generally used in its acronym form, *IBC*, drawing from a third language, though pronounced *all’italiana* [in Italian]. It is curious that the subjects who claim this identity use this language and terminology to refer to people with Italian and Chinese backgrounds. The term originated in a homonymous private Facebook group that functions as a discussion space for people of Chinese origin, in particular second or third generations, making the dominant language Italian. However, the group’s Chinese origins are still deeply felt, as several second generation members have maintained strong ties to China or have returned there for work.

AF: The decision to select a term in the present global language, not drawing from either national identity the term comprises, is an interesting one. This makes me think about the G2 network and the refusal of externally produced identity categories, as the critical tendency has been that of lumping all dual nationals—Italians with foreign origins, or second and third generation Italians—within the “migrant” umbrella term. Do you find a similar sort of refusal taking place in the Chinese Italian community? Is the Italian-born Chinese group evolving in conversation with such networks?

LH: This shift, or increased awareness, amongst Sino-descendants regarding their identity, one split between two cultures, is only a trend of recent years. This has occurred thanks to the efforts and contributions of second generation residents raised in Italy, or even those born and educated here—activism we also witnessed last year during the pandemic before the virus reached Italy. Sino-descendants and Sino-Italians entered public discourse by appearing on television and various media channels, including social media, thus activating a direct channel and point of contact with their followers. As someone with a background in media studies, I noticed a certain curiosity and awe from the public regarding the active presence of Chinese residents in Italy, of Sino-descendants. Perhaps for the first time, the Chinese and Sino-Italian communities have found a voice in the public sphere, and a very strong one compared to the past.

AF: With regards to dual identity, your text often performs acts of cultural translation to clarify the position and values of your protagonists. You explain, for example, the meaning of certain Chinese terms, as well as customs a non-Chinese reader would not be familiar with. I found your book incredibly accessible in terms of readership. Did you write with a specific audience in mind?

LH: My intent was to address the book to the widest possible audience, so not solely the Chinese minority, those interested in China, or second generations. It is for this reason that I used simple language, the most accessible language, to render it legible to all. Now, over a year following its publication, I’ve seen that the book has unfortunately been repeatedly miscategorized. For example, in some bookstores it was placed in sections on China, despite not speaking directly about China or specializing in its history. Amazon itself initially placed the book in the “Preventive Medicine and Public Health” category, and yet this is not a medical text in the slightest way. More recently, in the last few months, I noticed that it has been added to

Amazon's "Asian & Asian Descent" category, as well as the section for "European & European Descent." It has thus unfortunately not reached the general public. I am a bit saddened by this, as when I do actually receive feedback, perhaps reviews or just messages from readers with no direct ties to or interest in China, the book emerges as a sort of chronicle for them. In truth, anyone could have written it; it recounts what we all experienced during the first phase of the pandemic, of course with its focus being the reality that surrounds me in particular, so the point of view of Sino-Italians. Yet the facts that I recount—from citing the news to press conferences and speeches by President Mattarella—have touched and involved us all.

AF: Right, it documents—albeit with a literary quality—a historical moment, and precisely for that reason would appeal to a broad range of national audiences.

LH: Yes, it can almost be seen as a reportage.

AF: With regards to categorization, your text instead veers towards the realm of what critics and scholars call *letteratura della migrazione*, migration literature. Considering these various misreadings, would you embrace *Semi di tè* being categorized as such? To what extent do you find this terminology limiting, or perhaps productive?

LH: In part. If you were to categorize my book, this category would be the most suitable place for it. However, like other texts by writers of foreign origin, it is a difficult text to classify; it lives halfway between the novel, memoir, and essay. It should also be noted, as scholars of migrant literature have argued in the last decade or so, that migrant writings tend to move between multiple genres while simultaneously detaching from such typologies, which thus necessitates their placement in what Venturini called the "counter-canon." Efforts should be made then to consider the fluidity of literature produced in these so-called intermediate spaces, the "in-between spaces," as Bhabha defines them, in their articulation of new cultural products; method is key to the articulation of cultural difference for these so-called migrant writers.

AF: In your brief preface, you frame the protagonists as the simple, everyday person, citing Manzoni in calling them "gente meccaniche e di piccoli affari" ("mechanical folk, and of but small account"),¹⁷ adding, "they may represent the other, or perhaps not." I find your citation of Manzoni especially provocative. On the one hand, it solicits reading your text in relation to works centered on social inequalities as affected, or exacerbated, by shifts in power during crisis. On the other, it also reflects on the role of artistic, literary discourses in Italy's historical production of "others." Could you further elaborate on this characterization of your protagonists as "others or not"? And what place do you give the Italian literary tradition in this text?

LH: Tying back to your first question, in Italy, as mentioned, foreign-born people, or those born in Italy with somatic features that differ from the majority of the population, are identified as the "other," represented as an enemy, as the problem. And yet looking around, the reality is a different one; it moves beyond these narratives built around fear, stereotypes, and clickbait headlines. As I write at the end of the book, "the 'other' lives beside us, feels our same fears, faces our same risks." The Italian literary tradition thus played a fundamental role in the text; I

¹⁷ Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, trans. Bruce Penman. Kindle Edition. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 19.

deliberately inserted the Manzoni quote at the beginning of the book, but also made additional references throughout the text, as his work *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), which takes place during the seventeenth-century plague, is set in my very city—Milan—where a large part of the events in my book take place. While writing, in addition to Manzoni, I was also inspired by another canonical text of European literature that similarly interprets plague as a social condition, namely, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, [which is] a fundamental and highly topical work.

AF: You also cite the eighth-century Chinese poet Li Bai, who, contrary to Manzoni and Camus, would not figure in Eurocentric curricula of Italian schools. Could you tell me more about the poem you cite directly in the text?

LH: The poem by Li Bai, as well as another event described in the book—the *guyu*, rainy season—together mark a significant dimension of the first phase of the pandemic. During this time, despite our lived isolation, we were able to create moments of connection between people separated by distance—both physical distance and the distance marking the separation between life and death. These references were thus inserted to speak precisely to this bond in an effort to create a greater sense of connection between people, one maintained even beyond life, beyond earthly existence.

AF: In the various acts of solidarity and activism that your book recounts, you describe the “4xDecameron” project ideated by Ningyuan. How would you describe the relationship between art and activism? Do you find that this moment has ushered forth a rethinking of the forms of political action on behalf of Chinese communities in Italy?

LH: The period of the pandemic has certainly accentuated conflict and social inequality. In this context, the figure of the intellectual intersects that of the activist, creating new spaces for encounter and dialogue, as well as for new ways of engaging with the pandemic. Many Sino-Italians have found their voice: there has been greater participation on behalf of Chinese residents themselves, who launched initiatives within their very cities, and thus in a certain sense declared their belonging to the Italian social fabric through artistic expression. Figures like Ningyuan Zheng or Shi Yang Shi continue this artistic research in close contact with their local communities. In fact, in the past year Ningyuan launched additional artistic initiatives within Prato—a city whose social conflicts were felt even more prominently during this later phase of the pandemic. Artists like him carry out their research on site and maintain open dialogues with their territory of belonging.

AF: One of the primary changes you note within the experience of the Chinese community in Italy is that of shifting from a state of invisibility to one of excess, that is, from indifference to visible rejection. Thinking about what is often called an excessive monitoring of migrants and border control in Europe, how might your work speak to the notion of the right to invisibility, as well as the forms of visibility that are harmful versus those that prove to be productive?

LH: The pandemic brought with it increased media attention and concern towards people of Chinese origin, which then gradually decreased over time—with both positive and negative effects—in part due to the fact that this form of xenophobia in Italy was limited, as discussed

earlier, in comparison to other countries. The negative side of this is tied to the fact that we seem to take interest in a particular minority only when tied to a negative incident; if the pandemic has provided greater visibility for a particular community, then we should perhaps work towards creating more learning opportunities focused on the different realities that make up Italian society, the society we inhabit. And these should not only unveil its problems but also address new opportunities for exchange—new spaces that might involve a wide variety of actors from these cities. Through this form of visibility, these residents would not remain on society's margins but would be portrayed as active protagonists able to contribute to the development of our cities and society at large.

AF: Indeed, your book accomplishes this task. The title, to this end, urges readers to think deeply about the metaphor of tea seeds when thinking about difference. You note that tea, in its Chinese etymological sense, invites people to live in harmony with nature, without hierarchizing either, and you liken the last phase of Chinese spring—*guyu* (Grain Rain)—to the end of lockdown in Italy. Can you further elaborate on this metaphor?

LH: The meaning of the title, *Semi di tè*, emerges towards the end of the book in the chapter dedicated to the *guyu*. It is a metaphor for the seeds of hope sown during the pandemic by each of the book's protagonists; positioned at the meeting point of two cultures—Italian and Chinese—during the most difficult, dramatic, and uncertain moment of the pandemic, they, along with the everyday citizen, were able to offer a bit of comfort to those in need, even total strangers. The tea seeds represent the gestures that each of us can make in our daily lives, each in our own small way, to create a less divisive future, one based on effective recognition and mutual respect.

AF: You seem to approach the pandemic as the emergence of chronic societal conditions, relational norms and injustices only rendered more visible during crisis. In what ways is this pandemic condition continuous, and where do you see its ruptures?¹⁸

LH: On the one hand, the pandemic was an unexpected, epochal event that impacted all dimensions of our lives. On the other hand, the differences that existed before were rendered all the more visible; as we witnessed at the start, and still now, the pandemic was used as an excuse to attack the other, a pretext for directing more hatred or contempt towards the foreigner. Reconnecting to an argument made by one of the book's protagonists, Dr. Wen, it has also laid bare the egoism of individual nations, which to a certain extent did not actively collaborate during the initial phases. This extends to the present moment as well; considering the spread of a new variant [omicron] in South Africa, a country with low vaccination rates, it is clear that global collaboration is fundamental to ensuring that all countries are equipped for the treatment of COVID-19, that all nations have access to vaccinations in order to overcome this crisis. This is a global problem, and not of one or a few individual nations.

AF: This is exactly what you describe in Dr. Wen's section, where you note that he sees the present global response to COVID-19—*isolation and border closure*—as a missed opportunity for collaboration. Towards the end of the text, you also write that the reality of

¹⁸ This question follows a line of thought with respect to pandemic time offered by Rhiannon Noel Welch and Cristiana Giordano, co-editors of this special issue.

pandemic life resembles the isolation, uncertainty, and emotional distance felt by migrants in and after their arduous journeys. In this sense, you conclude on an optimistic note, calling on the recognition of the other as a means of restoring a shared sense of humanity. Was the positioning of your authorial voice as aligned with Dr. Wen an intentional choice? Do you see the pandemic as an opportunity for creating community—a sense of solidarity and collectivity—through shared experience?

LH: Yes, absolutely. The experience of the pandemic has been a trying one and has touched us all directly. Even just the period of isolation—the lockdown—was an unprecedented reality that somehow finds its parallel in the migrant experience: the migrant has already experienced displacement, an imposed remoteness from loved ones, from the homeland, often for the rest of their life. All of us, in our period of confinement, in some way—albeit limited but certainly unique—lived this feeling, the experience of physical and affective distance from loved ones. This epochal event has certainly hit us hard, and we should thus try to learn from it not only at the national level in encouraging global collaboration, but also at the individual level. By whatever means possible, this moment should be used to create new forms of collectivity starting from the recognition of the other, perhaps starting with forms of solidarity not previously considered, or that did not seem possible before.

AF: Speaking of the future, your book is narratively framed by reflections on new generations. Youth activists have in recent years emerged as instrumental voices not only capable of enacting and advocating for change, but also of ideating alternate ways of living and being—from the Black Lives Matter movement to climate change, as well as within the context of anti-xenophobia activism in Italy. Can we presume your text to also serve as a call to action for sustaining, supporting, and caring for younger generations?

LH: Definitely. Young people were one of the groups most affected by the pandemic; they suffered various levels of loss, from being separated from their peers to the forced closure of schools and universities for the entire first period of the pandemic, and later the repercussions of distance learning with additional closures. This all connects to larger conversations surrounding the need to heed to future generations, to consider the kind of society we aim to build; this discourse is focused on giving greater visibility to the needs of those without a voice among the most powerful, those absent in the decision-making room but who bear the consequences of what is decided. The call is to pay more attention to future generations, to those who will inherit the world, the society we are building in the present moment.

AF: It's been over a year since the publication of *Semi di tè*. What have you observed since, regarding both the national response and Sino-Italian activism?

LH: The vaccine rollout improved the general condition of pandemic life in the past year. In Italy, however, despite the situation being less dire than that of countries like the United States, we should not underestimate the ongoing presence of racist and violent incidents. This year, too, Italy witnessed violent attacks fueled by Sinophobia. These occurrences were reported sporadically but have endured, affecting not only people of Chinese origin but all those of Asian descent. It is important to note that it is oftentimes Korean, Japanese, or Filipino residents that are attacked; Sinophobia affects people beyond those of Chinese origin and ethnicity. This

broader discourse prompts us to turn our attention towards societal efforts to recognize minorities, as we witnessed in the case of Black Italians last year, for example. What is the current reality for minorities of Afro-Italian descent, and not only Sino-Italians? The Black Lives Matter movement made its way to Italy last year. And yet, when discourse turns to Italians without citizenship, to the million young people born, raised, and educated in Italy, attention does not immediately turn to the question of legal recognition, and does not effectively involve many of the minorities themselves. There is still much work to be done. These movements have brought more attention to minority groups, but there is much to be accomplished on a political and social level.

AF: With regards to this distance that you mention between activist conversations and the actual subjects they discuss, do you find there to be a break between these worlds, that is, between critical academic and intellectual thought and that of public activism and action?

LH: Yes. I see the need for greater representation, the greater presence of minorities, in the various spheres of Italian society, not only in media sectors but also in the academic and scientific spheres. This is certainly not my field of study, but they are interrelated: the field of Chinese Studies, for example, is composed solely of Italians of non-Chinese descent. And this is hardly the case in the United States, where many scholars in East Asian departments are of Chinese ancestry. An increased presence of minorities in such dimensions, which are in themselves difficult to access—in this case due to the very structure of the Italian academic system—could perhaps enrich knowledge, research, in undeveloped fields and help animate dialogues within them.

AF: This is something we often discuss in the field of Gender Studies, for example, where one's positionality—with respect to race, class, culture of origin, and so on—informs the very questions being asked. The idea is that there is much to be gained from those who theorize from positions they themselves occupy.

LH: Yes; in this sense there have perhaps been more strides taken in the realm of sports, an area ripe with success stories during this year, resulting in strong advocacy for the automatic legal recognition of children of immigrants of foreign origin, even before coming of age. Yet even in these cases citizenship and legal recognition are seen as a reward and not a right in and of itself that should be granted from birth or due to cultural upbringing. This has yet to happen.