

'Cin ciun cian' (ching chong): Yellowness and neo-orientalism in Italy at the time of COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has put in the foreground the dramatic actuality of global and local inequalities, undermining neo-liberal, communitarian, democratic or cosmopolitan projects of collective identity. In the light of intersecting inequalities such as class, race/ethnicity and gender, an explosion of Sinophobia, social stigma and physical attacks targeting people of East Asian and Southeast Asian appearance or heritage has been widely reported in Euro-American media. This article will focus on the case of Italy during the initial stage of the pandemic in early 2020. Italy has not only been the first European country to be exposed to the pandemic and to undergo national lockdown but also a country where the wave of racist assaults started in late January 2020, even before the first clusters have been detected. The critical investigation of Italian media discourses will highlight how deep-rooted, colonialist and ambivalent assumptions about the 'Oriental', 'Asian', 'Chinese' and 'yellow' other may have been crucial to the reproduction of racism against specific people, cultures and civilizations, regardless of nationality, class and gender. It will refer in particular to the concept of 'yellowness', resulting from a process of bio-cultural racialization within the hegemonic frame of 'Western', 'White' or 'Italian' identity. Furthermore, it will indicate how this process of racialized othering has emerged, but has also been contested, within the specific context of citizenship, Asian immigrants and governmental actions in contemporary Italy. The overall aim is not so much to denounce higher levels of racism in Italy compared to other Euro-American countries; rather, this article refers to the Italian case to stress how both global and local

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trajectories do mutually overlap to shape, and eventually to transform, a national context, offering further insights on the glo-calization of the civilizational 'West'/East' divide in the 21st century.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, Italy, neo-orientalism, racism, yellowness

COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; The fiction that unpaid care work is not work; The delusion that we live in a post-racist world; The myth that we are all in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General (18 July 2020)¹

Introduction: Pandemic inequalities

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has induced very different individual, collective or national ways of coping with the global emergency. While, on the one hand, cooperative, communitarian and national bonds have been institutionally emphasized, on the other, inequalities, discrimination and asymmetrical power relations have become evident more than ever, both within and between different nation states. It appears so far that global risks intensified by increasing globalization may contribute to an identitarian project shaped not so much by a cosmopolitan or democratic solidarity of 'shared fate', fostering transnational, transcultural or hybrid inclusiveness (Ulrich Beck), but rather by the opposite: a new 'clash of civilizations', nation states and cultures (Samuel P. Huntington), consolidating previous divisions in regards to class, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, age and so on.

In fact, one of the most evident issues has been the acknowledgement that we may all live in the same sea of the pandemic, but that we are not floating in the same boat (Guterres 2020). COVID-19 has not only been racially labelled as the 'Chinese virus' but has also been critically addressed as the 'inequality virus' by the Oxfam Report (2021), which offers a first global overview on how 'the pandemic is deepening long-standing economic, racial and gender divides' (Oxfam 2021: 13). Racial disparity has been particularly scrutinized in the United States, highlighting how the pandemic has induced asymmetrical death tolls along racial lines, with a rate of 74 deaths per 100,000 people among Black or African Americans, compared to the 30 death rate among White Americans (McCarthy-Statista 2020). While the 31 death rate of Asian American does not stand out particularly in this statistical counting, assaults, discrimination and slurs against people of East Asian heritage or Asian Americans have dramatically risen. According to the Pew Research Center (PRC), almost 4 in 10 Asian Americans have declared that racist views against them have become more common than before COVID-19 (PRC 2020). Stop AAPI Hate (2021), a non-profit organization established in California in response to racist attacks against Asian Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders, has reported 3795 incidents in the period from 19 March 2020 to 28 February 2021, with women being 2.3 times more targeted than men.

At the time of writing, it is still difficult to have a systematic and accurate overview of xenophobia and racism related to the COVID-19 pandemic around the world, which has been widely reported not only in North America, Europe or Oceania but also in Africa, Asia and South America.² However, besides the context-specific differences, there are at least two common and interrelated traits: *yellowness* and pathologization.

First, racist attacks have been mostly directed against people of North, East and Southeast Asian appearance or descent. The most immediate trigger for discrimination has been somatic aspects, such as flat-lying or slanting eyelids combined with straight black or dark hair, which have been strategically selected in modern colonial and scientific ideology to construct the idea of the so-called yellow, mongoloid or Asian race.³ We may consider this kind of racialization as constructing what I would tentatively refer to as *yellowness*, intersecting specific somatic, cultural and civilizational markers, which are cumulatively functional for othering people of North, East or Southeast Asian origin.⁴ However, this condition of being marked as ‘yellow’ would not be possible as an isolated, neutral and static form of biocultural essentialism. It should be considered instead as a context-specific, historical and social construction, always shaped by asymmetrical relations of power within other globalized forms of hegemonic or subaltern racialization, such as whiteness or blackness. In this sense, yellowness can be considered as a racialized ingredient nurturing wider orientalist constructions of the civilizational other (the ‘Orient’ or the ‘Far East’), which acquires meaning and its subaltern positionality only in relation to hegemonic whiteness and civilizational identity of the so-called West.

Second, COVID-19 has been initially labelled by mainstream media discourse as ‘Chinese’ virus, including both conservative state leaders such as Donald Trump and world leading science journals such as *Nature*.⁵ Pathologization of yellowness and racialization of the disease have jointly intensified social stigma, drawing from the most emotional reservoirs of anxiety, disgust or panic against invisible agents of contagious infection and resonating with historically deep-rooted fears in respect to Mongolic invasions or the Yellow Peril.⁶ This may have contributed to the further ‘biologization of culture’ (Bonilla-Silva 2001) beyond the racialization of physical individuals, as could be seen for instance by the association of the pandemic to wet animal markets, cruel eating habits, raw or living food, further naturalizing the presumed intrinsic aspects of cultural or civilizational traits attributed to yellowness.

This article will present an overview of racist attacks in Italy at the preliminary stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Italy has been the first European country to suffer the global wave of the pandemic, starting with the individuation of clusters at the end of February and reacting with the imposition of national lockdown on 9 March 2020. This critical investigation will focus on media discourses during and before this period to explore the ambivalent process of bio-cultural racialization of the ‘yellow’, ‘Oriental’ or ‘Chinese’ other and its possible implication to the reproduction of collective identity (‘white’, ‘Western’, ‘Italian’). Particular attention will be paid on how yellowness is enacted on the ‘Oriental’ other through the combination of the popular expression ‘*cin ciun cian*’ (‘ching chong’ in English) and the slit-eyes pose, conflating linguistic, biological, cultural and civilizational othering. However, the overall aim is not so much to underline alarming levels of racism in Italy compared to other Euro-



Figure 1. Ellekappa, *la Repubblica*, 30 January 2020.⁷

American countries. It rather intends to point out how both global and local trajectories do mutually overlap to shape, and eventually transform, a specific national context such as Italy, offering further insights into the glo-calization of the so-called West/East divide in the 21st century.

Preventive attacks against ‘Orientals’ in Italy before the pandemic lockdown

la Repubblica, one of the most influential newspapers in Italy, published a satirical cartoon on 30 January 2020, actually before the pandemic outbreak and before the first cases were reported in the country. It reads: ‘No problem! If the virus arrives in Italy, we are prepared...’ The stereotypical fascist looking character on the left says: ‘We have already attacked and insulted every passing Chinese’, while his comrade on the right replies: ‘This is called prevention!’ (Figure 1).

The cartoon is very revealing about the explosion of Sinophobia occurring in those days. The following is one example occurred a few days before and denounced on her personal Facebook account by Valentina Wang, a Chinese Italian student enrolled at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Figure 2). ‘Racist insults and spits from two boys on a train. Valentina Wang got on a train on her way back from university to home and has been assaulted by two 16 years old boys. She posted this bad episode on Facebook, which become viral’ (*la Repubblica*, 20 January 2020).



Figure 2. Valentina Wang, *Liberonotizie*, 20 January 2020.⁸

Coronavirus, giovane cinese aggredito in Veneto: gli hanno spaccato una bottiglia in faccia. «Nessuno l'ha difeso»

ITALIA
Mercoledì 26 Febbraio 2020 di Enrico Chilà



L'allerta **coronavirus**, almeno in teoria, dovrebbe unire le persone e favorire la solidarietà e l'aiuto reciproco. All'atto pratico, però, accade esattamente l'opposto: la **psicosi** finisce inevitabilmente per alimentare episodi di **intolleranza e violenza**, come è accaduto due sere fa in

Veneto, all'interno del bar di una stazione di servizio.

Figure 3. *Il Messaggero*, 26 February 2020.¹¹

Actually, other racist episodes had been reported in Venice and other cities, involving Chinese and other Asian tourists, who have been assaulted in a similar way by local youngsters.⁹ On 26 February, a 26 years old Chinese man residing in Italy since the last 10 years was trying to enter a gas station in Vicenza to ask to change a 50 euro bill. He was refused entrance, followed by insults and physical assault by an adult Italian client inside the gas station. Newspaper headed: 'Coronavirus, young Chinese assaulted in Veneto region: they broke a bottle on his face. "Nobody defended him"' (Figure 3).¹⁰



Figure 4. Demetrio Elida, *Casteddu on line*, 7 February 2020.¹²

Again, on 7 February 2020, Demetrio Elida has been beaten in Sardinia because he was seen as ‘a Chinese who infects with the virus’. Newspaper headed: ‘Demetrio, the Filipino from Assemini [Cagliari, Sardinia Region] savagely beaten because “a Chinese who infects with the virus”’. “Thanks to God I am still alive”. Mistaken as Chinese and beaten on a bus. Facial and cranial trauma, one month of treatment for the 30 years old, who has been beaten up on the n. 9 bus, carabinieri are chasing the attackers. The victim has two children and is one of the waiters of the Golden Week [restaurant] in Marconi Avenue’ (Figure 4).

Italian media reported a growing number of racist assaults, occurred between January and February 2020, when most people were still freely walking in the streets, before the start of the national lockdown on 9 March 2020. Among these episodes, there have been also countless number of Chinese stores and restaurants, including Japanese restaurants, that have been vandalized and complemented with all kind of disturbing writings: ‘Murderous China’,¹³ ‘Buy Italian! Boycott Asian traders, the bosses of economy at our place!’,¹⁴ ‘Chinese, Jews, same life, same oven’,¹⁵ ‘Chinese, you are a sewer rat’.¹⁶

While it was not until 21 February 2020 that the first clusters of COVID-19 have been reported in Italy, specifically in the Northern regions of Lombardia and Veneto and spread by Italian locals, the director of Amnesty International in Italy already sounded the alarm a few weeks before on 4 February, warning about a ‘Shameful wave of Sinophobia’ and explaining that this was happening particularly at the expense of children.¹⁷

In fact, many schools and parents of Italian children had already begun in January 2020 to block or at least to try blocking Chinese children or children of Chinese and Asian origin to attend classes. One of the most covered episode by the media has been The Santa Cecilia conservatory of Rome and the ban of its enrolled students coming from East Asia. The case reached international attention,¹⁸ arguably because part of the addressed students were not Chinese or Asian immigrants, but incoming foreign students who denounced this incident on social media and their national newspapers. The Santa Cecilia conservatory is one the most prestigious music schools in Europe and it suspended classes for students of Chinese, Korean and Japanese nationality until they passed a medical examination as part of a *preventive* quarantine measures. These are the initial lines of the letter sent by the director of the conservatory to the teachers of the music school:

Dear Colleagues, because of events related to the Chinese epidemic, the lessons of Oriental students (Chinese, Korean, Japanese etc.) are suspended, as well as other who have come from the countries concerned [...].¹⁹

The term ‘Orientals’ or ‘Oriental’ (in Italian ‘*orientali*’ or ‘*orientale*’) is still very common in Italy, both in the media and in larger parts of the academia. It has so far not been widely addressed as an Eurocentric, outdated, potentially insulting and therefore political incorrect term, as has been instead in the United States, where it has been banned from federal laws.²⁰ The Santa Cecilia conservatory accident shows how the anxiety and social stigma had been extended to everybody looking somehow ‘Oriental’ or ‘Chinese’, regardless of actually having been in mainland China or Wuhan, or regardless of having Chinese nationality or background at all. Social panic had spread in everyday life, directed to all kind of ‘Orientals’, including Filipino, Taiwanese, Koreans or Japanese, especially female.²¹

Ambivalent and bio-cultural racialization of the ‘yellow’ other

In the face of these increasing episodes of physical or symbolic violence, public opinion, newspapers and politicians, including right-wing deputies and mayors in Italy, expressed immediate and open condemnation. One of the most visible acts of institutional and symbolic solidarity occurred on 6 February 2020, when President of Italy Sergio Mattarella visited the ‘most Chinese school in Rome’, which has been widely reported by national media.²² The comprehensive school ‘Daniele Manin’ is located in the district of Esquilino, called informally ‘Chinatown’, with almost half of its students having foreign nationality or origin, and has been transformed for this occasion into the President’s stage to address teachers and students, speaking about friendship, peace and inclusion.²³

However, critical scrutiny of mainstream media reveals how a deep-rooted ambivalence in matters of ‘Orientals’ or ‘Chinese’ cross-cuts ideological or party membership. It is mostly evident in the Lega Nord Party discourse: a right-wing populist party of the opposition, which in this period, according to opinion polls about voters’ intentions, would have been the first party in Italy.²⁴ Vittorio Feltri, the most influential right-wing

journalist and editor, known for controversial racist, misogynist and homophobic remarks,²⁵ published an article on 30 January 2020 in the newspaper *Libero* under the title ‘The Chinese are more intelligent than us’.

I sympathize with the Chinese. They are tireless workers, relentless scholars, equipped with an iron will.

Maybe this is the reason why they are victims of racism. They live secluded in their own neighborhoods, they mind their own business, they do not disturb. I ask to myself why Africans are, in general, not welcomed with friendliness in our country. And I have an answer. I have never seen a Yellow person loitering across a street and looking for charity. [...]

I am not surprised by the success obtained by people with almond eyes in the whole world. I imagine that the plaque of the virus will soon be cured, even if some news from the Land of the Rising Sun [!] are disturbing: it is stated that the populations feed on live insects and animals, swallowing them without precautions. [...] however I don't forget that in the Bergamo valleys my fellow countrymen used until the 1970s to feed on frogs, small birds and eels [...] we don't have the right to deplore the Chinese. In our small way, we have been Chinese too. (Vittorio Feltri, *Libero*, 30 January 2020)²⁶

The article can be read as a revealing discursive example of cultural, but also ambivalent racialization, marking explicit yellowness and blackness, in relation to implicit or unmarked whiteness. First, there is no basic distinction between Chinese or Japanese (‘the Land of the Rising Sun’) because these people are termed as ‘yellow’,²⁷ have almond eyes, do exhibit disturbing eating habits (populations feeding ‘on live insects and animals, swallowing them without precautions’). However, ‘yellow’ people are positively contrasted to ‘African’ people who are ‘loitering across a street and looking for charity’. This is because ‘yellow’ people are ‘tireless workers’, ‘mind their own business, they don't disturb’ and ‘have an iron will’. While not explicitly stated, all these qualities are commonly associated to the populist right-wing discourse of laboriousness, frugality, determination, appealing to the self-employed or entrepreneurial middle class of Italian Northern regions to differentiate their identity (‘White’) from a supposed inferior, lazy or even parasitic, other (coloured): both an internal other (people from the Southern regions of Italy, public white-collars supposed to be mostly Southerners, Rom/Sinti people) and an external other (migrants from Northern or sub-Saharan Africa). Yet, one curious difference between the ‘yellow’ people and *us* (Feltri and his presumed readership) is underlined. Populist right-wing discourse tends increasingly to anti-intellectualism, including scepticism towards scientific institutions and sympathy for conspiracy theories, while ‘yellow’ people are ‘relentless scholars’, justifying the surprising title of the article: ‘The Chinese are more intelligent than us’. However, most interestingly is how the list of isomorphic qualities attributed to the ‘yellow’ people overshadows so much their apparent disturbing eating habits that the article arrives at the end to an even more surprising statement of sameness, though with a paternalistic nuance, comparing present Chinese to ‘my fellow countrymen [who] used until the 1970s to feed on frogs, small birds and eels’. The conclusion is: ‘In our small way, we have been Chinese too’.

Let us turn on Luca Zaia, the president of Veneto Region and member of the Lega Nord Party. Despite showing quite a low profile in his previous political career and not being a top leader at the national level of his party, he has been increasingly recognized as an efficient, moderate and responsible administrator of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising to become the most popular politician in Italy during spring 2020.²⁸ In reaction to first racist attacks occurred in his region, he immediately posted on his official Facebook page a message of solidarity to Valentina Wang, the same day that the assault has been reported on national newspapers.

A student of Chinese origin insulted on a train, a shame, it's uncivilized. What happened to Valentina, the young lady offended by spits and unspeakable epithets is unworthy of a civil society [...]. My solidarity and the solidarity of all decent people with Valentina! (Luca Zaia, 20 January 2020)²⁹

However, 1 month later, during a show program at the local TV station Antenna 3 Nord Est, which actually raised to become the local station with the highest viewing rate in Italy,³⁰ thanks to Zaia's live airing of his press conferences, he commented proudly about the cultural reason explaining the relatively low COVID-19 contagion rate in his Veneto region:

The hygiene that our people, the Veneto people and the Italian citizens have, the cultural training we have, is that of taking a shower, of washing ourselves, of washing one's hands often [...] It is a cultural fact that China has paid a big price for this epidemic because we have seen them all eat mice live or things like that. (Luca Zaia, Antenna 3 Nord Est-News, 27 February 2020)³¹

The following day, the Embassy in Italy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), sent an official protest against this statement. Zaia quickly apologized, remarking that he has been misunderstood and didn't intend in no way to offend Chinese people.³² Just the day after his apologies, journalist Feltri tweeted:

Zaia is right, some Chinese do eat dogs, mice, bats and live octopus. Fresh food, but which isn't so good for health. (Vittorio Feltri @vfeltri, 29 February 2020)

But actually where Zaia, Feltri or other people may have *seen* 'Chinese eating living mice or things like that?'. An endless amount of uncontrolled fake news and metropolitan legends about cruel or disgusting eating habits went viral on YouTube and social media, especially in late January 2020. YouTube videos titling 'Eating a live mouse in a Chinese restaurant: here's the video. Strong and disgusting images of a Chinese man eating a live mouse after digging it in a sauce'.³³ Or, 'China Virus: girl eats a bat at the restaurant, the animal to which it is suspected that the disease has started'.³⁴ These kind of fake news have been unfortunately amplified without any fact checking also by local newspapers, like the *Il Gazzettino* in Veneto region, contributing, more or less intentionally, to the social panic and stigma against 'Chinese' and 'Orientals'.³⁵

Neo-orientalism of the ‘Chinese’ and ‘Asians’

On the one hand, there is no doubt about institutional, public and non-partisan condemnation of racist attacks against people of Chinese or East Asian origin, and the contingent character of these assaults, which have been mostly reported during the initial stage of the pandemic. On the other, some additional specification of more or less un-democratic or threatening aspects attributed to China or the Chinese have been employed by the public opinion, regardless of progressive or conservative ideological orientations. Besides the accusation of being the origin of COVID-19 and having hidden for long time the virus to the world, a constellation of other negative associations has been articulated and accumulated in the last decades, cross-cutting political, economic, environmental, social, legal dimensions. Resonating with the modern process of orientalism, the ‘Chinese’ have been defined to a large extent as the ‘Oriental’ other through a binary contrast to the liberal-democratic identity of the so-called West, including Italy. For instance, emphasis on ‘Chinese’ state authoritarianism, human rights violations, invasion of Tibet; unfair economic and commercial competition, labour exploitation, cheap and shoddy goods; environmental pollution, illegal trade of protected animals, cruel eating habits (dogs, mice, bats, etc.); self-seclusion of supposed ethnic homogenous immigrant communities dedicated to tax evasion, prostitution, complicity with organized crime.³⁶ Particularly worthy of note is that surveys on Italian public opinion about China during the pandemic have hinted to possible influences from conspiracy theories, reporting a large number of respondents convinced that COVID-19 was artificially produced in a Chinese laboratory and spread internationally (ca. 30% of respondents) and that China has gained economically from the pandemic (ca. 24%) (Gallelli et al. 2020: 14).

Systematic or extensive investigation on discrimination, hate speech or racism in Italy against people of Chinese origin, linking them to a more wider and colonial process of bio-cultural racialization of the Asian ‘East’, has been quite scarce so far.³⁷ According to the PRC poll in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Italian views on China were generally negative (57%), but not so different compared to other European countries (France 62%, Germany 56%, UK 55%, Spain 53%) and the United States (60%) or Australia (57%).³⁸ Perhaps more worrying are specific, but fragmented, national surveys on how residents of Chinese origin are viewed and treated within Italy. For instance, one way to view tolerance to social inclusion of others is how we may accept them as members within our own family. According to the national survey commissioned by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, the availability of Italian parents to marrying their daughters to an immigrant have been positive and highest in the case of an U.S. male (63.6%), while it drastically shifts to negative attitudes towards other foreigners: from Peruvians (57.3%), Chinese (63.6%) and Nigerians (63.9%) to Moroccans (67.5%), Albanians (67.8%), Romanians (68.9%) and Rom/Sinti (84.6%).³⁹ Another more alarming picture, even if local, emerges from a survey by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) on second-generation integration of migrants in lower secondary schools in Naples (ISTAT 2020). In the case of bullying, students of East, South East and South Asian origin have reported in 2015 the highest number of offensive or violent episodes suffered from peers (ISTAT 2020: 59). The most bullied students are students of Philippine origin, followed by those of Chinese, Indian and Moroccan descent, who exceeded the average number of bullying episodes against foreign students.⁴⁰

Besides these scattered data on specific prejudice and discrimination, some tentative considerations could be made about the wider process of neo-orientalism in Italian media discourse before the COVID-19 pandemic. First, a general overlapping between Chinese state, politics, economics, culture and people, extending or intersecting with other East Asian countries and people. This essentialist reduction of the Chinese, Asian or 'Oriental' other is particularly facilitated in contemporary Italy by normative assumptions on European and Italian citizenship. Since the 1980s, the term '*extracomunitario*' (litt. 'non-communitarian person') has been used not only to define non-European Union citizenship in judicial language but also to negatively connote in public opinion migrants from the global South as clandestine, poor and potentially dangerous people, as outsiders who are forcing the gates of Italian or European borders. While technically this term would include also non-EU people, such as North Americans, Australians, Japanese and so on, the prevailing image has become to imply coloured, subaltern, more or less legal migrants, somehow alien or threatening to Italy.⁴¹

In addition, Italian citizenship is conferred on *jus sanguinis* and not *jus soli*. This means that most of the growing number of second-generation immigrants don't have automatically the right to Italian citizenship, even if they were born in Italy, have become literate in Italian language and may have never lived in the country of origin of their parents or do not speak their language. This further contributes to enhance essentialist conceptions in respect to the otherness of the Chinese, Asian or 'Oriental' 'non-communitarian' (i.e. their non-Italianness). Among other, it 'limits the possibilities for expressions of mixed or multiple identities, and renders formal citizenship status a key identity marker' (Baldassar and Raffaetà 2018: 738). In contrast to countries with a longer history of Asian immigration such as North America, Australia or the United Kingdom, where hyphenated identity is accepted both in formal and popular discourse (i. e. Asian American or Afro-American), Italy is still a 'context where the politics of identity does not permit mixed ethnic identities and consequently forbids any claim to Italian identity' (Baldassar and Raffaetà 2018: 740), making social inclusion and participation even more difficult. This means that identity is mainly ascribed on visible phenotypes linked to essentialist notion of culture and citizenship, contributing to the reproduction of colonial and racist stereotypes about the 'yellow' other.

Yellowness: 'cin ciun cian' (ching chong), 'almond eyes' and racism without racists

The word 'Chinese' referring to incomprehensible discourse, text and writing is among the negative stereotypes listed by the Italian Chambers of Deputies (ICD) report on intolerance, xenophobia, racism and hate crimes (ICD 2017: 26). Actually, '*ciun ciun cian*' (ching chong) is the expression widely used in everyday life to address people of East Asian origin or aspect. It represents one of the most diffused and unfortunately unacknowledged forms of micro-aggression, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, because it is even not registered in Italian dictionaries, including the above-mentioned report against racism, and usually not recorded in the news.⁴² *Cin ciun cian* could be considered as a linguistic and performative marker (it is usually shouted), highlighting crucial aspects in the essentialist overlapping of biological and cultural racialization of the 'Oriental' or 'yellow' other. As the English equivalent 'ching chong', it is used to point to or to mock and play on Chinese, East or Southeast

Asian language, people or culture to stress their assumed incomprehensibility and radical diversity. But while *cin ciun cian* may be perceived as irritating, pejorative or racist by people addressed by these terms, on the contrary, people using them tend to emphasize their funny, humorous, playful, light intentions, without offensive or racist purposes, contributing to a polarized perception and interpretation.⁴³

From a linguistic point of view, *cin ciun cian* is an imitation of Chinese seeming sounds to an Italian speaker: the syllable ‘*ci*’ indicates the perceived frequency of voiceless coronal affricates (Mandarin [ts], [tʂ], [tʂʰ], [tsʰ], [tʂʰ], [tʂʰ], respectively, in Pinyin ⟨z⟩, ⟨zh⟩, ⟨j⟩, ⟨c⟩, ⟨ch⟩, and ⟨q⟩), while the ‘*n*’ points to the perceived abundance of nasal sounds in syllable codas in many varieties of Chinese. According to socio-linguistic Elaine Chun, ‘this “bivalent” word, which belongs to two languages at once, serves less to disrupt this linguistic boundary than to reify it’ (Chun 2016: 82).⁴⁴

Cin ciun cian seems to have a quite unclear origin in Italy. In the English-speaking world, it has been found as early as the late 19th century in children’s songs (Paik Lee and Chan 1990: 16–17). From a wider historical perspective, this expression resonates with the same etymological and cultural logic underlying the term ‘barbarian’ or ‘*barbaro*’ in Italian. Both originate from the ancient Greek βάρβαρος ‘*barbaros*’, which has been considered as an onomatopoeic word: ‘*bar...bar*’ to imitate the sound of non-Greek speakers (Egyptians, Persians, Medes, Phoenicians, etc.), indicating something incomprehensible, gibberish, unpleasant, similar to animal sounds, as in the Italian verb ‘*BORbottare*’ (to mumble) or ‘*BALbettare*’ (to stutter). At a later stage, further cultural and civilizational connotation have been attributed to the term, which has been used to refer to alien, primitive, inferior, uncivilized, inhuman behaviour and people, in contrast to the Greek, Roman or the so-called Western civilization. In other words, the appellation *cin ciun cian* can be considered as a more informal or vulgar equivalent of ‘barbarian’. In this sense, it reveals the shift from orientalism of the ancient other (for instance Persian) to neo-orientalism of the modern or contemporary other (East Asian) as opposite, inferior and potentially threatening, to ‘Western’ identity.

However, unlike ancient or classical orientalism, modern orientalism has been deeply affected by colonial and scientific ideology of racism. In fact, the term *cin ciun cian* or ‘ching chong’ is not rarely combined with the pantomimic gesture of the slit-eyes pose, the so-called *occhi a mandorla* (almond eyes), both intended to imitate acoustically and physically the ‘yellow’ other. The modern hegemony of this racialized orientalism has been so effective, that even most influential representations, loved by generations in Europe, have contributed to its reproduction, at least until recent times. For instance, it was not until 2014 that Swedish national broadcaster SVT eliminated a scene from the *Pippi Longstocking* TV series adaptation, based on the famous character created by writer Astrid Lindgren in 1945.⁴⁵ In this edited scene, Pippi, acted by Inger Nilsson, is performing in front of her friends an ironic imitation of a Chinese, by singing repeatedly: ‘*shin shun, shin shin, shin shun, pling, pling!*’ and making the slit-eye pose.⁴⁶

While the use of *cin ciun cian* in Italy is mostly restricted to children or teenagers, the slit-eye gesture is more used also by adults, not rarely as a well intentional sign of cultural or personal appreciation of the Asian other. Maria Giovanna Elmi, a former Italian television announcer and presenter, a national celebrity in Italy for many decades appreciated for her spontaneous kindness and professionalism, has performed this pose for the weekly journal *Gente* in 2019, appearing in an article under the title ‘For him [my



Figure 5. Maria Giovanna Elmi, *Gente*, 30 March 2019.⁴⁷

husband] I have become the fairy of the Orient' (Figure 5). In this case, during her stay in a Japanese hot spring to celebrate with her husband their silver wedding anniversary, she is intentionally paying homage to Japanese traditional culture, while offering herself as a geisha-like fairy to her husband.

Many similar photos have passed unnoticed or unchallenged by Italian public opinion, but finally in late 2019, there was one which received more attention; in this case, there was a specific addressee, who did not appreciate the homage. The trigger was a photo posted on his Instagram account by Michelin starred chef Gianluca Gorini on 4 December 2020. He has been chosen during the Gelinaz! international culinary competition to pair with Victor Liang, a Chinese Australian chef from Melbourne. To celebrate this exciting event and pay homage to his 'Oriental' partner, he took a selfie with his staff, putting supposed Chinese rice farmers hats and making the slit-eye pose (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Gianluca Gorini and his staff, *Gambero Rosso*, 6 December 2019.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, Victor Liang didn't appreciate this photo at all, while accusation of racism on social media posted by infuriated Asian Canadians and Asian Americans chefs went viral and were covered by international news broadcasters.^{49, 50} Gorini apologized instantly and Gelinaz! officially defined the photo as 'unacceptable, offensive and humiliating'.⁵¹ However, Italian chefs and newspapers considered it a complete wrong accusation because, even if not appropriate, it was after all only an innocent and funny joke and the intention of the Italian chef was of sincere friendship and transcultural curiosity.⁵² In contrast to media discourse in Italy, one of the most interesting comment about this incident was a twitter by Korean American chef Edward Lee: 'Funny thing is the most racist people I know always insist that they aren't...as if that corrects it all' (@chefedwardlee, 4 December 2019).⁵³ Even after public condemnation of racist attacks against 'Chinese' or 'Orientals' during the pandemic, the slit-eye pose still continues to be popular in Italian mainstream media. On 12 April 2021, satirical TV show "Striscia la Notizia" (ca. 4.6 million viewers) of television channel Canale 5 hosted former member of the Italian Parliament Gerry Scotti and Swiss-Italian model Michelle Hunziker, pulling the corners of their eyes up and mocking the pronunciation of the letter "R" attributed to Chinese people. Again, the accusation of racism didn't start in Italy, but came from foreign dog watchgroup Diet Prada. Accessed 22 April 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNnuRoKnv8u/>.

The difficulty of the 'White' majority to decentralize, if not de-colonize, its own perspective to share and possibly empathize with the position and point of view of the coloured other has been evident also in one recent anti-racism campaign. In the same

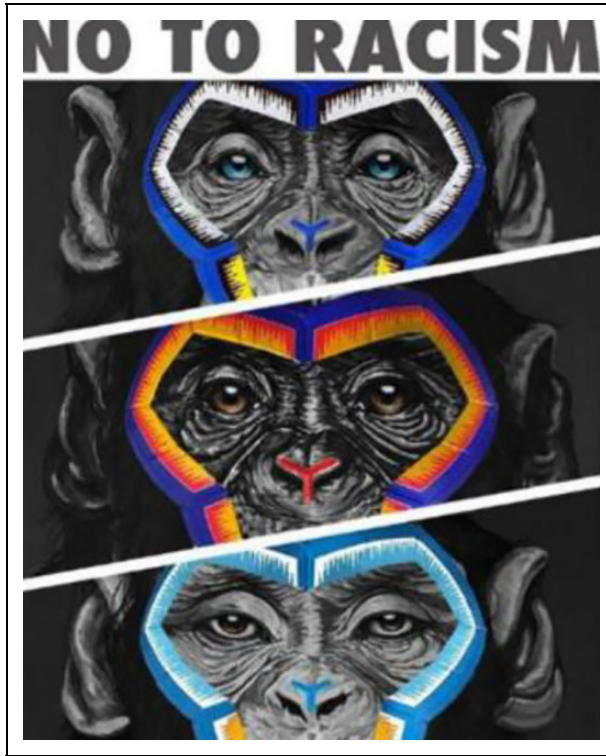


Figure 7. Soccer Lega Serie A campaign 2019 against racism (artist Simone Fugazzoto).⁵⁴

month of chef Gorini's incident, in the light of increasing and disturbing racist insults during soccer games against African or African Italian players, who have been targeted with racist chanting, monkey sounding howls and banana launches, soccer Lega Serie A decided to start an anti-racist campaign, showing three chimpanzees: one ape with blue eyes referring to 'White' or European people, one with brown eyes referring to 'Black' or African people and one with slanted eyes referring to Asian people (Figure 7).

However again, good intentions backfired.⁵⁵ The pictures spurred heated criticism from players of African origin in all Europe, but also by Serie A clubs, such as AC Milan and AS Rome.⁵⁶ Anti-discrimination network Football against Racism in Europe wrote: 'In a country in which the authorities fail to deal with racism week after week Serie A have launched a campaign that looks like a sick joke. [...] These creations are an outrage, they will be counterproductive and continue the dehumanization of people of African heritage'.⁵⁷ Serie A Ceo Luigi De Siervo promptly apologized, but Simone Fugazzotto, the artist who painted the three apes, continued insisting on his sincere intentions of promoting equity and brotherhood, induced by personal indignation during a soccer game, where Senegalese-French player Kalidou Koulibaly had been targeted by monkey imitating howls. According to the artist, the anti-racist message should be evident to 'a pure mind, a pure heart' who may be inspired to realize that 'we are all monkeys, we are

all the same'⁵⁸ because 'we can be Catholics, Muslims or Buddhists, but ultimately it is our actions that define who we are, not the color of our skin'.⁵⁹

These comments are symptomatic not only of the difficulties to recognize the blind spot of Eurocentric (or Italo-centric) perspective sustained by 'White' privilege but also to deal with the ambivalent complexities facing anti-racists who try to articulate humanistic universalism (we are all brothers) and multicultural particularism (but we are also different). On the one hand, for a 'White' (Italian male), it may be self-critically or self-aesthetically revealing to view himself as a blue-eyed monkey and extend this condition of shared apeness to coloured people in an act of benevolent tolerance; on the other, it could not be equally self-gratifying for people of African origin, who may have experienced degrading racist slurs based on the very association with the figure of a monkey, or for people of Asian origin, who may have suffered similar experiences as targets of the slit-eyes pose configuring yellowness. Furthermore, the loose association of 'White' or European people to Catholics, of 'Black' or African people to Muslims and Asians to Buddhists, besides the religious generalization, points to a more ambiguous overlapping between biological and cultural racialization.

As Pierre-André Taguieff has remarked regarding the French context since the early 1970s, we are witnessing in the last decades a wider shift in racializing rhetoric and ideology; from concepts of race, inequality and heterophobia, to increasing acceptance, if not celebration, of ethnicity/culture, difference and heterophilia (Taguieff 2011:4). This means that, regardless of being racists or antiracists, both haters and lovers of cultural and ethnic difference may actually contribute to form the two sides of the same coin. In other words, both culturalization of biology and biologization of culture are ultimately complicit in neo-essentialist racialization as a primary principle of collective othering and identity.

Pandemic antibodies

In reaction to the initial wave of racist attacks targeting 'Orientals' and 'Chinese' all over Italy, in addition to public condemnation of these episodes, it is Italian Chinese and Chinese Italian individuals, communities and companies that emerged as active and visible agents of resistance, as well as boosters for solidarity. On 2 February 2020, Massimiliano Martigli Jiang performed a symbolic street protest in the historical centre of Florence, blindfolding himself, wearing a surgical mask and standing silently beside a handwritten sign: 'I am not a virus. I am a human being. Set me free from prejudice' (Figure 8).

Some local passers-by reacted to this invitation by applauding, hugging him or removing the blindfold from his face.⁶¹ Martigli Jiang is member of the Chinese Italian Youth Union which together with Micromedia Communication Italy and Associna, all organizations established by second-generation Chinese immigrants, sponsored similar performances in different cities and posted their videos on social media.⁶² On 9 February 2020, in occasion of the soccer derby in Milan, players of FC Inter, owned by Chinese commercial giant Suning, wear shirts with 'Keep fighting China!' in Chinese woven on their shirts in front of a giant screen projecting the slogan: 'Today and always. Together as a team. Forza Wuhan'.⁶³



Figure 8. 'I'm not a virus'. Massimo Martigli Jiang, Florence, 4 February 2020.⁶⁰

Already before the first cases of COVID-19 had been reported in Italy, Chinese communities had started to check, in coordination with the Chinese Embassy, incoming members from mainland China, imposing self-quarantine and even renting apartments or entire hotels in the mountains.⁶⁴ In the initial phase of the pandemic, a huge amount of masks (unobtainable for common people in early 2020), sanitarian clothing and money have been donated to hospitals, schools and neighbourhoods, including masks left in mailboxes of condominiums with a message of encouragement and friendship.⁶⁵ Concomitantly, the PRC sent to Italy a team of nine medical staff together with tons of medical supplies (face masks, protective suits, artificial respirators).⁶⁶

This link between the PRC, companies and the coordination of local communities in handling both the sanitary and racist emergency has contributed to gradually shift public perception and prejudice of the Chinese, labelled as the origin and contagious infector of COVID-19, to the image of the victim, or even of an efficient and helpful agent to contrast the pandemic. It arguably favoured for the first time the embryonic idea of 'model minority' in Italy referred to the Chinese or Chinese Italians. Unlike the 'model minority' in the United States built upon, but also criticized by, the Asian American community, this 'model' seems at least for now to be strongly shaped by more direct coordination with the Chinese State or corporations. The town of Prato in Tuscany hosts one of the largest Chinese communities in Europe, while whole Italy has become the destination for increasing immigration from mainland China, which almost tripled in the last 15 years (ISTAT 2021).⁶⁷ However, in addition to the persistence of *jus sanguinis*, which still hinders full citizenship and social integration to a large part of second-generation immigrants, the relatively recent Chinese immigration to Italy

and the moderate overall number of other Asian migrants or immigrants have not allowed the formation of a more solid, embedded and independent Chinese or Asian Italian community.⁶⁸

Sociologist Antonella Ceccagno has highlighted the ‘mixed embeddedness’ of Chinese migrants’ agency, shaped by close, vertical and collective coordination with mainland China (Ceccagno 2015) and has employed the concept of ‘grid reaction’ to define their ‘model community’ in Italy during the pandemic.⁶⁹ This strong connection between migrants or immigrants, who remain to a large part Chinese citizens and their State, could be observed also a few years before on 12 April 2007 during a spontaneous riot in Milano; hundreds of Chinese merchants clashed with local police over matters of traffic control and some protesters stormed the streets waving huge flags of the PRC.⁷⁰ This induced the ambassador of the PRC to release an interview for *Il Corriere della Sera*, Italy’s most read newspaper, stating: ‘They should not try to kick us out, otherwise we will reconsider our investments in Italy. [...] Many [of the Chinese community] feel more discriminated compared to other non-EU people’ (14 April 2007).⁷¹ Extending this intra-societal perspective to an intra-governmental level, Italy has been the first European Union country to suspend on 31 January 2020 direct flights to and from mainland China and Taiwan. However, it was also the first G7 country to formally join the Belt and Road Initiative, arguably the most ambitious infrastructure and investment plan in human history and which has become the symbol of the RPC’s increasing global hegemony.

Conclusion: Post-pandemic equalities?

If we consider racism and the wider process of intersecting inequalities as an engine that structure the identitarian project of our societies and world, then the COVID-19 pandemic has been the fuel that started the machine, which may have been more or less running in neutral. However, the smooth progression of the engine depends on the quality of the fuel, which could be mixed with impure or even resistant ingredients that may induce to slow down, arrest or eventually compromise the engine.

The virulent social panic of prejudice, hate speech and physical attacks in early 2020 Italy against ‘Orientals’ and ‘Chinese’ reveals, on the one hand, how the COVID-19 has been a powerful fuel to restart the machine of bio-cultural racialization, configuring, in this case, the pathological yellowness ascribed to the ‘Oriental’ other, to preserve the health of ‘White’, ‘Western’ or ‘Italian’ identity. On the other, it shows that an increasing variety of more ambivalent and resistant ingredients have emerged, which are gradually reconfiguring the racist engine and its underlying asymmetrical relations of power, both on an intra-societal and international level.

The investigation of the Italian case has revealed how the PRC has gained increasing hegemonic effectiveness on the international level towards the Italian state and on the intra-societal level through the coordination of the ‘grid reaction’ of its Chinese communities. However, the critical scrutiny of Italian media discourses has shown also how deep-rooted, essentialist and racialist common sense constructing the ‘yellow Oriental’, regardless of being Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and so on have been reproduced in the past almost unchallenged. This has offered limited and only *a posteriori*

margins for resistance to the first wave of racist attacks, relying to a large extent to institutional top-down actions, both from the Italian side and from the external (PRC)–internal (immigrant individuals, organizations) Chinese side.


This investigation has also indicated how bottom-up actions have been relatively weak; not only because verbal or physical microaggressions against ‘Chinese’ or ‘Orientals’ have been committed mostly on a level of informal, spontaneous, everyday life but also because it is at this bottom-up level that a more socially embedded, numerous and independent community of Chinese Italians or Asian Italians would have been crucial, as could be seen instead in counter-discourses and affirmative actions by Asian American politicians, intellectuals, organizations opposing racism, during and before the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

Italy’s specific modern history of colonialism and the persistence of *jus sanguinis* are some of the more evident obstacles to the acquisition of full citizenship, social integration and autonomy for second-generation immigrants; not only for Asian Italians or Chinese Italians but also for the wider multitude of African Italians or other immigrants, who could jointly contribute to decolonize these deep-rooted assumptions about racial otherness, such as yellowness and blackness. However, as the U.S. experience has shown so far, it is not only through the legal and individual acquisition of civil, social and political rights guaranteed by *formal citizenship* and the shift to a more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic or colour-blind society that the mechanism of the racist engine has been radically compromised (Mills 2017; Olson 2002). The issue of *substantive citizenship* points instead to the challenge on how those rights may be actually enjoyed, or not, through mutual trust, solidarity and recognition in relation to other citizens within everyday practice and struggle, to actively participate and construct a more equal society, economy and politics (Glenn 2011).

In this sense, besides the liberal and communitarian divide, informing more or less universalistic and democratic paradigms to define or regulate the belonging to a common identity, what may be needed is not only more critical scrutiny of globalized racialization occurring in everyday interaction or media discourse. In addition, what the global and Italian COVID-19 pandemic have revealed is the crucial importance of critical self-reflexivity towards more wider, foundational and modern assumptions shaping our modes of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, how is bio-cultural racialization related to other intersecting inequalities such as class and gender, contributing cumulatively to make the whiteness of hegemonic identity still a kind of blind spot? A step back to revision and practice a more hybrid, democratic, cosmopolitan and may be less universalistic future.

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Antonio Gramsci 1971: 324)

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Notes

1. See Antonio Guterres (18 July 2020).
2. For a general and updated overview, see the Wikipedia page “Xenophobia and racism related to the COVID-19 pandemic.” Accessed 20 March 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenophobia_and_racism_related_to_the_COVID-19_pandemic.
3. For a historical investigation on the modern construction of the ‘yellow’ race, see Michael Keevak (2011), Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (2013, 2015).
4. ‘Yellowness’ as a concept is still absent within critical or race theory. In contrast to the concept of ‘racism’ or its adjective ‘racist’, I am relying on the concept of ‘racialization’ as constructing yellowness to underline both its essentialist, homogenous and static and its processual, heterogenous and unstable aspects. Unlike racism, racialization precedes evaluations about superior, inferior or equal ‘races’ but is instead the underlying process that contributes to the very idea that ‘races’ do actually exist and, therefore, to the ascription of racial meanings to persons, cultures, societies and civilizations.
5. In reaction to the World Health Organization admonition on February 2020 to avoid linking the virus to China, the journal *Nature* published an article of apologies: ‘As well as naming the illness, the WHO was implicitly sending a reminder to those who had erroneously been associating the virus with Wuhan and with China in their news coverage – including *Nature*. That we did so was an error on our part, for which we take responsibility and apologize’ (*Nature*, 7 April 2020: 580).
6. However, for a genealogical investigation, stressing historical discontinuity between Sinophobic epidemics in classical times and contemporary United States, see Dennis Zhang (2021).
7. Accessed 16 May 2020. https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/rubrica/2020/01/29/news/ellekappa_la_vignetta_del_30_01_2020-247106037/.
8. Accessed 19 May 2020. https://liberenotizie.altervista.org/il-razzismo-esiste-cara-giovane-immigrata-cinese-hai-ragione-tu/?doing_wp_cron=1617026623.7125430107116699218750.
9. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://nuovavenezia.gelocal.it/venezia/cronaca/2020/01/26/news/venezia-da-baby-gang-spunti-e-insulti-a-coppia-cinese-1.38384648>. <https://www.rappler.com/world/europe/spitting-shaming-chinese-communities-warn-italy-racism-virus>.
10. Actually, Valentina Wang reported too on her Facebook page that nobody defended her in the train from the assault of the teenagers who spat on her.
11. Accessed 19 May 2020. https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/coronavirus_ragazzo_cinese_aggedito_veneto-5076238.html.
12. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.castedduonline.it/demetrio-il-filippino-di-assemmini-picchiato-selvaggiamente-perche-cinese-che-infetti-col-virus-grazie-a-dio-sono-salvo/>.
13. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.blogsicilia.it/palermo/coronavirus-a-palermo-scritta-razzista-davanti-negozio-cinese-cina-assassina/520406/>.
14. Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.open.online/2020/01/29/milano-volantini-dei-neonazisti-nel-giorno-della-memoria-boicotta-i-commercianti-asiatici/>.
15. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.lastampa.it/vercelli/2012/12/10/news/scritte-razziste-sul-muro-del-market-cinese-1.36350762>.
16. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.genova24.it/2020/02/cinese-infame-le-scritte-della-vergogna-comparse-a-marassi-tra-svastiche-e-insulti-231872/>.

17. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.amnesty.it/coronavirus-amnesty-international-italia-vergognosa-ondata-di-sinofobia/>.
18. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/31/top-european-music-school-suspended-students-east-asia-over-coronavirus-concerns-amid-rising-discrimination/>. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/18/coronavirus-prompts-hysterical-shameful-sinophobia-in-italy>
19. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/01/30/coronavirus-il-conservatorio-di-santa-cecilia-sospese-le-lezioni-degli-studenti-orientali/5689747/>.
20. Former U.S. President Barack Obama signed in 2016 a bill (H.R. 4238) that eliminated the terms ‘Negro’ and ‘Oriental’ from Federal Law, replacing them with ‘African American’ and ‘Asian American’, ‘Native Hawaiian’, ‘Pacific Islander’, respectively. The bill has been promoted by congresswoman Grace Meng who commented: ‘Many Americans may not be aware that the word “Oriental” is derogatory. But it is an insulting term that needed to be removed from the books, and I am extremely pleased that my legislation to do that is now the law of the land’ (20 May 2016). Accessed 21 January 2021. <https://meng.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/meng-bill-to-remove-the-term-oriental-from-us-law-signed-by-president>.
21. For instance, a language teacher at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, a Japanese woman married to a Venetian resident, reported this episode on her personal Facebook page on 28 April 2020. The lockdown rules had started to loosen and she was happy to take a liberating walk in Venice with her 12 years old son after a long period of self-confinement at home. However, on the street, she had been insulted by a group of local teenage girls, laughing and shouting at them ‘Ew, these people suck!’. As a further personal account in Venice, Chinese owners of Asian restaurants had not only been obliged to shut down activities but also to forbid their daughters to walk out in the streets to avoid being exposed to the pervasive Sinophobia by local residents.
22. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mattarella-visita-scuola-piu-cinese-roma-gesto-anti-discriminazioni-AC4sLaHB>.
23. Accessed 19 May 2020. President of the Italian Repubblica website: <https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/44136>.
24. Ixé survey on 25 February 2020: Lega Nord 27.7%, Democratic Party 21.6%, 5 Star Movement 15.4%, Brothers of Italy 13.7%, Forza Italia 5.9%. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.youtrend.it/2020/02/26/sondaggi-politici-ixe-25-febbraio-in-crescita-i-partiti-di-governo/>.
25. It must be stressed that part of his controversial remarks, including appreciation of Mussolini and Hitler, have been considered as provocative exaggerations. For an updated overview, see the Wikipedia page, accessed 25 March 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vittorio_Feltri.
26. Accessed 21 May 2020. <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/opinioni/13559307/vittorio-feltri-coronavirus-cinesi-piu-intelligenti-piaga-sara-sanata.html>.
27. Besides right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale*, which described Japanese people as ‘yellow mugs’ (*‘musi gialli’*) (30 April 2009), prompting a protest from the Japanese Embassy, Italian press occasionally uses the term ‘yellow’ referring to Asians or Chinese. For instance, *Limes*, a respected journal of geo-politics in Italy, published an issue on China with the title “The Yellow Brand. Why China Is Scary” (*Il marchio giallo. Perché la Cina fa paura*, 11 July 2008). Regional newspaper *Il Quotidiano di Sicilia* published an article with the headline “The Yellow Economy Advances in Sicily” (24 December 2013), and even the *Il Sole 24 Ore*,

- owned by the national Italian employers' federation Confindustria, commented on the New Silk Road as a challenge for Italy to face the bulky reality of a 'yellow' planet (18 March 2019). Among these terms, 'yellow planet' has been the most popular one before the pandemic, cross-cutting newspapers and even travel agencies.
28. According to Winpoll survey (20 April 2020). "Who Is the Politician You Have Appreciated More in this Period of Crisis?" Zaia 46%, Conte (prime minister) 35%, Mattarella (president of the Republic) 32%, Meloni (leader of right-wing party Brothers of Italy) 28%, Bonaccioni (president of Emilia-Romagna region) 23%, De Luca (president of Campania region) 20%, Salvini (leader of right-wing party Lega Nord) 19%. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://scenariopolitici.com/2020/04/sondaggio-scenari-politici-winpoll-28-aprile-2020.html/5>.
 29. Luca Zaia Official Facebook. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/zaiaufficial20.01.2020>,
 30. Accessed 20 May 2020. https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/venezia/televisione_antenna_tre_medianordest_prima_tv_italia_ascolti_auditel_fascia_12_30_13_30-5209937.html. https://www.auditel.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Regionale-TV-Locali_2020.pdf.
 31. For this specific part of Zaia's talk, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqKPFtH3eDE>.
 32. Accessed 20 May 2020. https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/28/news/coronavirus_1_ambasciata_cinese_basiti_un_politico_italiano_ci_insulta_-249841889/.
 33. The video has been posted on YouTube by Papavero TV on 26 January 2020. Accessed 25 May 2020, but has been removed since then.
 34. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=cinese+mangia+pippistrello&sp=CAM%253D; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_qpA-9td3M.
 35. *Il Gazzettino*, the main local newspaper in Venice and in Triveneto region, published on 23 January 2020 the Chinese girl eating bat video on its webpage. Accessed 19 May 2020. https://www.ilgazzettino.it/video/primopiano/virus_cina_ragazza_mangia_un_pipistrello_al_ristorante_animale_da_cui_si_sospetta_sia_partita_la_malattia-5002987.html. According to a national survey conducted in Italy between September and October 2020, still ca. 30% respondents were convinced that COVID-19 spread to Chinese people eating bats and other wild animals (Gallelli et al. 2020: 14).
 36. For an overview of new orientalism towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic in Euro-American media (Australia, UK, USA, Germany), see Meinhof (2020). For a critical investigation of these discourses in Italian media before the pandemic, see Zhang (2019).
 37. The only exception is the non-academic, but unique work, written by journalist and essayist Fabio Giovannini (2010).
 38. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/05/people-around-the-globe-are-divided-in-their-opinions-of-china/>.
 39. Italian Chamber of Deputies (2017: 45–46). Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.camera.it/leg17/1313>. www.camera.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg17/attachments/uploadfile_com_missione_intolleranza/files/000/000/001/RELAZIONE_FINALE.pdf.
 40. Students below the average bullying rate against those of foreign origin (ca. 48 episodes reported in the last month) are of Romanian, Ecuadorian, Moldovan origin. Interestingly, Italian students reported abuses too (ca. 42 episodes), but those of Peruvian, Albanian and Ukrainian origin reported less episodes (Italian National Institute of Statistics [ISTAT] 2020: 59).

41. For a critical investigation of this racialization in Italian cinema, see Grace Russo Bullaro (2010).
42. On a personal note, as a Japanese living in Italy for more than 30 years, I have been addressed countless times by these expressions, mainly coming from groups of children or boys in the streets, shouting it sometimes from a long distance and laughing. This includes also the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the addition of ‘Chinese!’, ‘disgusting virus’ or ‘go home!’. Furthermore, according to annual surveys in the last 5 years conducted among my undergraduate students of Japanese Studies at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, the most annoying stereotype for them about Japan is that so many people do not distinguish between Chinese and Japanese, including their respective languages and cultures, terming them both ‘*cin ciun cian*’.
43. For a socio-linguistic investigation of the expression ‘ching chong’ in the U.S. context, see Elaine Chun (2016).
44. Chun stresses also the pattern of antiphony in which repeated syllables differ by a single vowel; in the case of Italian, the ‘i’ is followed by the ‘u’ and eventually by the ‘a’ (as in *bim bum bam, pim pum pam*, etc.); in English the ‘i’ is followed by the ‘o’ (as in king kong, ping pong, tick tock).
45. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/arts/television/pippi-longstockings-words-to-be-modified-for-tv.html>.
46. This scene can be viewed on YouTube. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjdr6CEgws0>.
47. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/italy/gente-italy/20190330/281685436200815>.
48. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.gamberorosso.it/notizie/il-giovane-chef-gianluca-gorini-accusato-ingiustamente-di-razzismo-una-storia-incredibile/>.
49. Chef Liong commented: “At the start I was f* pissed off.” Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://thelocaltongue.com/victor-liong-gelinaz-shuffle/?fbclid=IwAR0ZbB1RGSEky7pHTDAZRKcQzR2d6KbusvNBxMP3rLScpgUAgErFgwoe0I4>.
50. Accessed 11 March 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/italian-chef-apollo-gizes-racist-slant-eye-pose-n1096831>.
51. Accessed 19 May 2020. <https://www.gamberorosso.it/notizie/il-giovane-chef-gianluca-gorini-accusato-ingiustamente-di-razzismo-una-storia-incredibile/>.
52. For a critical analysis of racist humour and jokes, see Raul Pérez (2017).
53. This episode resonates with the Dolce&Gabbana videos in November 2018 aimed at promoting its luxury brand in Shanghai and which has been accused of racism too. Accessed 22 May 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/fashion/dolce-gabbana-china-disaster-backlash.html>
54. Accessed 20 May 2020. https://www.adnkronos.com/roma-contro-lega-a-razzismo-non-si-batte-con-scimmie_4T9R7MIJj8tJDqJVngPTYW.
55. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2019/dec/16/serie-a-receives-condemnation-anti-racism-artwork-monkeys>.
56. Accessed 20 May 2020. https://www.corriere.it/sport/19_dicembre_17/quadro-le-scimmie-contro-razzismo-campagna-lega-a-indigna-roma-social-manager-adda5424-20a7-11ea-ad99-8e4d121df86f.shtml.

57. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/soccer-italy-racism-idINKBN1YL1T3>.
58. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/1448765>.
59. Accessed 20 May 2020. https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/le-tre-scimmie-artistiche-control-il-razzismo-nel-calcio-e-polemica-fugazzotto-stupito_it_5df8861de4b047e888a34822. <https://www.seriea-fanplace.it/combattere-il-pregiudizio-con-larte/>.
60. Accessed 10 February 2021. https://www.adnkronos.com/non-sono-un-virus-protesta-di-un-ragazzo-cinese-video_.
61. Accessed 10 February 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3872349>.
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68. Major Asian immigrant groups in Italy: 288,923 Chinese; 157,655 Filipino; 7481 Japanese; 5692 Thai; 1455 Vietnamese; 3783 South Koreans (ISTAT 2020).
69. Borrowing from anthropologist Biao Xiang, Ceccagno and Salvati define the ‘grid reaction’ as ‘consisting in the mobilization of residential communities, districts, and cities that act as grids, with “grid managers” (normally volunteers) and “grid heads” (cadres who receive state salaries) imposing tight surveillance over all residents and minimize mobilities. The “grid reaction” is therefore an undifferentiated warlike strategy that involves everyone’. (Ceccagno and Alvati 2020).
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