

LITTLE ITALY, BIG JAPAN: PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY AND DISPLACEMENT AMONG ITALIAN WRITERS IN JAPAN

MICHELE MONSERRATI
(Tulane University)

Sommario

L'articolo studia due incontri di eccezione tra la cultura italiana e quella giapponese: l'organica interpretazione di Fosco Maraini, antropologo e orientalista, in visita a più riprese (anche in circostanze drammatiche) nel paese del Sol Levante prima e dopo la seconda guerra mondiale; le impressioni e i giudizi, tra letteratura e giornalismo, di Alberto Moravia. In entrambi i casi emerge una sorta di attrazione, pur non priva di riserve, per un modello dinamico, capace di conciliare – a differenza di quel che accadde nell'Italia del dopoguerra – tradizione e innovazione, passato e futuro.

Even today Western interpreters discourage any serious attempt at locating Japan within a comparative spectrum. They tend to emphasize Japanese uniqueness and exceptionality, despite the fact that twentieth-century Japanese history is by no means unrelated to the rest of the world. In this article I show one possible aspect of a comparison between Japan and Italy by employing the opposing categories of “tradition” and “modernity”.

During the three decades after World War II, Western intellectuals noted a remarkable aspect of Japanese reconstruction: the nation with the highest economic growth rate was also a society in which traditional values of the medieval age (e.g., respect for the divinity of the emperor, the structure of personal relations, the anxiety about gossip and criticism, and so on) were still alive. The paradox of structural change and continuity with the past is of particular interest to Italian observers because their society embraced a similar set of

problems at the dawn of the foundation of the Italian Republic. During the fifties and sixties, twentieth-century Italy experienced a similar economic development followed by an intense phenomenon of migration from the south to the cities driving the “economic miracle” in the north. The consequence of this rapid growth was unprecedented social and cultural transformations that engendered a perceived discontinuity with the past and change in the national identity. For Italians who travelled in Japan during these years and tried to interpret its rapid modernization, comparing the Nippon example with the historical circumstances that Italy was experiencing was inevitable.

It is not my intention to deny the authenticity of these accounts of Japan, but I believe that the original point of view of this representation – what distinguishes the Italian perspective from the rest of Western discourse on the Orient – can be detected in the reflected image of Italy through the lens of the Japanese world.

Two meetings with Japan

When approaching the relations between two different cultures and civilizations, one must consider not only diversity in terms of national identity but also in terms of more subjective elements related to the personal experience of the observer. The degree of comprehension of a different society depends on several variable factors, such as the amount of time spent in the country visited, general awareness of its history and culture, and finally, knowledge of the language. These aspects have played a determining role in selecting specific Italian authors for this article’s focus: Fosco Maraini (1912-2004) and Alberto Moravia (1907-1990). These authors visited Japan between the 1950s and 1980s, during which time Japan captured the attention of the entire world for its extremely fast modernization and economic growth. These writers also deal with the theme of modernity in relation to tradition, and they reach a similar conclusion: that the rapid changes in Japanese society have not overthrown the traditional structure of the society, relations among individuals, or its set of rules. What is most relevant to the purpose of this article is the different levels of experience and knowledge of Japanese society

among the authors. I present these authors' work in an order that corresponds to their different degrees of knowledge of the Nippon world and their inclination to compare it with Italy. In general, the less observers know about Japan (the least time spent within its territory and among its peoples), the higher the probability that they will to be engaged in a comparison with their own country. Encountering a new culture has the immediate effect of enhancing and intensifying awareness of the observer's national identity and of stimulating his reaction by emphasizing the differences.

For each author, the encounter with Japan results in an experience of infatuation somewhat greater than the typical reaction of a knowledgeable European writer in an exotic land. Behind their wondering gaze a shadow is cast, the shadow of the Italian republic and its uncertain path toward the acquisition of a clear, new identity.

The defence of Otherness: Fosco Maraini and Japan

The first of the two authors is Fosco Maraini – writer, photographer, mountaineer, traveller, and ethnologist. Maraini is definitely an Italian intellectual whose acquaintance with the Nippon world was deep. In this article I discuss his book, *Japan, Patterns of Continuity*, published in 1971.

Maraini first travelled to Japan in 1938, at the age of twenty-four, to study the Ainu people on the island of Hokkaido. In 1943, after Italy signed an armistice with the Allies on September 8, Maraini and his wife, Topazia, were imprisoned in a Japanese concentration camp with their three children because he refused to support Mussolini's Fascist Republic of Salò. As a vehement protest against the officials' inhuman treatment of inmates, Maraini lopped off his finger with a hatchet. The family was finally released in 1945 when the American troops took control. He returned to Japan from 1953 to 1956, during which time he collected the sources for his book about Japan, *Ore Giapponesi* (1957, the English translation was published in 1960 with the title *Meeting with Japan*). He visited Japan again from 1963 to 1972, and in 1970 he married his second wife, the Japanese Mieko Namiki.

Japan, Patterns of Continuity was published by the international publishing house Kodansha International, and immediately became a best-seller, with thousands of copies sold and named “book of the month” in the United States. Besides the superb quality of the photographs, the book’s success must also be attributed to the popularity of the subject, the relation between continuity and change in Japanese society. The rapid pace of modernization undertaken by Japan after the humiliation it suffered during the Second World War drove it to become one of the strongest economic powers in the world. Nevertheless, this is the “only complex society with a Bronze Age monarchy, where the emperor until recently was believed to be the lineal descendent of the sun goddess and, in some sense, himself divine” (Bellah:184). The paradox of Japanese modernization that drew the attention of the international community of anthropologists and sociologists is not concerned with its intense postwar recovery. Instead, it regards the nature of this change: that is, the fact that structural change was effective despite major features of Japanese society remaining unaffected. How can one explain the coexistence of unchanging structural features of Japanese society and the process of change?

Maraini has his own hypothesis, other than theorizing a dichotomy between continuity and change, as he makes clear at the very beginning:

Similar views [the dichotomist views], usually less explicitly stated, can be found in most writings on Japan, from the papers of economists to the articles of foreign correspondents or the books of missionaries.

The author feels inclined towards different conclusions. Thirty years of loving acquaintance with Japan, its people, its language and culture, have been a progressive discovery of unity and continuity underlying all superficial conclusion and change. (8)

While the visitor to Japan is normally impressed by the contrast of ancient elements existing side by side with all the accoutrements of a

modern industrial superpower, Maraini points out that there is a unity and continuity beneath this apparent contradiction.

In the fourth and last chapter, “The Future of the Past”, Maraini goes further and explains the details of his main stance that can be summed up as follows. One side of his argument is based on a distinction between Westernization and Modernization. Maraini first denies the idea that Japan’s success in modern world is due to its full acceptance of Western (mainly American) ideology, political thought, and ethics. In Japan change has the distinction of adopting Western technology (modernization) rather than its way of thinking or lifestyle (Westernization)¹.

In addition, Maraini emphasizes Japanese self-determinism. As a consequence, “Japan’s success must be explained in human terms and, one must add, predominantly in Japanese terms” (Maraini, 1971:183). The core of Maraini’s view is that through the centuries Japanese civilization has developed a series of elements that facilitated its path toward success in the modern world. First, “in the case of Japan [compared to Europe], a series of historical circumstances and some extremely lucky coincidences place its civilization in a most favourable position as regards the scientific mutation” (185).

According to Maraini, Japanese history is characterised by the absence of negative forces that could retard the rise of modern progress. In particular, he refers to the Christian bias toward the scientific revolution in medieval and early modern Europe as compared to the alleged religious tolerance of the Japanese: “Japan, therefore, appeared on the modern scene with a mental outlook

¹ In 2001 a new edition of *Le ore giapponesi (Meeting with Japan)* was released. Maraini added a new introduction in which he confirms the same view illustrated in *Pattern*: “Venendo adesso al Giappone, potremo affermare ch’esso è altamente, splendidamente modernizzato, assai più modernizzato di noi per molti aspetti, ma poco, pochissimo, occidentalizzato. Numerosi e continui malintesi tra stranieri e giapponesi hanno luogo proprio perché, visitando l’arcipelago e notando tanti segni di somiglianza con l’Occidente nel vestire, nella casa, nel mangiare, nel lavoro, nei giochi, nelle abitudini più comuni della giornata e della notte, il viaggiatore conclude: ma allora sono come noi! Niente affatto, sono diversissimi: in molte cose meglio di noi, in altre peggio, però sempre diversissimi. Regola basilare dunque: non si scambi modernizzazione per occidentalizzazione”. (*Le ore Giapponesi*, 2001:19)

particularly adapted to accept in full the essence of the Western scientific cultural mutation and of its dependent technological revolution, leaving behind all the antagonistic and retarding elements that were, and still are, so deep a part of Western civilization” (187).

Another aspect of the Japanese attitude toward modernization is the love of nature, which is mostly considered divine. Adoration of nature facilitates a scientific approach:

In this attitude toward nature and to life, I think one can appreciate an extraordinarily favorable background to the acceptance and understanding not merely of the methods and application of science but of its very spirit. Men and women who for thousands of years have approached nature in trepidation and wonder and who have been inspired by it to extraordinary heights of artistic and poetic feeling are now admirably prepared to face this same nature in a framework of pure rationality. [...] Such ideas may seem obvious today. It should be noted, however, that this attitude, achieved in the West by bitter victories over stake and proscription, springs in Japan from the most ancient frontiers of the collective mind, from myth, proverb, and folksong. (Maraini, 1971:189)

This love of nature carries another similarity between Japanese traditional values and the essence of modern times: “Transcendence and contemplation are out; immanent values and actions are in” (189). As a consequence, Maraini considers Japanese society to be more pragmatic and achievement oriented. A successful career is well rewarded on all sides; there is no contradiction between the spiritual sphere of life and the more interior needs of the soul.

Even the lack of individualism in Japanese society and the need for the individual to be embedded in a social network seem to meet the demands of modern life. As Maraini points out: “The modern age stresses communal life: ours are times of groups, crowds, collaboration, and social integration” (191).

In Japan ethical values are not based entirely on religious beliefs. Thus the process of secularization that is underway in the West does

not affect Japanese society: “The development of Japanese ethics has taken place predominantly under the auspices of secular philosophy, especially of Confucianism, and only to a limited extent under religion” (192).

Finally, Maraini reviews the common idea of Japan as a man’s world and emphasizes that the role of the woman is in a direction consonant with the recent tendencies of the contemporary world: “One may say, however, that modern Japanese women [...] have seized with spiritual eagerness most of the opportunities offered to them. There are few countries in the world where the average husband hands over the entire monthly pay-packet to his wife. The wife then takes care of household expenses, perhaps saves some, and doles out small sums for her husband’s personal pleasures” (194).

The overall picture presents an image of Japan as an ideal country for modern society and against the Western world that still faces negative influences, mostly due to religious values, from its past.

By showing the source of this particular cultural representation of Japan that Fosco Maraini provides, we can better understand what is omitted from the representation and, above all, we can compare the literature behind this interpretation with the discourse that Maraini builds on it. The author wants to hide his subjective cultural representation by claiming the status of a neutral observer when he says, “We are not expressing judgments; we are merely observing a cultural scene that has certain definite characteristics – the modern world” (191). Instead, what we are looking for are exactly the judgments that are implicit in his vision, that is, his relativistic view.

The idea of continuity between traditional and modern Japan was introduced by Japanese anthropologist Nakane Kie (1926-) in her book, *Japanese Society* (1970), published in English one year before *Patterns of Continuity*. At that time a Japanese self-interpretation was quite rare, and Nakane’s book became one of the most well-known examples of *nihonjinron* (discourse about the Japanese), with more than one million copies sold in her country and about thirty different translations published².

² Nakane Chie is also famous for being one of the few women of her generation to become a professor at a major university, the University of Tokyo.

The core of Maraini's stance is the same as that in Nakane's book, as is evident in the following quotation:

Some of the distinguishing aspects of Japanese society that I treat in this book are not exactly new to Japanese and Western observers and may be familiar from discussions in previous writings on Japan. However, my *interpretations* are different and the way in which I *synthesize* these aspects is new. Most of the sociological studies of contemporary Japan have been concerned primarily with its changing aspects, pointing to the "traditional" and "modern" elements as representing different or opposing qualities. [...] The proponents of such views are interested either in uprooting feudal elements or in discovering and noting modern elements that are comparable to those of the West. *The fabric of Japanese society has thus been made to appear to be torn into pieces of two kinds. But in fact it remains as one aspect (not element) of the same social body that also has "modern" features.* (Nakane, 1970:viii-ix)

For the first time Nakane elaborates on the idea of a pattern of continuity between traditional and modern Japan in a way that will be restated by Maraini. While Nakane's work attempts to show positive and negative aspects of modern Japanese society, Maraini is rather oblivious to the shortcomings of the Nippon economic revolution. By reading Nakane's book we learn what is hiding behind Maraini's praise for Japan's achievements in "high-level education, in ambition, organization, group solidarity, in a pragmatic approach to problems both large and small" (Maraini, 1971:212). According to Nakane, the key to understanding Japanese society is the principle of vertical human relations – the *ie*-type society. The typical Japanese group model is formed by an inverted "V". The superior member, located at the apex, establishes a link with two subordinated groups, located in the two branches. The only possible human relation is vertical and, ideally, each subordinate branch is not aware of the other's existence. Any horizontal collaboration among lower ranks is prevented by

superior hegemony. The result is that each individual is identified with a group (usually a group of co-workers) to the extent that individual identity overlaps with the group's identity. According to the vertical principle, individual freedom is undermined because what counts is the tie of the individual to one group (Nakane, 1970:57). Maraini joins Nakane in celebrating the modernity and efficiency of a society based on group affiliation but, unlike his Japanese counterpart, he neglects to admit the cost in terms of individual freedom that this model implies: "It is interesting to observe that the traditional system, manifested in a group organization, has generated both the major driving force toward a high degree of industrialization and the negative brake that hinders the development of individual autonomy" (Nakane, 1970:120). When Maraini emphasizes Japanese group solidarity he refers to the traditional household system and the great solidarity among members, but he disregards the realm of hostility and ruthless competition among the heterogeneous groups within the society. As Nakane observes, "the entire society is a sort of aggregation of numerous and independent competing groups that by themselves can make no links with each other: they lack a sociological framework on which to build up a completed and integrated society" (102). Another potential shortcoming that Nakane detects is the absence of mobility for workers among different companies: "The prohibition on mobility in the Japanese system promotes inefficiency" (107).

Even though Maraini does not deny the subjugation of the Japanese woman in contemporary society, he believes that the rising modern women's rights movement is consistent with the Japanese story in which women often occupy a privileged position in the social ranking. Maraini, who quotes Nakane in this regard, does not deal with the different pattern that Nakane lays out: instead of rising independence of Japanese women, Nakane observes that "Japanese wives adopt the role of mother rather than wife to their husbands; this is the traditional pattern, little affected by post-war change" (128). Excluded from any social activities, neglected by their husband who is more concerned with his work, Japanese wives direct their attention to their children; even the husband-wife relationship becomes a parent-child relationship.

In conclusion, Maraini's idealized portrait of Japan is partly due to his historical context: the 1970s was the beginning of Japan's economic boom with its clear effects on society. Japan's manufacturing production index reached 8,143 in 1965, while in the United States it was 1,227. The enthusiastic prediction that the twenty-first century will be the "Japanese century"³ is manifested throughout this book. Nakane's book on the same subject leads to a different conclusion. As a native-born Japanese woman, Chie Nakane presents an optimistic vision of her country but does not spare it from criticism. Maraini's case is just the opposite: Japan is his chosen country and through his lack of criticism he intends to advocate his choice. What is missing here is a point of reference for this interpretation: Maraini depicts a bright image of Japan in contrast to a generic "Western society" left behind on the path of modernization. I suspect that the accusation of backwardness and decadence has much more to do with Italy than with a generic "Western society". Behind this label one recognizes the dissatisfaction of an Italian intellectual toward his country and the path that Italy undertook after World War II. At the end of the war Italy and Japan were both defeated and victimized countries. While Japan was able to achieve unexpected growth, Italy's economic growth and social transformation failed to rebuild it into a leading country of the world, as the Fascist government had promised. The core of Maraini's criticism seems to be the influence of the Catholic Church in Italian society⁴. According to him, the split between Catholicism and science in terms of moral

³ In this regard see Herman Kahn, *The Emerging Japanese Superstate* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

⁴ For a detailed reconstruction of the role played by the Christian Democrat party in shaping the image of Italy see Gentile, 2009: "The way the Christian Democrats officiated at the 'Italy '61' celebrations [Italians' celebrations of the centennial of its unification] seemed to consecrate, with the pope's blessing, both the Catholic leadership of the national state and the reappropriation of the nation by the Catholics, who returned it to the Church's folds. The governing party was leading the country toward modernity under the emblem of Christ, moderating conservatism and progress, conciliating modernization and Christian tradition. At the same time, the Jubilee celebrations allowed the Christian Democrats to claim they were the legitimate winners of the competition with the communist party for the monopoly of the national myth" (Gentile, 2009:344).

values condemned Italy to fall behind the pace of other nations. The way that Maraini depicts his Japanese “dreamland” shows an implicit disappointment in the lack of significant change in Italian society. This bitter and implicit side of Maraini’s conclusion, this perception of decline of the sense of the nation, was common among Italian intellectuals during the period considered, as the journalist Domenico Bartoli sharply observes: “We are not capable of being the kind of state or nation that we are, or were, as civilization or culture. This incapacity exasperates particularly the intellectuals, active minorities and those who should be the ruling class, and turns everybody toward extreme pessimism or evasion, which almost always ends up in cynical indifference as soon as the first moments of fury passed” (Gentile, 2009:354).

This national climate of disillusionment among Italian intellectuals deeply affects Maraini’s representation of Japan; from his perspective, the change that Italy was unable to accomplish was carried out by the Far East country. This explains his diminished representation of the Western world compared to his wondrous view of the Nippon society.

Moravia and the Japanese crowd⁵

Moravia went to Japan three times as a reporter for the Italian magazine *L’espresso* and the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, as well as an intellectual invited by Japanese cultural institutes. In 1957 Moravia accepted an invitation to participate in the Pen Club congress in Tokyo, together with Stephen Spender (1909-1995) and Angus Wilson (1945-2005). Ten years later he came back to Japan with his new wife, Dacia Maraini (1936-), and together they travelled through China and Korea as well. In 1982, Moravia was sent by *L’espresso* to Hiroshima, where he wrote articles on the atomic bomb. As Moravia said in an interview, “The first time, the encounter with Japan, not always pleasant, was totally new for me. The second time, I met many writers and intellectuals, including Yukio Mishima, and I had the

⁵ All quotations from Moravia, 1994, are my translations.

opportunity to understand Japanese life more profoundly; on the other hand, the Japanese experience became mixed with those of China and Korea. Finally, the third time I visited also visited the Japanese provinces. I went as far as the island of Hokkaido, and in particular, after visiting Hiroshima, I decided to devote myself to the antiatomic campaign” (Moravia-Elkan, 2000:282).

Between the first and the second journey, Moravia observed the rise of the Japanese economic miracle, and along with Fosco Maraini he drew attention to the particular phenomenon of the coexistence of tradition and modernity in Japan. Unlike Maraini, who underlines the continuity between past and present in the Land of the Rising Sun, Moravia considers these two elements as independent and juxtaposed. The European Industrial Revolution is considered as an achievement of humanistic culture, and technical change is immersed in European thought. On the other hand, Moravia considers the Japanese Industrial Revolution as a consequence of opening the country to the rest of the world; it is a revolution based on imitation of European technical progress without absorbing the philosophical culture that nourished such progress. In the end, postwar Japan reveals a unique overlapping of the feudal structure of society and modern technology:

The nations of Asia are not in the least inferior to those of Europe but they have religious and cultural traditions that, unlike those of Europe, don't necessarily lead to industrial revolution; which is for Asia a voluntary and unnatural grafting of a foreign idea onto the traditional foundation of the nation rather than, as in Europe, the continuation of previous epochs.

The drama is therefore this: capacity for development equals that of European countries; religious and cultural traditions differ from those that in Europe preceded and prepared for scientific progress. For a century and a half this has been Japan's particular drama, and it not only occupies the centre of the country's social life but also individual consciousness. One owes to it on one hand the incredible, meteoric national transformation of the country into a great industrial power; on the other hand,

through the continual, obstinate force of assimilation, the mimetic immobility and hybridism of many sectors of cultural life. (Moravia, 1994:790)

In this way Moravia denies the existence of a “Japanese way of modernization” because in his view the persistence of the traditional elements in its history is due to the conservative character of its society; instead, technological innovation is due to the Japanese meeting a challenge to keep up with Western countries and delete the stigma of an inferior civilization. Moravia considers the ongoing changing process in Japan to be the result of a Westernization of this country and as an intrusion of a new-capitalistic politic into the body of an old and perishing culture. Moravia’s ultimate goal is to include the representation of Japan in his critical discourse against the alienating effects of neo-capitalism in society.

Alienation, a concept that Moravia borrows from Marx, is a cornerstone idea through which it is possible to interpret many protagonists of Moravian novels (for example, *Gli Indifferenti* [*Time of Indifference*], 1929 and *La noia* [*The Boredom*], 1960. Moravia’s essay *L’uomo come fine* [*Man as an End*] (1963) goes deeper in explaining how such concepts as “neo-capitalism”, “alienation”, and “anti-humanism” are related in the present world:

It would be interesting to ask why, despite the apparent contradiction, today’s anti-humanism coincides with the victorious achievements of neo-capitalism. [...] In the modern world it would be hard to find the solid confidence, the full-bloodedness and the richness of temperament that were the hallmarks of humanism at its dawn. The man of the neo-capitalist age, with his refrigerators, his supermarkets, his mass-produced cars, his missiles and his televisions sets, is so bloodless, insecure, devitalized and neurotic that he provides every justification for those ready and anxious to accept his decline as positive fact, and reduce him to the position of an object among other objects. And so his anti-humanism falls short of real conviction. Beneath the bright, abstract

appearance, we find – if we look carefully – boredom, disgust, impotence and unreality. (Moravia, 1966:9-10)

All these three key terms are suitable in Moravia's view of Japan. The Japanese economic miracle is nothing more than an example of a new-capitalistic phenomenon with all its negative consequences in terms of alienation. According to Moravia, Japanese modernization is not a result of an alternative humanism or an Asian scientific revolution, but represents the avant-garde of an anti-humanism spirit that lingers in Europe. This is evident in the way Moravia observes the Japanese path of modernization:

As long as the legacy of Christian and Renaissance Humanism endured in European culture, Japan was able to indeed define itself the clay pot among pots of iron. But the crisis, or better the liquidation of this legacy in recent years allowed for Japan a qualitative jump that aligned it equally with the big nations of the West, which brought about the industrial revolution with the noted consequences of the rise of the masses and mass production. Japan finds itself perfectly at ease, like her traditions, in a world where the individual disappears submerged by the mass, where the economic situation flattens every relationship and existential anxiety negates reality. (Moravia, 1994: 796)

The discourse about the Western contemporary crisis and the dawn of European humanism is predominant in Moravia's view, to the extent of including Japan in this scenario. Moravia's attempt to describe contemporary Japan as part of this crisis implies the negative connotation of Japanese tradition and culture as unable to produce an alternative modern form of humanism. On the contrary, it seems that the only source of Japanese culture is to imitate its European counterpart: "The massive doses, forced and swift, of Western cultural assimilation that took place in Japan for almost a century ended up almost producing in this country a state of schizophrenia, divided between the greedy and indiscriminate avidity of all that is

foreign and a conservatism and traditionalism just as excessive” (Moravia, 1994:830).

At this point it is worth asking how Moravia justifies his idea of Japanese culture as an empty container suitable for every kind of Western intrusion without offering any resistance. It is interesting to investigate how Moravia explains this passive and conservative attitude of Japanese civilization. In one article Moravia uses the image of a paper page (“un foglio di carta”) to depict the allegedly one-dimensional Nippon culture:

“If [Japan] were any object, what object would it be?”
The answer might also be thus: a sheet of paper, one of those heavy sheets of paper bordered with green bamboo or white maple or red cherry, ornamented with some impressionistic landscape design or some calligraphied ideogram, functioning as walls in Japanese houses. In other words, the impression that one brings back from Japan, not only regarding physical aspects but also psychological and cultural, is that of a world that has the dimensions of a sheet of paper: length and width but no thickness, depth or volume. (792)

The source of this sharp judgment on contemporary Japan society is *The Pillow-Book of Sei Shonagon* (1929), one of the first English translations of a diary of observations and remarks recorded by the court lady, Sei Shonagon, during the 990s in Heian Japan (794-1185). The translator of the book is Arthur Waley (1889-1966), an English Orientalist, a member of the Bloomsbury Group, and famous primarily for his English translation of the masterpiece of Japanese literature, *The Tale of Genji*. In his introduction Waley uses the precious sources, gathered from the *Pillow-Book* as well as from *The Tale of Genji*, to give a portrait of Japanese society and the spirit of the tenth century. The final result is an image of Japan during the Heian period as a refined civilization with a heightened sensibility for literature and aesthetic forms in general. Waley then attempts a bizarre (from a historical perspective) comparison between this ancient aesthetic world and twentieth-century England (or the

Western world in general). He argues that what distinguishes “them from us” is a lack of historical awareness: unlike contemporary Western societies, tenth-century Japanese were completely oblivious of and indifferent to their country’s history. Their only concern was the present: “It is indeed our intense curiosity about the past that most sharply distinguishes us from the ancient Japanese. Here every educated person is interested in some form or another of history” (Waley-Shonagon, 1929:10). After disqualifying the Sei Shonagon’s culture by stressing its “absence of intellectual background” (12), Waley finally uses the image of the paper page that must have inspired Moravia: “It is this insecurity that gives to the Heian period that oddly evasive and, as it were, two-dimensional quality, its figures and appurtenances all sometimes seeming to us to be cut out of thin, transparent paper” (12). It must also be noted that although his translations were influential between the 1920s to the 1960s, Waley never set foot in Japan. His knowledge of Japan was based on his acquaintance with the “Oriental Prints and Manuscripts” in the British Museum, where he was appointed as assistant keeper. He always “maintained a profound textual attitude toward his subject” (De Gruchy, 2003:165), and his image of the Japanese world “bought into and sanctioned the one-sided feminine or aesthetic view of Japan” (De Gruchy, 2003:164), in line with Bloomsbury’s aesthetic sensibility and antagonism toward moral constituted authority.

Moravia’s representation of Japan as a one-sided and aesthetic society relies on such an Orientalist portrait of the visited country. Yet what really matters in his discourse is the attempt to ignore chronology and to overlap the Japanese civilization of the tenth century with that of the present time. Borrowing Waley’s characterization of Medieval Japan, Moravia is able to achieve his goal of deleting historical and cultural differences between Western and Eastern modernization. In this way he facilitates the task of the Italian reader of magazines, who can easily understand the new phenomenon of modern Japan by resorting to Marxist criticism of capitalism.

This is evident in Moravia’s article on the crowd in Japan (*La folla in Giappone*, November 10, 1957), in which all the passages that I have already cited are summoned up. At the very beginning Moravia

highlights the conflict between modernity and tradition in contemporary Japan through the contrasting images of Kyoto and Osaka: “Kyoto is the old capital, a beautiful city but asleep in the memory of its ancient monuments; Osaka, instead, is the Manchester of Japan: ugly, active, full of traffic, with factories, department stores, commercial and industrial social centres and so on” (825). While Kyoto is a symbol of an embalmed cult of the past, Osaka embodies the spirit of the rootless Asian new capitalism, a counterpart to the analogue Western phenomenon. Once he has established the distance between past and present in Japan, Moravia underlines the similarity between Western and Eastern modernization. In doing so he chooses to set the narration of the Japanese crowd in the space of a train, which is a typical example of a “non-space”, neither Western nor Eastern, the perfect setting in which all geographical and cultural differences are abolished: “These trains are therefore places very suited to observing the Japanese crowd” (825). The next step is to delete all differences in terms of social class, emphasizing the bourgeoisie character of the Japanese crowd: “I would say that the Japanese crowd has a petty-bourgeois aspect even when it is comprised of workers” (827). After removing all geographical differences (Osaka as Manchester), spatial differences (train as neutral space), and social differences (the universal image of the bourgeoisie), Moravia can apply to the Japanese world the ideological message of the “moral crisis of the middle-class”. Like his other stories in which the protagonist is Italian middle-class, even the Japanese bourgeoisie are affected by boredom: “Indeed, boredom is one of the diseases of this country” (829). The final step is a universal, metaphysical definition of boredom, within which all the anthropological distance between Europe and Asia is elided: “But one is probably dealing with a cosmic or existential ennui: originating, it seems to me, from the bovaristic gap between ideals that are so hysterically noble (one thinks of the heroic spirit of the samurai taught in schools for decades) and modest reality. Each time that the ideal fails clashing against reality, the individual might fall back to the depths of ennui, that is, to a massive undervaluing of their own existence and that of others” (830). Here we are no longer in Japan but in the realm of the Moravian world. This definition of boredom is

the same as that for Dino, the protagonist of the novel *La noia* [*The Boredom*], that Moravia published only a few years later (1960): “For many people boredom is the opposite of amusement; I might even go so far as to say that in certain of its aspects it actually resembles amusement inasmuch as it gives rise to distraction and forgetfulness, even if of a very special type. Boredom to me consists in a kind of insufficiency, or inadequacy, or lack of reality” (Moravia, 1999:5). At this point the process of modern Japan’s assimilation into Western society is completed.

In conclusion, contemporary Japan, in its economic power and new materialistic tendencies, is perceived by Moravia as a leader of a postmodern society: “With the advent of postmodernity, American culture, with its economic and political influences across the shores, is bent on Americanizing the world, but at the same time is trying to internationalize it” (Hakutani, 2002: 14). This is evident in Moravia’s article *Il Giappone al posto dello “Zen” ha scelto la religione dei grattacieli* [*Instead of Zen, Japan has chosen the skyscrapers’ religion*]. It relates the story of Moravia’s interview with a Buddhist bonze in Kamakura’s convent, one of the most important Zen shrines of the country. With surprise, Moravia vainly attempts to orient the conversation to topics related to Zen thought, but the bonze successfully keeps the conversation on a superficial level, talking about his travels around the world. In Moravia’s view, the bonze’s pragmatic and materialistic attitude is an unequivocal sign of the intrusion of the so-called “American way of life” into the core of Zen tradition. At the same time Moravia refers to an encounter with a young American student of Zen in the same convent. The American student seems to have much more interest in Zen practice than the Japanese bonze. This student represents the cultural appropriation of Eastern traditions by Americans who are eager to find a valid alternative to their consumer society. Moravia’s conclusion is that “Japan and the United States are like two communicating vessels: from the Japanese vessel Zen, art, decoration, and Nipponic gusto pass into the American vessel; from the American to the Japanese the American way of life in an almost excessive measure. It is difficult to say which of these two countries gains more” (Moravia, 1994:1249). In the contemporary world Zen Buddhism is what makes Japan an

influential partner among capitalist societies and represents a critical cultural element that complements the predominant American culture.

A negative portrait of postwar Italy springs from this perception of the benefits that Japan provides in solving the spiritual crisis of the West. In this regard Moravia finds an analogy between the authoritarian power wielded by the United States in the Orient and the glorious image of Italy during the medieval age: "The relationship with the East during the Middle Ages was for Italy not much different than what the United States has with Japan and with East Asia in general today: wars, interventions, cultural exchanges, commerce, travel, et cetera. The result of all this can be seen in Venice, in Ravenna, in Sicily, in Siena, and a bit everywhere. At that time the Italians knew how to appropriate ideas and philosophical sensibilities of the near and far East, with whom Italy had direct relationships" (Moravia, 1994:1268).

The longing for the mythical image of Italy as a leading country in the Orient for its cultural, economic, and military enterprises is emphasized by the contrast with the disappointing portrait of Italy during the sixties:

Italy is a country completely and narrowly Western; even those that adopt the foreign beat style, ignore that a big part of that style comes from Zen. One cannot call this provincialism; that would be an insult to the province. It is unfortunately necessary to say that one is dealing with a lack of existential anxiety, that is a lack of what is communally but perhaps not improperly called idealism. Today Italy is a nation less anxious than those of the East. It is still immersed in the boom or the explosion of affluence. The great American debate against a civilization of consumption or better against the fact that consumption might become the foundation of a civilization, a debate that pulls a significant part of its argument from Zen, is still to come. (Moravia, 1994:1268)

Moravia's resigned conclusion is an indictment against the political and cultural conservatism in Italy, despite the success achieved in rebuilding the country devastated by the war. Whereas Japan is perceived as a flexible society ready not only to absorb elements of American culture but also to promote a significant protest against its predominant way of life, Italy is perceived as an affluent but culturally stagnant society. One must also mention that at the origin of this negative judgment is the all-encompassing influence of the Roman Catholic Church in a country where the political success of the Christian Democrat party raised questions about the boundaries between the Vatican and the Parliament. According to Moravia, this conflict can be detected at the beginning of Italian unification: "The unity of Italy, as Goldoni says in his comedy *Il bugiardo*, is a 'witty invention'. After its unification, Italy has remained disunited and, what's worse, with a capital that isn't a capital, but the main city of the Lazio region. If anything, it's the capital of the Church" (Moravia-Elkann, 2000:238).

Conclusion

Both in Maraini and in Moravia, the historical comparison between Japan and Italy resulted in a discourse about Italian shortcomings; neither author seems to be convinced that Italy has achieved the status of a modern, powerful nation. They both share the opinion that Italy holds a backward position among Western societies, and this persuasion seems to be nourished by a general inferiority complex. One of the reasons for this lack of enthusiasm must be located in the reference to a mythical "greater Italy", compared to which the current image of the country cannot help but be diminished. This contrast is even more remarkable in a period during which Italy completed its postwar transformation into one of the most economically and socially advanced countries of the world. Among the intellectuals, the dawn of Fascism, the war, and the subsequent rise of a politically divided republic have not abolished the patriotic dream that the Risorgimento's propaganda was able to stir up, but that dream has now become the premise on which the perceived current image of the "little Italy" is based.

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