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China in the Frame: Materialising Ideas of China in Italian Museums

Iside Carbone

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China in the Frame: Materialising Ideas of China in Italian Museums Iside Carbone
Mechanisms of representation of the cultural Other and their connections with processes of self-expression constitute the core of China in the Frame. This original ethnographic study of Chinese-themed displays of artworks in a selection of permanent and temporary exhibitions in Italy highlights specific forms of the materialisation of ideas of cultural identities. The Other represented by these displays is China, the identity of which is nowadays perceived by a wider western public, if not unambiguously, at least more closely, thanks to faster and intensified means of communication and interaction. The representing counterpart is Italy, the identity of which, far from being firmly univocal, is fragmentary and not rigidly set due to the country's peculiar socio-historical circumstances. The wide range of case studies brought together in this book draw attention to the impact of physical and cultural settings, as well as of various exhibitive criteria and techniques, on different types of manifestations of ideas of China through the medium of museum display. Adopting an underlying theoretical framework whereby representation is a mimetic operation that creatively contributes to the transmission of awareness and knowledge of the Other, the book provides a re-evaluation of the concept of appropriation, emphasising how the recognition of a cultural Other can be instrumental in the determination of certain modes of self-expression. On this basis, the book also elaborates a suggestive definition of Italian Orientalism intended as a phenomenon by which while relating to and trying to represent China, Italy is induced to question and represent its own cultural identity. Through an analysis of fieldwork data, the book identifies and navigates the long and rich history of many of the buildings housing the displays, the different ages of the specimens exhibited and the diversity of topics illustrated, spanning from the artistic and technical achievements of ancient China to the socio-economic changes of contemporary China. As representations are re-affirmed, developed and changed, the variety of materials included in the displays play a relevant part in bringing forth the comprehensive and overarching character of cultural representations in museum contexts.

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