Self Through the Other
Production, Circulation and Reception in Italy
of Sixteenth-Century Printed Sources on Japan

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0   Introduction

> Mythology is static, we find the same mythical elements combined over
> and over again, but they are in a closed system, let us say, in contradis-
> tinction with history, which is, of course, an open system. The open char-
> acter of history is secured by the innumerable ways according to which
> mythical cells, or explanatory cells which were originally mythical, can
> be arranged and rearranged. It shows us that by using the same mate-
> rial, because it is a kind of common inheritance or common patrimony of
> all groups,of all clans, or of all lineages, one can nevertheless succeed in
> building up an original account for each of them. (Lévi-Strauss 2005, 17)

The fine line between 'myth' and 'history' is the dimension where 'Japan'
as a cultural object was produced, circulated and received in Italy (and
Europe) in the sixteenth century.

The sixteenth century marked a most crucial phase in the history of the
Japanese archipelago. After a century of internal division and turmoil, the
unifying process initiated by the military leader Oda Nobunaga (1534-
1582), and completed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) and Tokugawa
Ieyasu (1543-1616), did not simply restore the integrity of the Japanese
State: it pushed Japan, as a political entity, into a whole new dimension.
While not erasing regional differences (that predated the political disrup-
tion brought by the rise of the warlords, the *sengoku daimyō*), it contrib-
uted to the creation of the conditions – the birth of regional (and even
national) markets, reliable transport, urbanization, schooling – for a new,
albeit still relative, level of cultural integration within Japan. The intercon-
nection between these processes of state (and identity) formation and the
presence of European natives living, preaching and commercing on the
Japanese archipelago has long been a matter of fascination and discussion
among scholars. Past historians are known to have attributed a strong
weight to European influence, not only in terms of culture and economy,
but also as far as religion and politics are concerned. Emblematic is Box-
er's statement in the preface of the first edition (1951) of his well-known
work, *The Christian century in Japan*: "but for the introduction, growth
and forcible suppression of militant Christianity in the sixteenth and sev-
enteenth century, it seems probable that Tokugawa would have not retired
into its isolationist shell". (Boxer 1951, IX). Most contemporary scholars,

on the other hand, have worked to debunk these assumptions, minimizing the weight of the foreign presence in Japan, in the face of endogenous developments predating the arrival of the Portuguese. Massarella (1996, 136) has underlined how the very label 'Christian century', that has commonly come to be associated, at least in non-Japanese literature, with this phase of Japanese history, is in itself problematic, as it implies that "Christianity was quite central to the formation of the early modern Japanese polity", while "in reality, the role of Europeans in early modern Japanese state-building is secondary". Not quite as explored is, however, the other side of the coin: what legacy did the encounter between the Europeans and the Japanese leave for Europe?

The so-called era of 'Great discoveries', the aftermath of Da Gama's pioneering expedition around the Cape of Good Hope (paralleled by Columbus' voyage to the New World), surely had game-changing consequences for Europe, in more than one respect. Through the Portuguese merchants first, and then through the Spanish, the Dutch and the English, European economy came into direct connection with the huge and prosperous maritime economic systems of the Indian Ocean and of the Greater China Seas. The balance of European trade, as a consequence, slowly shifted away from the Mediterranean and toward the oceans. The amount of Asian products flowing to Europe increased sensibly, and Europeans progressively became involved into Asian inter-port trades. At the same time, new political structures were born – starting with the Portuguese *Estado da India* – specifically created to exert control over the newly discovered maritime trade routes. The treaty of Tordesillas – that sanctioned the Portuguese expansion in the Atlantic Ocean – worked in this sense as a fundamental landmark for the construction of European modernity: where in the previous centuries state leaders had fought over lands and people, sovereignty was now, through the treaties, also being claimed over (yet to be encountered) seas. The ocean had become

> politicised space to be fought over, controlled, taxed, allocated and re-allocated, and international law had to extend its reach to encompass this new concept which was to lie at the hearth of European colonial expansion. (Newitt 2005, 57)

European perception of the 'outside world' was also, inevitably, influenced. European travellers, in increasing numbers, began to live and work in the newly discovered regions. Their experiences there challenged the visions of Asia that had dominated Medieval narratives, where direct testimonies had been scarce and geographically limited. Asian countries and populations came to acquire a definite character of 'reality', after having been relegated for centuries, in the European imaginary, to the realm of the magical and the legendary. However, 'myth' – intended, broadly, as a projection of one's

desires and fears on the object of representation – was still central to the way the 'Other' was understood. As the newly encountered populations came to be acknowledged as real, in fact, they became part of a 'Christian mythology': they came to be deemed as pertaining to the domain of Divine Law, as 'Gentiles', who had to be approached with the prospect of extending the bounds of Christendom. Missionary impulse, of course, had been part of the Christian ethic since its origins – in accord to the teleological conception of history as a progression towards the last judgment, where all human beings, God's subjects, should be led to the eventual, everlasting salvation. The new wave of geographical explorations, on the other hand, contributed to putting the drive to convert nonbelievers in a whole new perspective. Intellectual controversy soon arose, both on how the newly encountered populations were to be perceived, and on how to perform the missionary imperative. Were all the Gentiles really of the same kind of humanity as the Europeans? Were all of them apt to hear and understand the Christian message – and in the same way, or to different extents? The 'Other' was slowly defined, through a process of self-definition, that would exert long-lived influences on European intellectual history.

Throughout the sixteenth century, the intercourse with the Japanese archipelago occupied a central role in these processes. Japan, up to the first decades of the sixteenth century, had been 'Cimpagu': the mythical golden land of Marco Polo's writings. As 'Cimpagu' was pushed beyond the boundaries of the known world, 'Giapam' was born – a golden land of a different kind. 'Giapam' was, for the Portuguese merchants, a stage for exciting economic opportunities: a market where precious materials were largely available for purchase and silk and cloth were easily sold, a most fundamental source of silver for a country that was working its way into a developing world bullion trade. At the same time, up to the final decade of the sixteenth century, Japan was the territory holding the most promising prospects in terms of evangelization.

The growing European presence in Japan in the second half of the sixteenth century was born of these interests and expectations. And it translated into the production of a wide range of first-hand sources, reflecting the developing knowledge accumulated on Japan by the merchants and missionaries travelling to and operating on the archipelago. Letters and longer accounts were exchanged among the Europeans residing in East Asia and shipped to Europe to report about the status of the religious and commercial missions. Part of these materials was kept under reserve, but many sources were distributed commercially in Europe, and, thanks to the diffusion of print, reached a considerable level of popularity, giving way to what was, in all respects, a small editorial boom. This was the case, in particular (even though not exclusively), of the Jesuit sources. The missionary materials were in fact released into the editorial world with more deliberation than other sources – as instruments of propaganda, fitting

into the purposes of the Counter Reformation. They were not, however, simple tools of propaganda in the hands of the Roman Church: they also, as we will see, worked their way into the market, fitting into dominating editorial trends.

The missionaries' and the merchants' reports contributed, for the first time, to the creation and systematic divulgation of an imaginary of Japan – an imaginary grounded, as opposed to the mythical visions of the Middle Ages, in 'factual' knowledge, but not necessarily devoid of 'myths'. As Caputo (2016, 11) underlines, a question needs to be asked in relation to all literature connected to travel: even in the presence of a 'factual' narration, where does this type of literature stands, in the dialectic relationship between reality, textuality and fantasy? In other words, is myth inherent to the way one represents oneself in relation to the Other?

In this work I aim, in light to these considerations, to explore the imaginary on Japan that was built by the sixteenth-century sources, in relation to the cultural processes that motivated their production, and focusing on the interplay, inside them, between 'factuality' and 'myth'. I also aim at analysing the effective impact of the imaginary in Europe, in light of the circulation and reception of the sources as published materials. In published books, text is but an aspect: books can be analysed also as objects, viewed in the light of the cultural and economic processes that lead to their production and circulation (or, sometimes, lack thereof). A special focus will be put on the Italian editorial world. Italian publishing centres dominated the European book-market up to the end of the sixteenth century.[1] Venice, in particular, had, ever since the beginning of the fifteenth century, a central role as the "centro di raccolta e smistamento delle informazioni relative a ciò che avveniva al di la dei mari" (Milanesi 1978, XVIII). This Venetian interest toward faraway realities was connected to the progressive decline of Venice as a commercial leader in Europe – especially after the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the discovery of the West Indies. This decline prompted the authorities of the Republic to seek and obtain information about recent geographic discoveries. Political motivation, on the other hand, soon came to be mingled with genuine cultural interest (Caputo 2016, 89-90). Above all in the case of Jesuit sources, as we will see, Italian editions are of particular interest from the perspective of distribution and reception. Many *editio princeps* were Italian and provided the basis for subsequent translations in Northern European languages (Lach 1965, 674-5).

Firstly, I will provide an introductory framework to my discussion on sixteenth-century materials, by focusing on the 'mythical' imaginary on

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[1]   When they were hit by a crisis, connected to the policies of the Counter Reformation, that, in the long run, would move the axis of the publishing world towards the Protestant countries. See in this regard Maclean 2012, 211-34.

Asia and Japan developed through European (mostly indirect) sources before the so-called era of 'Great discoveries'. 'Japan' was relatively late in coming on European's intellectual map, but even before Marco Polo a long tradition of contacts had been established between the European continent and Asia. The course of such relations, far from linear, had been matched by a parallel tradition of geographical, cartographical and historical writings, reflecting an ever-changing and developing 'European' consciousness of 'Asia'. A large literature already exists on this tradition, and dwelling on it would be well beyond the scope of this work. I will, nonetheless, try to summarise it, while pointing at a list of useful references, as way to contextualise the sixteenth century sources and as a way to introduce the reader to the peculiar dialectic relationship between 'factuality' and 'myth' that is a key to the interpretation of sources on Japan.

I will then discuss how the early Portuguese explorations in the Atlantic Ocean and Greater China Seas area came to affect the perception and representation of Asia in the sixteenth century, and focus, particularly, on the production of lay sources on Japan and on their (lack of) distribution in the Italian market.

Lastly, I will focus on the sources related to the Christian missions in Japan, and particularly on the materials on Japan resulting from the system of correspondence adopted by the Jesuit order. A wide range of literature already exists discussing different aspects of the Jesuit system for correspondence, its evolution and its long-term impact. Lamalle (1981-82) explores the innovative cultural potential of Jesuit letter writing and the way in which Jesuit correspondence was organized and archived. Lach (1965) underlines the role of the reports in conveying, after the prolonged lack of direct contact during the Middle Ages, the very first significant bits of factual knowledge about Eastern Asia to Europe. In a similar vein, Harris (1999) builds on previous works by Wessels (1924), Bolton (1936) and Dainville (1964) to discuss the contribution of Jesuit travels and writings to geography, natural history, botany and ethnography. Caputo (2016) specifically discusses the reports from Japan published in Italy between 1552 and 1585 as part of a broader analysis of the impact of the imaginary related to Japan on Italian literature, from the writings of Marco Polo (1254-1324) to Francesco Carletti (1573-1636). Palomo (2005) focuses on the edifying nature of the reports and their role in building a common religious identity among the Jesuits. Friedrich (2008), on the other hand, focuses on the letters' administrative value: he discusses the factors that prompted Loyola and Polanco to conceptualize a central government for the Society, and the ways in which (not without controversy) this sedentary centre obtained and archived information from the local level, using the Jesuit correspondence system as a case study of the connections between the emergence of rational bureaucracy and the birth of a modern system of information management in Europe. Delfosse (2009) more thoroughly

analyses the dialectic relationship between the central level and the local level by describing the system of correspondence in a diachronic perspective. While crediting Loyola for his role in building a pyramid structure of information within the Society and in defining the letters' basic aims and characteristics, she argues that Jesuit letter-writing was an evolving reality, constantly redefined in accord with the order's expanding needs. Similarly, Asami (2002) discusses local contributions to the readjustments of the system, focusing on the reports from Japan, the way Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) envisioned their structure, and the selection of information intended for inclusion in published letter-books. The present work will focus on the role of the system in creating a (generally) coherent 'Christian' narrative on Japan as part of a new narrative of the European 'Self', and on how this narrative impacted the Italian book market, by creating a niche market that fit in contemporary Italian editorial trends.

The "Appendix" includes a list of edition of Jesuit letters on Japan published in Italy in the sixteenth century.[2]

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2   The list derives from an ongoing research work through library catalogues and collections. The research project also resulted in a database, including metadata about the Japan-related or Japanese documental (historical and literary) materials kept in Venetian libraries and museums, accessible here: URL `http://www.unive.it/pag/33845/` (2018-09-17).