

To conclude, the book covers the rise and fall of the ‘yellow-green coalition’ (the League and the Five Star Movement) in which Salvini assumes the posts of Italian Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, up until the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, which strikes first in the Val Seriana in northern Italy, the historical heart of *leghismo*.

Overall, the book gives most space to external representations of the Lega; unfortunately, activist voices are largely absent. That said, the narrative will be very useful for those who seek a better understanding of a subject in constant evolution. Like a chameleon, the Lega party has changed significantly over the last 40 years. Nonetheless, a watchful reader cannot but notice several elements of continuity. Among these, distrust of the public health sector (which the author links to the collapse of first-line care during the pandemic); and its underlining conservatism.

Barcellona highlights one aspect of Lega populism that is still barely studied: the strength and prominence of a patriarchal ideology based on a sense of sexual honour that attributes control (and defence) of female bodies to males in the community. If during the 1990s the conservative attitude was expressed through pseudo-ironic slogans – such as ‘*Noi della Lega ce l’abbiamo duro*’ (‘We of the League have it hard’) – in the recent past this hegemonic masculinity has been adapted to a new era and, in particular, to a new relationship with the Church (and the Catholic faith more generally). The original patriarchal imprinting has been shaped by a neo-conservative and nationalist pattern which could appear so radical as to seem ridiculous and, consequently, harmless. Yet it can be considered truly inoffensive only as long as a right-wing government (led by post-Fascist politicians) does not make it real.

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## Searching for Japan: 20th Century Italy’s Fascination with Japanese Culture

by Michele Monserrati, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, xi + 246 pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78962-107-5.

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Italian representations of Japan in the twentieth century were not merely depictions of a distant land, of interest only for its exotic thrill; they often also entailed comparisons and processes of identification based on real or imagined similarities. Since the late nineteenth century, Italian culture has paid increasing attention to Japan, both because of the influence of the aesthetic movement known as *japonisme* and through a sense of curiosity about a country that, just like Italy, was longing for a place among the world powers after a turbulent phase of political, social, and economic transformation. Italian interest in Japan grew during the 1930s, as these two ‘late-developed’ countries joined forces – together with Nazi Germany – triggering a spiral of mutual influences, reciprocal radicalisation, and rampant belligerence. After the Second World War, despite the severance of many ties established in the framework of the military alliance, Japan continued to occupy a special place in the Italian imagination. Both countries faced similar challenges

in building democratic political systems, and both experienced an 'economic miracle' with significant social consequences. However, cultural history and Italian studies have so far neglected a comprehensive reconstruction of the image of Japan in modern Italy. Much of the relevant research has focused on specific aspects, but few have put them in a broader context that could provide some insight into the peculiarities and developments of Italian representations of Japan. This lack of research is particularly evident with regard to the Fascist period, especially when compared to the amount of material on the image of Japan in Nazi Germany – an asymmetry linked to the historiographical depiction of the Axis as a purely German venture, in which the Italian-Japanese rapprochement was a mere by-product of the alliance between Rome and Berlin.

Michele Monserrati's *Searching for Japan* makes a significant contribution to filling in some of the many gaps in this field of study, by focusing on the well-established genre of travel literature in order to understand what it means 'to imagine Japanese culture as contributing to Italian culture' (p. 3). The book is structured into four chapters, in which a specific period is analysed through a selected number of works: the Russo-Japanese War, traditionally considered a major turning point in the history of the European image of Japan, which is characterised by the rise of both the 'yellow peril' rhetoric and the fascination with Japan among Italian nationalists; the Fascist *ventennio*, a period during which the narratives about the East Asian country peaked and intertwined with political propaganda; the Cold War, which saw post-Marxist intellectuals dealing with the relationship between tradition and modernity in Japan in order to express dissatisfaction with the blooming of an individualist and consumer society in Italy; and, finally, the emergence of women's writing on Japan at the turn of the century, where the comparison with Japanese gender roles, even though generally considered backward and unequal, has led Italian female writers to reflect on their own identity and the pitfalls of their emancipation.

Given its historical implications and the existing lacunae in the literature, the most interesting part of *Searching for Japan* is undoubtedly the analysis of the Italian discourses during the Fascist period and the underlying question of how a partnership with a completely alien country could be conceived in an ultra-nationalist ideological framework. Here Monserrati identifies 'a fundamental shift in the mode of representing Japan' (p. 85). Before the alliance, Italian narratives were informed by a sense of 'cultural supremacy' based on racial biases and sexualised gazes; after its ratification, Fascist propaganda set a new tone, with the emphasis placed on similarities rather than differences. As Monserrati puts it: 'In order to introduce Japan as the ideal political partner ..., it was necessary to reset all the data accumulated in Italian memory about this anomalous land full of ladies of weak morals and effeminate or irrational men' (p. 113). To be sure, the view of two different phases in the Fascist narrative about Japan may not in itself be wrong. However, the sharp divide identified by Monserrati is not entirely convincing, because it overlooks both the legacy of the early twentieth-century right-wing fascination with Japan and how the change in Fascist foreign policy in the early 1930s impacted the perception of the 'Orient' – as attested by the foundation of the Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO) in 1933. Perhaps, instead of a 'fundamental shift', it would have been more accurate to speak of the coexistence of contrasting views and the gradual prevailing of one over the other, accelerated by the political rapprochement.

Nevertheless, as a whole, *Searching for Japan* succeeds in revealing significant continuities in the Italian representation of Japan during the twentieth century and makes a strong case that, 'from Italian unification to the present day, "searching for Japan" remains an ideal point of reference for Italians to reflect on the place of Italy in the world' (p. 236). However, this consideration raises a further question: whether such an attitude, which falls outside the framework of Said's theory of Orientalism, is an exclusive feature of the Italian discourses on Japan or whether it also characterises other cultural

contexts, if not every representation of Japan in the twentieth century. Monserrati argues that there is ‘a specific Italian version of Orientalism(s) toward Japan’ (p. 3), a ‘relational Orientalism’ that, strengthened by both historical similarities and the lack of colonial interests in East Asia, promotes a ‘different relationality, one not necessarily dominated by colonialist discourses’ (p. 32). Still, the concept of Orientalism as an imperialist outlook is difficult to generalise – as demonstrated by Suzanne Marchand in the case of Germany. Furthermore, it is also questionable whether ‘Western’ representations of modern Japan could ever be considered a part of Orientalist discourses, since Japan was by no means a passive object of foreign narratives but participated meaningfully in shaping its own image abroad. In this sense, instead of emphasising a national exceptionalism, the concept of ‘relational Orientalism’ could be used for describing a wider, more complex, trans-national phenomenon.

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## ***Italy’s Sea: Empire and Nation in the Mediterranean, 1895–1945***

**by Valerie McGuire, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, xiii + 285 pp., \$130.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781800348004**

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Italian empire-building is often remembered as a uniquely Fascist phenomenon and an aberration from the longstanding Italian tradition of being the *brava gente* – the ‘good people’. Valerie McGuire’s recent book challenges both of these trends by asking questions that are novel in approach and geographical focus. McGuire draws on a rich range of interdisciplinary methods and rare archival sources to investigate the little-known experience of empire in the Dodecanese Islands across both Liberal and Fascist eras. She demonstrates that shifting and unstable ideas about nation and race characterised Italian empire- and nation-building between 1895 and 1945. *Italy’s Sea* makes an important contribution not only to the history of Italian imperialism, but also to grappling with its long-lasting legacies shaping public understandings of Italian and Greek cultural identity within Europe today.

*Italy’s Sea* unfolds chronologically to examine the special place of the Mediterranean within Italy’s nation-building project. The Dodecanese Islands serve as a case study to explore the central tension that emerged between the aesthetic of *mediterraneità* (or Mediterraneanness), which celebrated a certain degree of cosmopolitan diversity,