

The Triumph of the Uncanny

Italians and Italian Architecture in Tianjin

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Braving the bitter cold, I travelled more than seven hundred miles back to the old home I had left over twenty years before. It was late winter; as we drew near my hometown the sky became gloomy and a cold wind blew into the cabin of the boat ... I could not help feeling depressed.

Ah! Surely this was not the hometown I had been remembering for the past twenty years?

The hometown I remembered was not like this at all. My hometown was much better. But if you asked me to recall its peculiar charm or describe its beauties, I had no clear impression, no words to describe it. And now it seemed this was all there was to it.

Lu Xun, *My Hometown*, 1921¹

In the year 1900 Italian troops participated in the repression of the Boxer Uprising, during which impoverished local farmers from the northern Chinese province of Shandong, outraged by the Qing Court (1644–1911) and its supine attitude to the Western imperial powers, rose up in armed rebellion.² In retaliation for their attacks on foreigners in the northern provinces and Beijing in particular—where the foreign legations quarter was under a 55-day siege (which lasted from 20 June to 15 August 1900)—a massive foreign army, known as the Eight-Nation Military Alliance (*Baquo lianjun*), invaded China. The fighters of the ‘Righteous Harmony Society’ (*Yihetuan*), as the Boxers were known in Chinese (although the court originally stigmatised them as ‘Boxing Bandits’, or *quanfei*), were finally defeated on 14 August 1900 as twenty thousand foreign troops entered the imperial capital Beijing. With the signing of the ‘Final Protocol for the Settlement of the Disturbances of 1900’ that brought the conflict to an end on 7 September 1901, Italy received 5.91 per cent of the Boxer Indemnity paid by China to the foreign powers, extraterritorial privileges and the concession of a small area of 447,647 square metres on the northern bank of the Haihe River in the nearby city of Tianjin.³

It was here that the Italians developed what became known as the ‘Italian Concession’, originally translated in Chinese as the 義租界 (*Yi zujie*), using the character ‘yi’ (義/义, ‘justice, righteousness’) to indicate the first syllable of ‘I-ta-ly’. The ‘Italian Concession’ was subsequently rechristened the 意租界 (also read: *Yi zujie*), with ‘yi’ 义 being replaced by the homophonous character ‘yi’ 意, literally meaning ‘idea’ or ‘intention’. Today, in the context of the multiple layers of semantic puns and phonetic serendipity which characterise the Chinese language, another character, 异, also pronounced ‘yi’, dominates the debate on Tianjin’s uncanny identity and the biopolitics of urban modernity. The character 异 indicates alterity or strangeness, and it alludes to something that is uncanny, or out of the ordinary. In the context of Tianjin, 异 refers to a foreign and alien land (*yiyu* 异域), and ultimately means ‘non-Chinese’. 异 ultimately reflects the city’s ‘bifurcated identity’: both Chinese and foreign.⁴ Between 1860 and 1945 Tianjin was the site of as many as nine foreign-controlled concessions that functioned side by side. British, French and American concessions were established in Tianjin in 1860.⁵ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Tianjin became a base for the Westernisation movement,

and spearheaded the country's military modernisation and the transformation of its societal infrastructure. This process included the construction of railway, telecommunication, education and legal systems, and the formation of a mining industry. During this time, Tianjin became a major international trading city with shipping connections to all parts of Asia. Between 1895 and 1902 other concessions were ceded to Japan, Germany and Imperial Russia. Even countries that did not yet hold concessions elsewhere in China, such as Austria-Hungary, Italy and Belgium, succeeded in establishing self-contained concessions with their own schools, barracks and hospitals. The concessions covered an area of 15.5 square kilometers, eight times larger than the old built-up area, and the riverfront was governed by foreign powers.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was created on 1 October 1949, Tianjin was not an easy place to govern because of its distinctive foreign-indigenous duality and the interconnected presence of modern and traditional enterprises. Even though all foreign property in Tianjin was seized and nationalised, the city remained tainted for a long time by the foreignness of its socio-spatial legacy, which was inscribed in the built environment as well as embodied by the *habitus* of its Chinese residents. Tianjin has the largest amount of diverse foreign-style architecture in Asia concentrated in one single locale. The city's 'foreign-Chinese' historical past was first concealed under the strategy of turning Tianjin into a 'model of socialism', but then, in the 1990s, the multifaceted and uncanny historical legacy resurfaced and was used as evidence of Tianjin's *ante litteram* international and alleged global character.

This article focuses on two, strictly interrelated, historical and cultural processes. The first is the Italian domestication of the alien land (that is, alien as Chinese), which occurred at the time of the creation of the Italian Concession (1901–45). The second process is the Chinese domestication of Tianjin's alien land (that is, alien as foreign), embodied by its uncanny 'global' architecture. The article explores the reinterpretation of 'Made in Italy', which has occurred during the last fifteen years. The domestication of foreignness involves mechanisms of adaptive cultural reproduction, functional transformation, flattening, stereotyping and branding. I argue that the essentialisation of 'Made in Italy', in its appearance and reappearance in the Chinese city of Tianjin, serves a specific purpose: the tamed alterity and the reappropriated foreign design are used as a political instrument to assert both

Tianjin's and China's growing international influence via 'soft power', and thus contribute to the construction of a—bilaterally useful—ultra-positive image of China's relations with other countries, Italy included.

—THE UNCANNY AS EXTRA-ORDINARY

'At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny.'

Martin Heidegger⁶

Since 2008, Tianjin tourist maps have featured two special visual-textual boxes to highlight different areas of the city. One focuses on the 'European charm' of the 'Five Street Area' (*Wudadao*); the other features the 'scenic Italian-style neighbourhood' (*Yishi fengqingqu* 意式风情区—a formulation that is also often translated as 'Italian Business Park'). In 2009, the former Italian concession was rebranded as *XinYijie* 新意街, the 'New I/Yi-style Town' where 'I/Yi' stands, of course, for Italy. However, one could argue that the term *yiguo fengqing* 异国风情 (style of a foreign/alien country) would be a more appropriate, and more historically accurate, way to describe the former Italian concession.⁷



Image 1: Map of Tianjin

Source: Tianjin, Universal Map Company, 2008

The recent transformation of the former Italian concession demands an exploration of the identity politics of Italy in China—especially today when the built environment, through planning strategies and interrelated logics of economic and emotional capital, has become, once again, the embodiment of an abstract, idealised, and essentialised version of a whole country and its people. This inevitably involves a critical engagement with a certain idea of ‘Italy’, whose claimed reality in China was shaped, more than a century ago, through the projection of the symbolic and cultural capital of *Italianità* onto the acquired concession in Tianjin. *Italianità*, usually translated in English as Italianness, was the highly praised rhetoric trope of the ‘Italian spirit’. This trope derived from the juxtaposition of two apparently antithetical images: the image of Italy’s overtly proud sense of superiority, generated from its glorious historical past (both in terms of the Imperial past of Rome and the Renaissance-humanistic tradition), sharply contrasted with the image of Italy lagging behind other European countries in the nineteenth century’s race to acquire growing national prestige through the global imperialist experience.⁸

After the repression of the Boxers’ uprising, Tianjin became a testing ground for the hubris and greed of the imperialist powers. For two years, from July 1900 to August 1902, Tianjin was administered by an allied military government, known as Tianjin Provisional Government (TPG). This was the crucial time when the blueprint of Tianjin as a ‘modern city’ emerged from the Western minds: ‘The history of the TPG was played out against the backdrop of the Great Power rivalry in China’ and the foreign-led administration ‘showed the Chinese Government how cities could be transformed into money machines using modern administrative methods’.⁹

A precise pedagogical project of designing and framing space took place in those two years, so that Tianjin’s built form was transmogrified, a new transport system was implemented, electrical lighting and water supply systems were created and radical public health work was undertaken. All this was done to guarantee the TPG’s top priority: the maintenance of public security and order through the standardisation of administrative practices and regulatory discourses which required first the annihilation of the Chinese ‘unhomely’ forms, and later its replacement with an uncanny replica of the ‘homely’. In the words of Italian Vice-Consul in Tianjin, Cavalier Poma:

This was the time when everybody was taking: the individuals, the soldiers, the civilians, everybody was taking, the Governments were taking; those who already had a settlement were taking another piece of land, and those who did not have one were taking one. Therefore, one might suppose that it would have been quite difficult to resist the contagion of taking.¹⁰

Italy did not remain untouched by the greed of 'taking'. Since the vision prevailed that the concession presented a unique opportunity to affirm Italy's prestige on a global geopolitical scale, the reinvention of the foreign space led to the dream-like reproduction of a 'little Italy' in China.¹¹ The words of one of the advocates of this 'glorious' Italian colonial enterprise, Luigi Sborlino, reveal the aspiration to project the homeland's design directly onto the far-away settlement:

In a few months our concession should be comfortably and beautifully provided with numerous European-style houses. We can imagine these houses—on two storeys, some of them facing large boulevards with pavements, others surrounded by pretty gardens and small vegetable plots, decorated with verandas—populated by our countrymen, who are actively occupied in running industrial and commercial enterprises, both locally and internationally; in such a way that to the train's passengers, to the dwellers of the other concessions, and to the Chinese people living in Tien-tsin, our concession would appear as an enviable example of prosperity and a model of what the Italians are able to do when they want to.¹²

Domesticating and framing the foreign space was a way to make sense of the arrival and the 'conquest': it involved a process of turning the overwhelming into order, responding to the imperatives of taxonomies and cataloguing. Like the mall-ification of space in contemporary cities is a way to normativise urban life, and transform metropolises into fabricated artefacts to be consumed, for the foreign powers that controlled various parts of Tianjin annihilating the pre-existent Chinese space to design and impose their national built form was like a new writing and editing project of governmentality.¹³ But Tianjin was both an object of desire and fear, and the politics of emotions defined the city as a project. The Chinese space was much more than simply 'unhomely', and it was progressively transformed into something

much more complex than an organic, socio-spatial representation of the 'homely'. Freud's paradigm of 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) can be particularly useful to explore the context in which forms and representations that were considered 'homely' and 'familiar' have been proposed and imposed on the perceived otherness of Tianjin's space.

As Freud pointed out, the concept of home and the familiar (*heimlich*) progressively 'develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite (*unheimlich*)'.¹⁴ In Chinese the word 'uncanny' can be translated in many ways. In colloquial language, something which could be simultaneously familiar and strange, and almost incredible, being both inexplicable and amazing, almost unimaginable and unfathomable, is expressed by the four characters *bukesiyi* 不可思议. The compound word *shenminde* 神秘的 also contains a connotation of something mysterious or unearthly. In a more formal way, the concept of 'uncanny' as unusual, extraordinary, bizarre and remarkable is conveyed by the four characters *yihuxunchang* 异乎寻常, while *guaimoguaiyangde* 怪模怪样的 refers to the idea of a strange and unusual aspect. Another possibility is the compound word *guaidande* 怪诞的, which refers to something eerie, whacky, whimsical and fanciful. However, after an in-depth analysis, I would suggest that the most appropriate compound words which could translate 'uncanny' in Chinese are: *guaiyi* 怪异 or *guiyi* 诡异. They indicate something strange, eerie, whacky, whimsical, fanciful and ultimately uncanny. *Guai* 怪 or *gui* 诡, both indicate something that is strange but surprising, hard to understand and mysterious, and they are often used to describe a person. For the purpose of researching Tianjin, the most appropriate term for 'uncanny' is *yi* 异 or *yiyang* 异样, which conveys the meaning of something alien, different and unusual, something curious and 'out of the ordinary', which, as Heidegger suggests, is also 'extra-ordinary'. This 'extra-ordinary' is what confronted the Italians arriving in China at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

—THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE OF THE UNCANNY

Among the vast Italian literature on Tianjin, one of the most significant examples revealing the unparalleled atmosphere of emotional uncanniness, originating with the Italians' encounter with China, is represented by the fifty-eight letters and four hundred photographs that Medical Lieutenant Giuseppe Messerotti Benvenuti

(1870–1935) wrote to his mother between September 1900 and September 1901. Benvenuti accompanied the Italian troops, which were part of the military alliance organised to repress the Boxers' uprising. Since the letters were sent to a beloved person—his mother—who was living in Italy and would never be able to go to China, and thanks also to the accompanying photographs, these epistles reveal the interplay between cognitive dissonance and estranged ordinariness which characterised Benvenuti's experience of 'reality' in China. They reveal the selection of his 'world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases'.¹⁵ Benvenuti's correspondence is evidence that his daily experience in China was an emotional route, moving between surprise and disappointment, attraction and repulsion, and all the feelings, emotions and affect in between.¹⁶ Curiosity and surprise often turned into repulsion or attraction, due to a continuous comparison with 'the real Italy', and the inclination to use familiar interpretive parameters in an unusual terrain. The letters disclose a tension between the desire to find the 'homely' in China—trying to domesticate, order and control the other—and, at the same time, the inevitable force of the 'unhomely'. The unhomely tends to make the familiar look strange and at times 'extra-ordinary', once it is transplanted onto another territory. But there is also a certain authenticity in his letters. In one of them, for example, Benvenuti documented the relations between the different military troops, mentioning the killing, looting and other atrocious excesses, often concealed in Italian colonial literature which tended to portray the Italian experience as 'benign'. Thus, Benvenuti sadly concluded:

If our soldiers did less harm than the other armies it is due to the fact that, even though they (the Italians) always went everywhere, they always got there late, when the villages had already been burned and plundered. The few times they arrived on time, they behaved like the others.¹⁷

Benvenuti also described the exact moment when the Italian troops entered Tianjin in January 1901:

As soon as we entered the remains of the city, the smell of burning was replaced by a special stench that we call Chinese smell. It is a stink of fat, aromas, and soil, dissimilar from any good and bad smell which is known among us: this is the reason why we call it Chinese.¹⁸

The uncanniness of the smell becomes a metonymy to symbolise the whole country and its people. The Chinese people are, for Benvenuti as well as for many Italians who went to China with him, before or after, the 'Other' par excellence: the word 'China' itself often evokes an all-encompassing monolithic concept that defies any nuanced description or possible unpacking of the concept. At times, however, other elements, such as social class and gender, appear. These are helpful as dialogic paradigms and often point in the direction of the uncanny. Benvenuti insisted on the Chinese dirtiness, especially in the houses of the poor, but also among the well off, even though he vaguely concluded: 'It seems that the wealthy are clean.'¹⁹ One might wonder if the association between wealth and cleanliness could not be seemingly applied to Italy or, in fact, derive from it.

His reference to Chinese women reveals a strong sense of estrangement, which borders on racially connoted misogyny: 'I haven't seen a single Chinese woman who is beautiful or pleasant, or at least not repulsive.'²⁰ This leads Benvenuti not only to consider the 'homely' presence of the European concessions as a 'blessing', but also to express sympathetic understanding for the Chinese men who show little respect to their wives, simply because 'they are so horrible'. Thus, Chinese women are objectified, with a mixture of colonial gaze and colonial grasp.²¹ Their derogatory depiction, which betrays racial anxiety and leads Benvenuti to justify the Chinese patriarchal social hierarchy, can be seen as a metaphoric projection of power relations between the foreign occupiers and the Indigenous occupied onto the relationship between Chinese men and women, informed by a similarly binary code.

Nevertheless, one can find two cases in Benvenuti's correspondence in which interaction with the locals is positively described. In the first, Benvenuti is delighted to meet an 'educated official', who demonstrates 'particular sympathy for the Italians' and 'knowledge of Italian Risorgimento's history'.²² This example builds into the trope of the glorious 'Italian spirit', and unmask a certain self-referential pride. The second case leaves more room for intercultural dialogue, although it remains very vague and projected in the future. When Benvenuti describes Chinese architecture and civil engineering, he admits the possibility to learn from them:

If I stayed in China a bit longer, I would leave enthusiastic [about it]. The Chinese are called barbarians since it would be convenient if they were

such, while in many and many things they could be our teachers since in many ways they outrun us.²³

Raising this actual feeling of doubt, Benvenuti's emotional route to 'China' unmasks a hint of epistemic anxiety: 'a motive to distrust one's beliefs and for refraining from them without the support of further inquiry or investigation'.²⁴ In the interstices between mere acquaintance and deeper cognitive contact lies Benvenuti's moment of doubting the possible correctness of interpretive paradigms such as 'barbarism' versus 'civilisation'. But this is just one motive, among others, and derives from a moment of dissonance in his epistemological confidence. Significantly, the argument of a possibly inversionary discourse between Western and Chinese claimed superiority has re-emerged, *mutatis mutandi*, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Improvised China expert Martin Jacques has combined the rhetoric trope of 'China's peaceful rise'²⁵ with an accusation of the West's 'arrogance bred ignorance', in order to criticise the West for portraying itself as 'the fount of all wisdom'.²⁶ But while Jacques inverted paradigms to create another form of binarism, Benvenuti simply expressed a doubt, which, for the purpose of this essay, deserves to be properly historicised. Benvenuti's correspondence overall reveals the psychological disposition and the emotional perception of an Italian outsider who landed in the Chinese Empire at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1910). His general outlook is informed by what would appear as healthy criticism of the economic interests, looting and other brutal excesses shown by the Eight-Nation military expedition organised to repress the Boxer uprising. Benvenuti shows an appreciation for the ancient Chinese civilisation, its rituals, its civil and religious buildings, but when it comes to expressing an opinion on 'the Chinese' he offers an outstanding example of Italian racist prejudices. His description involves all the senses, in particular vision and smell, with strong emotive connotations. Fast forwarding to the present, Jacques' argument that China is not a nation state, but a civilisational state (a concept powerfully translated into Chinese with the high-sounding *wenming guojia* 文明国家), simplistically antagonises the master narrative of the 'rise of the West', as primarily shaped by the individual experiences of rising nations, to the 'rise of China'. Jacques' argument that that China has been 'moulded by its sense of civilisation', *ergo* the state is the embodiment of this civilisation, is an a-historical

assertion that contributes to the hubristic logic of the 'clash of civilisations' without offering a more nuanced position which the lens of the uncanny can contribute to.²⁷

Julia Kristeva poignantly inferred that Freud's analysis of the uncanny 'teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves'.²⁸ Kristeva argues that foreignness is not an external but an intrinsic characteristic since: 'We know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others.'²⁹ This position echoes Zygmunt Bauman's emphasis on the heterogeneity of the 'ideal' of Europe that in reality is not a monolithic entity, but a geographically, culturally and socially diverse and complex region. Therefore, Bauman argues that, in cultural terms, Europe is contrary to the *fixity* and *finitude* of border control, surveillance and securitisation policies.³⁰ Kristeva's position also echoes Hans-Georg Gadamer's powerful argument about the scope of hermeneutic reflection that leads him to conclude that 'we are all others, and we are all ourselves'.³¹

Going back to Benvenuti, one could argue that estrangement and unhomeliness were only one side of his experience, since by experiencing them his speaking-being became closer to the subtle thread that connects homeliness and unhomeliness. This was also part of my experience when I visited Tianjin for the first time.

—MY CONTACT WITH THE UNCANNY

In April 1999, I took a train from Beijing to Tianjin. After I arrived at Tianjin Railway Station, I headed west and turned right along the Haihe, without crossing the bridge. When I reached the corner between *Bo'Aidao* (Universal Love St) and *Wujingdao* (Five Elements St), I suddenly found myself surrounded by Italian-style architecture and overwhelmed by an unsettling feeling of uncanniness. In 1999 Tianjin's Municipal Government had begun to redevelop the area. At no. 20 *Jianguo dao* (National Foundation St), I saw a late Renaissance-style church (Sacred Heart Church), with a building area of 1200 square metres, on three levels, with tripled arch windows below the pediment of the cornice, a cross above it and an octagonal-shaped upper floor with a round window on each wall. Later, I walked through two squares, paved with Italian-style pebbles to form concentric circles. Around the square there were crescent-shaped parterres. I came across Baroque-style architecture with brick jostled structure. I also saw examples of rationalist-fascist architecture near what, I later discovered, is now called 'Marco Polo Square'. I

recognised the imposing building, originally called SAI Forum, which is located between ex-Via Marco Polo and ex-Piazza Regina Elena. It was inaugurated on the 20 September 1934 and used for sport or recreational activities, but Chinese sources assert that it was also used for gambling.³² In 2006, during another visit, I found the same building had become a karaoke performance hall.

Walking in this locale was an uncanny experience: one could say I had been catapulted into a mixture between a secret garden and an open-air museum, where the outside had become inside and vice versa. Nicholas Royle argues that the uncanny indicates a 'crisis of the natural'.³³ There I was, walking in a Chinese city, where Chinese families resided, surrounded by Italian-style architecture. Some of the residents were staring at me: *Laowai, laowai* (老外 foreigner) was the word that I repeatedly heard. The physical and 'natural' boundaries of China and Italy had suddenly collapsed in the experience of this 'third space'. Edward Soja defines 'third space' as 'an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality'.³⁴ But the rebalancing act was precarious in this locale. The common sense of what is 'out there', or outside, and what is 'in here', or inside, had suddenly overlapped and become intimately entwined. Freud argues that the uncanny arises where the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced. In the former Italian concession in Tianjin, I could find multiple layers of imagination and claimed reality. One was the layer of language, since renaming meant reclaiming the deterritorialised space. Language was juxtaposed with layers of art and architecture: instruments of reterritorialisation via the imposed design of the new power.³⁵ The creation of the Italian concession had originated from the annihilation of the pre-existing 'filthy Chinese village' and the imposition of a chessboard-like street layout.³⁶ By October 1923, the concession was 'almost fully developed with fine asphalt roads and neat, modern-equipped residential and office buildings.'³⁷



Image 2: Cemetery and marshes in the territory of the Italian concession

Source: Courtesy of Historical Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

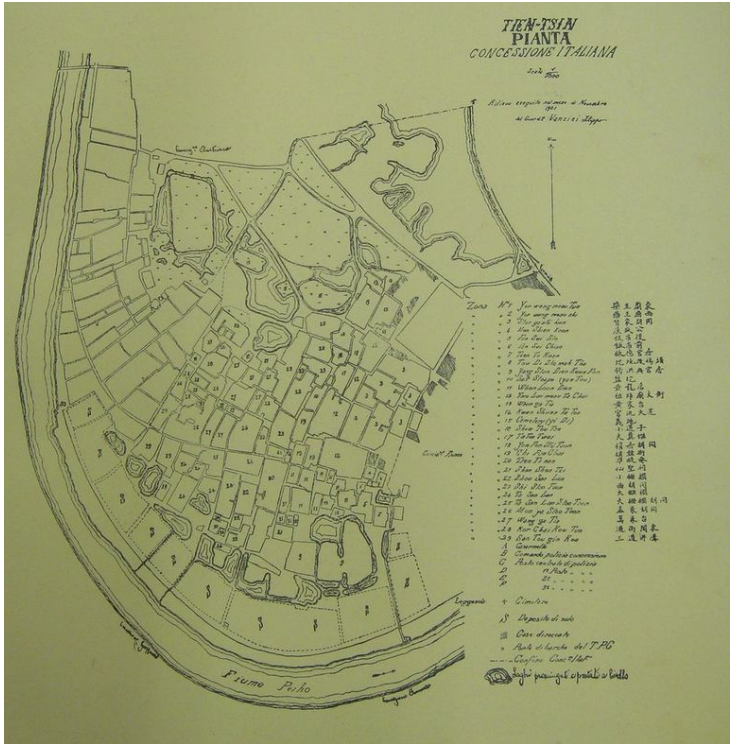


Image 3: Map drawn in November 1901 by the coastguard Filippo Vanzini

Source: Vincenzo Fileti, *La concessione italiana di Tien-tsin*, Genova, Barabino e Graeve, 1921, p.13

The squares and street names were rebaptised, projecting and inscribing in this territory both the glorious history of Italian Risorgimento and the consolidation of the unified Italian nation after 1861: 'There appear in bright blue and white name plates on street corners such names as Vittorio Emanuele III, Marco Polo, Ermanno Carolotto, Principe di Udine, Vettor Pisani, and others, while others bear the names of Roma, Trieste and Trento.'³⁸ These names were symbols of the new power; they asserted its own 'reality' in the Italian concession, in a similar way to reterritorialising signs like Victoria Road (today *Jiefangbeilu*—North Liberation St) and Victoria Park with its Gordon Hall in the British concession.³⁹ A subtle thread, which could also be discursively interpreted as a 'line of flight', connected the urban planning processes of reterritorialisation across the various concessions.⁴⁰ The hagiographic representation of the respective glorious national histories took shape in the configuration of distinctive national assemblages, creating culturally and historically specific national spaces, apparently interconnected. Kaiser-Wilhelm-Straße in the German concession (named after the late German Emperor William I) continued through the British concession, but its name was changed to Victoria Road, to be modified again into Rue de Paris in the French concession and Via d'Italia in the Italian one. This apparent linearity was complicated by territorial boundaries. One of the main problems that urban planners have encountered during the urban regeneration of the former concessions area over the last two decades is the existence of so-called *chadao* (fork streets) in the crossroad sections: at times one road diverts its course at the cross section, and bends in an apparently illogical way. This is because of the original existence of a national border: if one had continued along that road before 1945, he would have entered the territory of another concession. Today, continuing along this road one could encounter another cross section with another bend, for the same reason.⁴¹ This morphology is further complicated by the fact that the Haihe's waterways sinuously intersect the whole area. Historian Ren Yulan emphasises that it is impossible to speak of an organic and systematic approach to planning; the blueprint of urban planning was different in each concession. As a consequence, 'the streets were not straight and not well connected, and the architectural styles and the layout of the facilities were different (异 昇)':⁴² they were ultimately non-Chinese, but not controlled by one single foreign power. This perspective offers the possibility to combine, discursively, Sun Yatsen's

intuition that China was a hypo-colony, with the specific character of Tianjin's hyper-coloniality.⁴³ Each concession included a residential area, which responded exclusively to the objective requirements and subjective expectations and desires of the expatriates of the colonial power. Thus each concession became a lifestyle showcase of the respective colonial power, while each colonial power avowedly used its concession site to organise, promote and expand the commercial activities of the firms of its own nationality. Ren Yunlan also observes that the original lack of ordered street planning was because each foreign power, immediately after the occupation, concentrated on the development of commercial activities.⁴⁴

—TIANJIN: OPEN AIR MUSEUM OF WORLD ARCHITECTURE

There are two traditional Chinese expressions that emphasise the uniqueness of Tianjin as the only place in the world where one can visit neighborhoods that display a built form reminiscent of Brooklyn brownstones, Bavarian castles, Italian squares with fountains, French- and English-style gardens and Parisian cafes.

Tianjin is first defined as the permanent 'Exhibition of World Architecture' (*wanguo jianzhu bolanhui* 万国建筑博览会), a claim that encapsulates that the city boasts the simultaneous presence of different architectural styles in what amounts to a *plein air* museum. Ren Yunlan also defines Tianjin as 'exhibition' of world architecture, adding the connotation '*mingfuqishi*': the name is in accordance with the actuality. However, this actuality is one of alterity (*yi* 异). Associated with the high-sounding visual imagery of Tianjin as the first 'World Expo' in China is a spatially dynamic and semi-utopian notion: in Tianjin, one can 'realise the dream of "travelling tens of thousands of miles in one day"'.⁴⁵

The former Italian concession embodies two main paradoxes. The first is that the cultural reproduction of 'modern Italy in miniature'⁴⁶ in the foreign territory of China has been achieved without repeating exactly the same layout for any single building. Chinese sources emphasise this unique effect: 'In the streets of the Italian concessions one cannot see a single house repeated twice.'⁴⁷ Another paradox is that although during the concessions' era, Italian architects designed villas for their compatriots to live in, the dwellings mostly attracted Chinese 'aristocrats', while today the same villas have been turned into capital enterprises to attract commercial activities.⁴⁸

In the last two decades, the urban renewal of the former concessions area has been at the centre of Tianjin's 'global' ambitions. A key element of this strategy is the 'beautification' of the urban space. The plan for the reinvention of the foreign space was implemented under the coordinated control of Tianjin Haihe Developing Investment Co. Ltd, a public company known to foreign architects and urban planners by the acronym HEDO and to Chinese stakeholders as HAIHE, Haihe being the river symbol of what is vaunted as Tianjin's 'global charm and spirit'.⁴⁹ The former Italian concession has been selected as a pedagogical laboratory of urban regeneration to tell a visual story of 'Beautiful Tianjin'. The promotion of this story has capitalised on the reinvention of Italian design culture. The past and uncanny Italian-style design has served as a political tool in the strategy-making process of Tianjin's 'City Beautiful'. The site of the former Italian concession has become the testing ground of a performative strategy of rewriting the visual language of the whole city. The success story of this experiment has led the Tianjin Municipal Government to promote the whole city's 'global' characteristics through the 'Tianjin Planning Exhibition Hall', which has been strategically positioned within this locale and is marketed as: 'A bridge between the past and the present at the heart of the Italian concession.'⁵⁰

The Municipal Government construction management committee, together with HEDO, estimated there were '5000 Chinese households living in only 180,000 square metres of floor space', going on to claim: 'For some families, four people lived in a seven-square metre room, and some even lived in dim and damp basements'.⁵¹ The urban regeneration of the former Italian concession responds to the logic of *tenglong huanniao* 腾笼换鸟: to rid the cage of old birds in favour of new ones. The 'new ones' are not Chinese residents, but commercial enterprises, attracted with glossy tri-lingual publications (Chinese, English and Italian), emphasising the 'full-bodied Italian style' and that 'with advantaged position, one enjoys the superior resources in the whole city'.⁵²

The interconnected layers of claiming and reclaiming space, through the reclaiming of names and the construction of high-class socioeconomic imagery, unveil the governmental discourse of sanitised global modernity. The 'exclusive' Italianness and the 'typical ancient Roman architectural features, including stability, smoothness, and succinctness' are presented as qualifiers of progress and

forwardness. The risk is to neglect and forget the role of history. During the hyper-colonial era, the 'little Italy' in Tianjin became known as the 'aristocratic concession', and this had progressively led to the affirmation of an ultra-positive narrative. 'This small territorial entity ... an eye in the faraway Orient' was presented by Il Duce Benito Mussolini as an 'advanced sentry of Italian civilisation ... on which should converge both the attention of all the Italians, and the appreciative thanks for those who held high the name of the homeland.'⁵³

Today, the tropes of 'aristocracy' and 'civility' have assumed a new capital. The domesticated uncanniness of the area is promoted by the Tianjin Municipal Government as follows: 'Streets and area of independent scenic architecture: the only exclusive hundred-year old Italian-style architecture complex in Asia.'⁵⁴ What the observer can see today in Tianjin is, allegedly, a 'perfect reproduction of Italian-style area'. The past layers of uncanny language and architecture as political have been reproduced in the present. The spatial-temporal juxtaposition unveils another level of extra-ordinary uncanniness, exemplified by HEDO's promotional hyperbole: 'One can experience Italy fully without ever leaving China.' The slogan is accompanied by a bird's-eye view of Florence, and the Italian expression used—*Sente il gusto completo italiano senza andare all'estero*—suggests a possible coalescence of feelings, emotions and affect.⁵⁵

This echoes, although only partially, the 'flair, the appearance and the manners' described by former residents Wang Zhexing and Zhang Lianzhi. In September 1943 the Japanese troops entered the Italian concession and declared the area a 'special administrative zone'. Wang, a middle school student at the time, remembers how he and the other Chinese residents experienced and inhabited this liminal space:⁵⁶ the foreigners used to live in the western part of 'Marco Polo Square', while the Chinese lived in the eastern part. Zhang Lianzhi's powerful story also demonstrates how the embodied perception of liminality did not clearly differentiate between the two extremes of 'inside' and 'outside' before and after 1949. Zhang was born in 1957, and between 1957 and 1983 he lived on no. 2 *Minsheng lu* (People's Livelihood St). In a garden in the Italian concession there was a bronze horse. 'Whoever could sit on the bronze horse, he was the king.'⁵⁷ Zhang always managed, among the group of four- and five-year-old children, to sit on the horse. The dark bronze colour progressively changed into bright gold from the continuous rubbing of the children's

hands on the horse's head and the back. Zhang remembers that even though the former concession did not physically and legally exist anymore, there was an implicit rule that all the kids who lived in the area had to abide by: 'We could not cross *Jianguo dao*, the *Haihe*, Liberation Bridge, Northern Peace Bridge.'⁵⁸ Even after the return of the Italian concession's territory to China, those who lived in that area knew that they were not supposed to go outside it. Those who lived outside that liminal boundary knew they should not go inside. In Zhang's own words: 'An invisible limen without a precise shape still existed there ... it was the social class.' When people from outside met little Zhang the conversation was always based on the following questions: 'Where is your home? In the Italian concession? Who is your father?' ... 'Ah! When your mother was young, she was extremely beautiful!' The epitome of class was Granduncle Jia, a man Zhang deeply respected because he could speak eleven languages. He always had a white hat on his head, 'walked with the civilised stick (*wenminggun*), had glasses with a golden frame, and wore polished shoes'. Zhang concludes: 'It was a lifestyle.' Even though many families had no real money, the area had an air of elegance and civility, which was associated with 'modernity' and idealised as 'Western lifestyle'.⁵⁹ Today, architecture and design are reframed to evoke that lifestyle.

—THE UNCANNY AS A 'PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY'

The first time the design of the former Italian concession came to prominence was in 1995, when it was chosen as a case study for a competition by Tianjin University's students of architecture. The aim of the project was 'to solve the contradiction between preservation and renewal in historic blocs'. The students recognised that, 'due to Tianjin's colonial past, European-style architecture forms a key feature of the city's landscape'. Their predicament was clearly stated at the beginning of their work: 'As the old cities were torn down, old was becoming more rare than the new.' However, their assumption coincided with the foregone conclusion that 'cities should be continuously renewed.'⁶⁰

Ten years later, in 2005, the Architecture Research Centre of Beijing University conducted a 'phenomenological study' of the former Italian concession.⁶¹ The choice of this site as a 'research object' was primarily motivated by its temporality, which offered the opportunity of studying an ongoing 'settlement'. The Chinese sources

define this condition as *'shunshixingde zhuangtai'*, which actually refers to the apparently contradictory idea of instantaneous transience. That the former concession was going through a process of 'localised redevelopment' meant it was seen as a privileged site by the architecture researchers and students alike.

In 2009, the beautified 'New I-Town' was openly promoted by HEDO both as 'the only scenic Italian-style neighborhood in Asia' and as an instant success; an example of 'consumable cultural heritage of a foreign (*yiyu* 异域) country'.⁶² Such claims contain a dual paradox: the particular, and I would argue illogical, use of 'consumable' as opposed to 'sustainable', and the implicit assumption that the present uncanniness is so unique that it commands greater authenticity than the colonial past itself. Such paradoxes are a result of Tianjin's overtly promoted global ambitions. In keeping with the particular logic of this kind of consumerism, unpalatable elements of the historical reality are reformulated, ignoring advocates of a combination of sustainability and preservation of the original dwellings.

The claim is also made that Tianjin contains the highest concentration of foreign style villas in Asia.⁶³ It is indeed true that the 'New I-Town' offers the highest concentration of Italian-style architecture and design culture not only in China, but all over Asia, estimated today at around one hundred and fifty surviving buildings. However, one of the crucial issues is the so-called authenticity of the architecture and more specifically the historical continuity between the internal and external space and the connection, or even the permeability, between the individual building and the surrounding area. According to HEDO's promotional materials the Italo-Chinese joint scheme to restore buildings in the old concession should be guided by three principles: 'protecting the basic urban structure', 'maintaining the dimensions and styles of the original buildings' and 'restoring the old houses like the original ones'.⁶⁴ Overseas architects emphasise that: 'For *them* restoration is equivalent to cleaning the façade of a building.' Various architects and urban planners argue that the developers always try to get the best deal and save money once they have been guaranteed the tender. Therefore, the workers are mostly inexperienced and poorly paid farm labourers who move to the city and work on the building sites between the planting and the harvesting seasons.

In the end, the main objective of such 'urban regeneration'⁶⁵ is the creation of upmarket commercial precincts; scenic spots with a 'historic' flavour that is

primarily comprised of hotels, bars, restaurants, cafes, pastry shops and designer show rooms. As the restoration of the area progressed it became evident that it would not be a residential area. Indeed, the five thousand odd families still living there in 1999 were either relocated or forcibly removed. The authorities stressed the physical danger posed to residents by the derelict state and precarious structure of the houses. This ostensible official concern for the residents' health and safety was used to justify the policy of mandatory relocation.

The 2007 'Preliminary Masterplan Concept Strategy', drawn up by Design International for HEDO on 20 March 2007, proposed a combination of lifestyle, food, fashion and drinking 'culture' to express the 'Italian spirit' in Tianjin. HEDO originally insisted on renting out its properties exclusively to Italian entrepreneurs. The plan proved to be unrealistic, in no small part because of the financial difficulties that small- and medium-sized Italian enterprises had in investing in the city.⁶⁶ Eventually, HEDO decided to allow other foreigners as well as Chinese entrepreneurs to rent properties in the area. On various occasions, HEDO consulted two international companies, Jones Lang LaSalle and Johnwood Property, both specialists in real estate development who offer integrated services aimed at making developments commercially viable in the long run. HEDO sought their advice and possible assistance, but despite extended discussions and planning, an effective collaboration failed to materialise.

Nevertheless, by the summer of 2009, the 'New I-Town' was being promoted as a model for urban regeneration in Tianjin as a whole. The ultimate result of the re-engineered 'New I-Town' has been the creation of a Disneyland-esque commercial enclave with Italian inflections. The whole site revolves around 'Marco Polo Square', which is to be found at the intersection of Minzu Lu (National Rd) and Ziyou Dao (Freedom St). Ziyou Dao is a pedestrian road connecting Marco Polo Square with Shengli Lu (Victory Rd). The buildings around this square are marketed, in Chinese, as 'second empire Italian style'.

One of the strongest marketing points of this space is the idea, promoted also by the Italian Government, of introducing 'the Italian lifestyle to China'. Architect Massimo Roj, CEO of Progetto CMR, has cooperated with HEDO through a number of projects, including the HEDO headquarter at 22 Ziyou Road—a classical Italian-style villa. Roj seems to paraphrase the Italian Government's intention when he states:

'The former Italian concession provides a unique opportunity to recreate an area where the public could experience authentic Italian lifestyle, starting from its architecture—which faithfully reproduces that of a typical Italian city—and its atmosphere.'⁶⁷

Today, the 'New I-Town' is celebrated as an ideal way to 'approach the history of modern China'. The newcomer to the area would have the opportunity to 'walk at leisure' or do some 'wandering around' (*manyou*). In the maps prepared by HEDO, and especially in the map called 'Tracing the Scenic Spots' all buildings of the former Italian concession are indicated with the respective numbers (from one to fifty-one), but what is significant is that those chosen to be featured mostly correspond to the 'old residences' of famous Chinese residents. Senior official of the Qing government Hua Shikui (1887–1941), famous calligrapher and particularly well-known for writing the imperial edict on the abdication of the Qing last Emperor Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi, lived here at the corner between *Minzhu dao* (Democracy Rd) and *Shenglilu* (Victory St). Tang Yulin (1871–1949) lived on the opposite corner of *Shengli lu* (Victory Rd) in a Baroque style three-storey building with a foundation wall made of granite. Tang Yulin's ancestral home was in Shandong, but he acted as officer of the Northeast China Army and also covered the post of Chairman of the Rehe (Jehol) Provincial Government in 1928. Republican-era governor Cao Rui (1868–1924) lived on what is today *Minzhu dao*: he was Viceroy of Zhili in 1918, and was arrested when the warlord Feng Yuxiang launched the Beijing coup in 1924. Former mayors of Tianjin, Zhang Ting'e (1890–1973) and Cheng Ke (1878–1936), political theorist Liang Qichao (1873–1929), and playwright Cao Yu (1910–1996) were also among the 'aristocrats' who lived in the Italian concession.

What remains is the Italian-style blueprint, based on a Roman grid road layout, with two main squares (today known as Marco Polo and Dante Square respectively) connecting the radiating streets. In the 'Tracing Scenic Spots' map one can also find the former site of the Italian Consulate, the former site of the Sacred Heart Hospital, and also the church, the site of the military barracks. HEDO presents these buildings as 'architecture without words':

Architects from different eras and of different nationalities, with their intelligence and belief system, have preserved for us the magical fluctuations of history. In the middle of radical changes, through the

countless everlasting experiences, that architecture without words has been all along like a fragment of classical work, which records the length and depth of past events. Today, ‘the road of exploration (*tanxunzhilu*)’ activates the narrow lanes through the old architecture, and allows the interconnected elements of uncanny (*yiyu* 异域) architecture and Chinese culture to emerge across the centuries.⁶⁸

—CONCLUSIONS

‘The hometown I remembered was not like this at all. My hometown was much better.’

Lu Xun, *My Hometown*, 1921

The words by Lu Xun embody the paradox of the centrality of ‘home’ in one’s heart and mind. In Lu Xun’s case, the ambivalence of his position was characterised by both attraction and repulsion towards his native home. His words, on the one hand, acknowledge his despair at being far away from home and his longing to return, but, on the other hand, his writing also unmasks the disillusionment of refinding that home, and realising its unfamiliarity, and ultimately its foreignness. Lu Xun’s *Guxiang* (*My Hometown*) set the tone for a whole genre of exile literature, which moves between the paradigms of tradition and modernity.⁶⁹ Lu Xun wrote *Guxiang* in 1921, while Freud wrote ‘The Uncanny’ in 1919. Serendipity has its ways, and I am not arguing that there is anything in common between the two. However, Lu Xun’s incipit poignantly sets the tone for this essay, which historicises the uncanny in the representation of Italy in China, in the past and in the present, by exploring various layers of the emotional geographies of the uncanny.

The first layer of the uncanny is the temporality of language: the uncanny, in Chinese, is embodied by the character *yi* 异, which in the case of Tianjin assumes different connotations. In the past tense of the creation of the Italian concession, the ‘uncanny’ was the territorialised Chinese space, while in the present days of the ‘New I-town’, the uncanny has become domesticated Italian design.

The second layer is the temporality of space: this indicates first the creation of a space of alterity with the Italian concession in Tianjin (1901–45), but it also refers today to the way the ‘unhomely’ Italian architecture has been reappropriated and is

now promoted using, once again, design as a political instrument to project the global image of Tianjin.

The double-edged sword of the 'uncanny' offers a new methodological perspective to explore the identity politics of both Italy in China and urban China in general. The 'uncanny' also allows me to analyse why and how the former Italian Concession has been reconfigured, and how the 'New I-Town' is marketed today as a 'model' of urban design and, ultimately, governmentality.

I argue that the collateral damage of this strategy is the instrumental rewriting of the historical past. This means succumbing to the easy solution of annihilating the tension between homogenisation and heterogenisation, and obscuring the difference between cultures. Ultimately, it means to reduce the possible 'threat', what Freud calls: 'that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'.⁷⁰ The creation of the 'New I-Town' demonstrates how homogeneity is reaffirmed by including strategically adapted heterogeneity. The *difference* of 'foreignness' is reduced to the mere survival of its design façade. Projected now as a space of illusory commoditised 'reality', the Italian-style design becomes a form of political and economic capital useful to promote Tianjin's 'global' identity politics. In this sense, the essay intends to contribute to the study of neoliberal urban aesthetics. It sheds light on how aesthetic regimes of power carry with them a meta-politics, which indicates how today's residents of 'globalised' and 'modern' Tianjin can sense their place in the world in an extremely essentialised form, since the space between foreign and native has been reduced through an intentional and instrumental domesticisation of the foreign. The 'Italian spirit' has both triumphed and died, but the 'New I-Town' is not the Arab Phoenix that can return to life after adversity (*post fata resurgo*). The predominance of real estate development has reduced the imagery of 'Italy' to an essentialised symbolic and emotional capital that reveals a totalising projection of the political economy over culture itself. The intensified commoditisation of culture, dictated by the strategies of Tianjin's urban planning governance, promotes a stereotypical pseudo-culture through neoliberal political rationalities. Ultimately, culture disappears under the weight of the commercial apparatus that turns globalising cities into money-making machines.

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—NOTES

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- ⁵⁵ See note 17.
- ⁵⁶ Limen indicates the transverse beam in a doorframe: it is the threshold, which should divide inside and outside.
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- ⁶⁴ HEDO, *New Istyle Town*, I.
- ⁶⁵ On similar processes in Shanghai see Jie Shen, Fulong Wu, 'Restless Urban Landscapes in China: A case study of three projects in Shanghai', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 255-77. See also 'Shanghai Modern; The Future in Microcosm', eds Justin O'Connor and Xin Gu, *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, vol. 4, 2012.
- ⁶⁶ An example is the January 2006 'Come to Tianjin' initiative, which invited SMEs to invest in the 'Italian Business Park'. The mission was organised by Italian Association of Consultants in Research, Innovation and Development, the Italian Marketing Association and the Italian High-Tech Federation, in collaboration with SMEs International Network and with the support of the Italian Embassy in Beijing.
- ⁶⁷ HEDO, *New Istyle Town*, II.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Theodore Hutners, 'Blossoms in the Snow: Lu Xun and the Dilemma of Modern Chinese Literature', *Modern China*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1984, pp. 49-77.

⁷⁰ Freud, p. 219.