

**Codetta Raiteri Chiara**  
**Magister thesis, Faculty of Political Science , Università degli studi di Milano**

**Abstract:**

**Japan in the social imaginary of fascist Italy**  
**Representations of the *Rising Sun Empire* in Luce newsreels (1927-1943)**

“By now curiosity for strange shapes of temples and fascination for esotism expressed in their architecture has been overcome by the profound sense of religiousness of a great population”  
from the documentary “*Ciliegi in fiore*”, (“cherry trees blossoming”) Luce institute, 1943<sup>1</sup>.

In 1919 Mussolini started talking of the “Asiatic century” and about “Japan [which] is destined to act as a turmoil for all the yellow world”<sup>2</sup>. During the fascist period the Far East became prominent for Italian foreign policy. Italy formulated two main policies in the Far East. Firstly, in 1928, Italy recognized the Nanking government and Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and consul in Shanghai, began an assistance and penetration policy in China while maintaining political equidistance vis a vis China and Japan. Then in 1937 Italy joined the Anticomintern Pact, the embryonic form of the Axis Pact. Japan had been previously considered, as were all Asiatic countries, a colonial object and an esotic land. Now it had become a subject of history, participating in the international order. Contemporary Japan had entered the Italian social imaginary through all the media, particularly through cinema.

From 1924, the year in which the Luce Institute was founded, Luce films were one of the most effective vehicles through which the Italians gained access to the rituals and myths of the regime and, as a result, began to identify with them. The Institute was a direct emanation of Mussolini and depended directly on him and his Press Office. Luce newsreels are a good medium to understand the vision the regime sought to create of itself and the world.

Between 1927 and 1943 Luce newsreels offered a composition of words and images which represented international reality. Through the cinema, the “most effective propaganda weapon”, the fascist regime evoked fears and anxieties regarding the modern international context. The Italian

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<sup>1</sup> All the Italian quotations are translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Translation of the author. Speech in Trieste on the 6 of February 1921 at the inauguration of Venezia Giulia Fasci, in Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, op. cit., XVII, pag 152.

fascist model call for a guided modernity in order to avoid individualism, materialism, standardization and the overthrow of racial and sexual hierarchy, opposing both capitalism and communism. Fascist discourse shaped itself in parallel to the regime's coercive and propaganda structures. Domestic and foreign political issues were strongly tied to the promotion of consensus.

The representation of Japan was part of a discourse which defined others in order to trace and justify the new Italian identity. Along with images of Japan, Luce newsreels offered different narratives of the Sino-Japanese relationship and the war in China. Moreover, the images of China and Japan changed in accordance with the evolution of Far-East policy and relationships between Italy, China and Japan. From the great variety of images of Japan which were finally unified into a complex representation, an organic discourse arose. Initially the representation of Japan was contradictory and multiple. Critical phases of the discourse formation process coincided with crucial moments in the history of Japan, Italy and the relationship between the two countries. The formation of the image was not a linear process. There were strong moments of discontinuity in relation to particular historical circumstances and the propagandistic emergencies of the regime. Incidental and instrumental use of events in the Far East hampered the formation of a coherent discourse until Italy joined the Anticomintern Pact. Finally an organic discourse emerged from a fragmentary representation and absorbed the entire international scenery step by step. This discourse simplified the world and nations into an irreducible dichotomy. The opposition New order/Old order replaced the oppositions of East/West and progress/primitivism as a criteria to interpret the world. Spiritual community, which stood at the base of the Anticomintern Pact, became a deep union of brotherhood and solidarity, founded on blood, *volksgeist* and martial ideology. Fascism presented itself as a universal ideology, the only one able to save the world from the dangers of modernity while retaining modernity and progress as an essential characteristic.

The relation between modernity and tradition was a critical element of fascist ideology and was fundamental in representation of Japan from the very beginning. This relation was based on the dialectic opposition East/West, where modernity is feature of the West. As Japan and Italy

approached one another slowly but progressively, Luce newsreels discarded a voyeuristic and oriental view of Japan to promote a new image of the Rising Sun Empire within' the spiritual community based on the Tripartite Pact. Luce newsreels finally exalted Japan's martial spirit and modern army, the unity and devotion of its people, industrial productivity and rural wealth, social health and traditional spiritual depth. Japan was no longer represented as a far away, exotic country, instead the discourse emphasised similarity and continuity with Italy and Germany. Japan was the only Asiatic country which had been able to absorb the conquests of the West, whilst avoiding the degeneration of plutocracy and communism caused by modernity. China, on the other hand, had been squashed by contact with the West, which provoked its inexorable decline. The Italian narrative incorporated the Japanese pan-asiatic discourse which became one of the ideological supports of the Tripartite Pact. The Italian civilizing mission in Africa was transposed to China, where Japan, advanced thanks to western conquest but fierce in its martial and spiritual tradition, represented a surrogate against the degeneration of modernity. In the narrative of the Sino-Japanese war the old binary opposition of East/West is rediscovered and reinterpreted. In this representation of the Far East the false refusal of the West implied in the New Order rhetoric is unmasked.