Representations of China by Western Travellers in the Blogsphere

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Abstract. This article adopts a transmedial perspective in order to investigate narrative similarities and differences between print and online travel writing. Texts, which are contemporary and Western-authored, are written either in English, French and Italian and they all focus on China as the travel destination. Drawing upon Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal's studies on the narrative discourse, it is contended that travel books and travel blogs, despite sharing basic generic features (i.e. first-person travel accounts), present substantial differences. In the former, readers are presented with a coherent and self-exhaustive narrative. This means that the representation of both China and the traveller results as a progressive (self)discovery. On the other hand, travel blogs provide fragmented and objectified accounts rich in touristic tips. As a consequence, the narrative loses its internal development and takes on an informative value in which the portrayal of China and the traveller recede to the background.
Keywords: Narrative, travel writing, blogs, China, transmediality, Western texts

INTRODUCTION

By adopting a transmedial perspective, this article looks at similarities and differences in the narrative of two differently mediated forms of travel writing: travel books and travel blogs. Specifically, travel books and travel blogs are regarded as two "intermedial transpositions" (Wolf, 2008) that realize the same generic matrix. In turn, the (contemporary) travel writing genre can be defined as first-person narratives that recount, with words and illustrations, journeys that effectively took place. The present article focuses on Western-authored texts – in English, French and Italian – that describe trips to contemporary China. On the one hand, the decision to focus on texts in three different languages aims at overcoming the English-centredness of the majority of study on blogs (Schmidt 2007) and travel writing (Forsdick and Youngs, 2007). On the other hand, the choice of China as the travel destination has two main reasons. The first one is operative: given the medial diversity of these

texts, it was necessary to find a unifying theme that could project over the corpus of texts an overall coherence. Secondly, China is particularly fruitful insofar as, for Westerners, it has always represented the quintessential Otherness (Clarke, 1997). In this respect, the cultural and linguistic gap that separates the travellers from China helps highlight the cross-cultural potential of the narratives.

From these premises, this article aims at investigating how the "landing" of travel narratives on different medial formats – i.e. the book and the blog – is responsible for affecting the way in which the narrative is shaped and the kind of information (about China and the traveller) delivered by the texts. In order to do that, a narratological approach inspired by Genette's (1980) work on the narrative discourse is favoured. At the same time, elaborating on Mieke Bal's (2002) critique of orthodox narratology (to which also Genette belongs), according to which we can never think of a narrative as fully a-ideological, the conviction here is that to assess the form of the narrative also leads to highlight the way in which Self and Other – traveller and China – are represented and, consequently, the ideological charge of the texts. To facilitate the analysis, travel books are divided in monomodal and multimodal – the former composed only by written text, the latter including also illustrations – as for travel blogs, there are those hosed on platforms – such as Travelpod.com and Turistipercaso.it – and individual ones, which means that the blogger has created his/her own online space and is fully responsible for its management.

THE LITERARY FORM OF TRAVEL BOOKS

According to Genette (1980) all narratives are a form of telling (diegesis). This means that they necessarily imply a narrator and ultimately they can only provide the illusion of mimesis (i.e. the "showing" of the event compared to its telling). So, mimesis and diegesis are not two mutually exclusive modes; rather, the narrative presents variations in its "mood", that is, the distance of the diegesis to the (mimesis of the) event. In this article, particular attention is devoted to descriptions, personal reflections, and dialogues (as the textual terrain where the encountered between Self and Other is best displayed). Genette argues that the ways in which dialogues are embedded in the narrative provides varying

illusions of mimesis. For instance, the "reported speech" creates a sense of mimesis and proximity to the event, because people's words are transcribed verbatim; on the contrary, the "transposed speech" is embedded in the flux of the narration, thus keeping a greater distance to the episode recounted (Genette, 1980: 171-3). The mood of the narrative is also influenced by the functions that the narrator can take (Genette, 1980: 255-256). When the author maintains a basic "narrative function", for example through the descriptions of places or events, s/he tends to "disappear" from the text; by contrast, whenever s/he assumes an "ideological function", interrupting the narrative in order to provide comments, his stance fully manifests itself. The point is that, as Mieke Bal (2002) reminds us:

"Any description is modelled by an ideological vision. We need to question the idea of non-focalized, or zero-focalization description, theorized and defended by narratologists such as Genette. […] It can be either the plot […] or the description itself […] it does not make any difference from the point of view of the ideological partiality that is embedded." (Bal: 2002: 200-201; author's translation)

This means that all narratives are ideological and, according to Bal, there can only be varying degrees of effacement of the (ideological) function assumed by the narrator (who, in the case of travel narratives, is also – via a narratively constructed persona – the author of the text). Bal limits her analysis to the use of language (adjectives, modal verbs, etc.). However, in the case of first-person travel narratives the discussion can be extended to the shifting of the narrator's "I" between narrative and ideological functions, as well as to the way in which s/he decides to report dialogues. All these changes in the mood of the narrative, it is argued, have direct consequences on the literary form that the travel account takes and also on how Self and Other are represented.

The first travel book under exam is *Invisible China* (2009) by Colin Legerton and Jacob Rawson. Legerton and Rawson are two US-Americans who spent about five years in China completing their Master's degrees there while studying Mandarin. They undertook their travel at the end of their stay in China with the explicit intention to get in contact with ethnic minority "people in towns and villages all around the borderlands of China" (14). The book opens with a map of China in which all the ethnic minorities encountered by the authors are localized (See Figure 1).

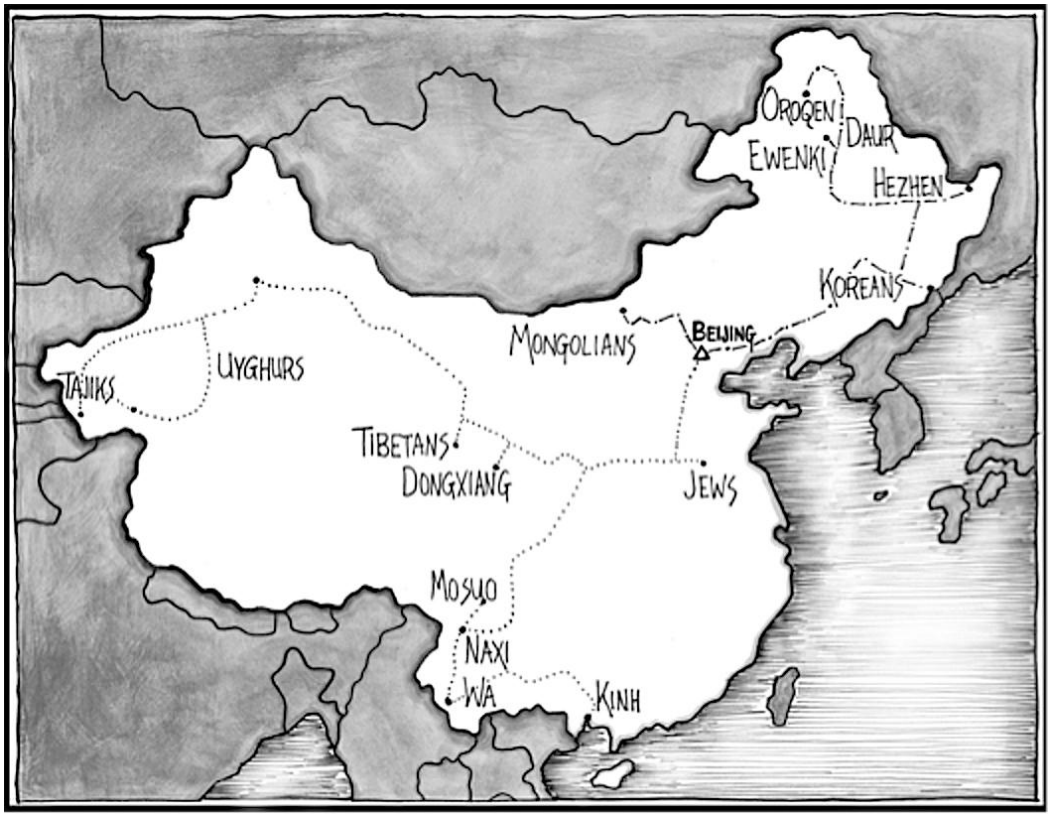

Figure 1: The whole map of China at the beginning of *Invisible China*

What is notable is that the illustration is not a "proper" map but a drawing in which space and distances are distorted and no precise point of reference is given (except for Beijing). This drawing is responsible for creating a "subjective" spatial representation that is dependent, in the first place, on the ethnic minorities who inhabit it. Hence, the spatial dimension of the journey becomes functional to the localization of the peoples encountered by the travellers. This impression of space-through-ethnicity is reinforced throughout the text in two ways: on the one hand, the book is organized according to four regionally defined chapters – the Northeast, the Southwest, the Northwest and the East – which follow the development of the journey; on the other hand, all chapters are introduced by maps in the same style as the first one, which show each region together with the names of the minorities, the main cities or towns, and the foreign bordering countries. Maps, however, are not the sole visual element in the book. The authors also inserted 50 pictures – Figures 2 and 3 are two examples – which are arranged following the development of the journey:


Figure 2 (left): Colin Legerton among Uygur people
Figure 3 (right): The authors of *Invisible China* playing with children

Being gathered together in the middle of the book the photographs of *Invisible China* help to create the impression of a visual account that is autonomous, rather than merely supportive, of the written text. The majority of the pictures (34 out of 50) portray only local people in their milieu, while in others (9 out of 50) the authors also appear in the pictures and they are usually engaged *intra pares* with locals. These photographs then reassert Legerton and Rawson's purpose, stated in the opening of the book, to "learn directly from the minority people" (2009: 13), and they shape the text in the spirit of an ethnographic study of China's ethnic groups.

This same approach finds also proof in the way in which the narrative is modelled. To begin with, we find many quotations from other texts. Examples are the aphorisms and poems that are found either at the beginning of each chapter (as excerpts) or within the text: "It takes a great people to build a great wall. But it takes an even greater people to make the Chinese build a great wall"(Mongolian saying, cited in Legerton and Rawson, 2009: 61) A popular Chinese children's encyclopaedia defines ethnicity: "Our great motherland is a unified country of many ethnic groups. The fifty-six ethnic groups that dwell in this vast and prosperous territory collectively created our long-standing history and glorious culture. In this large multi-ethnic family, the Han race occupies the majority, at more than 90 percent of the total population." (Legerton and Rawson, 1990: 4)

By introducing other voices through direct quotations, the authors foreground local knowledge and (Western) readers are put in contact with it in a mimetic way (i.e. with a minimal degree of filtering by the

authors). These references, then, contribute to counterbalance the "We" of the authors upon which the narrative depends. Beyond that, Legerton and Rawson adopt two other narrative strategies to further soften their simulacral presence into the text. On the one hand, they completely omit biographical information and personal comments on what they witness. In fact, the authors' "We" maintains a narrative function which rarely transcends the flow of the diegesis. Moreover, the writing of dialogues follows a fixed pattern: these are in the form of reported speech when it is the autochthons who speak, while they are transposed speech when it is the authors' turn:

"We approached an older woman, like us an idler bystander, to find out if all these jellyfish were for local consumption. 'Goodness no! They are far too expensive for us to eat. These are all for export.' [...] Now in conversation with the older woman, we determined to take advantage of the situation to learn how she felt the land reclamation of the 1960s that attached the three islands to the mainland had affected their fishing industry. 'Land reclamation was great for our people. When Mao brought more land between our islands, we were all able to plough and grow our own food.'" (Legerton and Rawson, 2009: 88)

Through these strategies Legerton and Rawson put minority people even more to the foreground, while their writers' simulacra fade into the background. For these reasons, it is possible to suggest that both the written narrative and the pictures conjure up to shape the travelogue in the form of an ethnography, in which what is most relevant is the representation of the Other, rather than that of the travellers; it is more about letting readers know how China's ethnic minorities live than recounting Legerton and Rawson's impressions along the road.

Moving now to a second multimodal book, the case of *La Cina in Vespa* (2008) by Italian Giorgio Bettinelli is taken into account. Bettinelli (1955-2008) was a notorious travel writer, whose peculiarity was to travel to the remotest regions of earth riding his Vespa. In the travelogue *La Cina in Vespa* Bettinelli recounts his journey around the Middle Kingdom (which, in his later years, had become his country of residence). In the author's own words, the goal of the journey is "to realize a trip on a Vespa that touches all the 34 geographic areas [of China]" (48). Far from simply detailing the stages of the journey, in this travelogue Bettinelli pours all sorts of reflections, from personal episodes to political critiques, passing through a variety of opinions on music, cinema and literature. As a consequence the thematic boundaries of the book

transcend soon the travel *per se* to encompass the author's whole vision of life, with respect to which his narrating persona keeps an overtly ideological stance.

Beyond the heterogeneity of the themes treated, even when Bettinelli writes specifically about the journey, he usually links it to the many other adventures he has accomplished. Hence *La Cina in Vespa* is inscribed into a long series of achievements as both a traveller and a writer:

"Needless to say, having decided to live in China for the next one or two years, while completing the travelogue about the 144,000 kilometres driven between 1997 and 2001, traversing 90 countries, from Ushuaia to Hobart, the idea that I cannot ride a Vespa in my 'elected country' is much more annoying than a little stone in my shoe." (Bettinelli, 2008: 39; author's translation)

To the extent to which *La Cina in Vespa* overtly focuses on Bettinelli's persona and his opinions on a variety of topics, the form of the text is best thought of as an autobiographic diary. At the same time, China and the Chinese tend to retreat to the background. This erasure is achieved in particular through two narrative strategies. The first one concerns dialogues: these are reduced to a minimum throughout the text, despite the fact that, during a great part of the journey, Bettinelli is accompanied either by his wife Ya Pei or by his Chinese lover, Manuelle, who both are two insiders who could easily negotiate between the author and the people encountered. This leads to a silencing of the Chinese and a representation of China as merely a space to be traversed in order to accomplish the endeavour. However, it is when looking at the pictures inserted in the book that the travelogue's egocentric connotation emerges more vividly. There are 16 photographs in total, inserted in the middle of the book, and in 12 of them the author is photographed alone, directly looking at the camera.

Figure 4: Giorgio Bettinelli riding his Vespa

Figures 4 is an example. This picture disclose very little of the places visited, or the people encountered by the author. Rather, it reinforce the image of Bettinelli as a solitary traveller (and one that stereotypically adheres to the idea of Italianness, as a mix of masculinity and latin lover's attitude). In fact, the sole "relation" that the author entertains in these photographs is that with his beloved Vespa. The function of these pictures is eminently to testify the author's accomplishment to ride a Vespa in China – which requires a series of permissions from the Chinese authorities, being it an imported vehicle – and visit all the 34 geographic areas. Differently from *Invisible China*, here pictures are self-centred, thus stressing the autobiographical nature of the account and overlooking an effective engagement with (and representation of) the Chinese.

To conclude the discussion on travel books, one French monomodal text is analysed: *Ivre de Chine: Voyages au coeur de l'empire* (2010) by Constantin de Slizewicz. At the age of 20 de Slizewicz left his studies and moved to Beijing. Since then, he has been living, working and travelling in China, contributing with reportages to both French magazines and Chinese newspapers. He traversed the whole Middle Kingdom many times: from Beijing to Kashgar, from Harbin to Lhasa. *Ivre de Chine* recounts the 2002 journey that de Slizewicz accomplished together with his friend Alexandre driving a sidecar from Beijing to Kunming. Given de Slizewicz's (and Alexandre) deep acquaintance with China, the narrative presents a variety of encounters that the two have with Chinese friends around the country, as well as a number of dialogues with local peoples, such as the following one with a policemen who patrols the road:

> [Policeman]: "Comrades, where are you from?" [De Slizewicz]: "Beijing"; [Policeman]: "You speak very good Chinese, where are you originally from?" [De Slizewicz]: "France." [Policeman]: "Where are you heading with your motorbike?" [De Slizewicz]: "Yunnan." A short silence, then he tells us with his thumb up: "*Niubi*! *Niubi*! Super! Super!" (De Slizewicz, 2010: 59; author's translation)

This dialogue reveals that de Slizewicz thinks of himself, in the first place, as a Beijing dweller, while the policeman seems more interested in knowing his country of origin. The author's insider position is also reasserted by his knowledge of Mandarin, which is transcribed in italics in many occurrences throughout the text. Beyond that (and similarly to Legerton and Rawson), the author fills the text with both direct

quotations from other texts (including his own) as well as with footnotes, adding to his travelogue features that are proper to the scholarly text. These are two examples:

"Despite the departure of missionaries and the persecutions during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, there still is a community of several thousand Tibetans, who pray every week in their stone-made churches. [1] I have recounted this first trip to Catholic Tibetan communities, as well as the epic journeys of French and Swiss missionaries to Tibet in my book *Les Peuples Oubliés du Tibet*, Perrin, 2007." (De Slizewicz, 2010: 140; author's translation)

"The legs of women will dance in the air, run into the desert, rest beside the rivulets left by streams. And the world will be peaceful." (Some of these notes are taken from the introduction to Luo Xu's work, edited by the Xin Dong Cheng Space for Contemporary Art Gallery: www.chengxindong.com.) (De Slizewicz, 2010: 222; author's translation)

The widespread use of footnotes enriches the travel narrative with a multiplicity of (textual) voices that eventually corroborate de Slizewicz's personal reflections made along the road. In this way, not only does the author demonstrate to be, by now, an insider in China, but he also shows to have acquired a profound understanding of the Tibetan region, due to his years of research on the region's history and the publication of an essay to which he makes reference in the second quote. Hence the narrative of *Ivre di Chine*, albeit being fundamentally an autobiographic travel narrative, gets closer to the essay. In fact, while de Slizewicz opts for elevating the accuracy and objectivity of his account by resorting to other sources, at the same time his "I" is free to assume an overt ideological stance throughout the text. The last quote deserves particular attention as it also presents a link within the footnote. What is at stake is not so much the obvious fact that this link lacks interactivity but rather that de Slizewicz decided to add such a piece of information into the book *despite* the impossibility of directly reaching the website. Hence, by creating a connection that ties the book to the Web, the print format forces – without crossing it – the medial boundary that separates online and offline texts.

This last notation is useful here because the analysis now trespasses the line between the print and online realm, by discussing the work of French blogger Curieuse Voyageuse (trans. "Curious Traveller"). This is, indeed, a particularly apt case study for the bridging of the two realms because the blog *Curieusevoyageuse.com* (2009) also underwent a

"remediation process" (Bolter and Grusin, 1998) that led it to be released as a book, *La Chine à fleur de peau* (2011), published with the real name of the blogger, Aurélie Croiziers.

A CASE OF REMEDIATION

Blogger Curieuse Voyageuse started to keep her eponymous blog in 2009, when she moved to China. In 2011, she went back to France but, since then, she has continued to write about her trips around the world. When Curieuse Voyageuse started blogging in 2009, she decided to begin narrating the trips she had previously taken to China, either for work or leisure, before her decision to effectively move there. The remediation process to which Curieuse Voyageuse's blog was subjected is one of "immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin, 1998), that is, one that strives to remain as adherent as possible to the source text, trying to reduce the effects of the new medial format on the remediated text. The book contains a variety of pictures taken from the blog. Moreover, the written text is largely unaltered and it keeps the subdivision of the posts. This also means that anytime the blogger quoted a passage from a different text or source, this same quotation also appears in the book. In this respect, as links to other website could not be included, the writer compensated for this deficiency by expanding the corresponding text in the book with some of the information reachable online via the link. See the following example:

Blog: "We passed the nights in the Miao villages we visited. Miao are the fifth minority in terms of number of people, counting nine million members in 2000. This striking number and the extension of their geographic spreading can explain the diversity of costumes and idioms from one region to the other. This site gives plenty of information on this minority. In the villages we visited, some days are really busy and people try to catch the tourists' attention so that villagers can get some money out of their presence. I despised these dances accomplished with no enthusiasm, and I didn't see any entirely. Only the beauty of the costumes – here, the traditional Miao costume – was really worth it…" (Curieuse Voyageuse, 2009; author's translation)

Book: "For three days I wandered around rice fields and villages inhabited by the Guizhou ethnic minority. These peoples have completely different ways of life, traditions and idioms from the Han, the Chinese majority. There are officially 56 ethnic minorities in China. Before today, I visited four villages: Matang, Ching'an, Langde and Xijiang, inhabited by Miao and Gejia. These two ethnic minorities count

several million people, being minorities on a Chinese scale! These cultures are recognized by the Chinese government, which grants them some more space and political power. However, these minorities are often folklorized, and it is not rare for celebrations and traditions usually devoted to crucial moments of life to be commercialized in favour of tourists. And whenever curiosity compels you to take a break, it is possible to discover a bit better such different ways of life. For example, how women carry their babies: here, they are kept on the back, in the African way. Idioms are very different too, but if you dedicate some time to people, you can exchange several smiles and a bunch of words. We passed several nights in the Miao villages we visited. Miao are the fifth minority in China, in terms of number of people, insofar as nine million were counted in 2000. This striking number and the extension of their geographic spreading can explain the diversity of their costumes and idioms from one region to the other. In the villages we visited, some days are mainly dedicated to entertaining activities in order to appeal to passing tourists so that villagers can get a small source of revenue. I despised these dances accomplished with no enthusiasm, and I didn't see any entirely. Only the beauty of the costumes – such as the traditional Miao costumes with a headdress, chest protection and silver shin guards – was really worth it…" (Croiziers, 2011: 41; author's translation)

It is evident that the longer version published in the book is enriched with details that online are reachable only by clicking on the link. By contrast, in print Croiziers co-opted the online source into the narrative, taking care of rephrasing the information found on the Web and making it her own. Thematically speaking, the major difference between the book and the blog has to do with the fact that the former only refers to Curieuse Voyageuse's journeys and stay in the Middle Kingdom, without taking into account those posts that do not relate directly to China (such as the one in which she mentions to have been nominated for an annual blog award). More broadly, it is possible to contend that *La Chine à fleur de peau* is a book that presents a variety of features that try to mimic the online text as faithfully as possible. However, the book required also reshaping the travel narrative according to more rigid formal criteria that could present the text as a coherent narrative. The book tends to homogenize the travel experiences, leading to suggest that it is the book's physicality to project onto Curieuse Voyageuse's experience (and its narrativization) a teleology that is completely absent from the blog. In the book, the knowledge of China is presented as a gradual, incessant discovery: it is a progressive scratching of layers from absolute ignorance to full appreciation, a scratching that on the blog appears more

disarticulated and, at best, deductible only *a posteriori* when comparing among them the blogger's journeys.

At this point, in order to effectively discuss how the narrative on blogs is shaped, the analysis addresses four travel blogs: two hosted on platforms – the Italian Turistipercaso.it and the English Travelpod.com – and two independently built by a British and Italian blogger.

TRAVEL BLOGS AND THE FORM OF NARRATIVE

The analysis discusses first the travel blogs on platforms. The first one is *Cina, nel regno di mezzo* (2012, trans. *China: Into the Middle Kingdom*) found on the platform Turistipercaso.it and written by the Italian blogger Supermary58. Her journey lasted two weeks during which the blogger visited the most popular places in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Xian, Suzhou. The second one is *All o'er China during Spring Festival Holiday* (2006) hosted on the platform Travelpod.com and written by blogger Ataritouchme. The blogger travelled over a period of a month and a half and visited both touristic places and less beaten areas.

According to Google Rankings, when the analysis was conducted (November 2015), Turistipercaso.it and Travelpod.com were the two most popular travel blog platforms in Italian and English. Turistipercaso.it is a platform founded in 1998 on the wave of the popularity enjoyed in Italy by the homonymous TV show (the titled can be translated as "Tourists by Chance"). Travel blogs, of which there are now more than 28 thousands, have certainly a core role within the platform, attested by the fact that the link "Travel Dairies" found on the main navigational bar on the homepage is the second one from the left, just after "Home". Nonetheless, the platform goes well-beyond its function of travel blogs' aggregator, by offering other services, such as a "Forum", a "Magazine" and guide-style information about potentially any destination in the world. Travelpod.com is an English free-of-charge platform founded in 1997. More stringently than Turisipercaso.it, it focuses on blogging in relation to travel, as the heading on the homepage – "Blogging Built for Travellers" – suggests. By scrolling down the homepage, users get a sense of how the platform works and the services it provides. For instance, bloggers have the chance to visualize their trips on a map, count the miles travelled, or, notably, turn their blogs into a book.

If now we focus on the travel accounts of the two bloggers, we can reflect on their narrative form. Without considering the page as a whole, we can see that the account of Supermary58's blog is exclusively composed by written text. This is because Turistipercaso.it urges bloggers to publish their photographs and videos in another dedicated section of the platform. Therefore, if users want to see Supermary58's pictures about China they are required to browse the whole website. The main consequence of this policy of the platform is to strengthen the overall sense of community, while homogenizing the bloggers' contribution with that of other users. Narratively speaking, in none of the 10 posts that Supermary58 wrote about China we find links to other sources or references to other texts. Moreover, dialogues with the Chinese are also completely absent. Lastly, the blogger maintains an integrally narrative function throughout the text. The extract below attests to the extent to which the blogger adopts a "distanced" position from what she experiences by keeping a purely diegetic stance:

"Tiananmen square is at the heart of Beijing and we reach it very early in the day in order to avoid the crowd of tourists that visit it everyday. […] You can access it only through check-in points which are under surveillance by armed and attentive policemen. […] The square is surrounded by buildings and monuments, among which the Monument to the People's Heroes, Mao's Mausoleum, the Great Hall of the People, and the National Museum of China." (Supermary58, 2012; author's translation)

Supermary58's "I" never assumes an ideological function – either commenting or "filtering" her description through a subjective point of view – and this, in turn, leaves readers at a certain distance from China and the events recounted. Overall, all these discursive features contribute to build a monological one-voiced account in which the simulacra of the traveller and the Other never take flesh. Rather, what the blogger does is to provide tips and information to would-be-travellers by largely complying with the writing that can be found in travel guides.

The main difference between Supermary58 and Ataritouchme's blogs is that in this latter the blogger included a great number of pictures in the blog. At the same time, however, the blogger specifies at the beginning of the account that photographs were not taken by him, but by his friend Hannah, and they were added all together at the end of each post. Apart from that, in terms of the narrative the whole account is composed by brief descriptions of the places visited and the things done, very similarly

to what happens on Supermary58's blog. Posts are usually very short, bare in syntax, and sometimes filled with jargon:

"Having seen everything we wanted to see in Wulumuqi, we spent a goodly amount of time in KFC. Of course I first ate, but I also had washed my hair & face and brushed my teeth by the time we got out of there. Yes, wunderbar, but I am a bit upset that they introduced corn salad as a side dish instead of fries and give you some gross fruit drink instead of Pepsi. You gotta pay exxxtra for fries. EXXXTRA!" (Ataritouchme, 2006)

Posts rarely articulate a thick narrative. Ataritouchme's "I" chiefly maintains a narrative function that does not transcend into an overtly ideological role. Besides, he opts for not reporting dialogues, nor other links to outer sources, thus simply creating an account in which his notations run uninterrupted and unaffected in their mood. The text has the main goal to keep memory of the events (as the blogger claims at the beginning); in doing so, however, the blog flattens out all that pertains to China and the blogger's encounter with the Other. More generally, these two blogs are shaped as informal personal journals. "Personal", however, does not mean subjective: indeed, while the "Is" of the bloggers never abdicate their narrative function, both the (self)representation of bloggers and of China are abstracted, neutralized. These findings confirm the validity of previous studies on blogs, which concluded that blogs are mainly single-authored diaries composed of written language and with a low frequency of links (Herring, *et al.* 2007).

The scenario appears more articulated in relation to individual travel blogs. Travel blogs considered are Bordersofadventure.com by British Becki and Gattosandro-viaggiatore.blogspot.co.uk by Italian blogger Gattosandro Viaggiatore. As the title suggest, Becki's blog recounts her globetrotting experiences around the world. Becki went to China in 2012 for roughly two months and wrote 11 posts about this experience. In each post there are usually a couple of links, for example to the Web sources that are dedicated to the landmarks visited by the blogger. There are also plenty of pictures and these are included within the account, revealing the purpose to balance visual elements and words and to organize them in a mutual relation.

Concerning the narrative, the alternation between the descriptions of places, personal anecdotes, and reflections continuously rearticulates the

mood of the discourse. Sometimes, the blogger assumes a chiefly narrative function, as in the following passage:

"Seeing pandas in Chengdu is as popular as visiting the Great Wall of China in Beijing or the Terracotta Army in Xian. As soon as you arrive in the city you known you hit the land of pandas madness. Their adorable faces greets you from every street corner appear on all manner of advertisement and are even used to decorate taxi car bonnets." (Becki, 2012b)

It is remarkable that even in such descriptive paragraph the blogger opens her writing to the "you" of the reader marking the intention of overtly addressing, with her advices, a precise group of followers. At other times, Becki focuses on personal stories: in so doing, the blogger's "I" also takes on an ideological function. Below, for instance, Becki recounts a humorous episode occurred in a Chinese massage centre:

"As my friend's face turned a little white when I entered the room, she simply screamed at me: 'OH MY GOD, what HAVE they done to your back?' Looking over my shoulder I couldn't see a thing, until I ran to the toilet and lifted up my top. I'd been tortured […] After six hours of cycling, our arses hurt from the crappy bike seats and we were tired, dishevelled, sweaty and ready to wind down. The grand idea at this point was to spend the last hour or so of the day relaxing with some spa-like indulgence […] Lying down, my back was cracked and the deep tissue massage took my breath away. It hurt like hell but it wasn't too different from what I've had at home, only harder […] Except that, alongside the pressure of his knuckles, there was a slight scratching sensation. How and why was he scratching? In China, we had a funny story to tell almost every day and today would be mine. Except it wasn't funny at all. It turns out the scratching wasn't his fingers, but a plastic card used to bring blood to the surface of my skin in order to help release toxins, and this was the result." (Becki, 2012a)

Here the blogger mixes the tale of an episode in which she was directly involved with comments on her whole experience in China. Furthermore, the first few lines of the passage are significant because Becki includes a dialogue with a friend in it, in the form of reported speech, which further approaches readers to the event.

Gattosandro Viaggiatore created her own online space relying on the Content Management System Blogspot.co.uk. She went to China twice: the first time in August 2012 – for 20 days – the second time in July-August 2013, for a month. She dedicated two accounts to these

experiences: *Cina e Hong Kong* (2012, trans. *China and Hong Kong*) and *Cina del sud e isole* (2013, trans. *South of China and Islands*). In the first account, which is analysed here, there are 21 posts, dedicated to the most well-known cities along China's east coast: Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Hong Kong. Each post contains a variety of pictures interspersed in the text. There are also various links both within each post and at its end, where the blogger meticulously details all the places she visited, the means of transport used, the hostels booked, the costs sustained, etc.

In terms of narrative discourse, it is illuminating to compare how Supermary58 and Gattosandro Viaggiatore recount the "same" episode, namely the arrival in Beijing:

"The Aeroflot flight lands on time in Beijing. It's roughly 10 am; we collect our baggage, we exchange some euros for yuan and we take the tube to DongSi stop, which is ten minutes away from our hostel. We check in and, because in our hostel there is a ticket office, we decide to book our next train transfers. For moving around the city, we will use a rechargeable card, which is sold in all metro stations. The first visit is to the Sky Temple…" (Supermary58, 2012; author's translation)

"After a roughly 20-hour journey (considering both the flight and the waiting for the transfers), we are finally in Beijing. We set the clock six hours ahead and, after a few minutes, we realize how big the airport is. Having attended to the bureaucracy at the Immigration Office, we go to collect our baggage. We follow the signs that tell us to go down the stairs and… we find ourselves at a train station! It's amazing that in order to reach the baggage claim, we have to take a train, and it does take quite long to get there! Our baggage is already there when we arrive, so we pick it up and take a train to the city centre. Outside of the window, the sky is blue. I am tired, but emotions keep me awake. We get off at Dongzhimen Station and take the metro to Jishuitan. When we get out of the metro, we realize that the hot weather is unbearable. I stop for a second to check my notes and congratulate myself, as everything has run smoothly so far. The first impression is harsh: the walking path is ruined, in some places there is not even pavement and in others we have to walk along the street because the walking path is obstructed by piles of gravel. Motorbikes and bicycles take the right of way over pedestrians, and everything here is dusty and shabby. On the road, the traffic is heavy: in the following days, we will get used to horns, which are used continuously and randomly. Completely sweaty, we reach the hutong where our hostel should be. The narrow street is filled with restaurants that have an unhygienic look, but nonetheless they spread a good smell of barbecued meat; low houses with small rooms hosting seven or eight people seated around a table; and some vendors of fruits and vegetables showing off cages

in which a few cocks are segregated and about to be cooked. The hostel gives me a strange impression. Being hosted in a typical Chinese house with an internal court, the architecture is precious, but the roof that covers the whole area and all the decorations that hang from it make the ambient a bit oppressive. The rooms of the main hostel are divided across two floors, in which we meet a bunch of Western people. The lady at the reception desk speaks English and, having photocopied our passports, accompanies us to 'our' hostel, which is located on a quiet street. What a joy! Our room is in a wonderful building at the centre of which there is a garden with plants, trees and a fountain. I like it straight away. We rest for a while and then decide to go out to get acquainted with the area, which appears as an intricate set of streets but in which we ultimately orientate ourselves easily." (Gattosandro Viaggiatore, 2012; author's translation)

Two considerations can be made here. To a certain degree, the routines that Supermary58 and Gattosandro Viaggiatore account for are rather similar: the landing, the luggage collection, the metro and the arrival at the hostel. It could be said that both texts reflect the point to which the preliminary stages of (almost) any travel have been commoditized. On the other hand, it is possible to note that Gattosandro Viaggiatore's text is much richer and tries to give an account of the arrival that goes beyond a mere descriptive plane. This means that Gattosandro Viaggiatore's "I" does not remain attached to its basic narrative function, but assumes in many circumstances an ideological role ("the hostel gives me a strange impression"; "What a joy"; "I like it straight away"). Overall, the blogger's posts present an articulated narrative in which shifts in the mood, signalled by the passage from a narrative to an ideological stance and by rich descriptions, help the reader to get close to the scene.

Lastly, a note is required on the presence of comments in the blogs. Comments can be considered as a form of dialogue between the bloggers and readers. These exchanges are extra-diegetic because they are not an integral part of the account, but remain external to it. Interestingly, in none of the travel blogs on platform analyzed we find comments to the posts, a feature that strengthens the monologicity of these texts (and hints also to the limited readership of the blogs). By contrast, on individual blogs comments are quite numerous. The majority of the conversations between the blogger and the blogs' visitors are subservient to appraise what the blogger has written. Beyond these complimentary comments, there are, however, some exceptions, such as the following one from Becki's blog:

[Rob Hornby]: "Two tips for the park. 1. Buy a panda card from one of the local shops, which gets you cheaper entry and also allows for other local discounts. This helps with…. 2. Not openly advertised but on a tour we found a door through which you could meet a real panda face to face and will pose for a photo while sat on your lap. Sounds a bit odd but this is similar to holding a koala. Very expensive but does go towards the park. It's not advertised so keep your eye out." (Becki, 2012b)

[Backpacker Becki]: "Thanks Rob… I did mention the 'hold a panda' moment. Although I don't totally agree with it!" (Becki, 2012b)

This exchange, taken from the post that Becki dedicated to the Panda Reservoir in Chengdu, exemplifies the extent to which comments can also constructively become a means for completing or clarifying what the blogger has written. In this specific case, because Becki feels that her reliability as a traveller and writer has been questioned, she is not afraid to correct what the reader mentions in his comment.

The complex articulation of the narrative of individual blogs, together with the presence of comments, differ substantially from what witnessed in blogs on platform and, consequently, with the findings of previous studies on blogs. In this respect, although individual travel blogs can be said to approach the form of the personal journal, the way in which the narrative is shaped open the accounts to a hybridization of their form, mixing features from the travel guide, the multi-service portal, the tourism website, the personal diary, the anecdotic account.

CONCLUSIONS

By relying on Genette's (1980) study on the mood of the narrative and the narrator's functions, the formal features of print and online travel accounts were discussed. The analysis showed the formal heterogeneity of travel books. Ethnography, diary, reportage, essay: all these forms have been found among the texts surveyed and some of them also coexist into the same text. Moreover, depending on how the authors decide to "tell their story", the narrative present varying shifts in its mood (and its ideological charge). Concerning travel blogs, a major distinction was detected. The accounts hosted on platforms chiefly comply with the diary form. Online, such form is characterised by a monologic, fragmentary narrative that rarely presents shifts in the mood. Hence, readers are confronted with texts that maintain a certain,

constant distance towards the events recounted; a distance that tends to flatten the representations of both the blogger and China. On the other hand, the accounts of individual travel blogs manifest a formal hybridization. Features that belong to the diary, the anecdotic account, the travel guide, the tourism portal all inform the accounts. This is cause and consequence of alternations between descriptions and reflections, dialogues and purely diegetic passages. While the findings concerning travel blogs on platforms confirmed those of previous studies on blogs, which were characterised as single-authored journals with usually a paucity of links and comments, individual travel blogs differ quite radically from these conclusions. This can be due to a number of reasons – e.g. consolidation of the Web 2.0, emergence of customizable CMSs, changes in reading practices – for sure, however, this change is the sign that contemporary blogging has evolved (compared to ten years ago) and diversified (compared to platforms). Overall, it could be suggested that the authors of travel books, by presenting the readers with a broad, subjectively-shaped vision of China, tend to fulfil the readers' desire to travel to the extent that all that has to be experienced is recounted in the book. Travel bloggers, by contrast, offer readers with a parcelled and fragmentary picture of China, which is mainly composed of hints and suggestions, although individual bloggers do unfold a personal perspective. Hence, travel blogs nurture the desire to travel, being grounded on the (silenced) assumption that "anybody can do it" and "anybody can write about it".

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