



# *Bringing Italian Literature to Chinese Audiences: An Analysis of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels on CCTV-10*

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, Elena Ferrante has gained significant popularity in the People's Republic of China, where her Neapolitan Novels resonate with Chinese readers for their deep exploration of intimate relationships, female friendship, identity, and the challenges of growing up in a rapidly changing environment. Reinforcing images of "Italianness" and fostering intercultural dialogue, Ferrante's novels continue to inspire book clubs, literary discussions, and cultural analyses, including on TV. On March 9, 2023, the Neapolitan Novels were featured on China Central Television (CCTV) in *Reading* (Dushu 读书), a program of CCTV-10, the channel dedicated to science and education. Building on previous studies on the Chinese circulation and reception of the tetralogy, this paper adopts a qualitative, discourse-oriented approach to examine its TV-mediated interpretation. The analysis begins by exploring Ferrante's transnational reach and the Chinese dissemination of the Neapolitan Novels, and then outlines the role of cultural and educational programs on Chinese television before turning to the case study of *Reading*'s episode on Ferrante. The exploration focuses on how the show presents the novels through an emotionally resonant lens, framing female friendship as a universally accessible and morally instructive theme. Particular attention is given to the visual and narrative strategies used to integrate Ferrante's tetralogy into China's cultural discourse. Through this case study, the paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of the popularization of the Neapolitan Novels in China, while contributing to broader debates on the role of national media in shaping the cultural positioning of foreign literature.

**KEY WORDS:** Elena Ferrante; Neapolitan Novels; mediation; China; CCTV-10



## ELENA FERRANTE'S WORLDWIDE SUCCESS

The present paper focuses on a specific case study concerning the popularization of Italian author Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* in the People's Republic of China (PRC): a China Central Television (CCTV)'s episode dedicated to Ferrante's tetralogy that aired on March 9, 2023. Produced by the leading State television broadcaster in the PRC, the 10-minute episode was part of *Reading (Dushu 读书)*, a program featured on the science and education-focused channel CCTV-10, and is now widely available online.<sup>1</sup> Given *Reading*'s institutional role in fostering literary appreciation, the episode constitutes a valuable case study of how contemporary foreign literature is framed for Chinese audiences. This analysis explores the episode's emphasized themes and moral values, and the aspects of Ferrante's literary merit it seeks to highlight, if any. It also examines the visual and rhetorical strategies used to integrate the *Neapolitan Novels* into the mainstream of Chinese cultural discourse. Through this investigation, the paper aims to deepen the understanding of the "Ferrante phenomenon" and its TV-based mediation in China, and contribute to broader discussions on the cultural positioning of foreign literature in national media.

The *Neapolitan Novels* are a series of four books—*My Brilliant Friend* (*L'amica geniale*, 2011), *The Story of a New Name* (*Storia del nuovo cognome*, 2012), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (*Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 2013), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (*Storia della bambina perduta*, 2014)—by Elena Ferrante. The novels are set in post-WWII Naples and follow the half-a-century long, intense friendship between Elena Greco (Lenù) and Raffaella Cerullo (Lila), first as children, then teenagers, and finally women. The tetralogy has achieved remarkable global circulation and reception, captivating readers and critics alike with its exploration of female relationships set against the backdrop of Italy's socio-political transformation. In Europe and the United States, the acclaim has been widespread, sparking what has become known as the "Ferrante Fever", a term popularized by Durzi's 2017 documentary (Durzi). In 2019, the series' inaugural instalment was ranked as the 11<sup>th</sup> best book since 2000 by *The Guardian* ("The 100 Best Books"), and in 2024, *The New York Times* celebrated it as the best book of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ("The 100 Best Books"). The first season of the much-admired TV adaptation *My Brilliant Friend* (*L'amica geniale*), produced by Rai, TIM Vision, and HBO, aired in Italy on Rai 1 in autumn 2018 and subtitled versions were broadcast in over fifty countries by the world leader in the creation, production, and distribution of entertainment programs Fremantle.

In the PRC, Ferrante's four-book series was published between 2017 and 2018 by the People's Literature Publishing House (*Renmin wenxue chubanshe* 人民文学出版社), under its Shanghai 99 Readers (99 *Dushuren* 99读书人) imprint. The titles—*Wo de tiancai nüyou* 我的天才女友 (*My Brilliant Friend*), *Xin mingzi de gushi* 新名字的故事 (*The Story of a New Name*), *Likai de, liuxia de* 离开的, 留下的 (*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*), and *Shizong de haizi* 失踪的孩子 (*The Story of the Lost Child*)—were marketed as

<sup>1</sup> On *Reading*'s website, and on YouTube (Dushu, "Ailaina Feilante Nabulesi si bu qu").



*Nabulesi si bu qu* 那不勒斯四部曲 (*Neapolitan Novels*), adopting the international branding commonly associated with the tetralogy, and received an enthusiastic response from Chinese readers, amplified by the subsequent TV adaptation. With the TV series being distributed in China thanks to a deal between Fremantle and the country's leading streaming platforms—iQiyi, Tencent, and Youku—the second season reached a potential audience of 250 million viewers, setting a record for European dramas in non-English languages (Fremantle).

This widespread recognition underscores the universal appeal and profound impact of Ferrante's storytelling, which has become a significant part of contemporary literary discourse, in both academic circles and among general readers globally. Academic studies have explored the transnational success of the *Neapolitan Novels* from multiple perspectives, looking particularly into their role in promoting images and models of "Italianness" and their cultural influence abroad. In Italy, for instance, both the books and their TV adaptation were included as case studies within the PRIN 2017 research project "Italian Na(rra)tives: the international circulation of the brand-Italy in the media".<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore unit conducted the study "Analysis of the Impacts of Italian Media Products on the Contemporary Chinese Market", which specifically focused on the circulation and reception of Italian media products in China during the 2010-20 decade.<sup>3</sup> The present paper builds on the findings of this broader initiative, but adopts a qualitative, discourse-oriented approach to examine the reframing through TV-based mediation of the *Neapolitan Novels* in *Reading*.

## ELENA FERRANTE'S TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS: GLOBAL AND CHINESE RECEPTION OF THE NEAPOLITAN NOVELS

Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* have gained broad global attention—among critics and the general public alike—for their ability to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. While their dissemination now extends beyond Europe and North America to regions such as Asia and Latin America, these contexts remain less thoroughly explored. Overall, studies suggest that the tetralogy's appeal lies in its interplay of local specificity and universal resonance, the intrigue of Ferrante's pseudonymity (with her identity being unknown), the role of translation, and the impact of cultural promotion and crossmedia adaptations. This section offers a brief critical overview of these dynamics as a backdrop to examine how *Reading* contributes to China's media-driven dissemination of the *Neapolitan Novels*.

<sup>2</sup> Bringing together multiple research units across Italy in a collaborative effort, this interdisciplinary project analyzed internationally successful Italian literary and audiovisual works of the 2000s, combining textual and reception analysis with a focus on the cultural industries involved.

<sup>3</sup> The study examined the *Neapolitan Novels* and their TV adaptation to assess their cultural and discursive impact in the Chinese landscape, focusing on the factors shaping their diffusion and the discourses—both top-down and bottom-up—they generated.



Firstly, a core feature of Ferrante's fiction is its transnational resonance grounded in localized storytelling. The *Neapolitan Novels* embody the concept of "global novel" (de Rogatis, *Key Words*) by articulating universal experiences through the socio-economic struggles, gender dynamics, and cultural shifts of post-war Naples—conditions that echo those of other globalized urban settings. The memoir-like structure reinforces this sense of recognition, making the protagonists' journeys accessible across diverse cultural environments (de Rogatis, *Made in Italy*). This stylistic accessibility, combined with the other factors noted above, supports Ferrante's global reach, including in culturally distant contexts such as Brazil and China (Maranhão; Restucci; Riva). In Brazil, for instance, the *Neapolitan Novels'* success has been linked to the "giallo" (thriller/noir) style, which lends a "pop hybrid" dimension engaging a broader readership (Maranhão).

Additionally, the *Neapolitan Novels'* grounding in Naples—a city portrayed as both setting and active agent shaping the protagonists' lives—enables Ferrante to deeply explore universal and subaltern experiences. As a socio-poetic analysis of the French translation of *My Brilliant Friend* argues, Naples constitutes an "abyss" influencing the characters' trajectories (Kearney), and illustrating how strongly Ferrante's narratives remain rooted in Italian culture while crossing national borders (Segnini, *Translatability*). This ability to universalize local elements—such as Naples' typical spaces and plebeian neighbourhoods—aligns Ferrante's works with the concept of "glocal literature" (Turchetta), a key trait of their worldwide appeal.

Similarly to other contexts, Chinese readers identify with Lila's and Lenù's struggles with education, poverty, class disparity, urbanization, and mobility (Riva). The tetralogy's feminist focus—centred on friendship, empowerment, and identity—also powerfully resonates, so much so that Chinese literary critics have labelled it "feminist literature" (Wang) and an "epic of female growth" (Pan and Shi), reflecting a broader demand for stories centred on women's lives.

In China, Ferrante's status is furtherly reinforced by her international acclaim: Chinese critics and readers alike often cite global book sales and the success of the TV adaptation as markers of her literary value (Riva). Nevertheless, questions about transnational recognition and the authority of national critics in shaping literary prestige have been raised as Ferrante's reception exposes a divide between local and global literary tastes, with early Italian reviews contrasting with enthusiastic American responses (Schwartz).

Secondly, the author's anonymity and the translation process further shape audience perception. Because a work's success, public persona—or Ferrante's lack thereof—and translation all affect its reception and meaning (Falkoff), there is a tension between Ferrante's pseudonymous identity and the intimate nature of her narratives. This creates a unique reading experience due to what Alison Gibbons calls Ferrante's "dissolving margins": a deliberate strategy to build a cognitive experience where readers interpret fictionality through textual cues, context, and emotion, blurring the lines between autobiography and autofiction (Gibbons).

In China, the mystery around Ferrante's identity, amplified by the *Neapolitan Novels'* TV adaptation, has fuelled popular fascination, being leveraged in marketing



campaigns that exploit the issues of authenticity and anonymity (Riva). In this context, Professor Chen Ying 陈英 of Sichuan International Studies University—Ferrante's translator and key Chinese voice—serves as a cultural mediator, carefully transmitting her themes across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Restucci; Riva). Francesca Restucci highlights Chen Ying's use of generalization, explication, adaptation, and omission to bridge cultural references—such as food or politics—in Italian-Chinese translation, while preserving the emotional depth of the original (Restucci). This balance between cultural fidelity and readability underscores the translator's creative role. As Olenka Burgess notes, translators not only interpret but also advocate for international literature, shaping global reception in complex linguistic landscapes (Burgess).

Translation has indeed been central to Ferrante's global success. Ann Goldstein's English version was key for Anglophone audiences, while as Elisa Segnini notes multilingualism remains a challenge because monolingual markets often dilute the richness of plurilingual texts (Segnini, *Glocal*). This echoes issues in the *Neapolitan Novels*, where dialect conveys identity and marginality, complicating global integration (Segnini, *Marginality*).

Thirdly, beyond translation, cultural diplomacy and media adaptations also shape Ferrante's reception. In China, Italian and Chinese institutions have promoted the *Neapolitan Novels* through funding, events, and cultural exchanges (Restucci; Riva). Notably, in June 2024, the Italian Cultural Institute of Shanghai hosted a conference with Chen Ying and other experts, framing Ferrante as a symbol of Italian cultural heritage (ICC Shanghai).

Lastly, the crossmedia appeal of the *Neapolitan Novels* undeniably expands Ferrante's international reach. The Chinese case exemplifies this as streaming platforms have brought the TV series *My Brilliant Friend* to millions, fuelling book sales and special reprints, and demonstrating the power of convergence synergies in globalizing literary works (Riva).

This brief overview sets the stage to examine how Ferrante's tetralogy is framed within officially sanctioned, mainstream platforms such as *Reading*, an emblematic example of China's institutional strategy of literary dissemination through educational media.

## CCTV-10'S *READING*

Before turning to the analysis of the episode of *Reading* dedicated to the *Neapolitan Novels*—broadcast on March 9, 2023 on the Chinese channel for science and education CCTV-10—it is useful to outline the characteristics of these State-approved cultural programs.

*Reading* is a cultural and educational program that promotes literature and fosters public appreciation for the humanities. According to its official website (Dushu, "Index"), each 10-minute episode—broadcast daily at 2:37pm—explores a book or author selected from a broad spectrum of classical Chinese texts, contemporary fiction, philosophy, and foreign works, combining expert commentary with accessible analyses.



Academic literature categorizes *Reading* as a “reading program” (*dushu jiemu* 读书节目): a TV format that employs audiovisual media to transmit cultural knowledge, enhance aesthetic sensibilities, and stimulate critical thought (Wang and Chai). Episodes typically blend narration and visuals with dramatized textual readings to present complex ideas in an engaging, relatable way.

In the PRC, reading programs have a long history. Chinese media and communication scholars trace their origins to a “budding stage” (1960-1995), when early cultural shows were limited by lack of resources and political turmoil, but later reemerged with the Reform and Opening-Up policies in the late 1970s (Wang and Chai). The 1980s saw rapid expansion as reading programs helped reshape China’s cultural environment after the Cultural Revolution (Lin)—a decade-long period (1966-76) of political and social chaos which caused profound damages to Chinese culture and education. Subsequently, the “pioneering stage” (1996-2004) featured the successful production of *Reading Time* (*Dushu shijian* 读书时间) by CCTV, later cancelled due to low ratings and market pressures, while a decline followed in the “exploratory phase” (2005-2015) as programs sought to adapt to digital media (Wang and Chai). With renewed State support after the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the “new phase” (2016-present) brought popularity to shows like *Letters Alive* (*Jian zi ru mian* 见字如面) and *Readers* (*Langdu zhe* 朗读者) (ibid.). A more recent example is *China in the Canon* (*Dianji li de Zhongguo* 典籍里的中国, 2021), a CCTV cultural program that uses immersive technology to connect audiences with classical Chinese texts and promote cultural pride (Zhu).

One of the most successful reading programs in China today is *Lecture Room* (*Baijia jiangtan* 百家讲坛), widely regarded in academic literature as a social phenomenon demonstrating how television can support education beyond formal schooling (Cai; Dulery). Launched in 2001, it has become the country’s most influential cultural and educational program, using expert-led lectures to make historical, literary, philosophical, and traditional knowledge accessible through engaging storytelling. Initially adopting a university-style format, it struggled to attract viewers until policy and market shifts introduced a more entertaining and accessible approach (Lin). The program’s success now lies in the ability of the invited scholars to simplify complex subjects, humanize historical figures, and link traditional morals to contemporary life. A key example of this is the case of Beijing Normal University professor Yu Dan 于丹, whose lectures on the Confucian classics, titled *Confucius from the Heart* (*Yu Dan Lunyu xinde* 于丹《论语》心得), became very popular in 2006 (Varriano). Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, the program has been viewed as a State-sanctioned effort to foster intellectual curiosity and cultural heritage, while reinforcing official narratives (Lin). Thus, *Lecture Room* exemplifies the complex dynamics of Chinese edutainment, balancing State influence, market logic, and popular appeal, and sometimes even entering the realm of “indoctrainment” (Feng; Sun).

Similarly to *Lecture Room*, *Reading* is a long-running flagship program of CCTV-10, though less documented in specialized literature. Originally launched in 2001 as *Ziwu shujian* 子午书简, it adopted its current title in 2011 (Wang and Chai). For years, CCTV-



10 mainly featured science and technology programs, and by April 2014, *Reading and Lecture Room* were the only remaining educational and humanities-based shows (Gong). Therefore, it can be seen how the evolution of reading programs mirrors the broader trajectory of CCTV-10 since its launch on July 9, 2001 as China Central Television's Science and Education Channel (*Zhongguo zhongyang dianshitai kejiao pindao* 中央电视台科教频道)—the first channel of this kind in the PRC (CCTV-10 "Kejiao"). Aligned with the national strategy of "invigorating the country through science and education" (*kejiao xingguo* 科教兴国), the channel has gradually shifted its focus toward content promoting Chinese history, traditional values, culture, and language, while also balancing pedagogy and audience appeal (Gong; Lin).

Given CCTV-10's and *Reading's* shared mission to foster literary appreciation and public engagement, the episode dedicated to the *Neapolitan Novels* offers a valuable case study for examining how contemporary foreign literature is framed by a key Chinese television outlet for the Chinese audience. The following section analyses the episode's themes, moral values, and rhetorical strategies to understand how *Reading* positions Ferrante's works within China's cultural discourse and mediates their interpretation through an institutional and educational lens.

#### READING PRESENTS: "A BOOK TO READ WITH YOUR BESTIE"—ELENA FERRANTE'S NEAPOLITAN NOVELS

In early March 2023, *Reading* launched an editorial subseries under the label "A book to read with your bestie" (*Yu guimi yiqi kan de shu* 与闺蜜一起看的书), airing four consecutive episodes centred on narratives of female friendship and emotional bonds. The books selected included the *Neapolitan Novels* alongside another global bestseller and two domestic works:

1. Kristin Hannah's *Firefly Lane* (March 7, 2023);
2. Zhang Li's *I See Countless Versions of Her: 30 Nights of Conversations on Literature and Cinema with Girls* (*Wo kanjian wushu de ta: gen nühai men liao wenxue he dianying de sanshi ge yewan* 我看见无数的她：跟女孩们聊文学和电影的30个夜晚) (March 8, 2023);
3. Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* (March 9, 2023);
4. Yi Shu's *Golden Years* (*Liu jin suiye* 流金岁月) (March 10, 2023).

The inclusion of Ferrante's works in this series provides an example of how *Reading* frames internationally acclaimed books for Chinese audiences. The case study explores the episode—titled "Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*—A book to read with your bestie: the *Neapolitan novels*" (*Ailaina-Feilante Nabulesi si bu qu—Yu guimi yiqi kan de shu: Nabulesi si bu qu* 埃莱娜·费兰特 《那不勒斯四部曲》与闺蜜一起看的书：《那不勒斯四部曲》)—with the aim to investigate how Ferrante's tetralogy is



presented through a discourse of emotional universality aligned with CCTV-10's educational objectives.

After the channel's opening sequence, the episode starts with a summary of the content (*neirong tiyao* 内容提要) read by a male voice accompanied by a carousel of cartoonish, cinematically-framed images appearing on the screen and depicting the books' two female protagonists: a colourful yet gentle picture of two girls reading while laying down on the ground, surrounded by books and birds; two black-inked silhouettes with their stuffed animal rabbits; one young woman playing a guitar with a girlfriend reading a book around a campfire in the woods; one woman holding a shining red bag and another looking at her with envy; and two young women in a coffee shop. As the description clarifies, the episode explores the complex and often paradoxical nature of female friendship as depicted in the *Neapolitan Novels*: a story of a brilliant and dark friendship forged by the extremely deep feelings of love and hate, admiration and jealousy, support and destruction. The four books are then shown on screen leading towards the literary discussion, which begins after *Reading's* opening sequence: a musical jingle accompanying a scene showing a butterfly flying between blooming flowers and trees towards a ship in the sea and the Chinese characters for *Dushu* as blocks placed on an open book, all made of printed paper. The host is Li Pan 李潘, a CCTV-10's regular presenter who, in 1997, participated in the establishment of *Reading Time* and now holds the positions of *Reading's* host and producer (CCTV "Jiemu guanwang"). Her elegant yet simple look, together with the blurred bookstore background, helps create an atmosphere of literary discussion rather than academic lecture, making the show more accessible. This approachability is also achieved by the multilayered narrative, which relies on both textual and visual strategies to engage viewers by means of a back-and-forth between book excerpts, the host's commentary, and animated sequences. The presence of an interactive element—a QR code and a phrase inviting to scan it flowing at the bottom of the screen—serves as an invitation to access other reading contents, suggesting an effort to encourage audience participation beyond the episode itself.

After Li Pan welcomes the viewers, the first visual element shown is the image of two flowers growing on the same stalk. The illustrative metaphor highlights the inseparability and competition between the *Neapolitan Novels'* protagonists, Lila and Lenù, as the host explains:

Legend has it that there's a kind of double flower that grows on a single stalk. The two flowers grow together, influence each other, are inseparable, but compete for nutrients. This image is particularly representative of the protagonists of the *Neapolitan Novels*, the set of books we are going to read today. (Dushu, "Ailaina Feilante Nabulesi si bu qu" 1:00-1:21)

The idea of *two intertwined yet competing lives* is immediately identified as the core theme of the novels. Showing the volumes to the virtual audience, the host introduces the tetralogy as a set of four books by Italian writer Elena Ferrante. An image presenting basic information—author and publisher—appears on the screen, also showing the book covers. The duality of interdependence and rivalry symbolized by the "double



flower" metaphor is then explored starting from the introduction of the two protagonists: Lenù, born in 1945 in a poor (*pinqiong* 贫穷), backward (*luohou* 落后), and violent (*chongman le baoli* 充满了暴力) neighbourhood in Naples, is sensitive and mature, and longs to escape as soon as possible from the tragedies her neighbours live daily. She appears well-behaved, excelling in her studies and earning the praise and affection of her teachers. At school she feels safe, yet there lies the deepest source of insecurity in her heart: a girl of her own age called Lila. While the host speaks, the framing switches from her to an animated sequence depicting the two girls as black silhouettes, perhaps evoking their entwined yet shadowy relationship. Avoiding screening any physical details, this visual strategy is useful to treat Lila and Lenù as universally relevant characters rather than two Italian girls embedded in the local context. Thus, *Reading* seems to frame the story as a universally relevant human experience rather than a product of Italian cultural and literary tradition. This is also evident in the book excerpts read by the host. The episode remains faithful to the original Chinese translation, but while some passages are delivered by Li Pan with the support of a visual element—a coloured mark underlining the words on the page—others are simply read either showing the page with no visual effects or framing the host reading the book. In these instances, some minor yet notable editorial choices are made. Names of characters (Oliviero, Serratore, Peluso) or places (Solferino) are omitted to simplify the storytelling and maintain focus on the two protagonists. These references are either cut or substituted by general forms: in the case of the teacher's name, Oliviero (*Aoliweielyuo* 奥利维耶罗), which in the official Chinese translation is "*Aoliweielyuo laoshi* 奥利维耶罗老师"—lit. "teacher Oliviero"—to translate the original Italian version "*la Oliviero*", the script uses "the teacher" (or teachers, *laoshi* 老师); in the case of the two classmates mentioned, *Sailatuolei he Peilusuo* 萨拉托雷和佩卢索 (Serratore and Peluso), the script uses "other students" (*biede xuesheng* 别的学生). A similar simplification occurs with the name of the Solferino bridge as the Chinese transposition—*Suoerfeilinuo* 索尔费利诺—is omitted in the script, leaving just the word for bridge (*qiao* 桥). By means of this strategy of universalization the story is made easier to follow for a broader audience, without detracting from the general meaning of the discussion.

The host guides the viewers through the novels' intricate themes in a manner that is both intellectual and emotionally engaging. Using the plural first-person pronoun "we" (*women* 我们), she moves from the book extracts to her own commentary, delivering them both with a pathos and emphasis that align with the novels' dramatic intensity. In doing so, Li Pan acts as a mediator explaining Lila and Lenù's complicated relationship of self-definition through the other. The excerpts are carefully chosen to highlight moments of emotional tension and personal growth in the story and to emphasize how the two characters constantly measure themselves against one another, but never in the sake of harming each other. The key passages are drawn from the tetralogy's first two volumes and include: a classroom scene that establishes Lenù's conflicted admiration and envy towards Lila (Ferrante, *Amica geniale* cap. 8); the doll-



exchange incident that showcases how Lila's provocation forces Lenù to retaliate, encapsulating betrayal, pain, and power dynamics between the two girls (Ferrante, *Amica geniale* cap. 10); a turning point when Lila reveals her hidden acknowledgment of Lenù as her equal, recognizing her potential by urging her to continue studying (Ferrante, *Amica geniale* cap. 57); and a symbolic act of letting go, when Lenù pushes a box into the river in a scene serving as metaphor for shedding Lila's influence and self-liberating (Ferrante, *Nuovo cognome* cap. 1). At this point, the host poses a question: how do we interpret the female bond between these two friends? A potential answer is given by the translator Chen Ying in a short video interview:

In *The Neapolitan Novels*, the relationship between Lila and Lenù serves as a central thread in the development of the entire story. We can see that from a very young age until the later years of their lives, they maintain a close and deeply influential connection. Therefore, I think defining their relationship merely as friendship might be too narrow. Their bond lasts longer than love, runs deeper than family ties, and has an even greater impact on them both. However, this relationship is extremely complex. While they help and care for each other, there are also many moments when they undermine one another, harbour resentment, and even feel jealousy toward each other. (Dushu, "Ailaina Feilante Nabulesi si bu qu" 8:20-9:06)

A conclusion is then reached by the host: Lila and Lenù are deeply embedded in each other's lives, supporting each other's soul and nourishing the river of each other's existence. Thus, the word "besties" (*guimi* 闺蜜) feels overly sentimental when used to describe them, while the word "friends" (*pengyou* 朋友) is too simplistic. They are "soulmates" (*linhun banlü* 灵魂伴侣), growing in competition yet leaning on each other as they journey into life.<sup>4</sup> In concluding the episode, Li Pan emphasizes that the true merit of *The Neapolitan Novels* lies in how the books deepen people's understanding of the complexity and depth of female bonds. This perspective aligns with how *Reading* frames the tetralogy: not as a multilayered, complex, and inherently Italian work, but as a portrayal of women's personal and intellectual struggles depicted by means of a universally relevant exploration of female friendship. Accordingly, the books' historical contextualization receives little to no attention and Ferrante's writing style and narrative techniques are overlooked in favour of a reflection developing on an intimate level rather than on a socio-political or literary one.

This shift in emphasis merits closer examination. With the inclusion of the *Neapolitan Novels* in the *Reading*'s subseries "A book to read with your bestie", the "bestie" framing foregrounds affective and moral dimensions over literary, historical, or national specificities. This approach appears emblematic of a broader interpretive strategy in which female friendship becomes the dominant narrative frame. The

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the host's use of the term "soulmates" echoes comparisons drawn in Chinese critical discourse between Lila and Lenù's bond and the ambivalent friendship portrayed in the film *Soulmate* (*Qiyue yu Ansheng* 七月与安生), where two female characters with contrasting personalities deeply love, hurt, and depend on one another (Yan). Such references highlight how Chinese narratives depicting intense female bonds often serve as emotional "bridges" that help local audiences connect with Ferrante's characters through familiar relational patterns (Riva 363).



episode emphasizes it as a deeply emotional and morally significant theme, recasting Ferrante's tetralogy as a universally resonant story of intimate connections and personal growth, while its engagement with social change, conflict, and mobility is largely left unexplored. In line with *Reading*'s educational mission, the episode simplifies—but does not necessarily deny—Ferrante's literary exploration of gender, class, and resistance. Instead, it translates it into a culturally and emotionally accessible message aligning with the program's goal of using literature as a tool for personal reflection.

This narrative simplification does not occur in isolation. A comparison with the *Reading* episode dedicated to Kristin Hannah's *Firefly Lane*, which aired two days earlier under the same "bestie" label, reveals a shared media logic privileging a narrative of deep emotional ties evolving over decades. As in the Ferrante episode, the focus is on the arc of a lifelong friendship, emphasizing shared emotions over cultural specificity, and the stories of female friendship presented are framed as universal narratives of moral growth and emotional resilience, even employing similar aesthetic techniques: excerpts highlighted on screen, illustrations of the protagonists with their backs to the viewers or stylized, and animations inviting audience identification. However, while Ferrante's literary stature and the socio-political dimensions of her works are left unmentioned, Kristin Hannah is introduced by Li Pan as "the queen of contemporary American fiction" (*Meiguo dangdai xiaoshuo tianhou* 美国当代小说天后) and her novel's autobiographical elements—caring for her terminally ill mother—are emphasized in relation to the experience with breast cancer of one of the characters, lending the episode an added layer of authenticity and emotional depth. In both cases, pathos is privileged over critique. With *Firefly Lane*, the host even invites the audience to consider their own relationships, concluding with a poignant quote: "Life is a lonely journey, but I met you. You are not me, yet you are like another me in this world" (Dushu, "Kulisiting Hanna Yinghuochong xiao xiang" 9:36-9:48). This affective framing echoes her treatment of Lila and Lenù's story, showing how the "bestie" paradigm functions as both a thematic lens and a device guiding viewers toward an introspective reflection across culturally distinct narratives.

To better understand the implications of this framing, it is useful to consider how Chinese literary criticism has engaged with Ferrante's works beyond the television screen. In recent years, the *Neapolitan Novels* have garnered sustained attention among Chinese scholars, with some drawing on Marxist feminist theory to show how they offer a powerful critique of patriarchal power and capitalist labour relations through the portrayal of female friendship as both a site of emotional support and social resistance (Yang). In this view, the friendship between Lila and Lenù is not merely personal, but functions as "a symbiosis of two radiant blooms" (*liang duo xuanlan huaduo de gongsheng* 两朵绚烂花朵的共生)—an image similar to *Reading*'s "double-flower" metaphor—being both entwined and antagonistic, reflecting identity formation as a process of mutual influence and tension within a male-dominated society (Yang 163). Echoing this interpretation, Wang Hongling emphasizes how Ferrante portrays female identity as a lifelong process of self-awakening and inner negotiation, tracing the arc of female growth across the four novels, where empowerment and vulnerability



intertwine through dependencies, desires, and emotional ties—including friendship, romantic longing, family attachments, and maternal hopes—all unfolding within a patriarchal and often violent context (Wang). Identity and intimacy are thus inextricably entangled in Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, framing Lila and Lenù's relationship not as a binary opposition, but as a process of mirroring (Pan and Shi). Through this dynamic, each woman confronts her own inner conflicts and desires as their bond is marked by ambivalence, suggesting that friendship operates both as a space of self-recognition and a site of rivalry. Yang captures this emphasis on transformative intersubjectivity as follows: "Through Lila, 'I' found another side of myself beneath the quiet life" (164). As well, in this view, education becomes a pivotal force of emancipation not only providing livelihood skills, but also fostering spiritual independence, with the girls' teacher assuming a symbolic weight as the "spiritual mother," a "symbol of female emancipation" (Yang 164).

These readings frame Ferrante's works as a complex negotiation of subjectivity, power, and resistance. Such dimensions are absent from *Reading*'s adaptation, which selects emotionally potent episodes and universalizes them into a moral lesson. Nevertheless, while the episode's brevity and pedagogical framing may limit interpretive depth, Ferrante's themes are not entirely misrepresented, but reframed through a lens prioritizing affective identification over social critique. *Reading* glosses over the socio-economic and political background of the post-war Neapolitan neighbourhood, choosing instead to focus on the experience of growing up female. This choice seems to align with the program's broader goals: promoting reading through emotional engagement, rather than intellectual or political debate.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the complexities of bringing Italian literature to global audiences, especially to Chinese readers, through the case study of *Reading*, a cultural-educational program that exemplifies how Chinese national television can mediate foreign literature. As a prominent example of "world literature" (Milkova), Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* offer fertile ground to analyse how China's official media reframe foreign texts to align with the moral and social mission of Chinese reading programs and the audience's expectations. The analysis has shown that *Reading* emphasizes the emotional resonance of the tetralogy's themes over its cultural specificity, presenting it not as a distinctly Italian work, but as stories embodying universally relevant values. Themes such as female bonds, admiration, rivalry, and personal growth are rearticulated as morally instructive and emotionally accessible, while the host's commentary, combined with selected visuals and dramatized readings, constructs a narrative in which Lila and Lenù are "soulmates": figures of mutual struggle and transformation. In this framework, the novels' literary prestige is reframed through a strategy of affective translation, enabling emotional bridges between foreign narratives and the Chinese cultural discourse. Viewed alongside *Firefly Lane*—only briefly discussed in this paper—*Reading*'s episode on Ferrante appears less as an isolated case and more as part of a



broader media discourse in which female friendship becomes a vehicle for moral development and psychological reflection.

Nevertheless, while this case study has shed new light on the mediated dissemination of the *Neapolitan Novels* in China, it presents limitations. The success and impact of programs such as *Reading* depends on factors such as audience reception, media trends, and institutional support. Future research could expand on these aspects to assess how televised literature popularization influences the circulation of Italian cultural products in China. Similarly, comparative analyses with episodes on other foreign or domestic authors could further clarify the editorial logic behind *Reading* and deepen the understanding of how Chinese media curate literature for national viewership.

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