



UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI L'ORIENTALE  
DIPARTIMENTO ASIA, AFRICA E MEDITERRANEO

# IL GIAPPONE

## STUDI E RICERCHE

VOLUME 3



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DIPARTIMENTO ASIA, AFRICA E MEDITERRANEO

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**“MAKE ITALIAN CULTURE ALIVE” AT EXPO 2025 OSAKA:  
A SYNERGY OF INNOVATION, HERITAGE, AND  
TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUE.  
A COMPTE RENDU FROM L’ORIENTALE**

*Gala Maria Follaco – Antonio Manieri*

**ABSTRACT**

From May 6 to 10, 2025, the Multimedia Conference Hall at the Italy Pavilion of Expo 2025 Osaka became the stage for a collaborative academic initiative titled “Make Italian Culture Alive” (MICA). This forward-looking project, promoted and funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR), brought together five leading Italian universities—Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (as project leader), the University of Florence, the University of Milan, Sapienza University of Rome, and the University of Naples L’Orientale—in partnership with the Fondazione CHANGES. Their shared goal was to offer a fresh, dynamic, and multidimensional representation of Italian cultural heritage, reinterpreted within a global and intercultural framework.

MICA was envisioned as a hybrid, experimental platform that integrated cutting-edge technology, innovative pedagogy, and artistic research to create a compelling and participatory cultural experience. By combining disciplines, languages, and media, MICA aimed to revitalize Italian cultural narratives and make them more accessible, especially to international audiences. It also sought to stimulate dialogue and exchange between Italy and Japan, emphasizing shared values and fostering deeper mutual understanding.

Throughout its five-day run, MICA hosted a comprehensive and stimulating program including talks, academic panels, multimedia installations, and hands-on workshops, each designed to invite public engagement and encourage reflection on what it means to keep cultural heritage “alive.” Visitors have been welcomed as active participants in a process of discovery, interpretation, and reinterpretation. Italian culture was presented not as a fixed legacy of the past, but as a living, evolving ecosystem, rooted in history but constantly renewed through dialogue, research, technology, and artistic experimentation.

Thus, MICA functioned as a laboratory of cultural imagination, where tradition met innovation, and where Italian heritage could be experienced through emerging digital forms, interdisciplinary collaborations, and global perspectives.

### **1. The Opening Ceremony: Setting the Tone for Transcultural Engagement**

The official opening of the event, held on the afternoon of May 6, 2025, at the Multimedia Conference Hall, marked a significant moment in the launch of the MICA initiative. The ceremony was attended by representatives from the participating universities and institutions, members of both the Italian and Japanese academic and diplomatic communities, as well as a diverse and enthusiastic public audience. The opening was a symbolic moment of convergence, setting the tone for the following days of intellectual and cultural exchange. It established the overarching theme of cultural vitality through both continuity and innovation, reflecting the project's dual aim of honoring tradition while embracing the future.

Professor Chiara Saccon of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the project's scientific coordinator, introduced the guiding principles and long-term objectives of MICA. In her speech, she emphasized the initiative's commitment to rethinking the role of heritage in contemporary society, particularly through the lenses of digital transformation and pedagogical innovation. Her remarks highlighted how cultural heritage can be reimagined and revitalized by combining academic research with creative, interactive, and interdisciplinary methods.

The central theme of cultural exchange was then brought into sharper focus by a series of keynote interventions, each exploring the historical, linguistic, and cultural facets of the project, occasionally stressing the bonds between Italy and Japan, while also identifying new avenues for academic cooperation, joint research, and mutual enrichment. These contributions positioned MICA as a celebration and a renewal of transnational collaboration.

Presentations by institutional representatives (Professors Monica Calcagno, Margherita De Luca, Marcello Pelillo, Marcella Mariotti, Gala Maria Follaco, and Andrea Innocenzo Volpe) reflected on the urgent need to make cultural content not only accessible to wider audiences, but also engaging, relevant, and

participatory, especially for younger generations. Their remarks highlighted the importance of building sustainable frameworks for intercultural dialogue, grounded in intellectual curiosity and collaborative learning.

The opening event set the tone for MICA as an ambitious and inclusive project, driven by the conviction that culture must be lived, questioned, and reinterpreted rather than simply preserved.

## **2. A Collaborative Framework: Unity in Diversity**

The five universities and the foundation involved in MICA each brought distinct thematic focuses and methodological frameworks to the shared platform, resulting in a rich and multifaceted mosaic of perspectives that reflected the complexity, diversity, and evolving nature of Italian cultural identity. While united under the overarching vision of MICA, each institution contributed its own unique project strands, research outputs, pedagogical models, and disciplinary expertise, reinforcing a structure that embraced both plurality and complementarity. This allowed for a dynamic interplay of ideas, demonstrating how regional, disciplinary, and institutional specificities can enrich a collective narrative.

What stood out in particular was the seamless integration of diverse academic domains such as the arts, archaeology, management, linguistics, digital humanities, education, bibliographic scholarship, and area studies within the overall programming. The careful curation of content fostered a transdisciplinary dialogue that emphasized the intersections between tradition and innovation, as well as between local specificity and global relevance. This integration contributed to an engaging and intellectually stimulating environment that welcomed both specialists and the broader public.

The inclusion of emerging, high-impact research initiatives such as RePAIR (Reconstructing the Past: Artificial Intelligence and Robotics), CHANGES (Cultural Heritage Active Innovation for Next-Gen Sustainable Development), and iNEST (Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem) further reinforced the academic depth and future-oriented character of the MICA project. These enterprises exemplified how interdisciplinary collaboration and cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotic applications, are now essential tools in the

study, preservation, and dissemination of cultural heritage. They also highlighted a growing commitment within academia to align cultural research with the principles of sustainability, innovation, and public engagement, positioning MICA at the forefront of cultural dialogue in the 21st century.

### **3. The Contribution of L'Orientale: Orientales and Beyond**

Among the participating institutions, the University of Naples L'Orientale distinguished itself through a set of curated contributions that foregrounded interculturality, linguistics, and the use of digital technologies in educational storytelling. Drawing on its long-standing expertise in Asian studies, L'Orientale brought to MICA a deeply reflective and innovative approach. Represented at the event by Professors Gala Maria Follaco and Antonio Manieri from the Department of Asian, African, and Mediterranean Studies, the university's participation was thoroughly aligned with MICA's overarching mission of cultural revitalization and dialogue.

At the heart of L'Orientale's contribution was the Orientales initiative, a new digital library and storytelling platform that reimagines the intersection between heritage, pedagogy, and technology. Orientales is dedicated to the creation, promotion, long-term preservation, and open dissemination of digital cultural assets. These resources, which include digitized items from the University's own collections as well as from partner institutions, are made available under Creative Commons licenses, ensuring open access and scholarly reusability. The project builds upon the DigitUno initiative launched in 2008 and is intended to eventually replace it entirely. Once all data from DigitUno is migrated, Orientales will serve as the sole digital interface for accessing these materials.

Orientales is powered by DSpace, a widely used open-source platform for managing digital repositories. DSpace's adoption reflects L'Orientale's commitment to international standards of metadata, digital preservation, and interoperability. In alignment with Italy's National Digitization Plan (PND), the materials hosted on Orientales conform to national guidelines for digitization, ensuring both technical reliability and long-term accessibility.

At MICA, Orientales was employed as an active medium for exploring pedagogical innovation and intercultural engagement. Within the framework of digital storytelling, Orientales was

presented as a pedagogical model that blends language teaching with transcultural dialogue and critical reflection. Drawing on visual cultures and literary traditions beyond the European borders, the platform invites learners to interrogate how representations of "the Other" are constructed and circulated. In doing so, it challenges students not just to absorb cultural knowledge but to reinterpret and reframe it through their own analytical and creative processes.

A central highlight of L'Orientale's participation to Expo was a multimedia video pathway developed by Professor Andrea D'Andrea, with the collaboration of researchers Elena D'Itria and Carlotta Passaro, and supported by Professor Johanna Monti, researcher Anna Chiara Trapani, and librarian Antonella Muratgia. This interactive installation offered an immersive journey through key moments in the history of Japanese studies in Italy. Beginning with pioneering academic activity in Florence and Venice, both institutional partners in the MICA project, the video traced the development of Japanese language instruction and culminated in the founding of the first formal Japanese language chair at L'Orientale in 1903.

Particular attention was paid to early pedagogical figures and methodologies in Japanese language teaching from the late 19th to early 20th century. One focus was a little-known manual on cursive writing, attributed to Adriano Vittorio Fidora (1914-1943), a figure unacknowledged thus far in literature from the field. This manual not only represents a rare pedagogical artifact but also symbolizes the transnational exchange of linguistic practices between Italy and Japan during a period of intense cultural curiosity and intellectual engagement.

In parallel with the video installation, Follaco and Manieri led two distinct interactive linguistic workshops designed for diverse audiences, including Japanese university students, Italian expatriates, scholars, and the general public. These workshops aimed to foster a comparative understanding of linguistic and cultural systems, highlighting contrasts and similarities between Italian and Japanese. Participants were invited to reflect on idiomatic expressions, grammatical structures, transcription styles, and pedagogical strategies, as well as on the cultural assumptions embedded in textbooks and teaching materials.

Antonio Manieri's workshop, titled "A Manuscript to Rewrite," presented a rare opportunity for experiential engagement with Japanese calligraphy. The session centered on a historical manuscript

preserved in the Asian Section of the University Library, a compact yet invaluable manual aimed at teaching various traditional calligraphic styles. Recently digitized within the framework of the Orientales project, this document was displayed publicly for the first time during Expo 2025. Participants were invited to interact with digitized excerpts of the manuscript, practicing the calligraphic techniques outlined within and gaining hands-on insights into the aesthetics and discipline of Japanese writing traditions.

The workshop focused on the manuscript cataloged as “MS GIA 2,” titled *Tavole introduttive allo studio del corsivo giapponese* (Introductory Tables for the Study of Japanese Cursive). No year of publication is furnished, but since the *Tavole* were published by the “Regio Istituto Universitario Orientale,” and *L’Orientale* bore that name between 1941 and 1946, this is the likely time frame for the publication.

The MS GIA 2 consists of three parts. *Parte A* is a manuscript comprising 171 loose parchment sheets (13 × 30 cm), kept in a paper case. *Parte B* is a manuscript of five folded protocol sheets. *Parte C* is a three-page typescript that explains the contents and provides a preface. In the preface, the author states that this manual is the first of its kind produced outside Japan (and in fact, no other similar manual predating MS GIA 2 is known to date).

On the cover, the author is recorded as “A. Fidora.” Yet no trace of this name survives, to the best of our knowledge, in connection with Japanese studies. Figuring out who this person was, how the manuscript came about, and when it was written is a fascinating puzzle—one that, at the time of the Expo, we could only tell in part.

Thanks to another document preserved in the library (MS GIA 3), contained in an envelope sent by Adriano Fidora to his father, Mario Cesare, we know that A. Fidora is actually Adriano Vittorio Fidora, who served as a lieutenant in the Italian Royal Army’s telecommunications unit. An entry in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* from 1953 further reveals that Adriano Fidora was born in Naples in 1914 and was killed in action in Tunisia in 1943, during World War II.

Moreover, from a small penciled note on this second document, we know that the papers attributed to Fidora were also connected with a certain “Vaccari, Tokio [*sic!*].” Indeed, Japanese studies of the time knew a Vaccari: Oreste Vaccari (1886-1980) had been a student at the Oriental Institute, and between the 1930s and 1940s he was already in Japan, where he married a Japanese woman, Enko Elisa

Vaccari (1896-1983), and founded the Vaccari’s Language Institute in Tokyo. At this Institute, not only were languages taught, but a large number of manuals and dictionaries was also published, including those for the study of Japanese in English, French, and Italian. Some works on writing were also produced, among which a manual for Japanese cursive script, published in 1938.

The manuscript MS GIA 2 and the figure of Adriano Fidora still deserve further study, but it seems likely that the cursive manual now preserved in the Library of the University of Naples L’Orientale was born out of an intellectual exchange on teaching practices between two very different men: Fidora and Vaccari. The former was preparing for war, the latter launching a major linguistic education initiative; the former was in Italy, the latter in Japan; the former still in training, the latter an established scholar. Yet both shared the ambition of equipping the young field of Italian Japanology—and, more specifically, Japanese language education—with rigorous and indispensable didactic and scholarly tools, such as a manual for learning cursive script.

The workshop included a hands-on activity where participants, after choosing a page from the digital version of the volume available on *OrienTales*, practiced copying cursive script using the exercises from our MS GIA 2 manual. The aim was twofold: to better understand how manuscript culture worked in the past, and to reflect on how, in the digital age, the practice of handwriting still engages important cognitive processes that play a key role in developing linguistic skills. Participants were encouraged to consider the manuscript not merely as a cultural relic, but as a living document that still has the power to teach, inspire, and connect across cultures. All these aspects had already been well understood in the teaching of Japanese at our University since its early decades. At the same time, the workshop also emphasized a broader point: digitizing books not only safeguards an invaluable heritage by protecting the originals, but also guarantees that the knowledge they contain remains accessible to everyone—and for an exceptionally long time.

Gala Maria Follaco’s workshop, “The Curiosities of Jochama,” explored a lesser-known but equally intriguing episode in the history of Japanese language education in Italy. The session focused on the Italian translation of *Minato no hana Yokohama kidan* (Flower of the Port: Strange Tales of Yokohama, ca. 1864), a topographical narrative

by Kikuen Rōjin (dates unknown), translated into Italian by Antelmo Severini (1828-1909) at the end of the 19th century. Remarkably, Severini reimagined this text as a pedagogical tool for Italian learners of Japanese, believing its vivid depictions of Yokohama's foreign settlements would render the document more accessible and engaging. The book reflects the atmosphere of this transformative era, presenting early impressions of "civilization and enlightenment" from the perspective of a Japanese observer. It conveys feelings of astonishment and bewilderment toward foreigners through humor and satire. By reading this work, one gains insight into how people of the time perceived change and how they engaged with foreign cultures. Thus, the text is not only engaging as a literary piece, but also valuable as a historical document.

An Italian translation of this work was produced by the above-mentioned Severini, a scholar of both Chinese and Japanese studies. Severini became acquainted with the text through his friend Enrico Hillyer Giglioli (1845-1909), who had purchased a copy in Yokohama prior to 1868. This translation first appeared in 1875 under the title *Le curiosità di Yokohama* (The Curiosities of Yokohama) within one of Giglioli's own publications. A revised edition was later published in 1882 under the title *Le curiosità di Jochama* (The Curiosities of Jochama), with the toponym transliterated in a rather unusual style. This updated version included the original Japanese text as an appendix, along with a bilingual transcription. Severini, who had been teaching Japanese in Florence since 1865, conceived his translation as a pedagogical resource. He regarded the original text as a "minor work for school use," suitable for the study of both spoken and written Japanese. Because the content addressed Western customs and manners, it was considered familiar and accessible for Italian students.

In his depiction of Europeans, Kikuen Rōjin emphasizes their strangeness and contradictions, portraying them as lacking in passion, concerned solely with profit, and utterly uninterested in the true joys of life, such as poetry and philosophy. When discussing European women, he praises their comparative lack of jealousy in contrast to Japanese women. However, he simultaneously implies, albeit through critical language, that even foreigners are not immune to infidelity.

There are also noteworthy omissions in the translated version, where certain content was deliberately excluded, presumably to prevent young students from encountering morally problematic subjects. For example, a passage referring to concubines and mares was intentionally left out by the translator.

The romanization system used in the book is largely idiosyncratic and markedly difficult to interpret by modern standards. Particularly notable is Severini’s unique method of representing voiced consonants, which he explains in the preface to his translation.

Participants in the MICA workshop were invited to explore hypothetical teaching methods inspired by Severini’s unconventional approach. Using digitized images from the rare bilingual edition of the text—also housed in the Asian Section of the University Library—they discussed how diverse narratives can be adapted for language instruction. The session illuminated how cultural and geographical storytelling has historically intersected with language learning, and how such intersections remain relevant for today’s educators.

Both workshops emphasized the idea of relational pedagogy, i.e. the notion that effective teaching arises not from unilateral transmission, but from reciprocal exchange between cultures, disciplines, and epistemologies. This approach reflects L’Orientale’s enduring institutional philosophy, which positions education as a space for dialogue, mutual respect, and critical inquiry. Especially in the context of Italy’s historical connections with Africa, the Mediterranean and Asia, this commitment to cultural literacy and pedagogical innovation remains as relevant as ever.

L’Orientale’s contribution to the MICA project represented a holistic and future-oriented vision of what cultural heritage can become when reinvigorated through digital tools, intercultural awareness, and participatory learning. It demonstrated how academic research, public engagement, and technological experimentation can converge to foster a richer, understanding of both Italian identity and its intersections with the wider world.

#### **4. Interactivity and Immersion: Redefining Public Engagement**

One of MICA’s key innovations was its deep commitment to interactivity not as a just technological enhancement, but as a core philosophical and methodological principle embedded throughout the event. Visitors were not treated as passive recipients of

information but rather as active participants in a thoughtfully curated experiential journey. The installations were intentionally designed to invite tactile exploration, open-ended interpretation, and collaborative meaning-making. This commitment to interactive engagement was perhaps most evident in the hands-on laboratories facilitated by the institutions involved, where language and culture acquisition, historical inquiry, and digital literacy were interwoven into immersive learning environments.

These multimedia experiences were carefully crafted to be nonlinear, customizable, and user-driven. Participants could select which narratives to follow, which objects to inspect more closely, and how deeply to explore each theme, allowing for an experience that felt both personal and empowering. This mode of engagement resonated especially with younger audiences, who often interacted with the exhibits using intuitive technologies such as touch screens, VR headsets, motion sensors, and augmented reality overlays. These interactive interfaces enabled a heightened level of cognitive and emotional involvement, transforming the exhibition space into a participatory learning landscape. At the same time, they powerfully demonstrated the flexibility and relevance of Italian cultural content in adapting to and thriving within new media and digital ecosystems.

### **5. Reflections on Methodology and Impact**

Throughout the five-day event, a constant and unifying theme emerged: the dynamic tension and fruitful interplay between tradition and innovation. MICA embraced these forces as inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions of cultural expression. Cultural heritage was not treated as a static repository of the past. Instead, it was reimagined as a living, evolving resource, fully capable of sparking contemporary inspiration, creative reinterpretation, and meaningful intercultural connectivity across generational and geographic divides.

MICA functioned as a methodological and intellectual laboratory for rethinking how culture is curated, communicated, and taught in a transdisciplinary and transnational context. The collaboration among universities created fertile ground for the sharing of best practices and the co-creation of pedagogical tools that are flexible, inclusive, and adaptable across diverse educational and cultural settings. The event was a prototype for how academic institutions can work

together to design culturally sensitive and technologically advanced educational models.

The impact of the event extended far beyond its immediate audience. The digital materials produced for MICA (including high-quality video content, interactive lesson plans, research synopses, and exhibition documentation) will remain permanently accessible through a dedicated online platform<sup>1</sup> coordinated by Ca' Foscari and its consortium partners. This ensures that the project will continue to serve as an open-access resource for educators, researchers, students, and cultural institutions long after the conclusion of Expo 2025.

Moreover, the emphasis on bilateral cooperation with Japanese institutions opened promising new avenues for future academic partnerships, student mobility programs, and collaborative research initiatives. The rich discussions and professional exchanges that took place during the event laid the groundwork for joint programs in key fields such as cultural heritage management, multilingual language education, digital humanities, and comparative cultural studies. These developments point toward the emergence of a more integrated and dynamic Euro-Asian academic and cultural landscape, one rooted in mutual respect, sustained dialogue, and shared commitment to innovation.

### **Conclusion: Culture as Living Dialogue**

“Make Italian Culture Alive” succeeded in transforming the Multimedia Conference Hall at the Italy Pavilion into a vibrant and dynamic space of living culture, where past and present, East and West, scholarship and creativity, technology and tradition, came together in meaningful and sustained dialogue. The event confirmed the power of universities as repositories of knowledge and custodians of heritage, and also as active agents in cultural diplomacy, innovation, and the co-creation of new narratives. Through an ambitious program of events, MICA positioned higher education institutions as key players in shaping the future of cultural understanding and exchange.

The University of Naples L'Orientale, one of the oldest and most internationally oriented academic institutions in Italy, confirmed its long-standing and sustained commitment to interculturality. It also

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://pric.unive.it/progetti/mica/home>

showcased its ability to integrate cutting-edge digital tools with critical pedagogy and to build bridges between bibliographic heritage and global narratives. Through flagship initiatives like *OrienTales* and its suite of interactive language and culture workshops, *L'Orientale* offered a compelling vision of culture and language teaching as something to be lived, questioned, reinterpreted, and shared, an ever-evolving process that thrives on human encounter, intellectual curiosity, and reciprocal exchange.

In an increasingly interconnected yet often fragmented world, MICA served as a timely and powerful reminder of the urgent need to keep cultural conversations alive not only through the preservation of memory, but through its creative reinvention. And in that crucial endeavor, the collaborative spirit, academic excellence, and intercultural sensitivity of *Ca' Foscari*, *L'Orientale*, and their institutional partners proved not only exemplary, but essential. The event left a lasting impression of what it means to make culture not just a legacy, but a living, breathing force for the future.



**Fig. 1** *Courtesy of Paolo Pettigiani for Fondazione CHANGES at Expo 2025 Osaka*



**Fig. 2** *Courtesy of Italy at Expo 2025 Osaka*



**Fig. 3** *Courtesy of Matilde Nuzzo for MICA at Expo 2025 Osaka*



**Fig. 4** *Courtesy of Matilde Nuzzo for MICA A EXPO 2025 OSAKA*