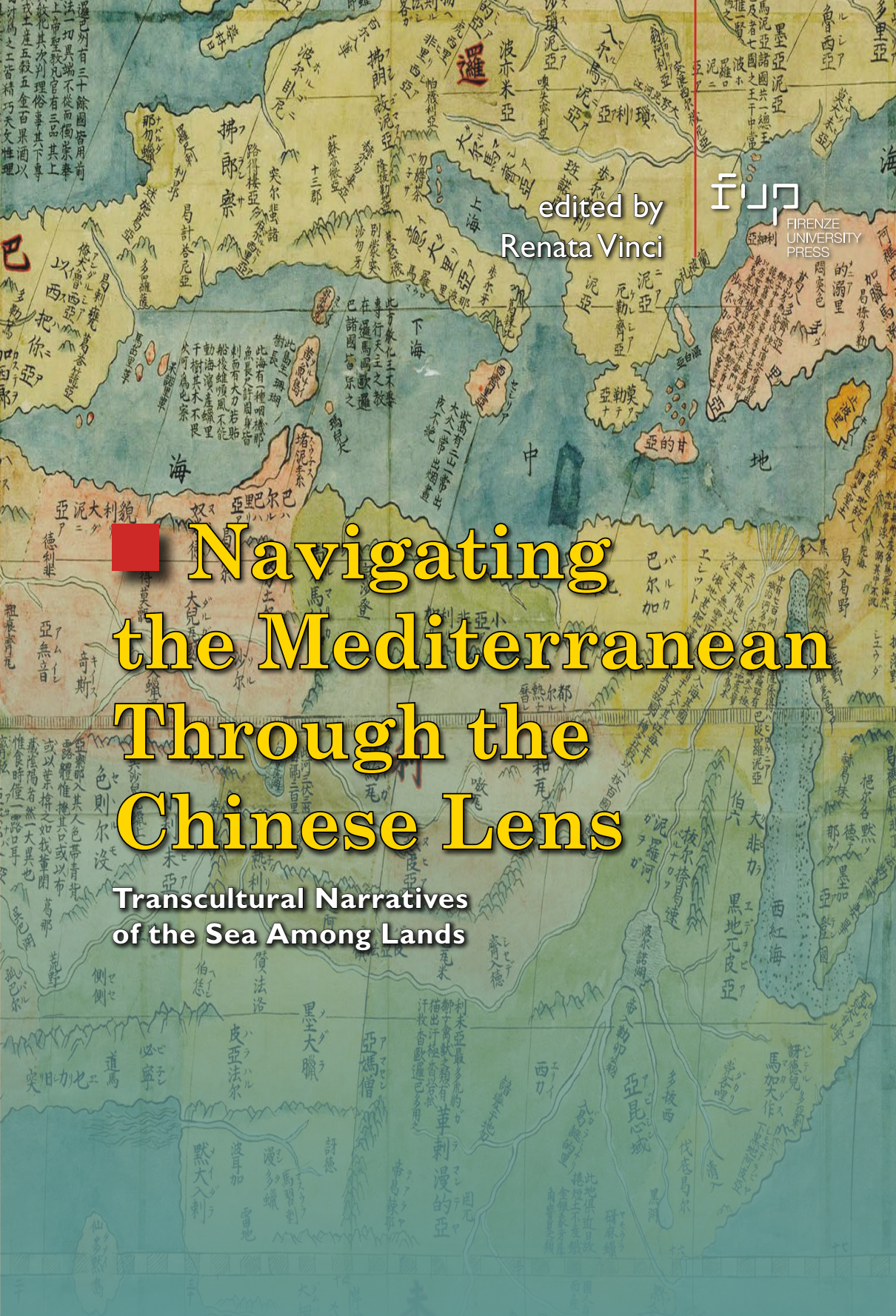

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Renata Vinci

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Navigating the Mediterranean Through the Chinese Lens

Transcultural Narratives of the Sea Among Lands

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Introduction

Renata Vinci

"Ready or not, a 'transcultural' era is upon us." This striking opening line from Richard Slimbach's *The Transcultural Journey* (2011, 205) may initially seem to challenge our capabilities. However, it reflects the natural condition of the contemporary age, a post-national world (Habermas 2001), where our paths, methods, objectives, and approaches must align and adapt to this transcultural reality.

In line with this perspective, this volume represents the initial outcome of the research project *The Mediterranean Through Chinese Eyes: An Analysis Based on Geographical and Travel Sources from the Song to Qing Dynasties (960–1911)* (MeTChE).[1] This project aims to investigate the perception and representation of the Mediterranean region in Chinese sources, conceptualising this 'region among lands' as a transcultural and debordered space, as advanced by contemporary Mediterranean Studies (discussed further in Chapter 1). "Transculturality", as an approach, allows us to explore the fluidity and interconnectedness of cultural exchanges, transcending the constraints of national boundaries. Similarly, the notion of "debordering" challenges fixed regional delineation, emphasising instead the overlapping, hybrid, and dynamic nature of cultures and civilisations. In this framework, the MeTChE research project explores the Mediterranean region – and the forms of interactions within and around it –

[1] For detailed information about the project, including its description, outcomes, team members, and more, please visit the official project website: https://www.unipa.it/progetti/china-mediterranean/en/.

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through the lens provided by the Chinese geographical sources and travel diaries of the Imperial era.

The volume opens with an introductory chapter by the editor (Chapter 1), which establishes the fundamental questions, objectives, and methodology of this research project, and advocates for a transcultural, debordered, and interdisciplinary approach to Sino-Western and Sino-Mediterranean Studies, supported by some illustrative case studies.

The subsequent chapters proceed both chronologically, spanning the Han to the Qing dynasties, and spatially, reflecting a progressively detailed and direct engagement of Chinese sources with the Mediterranean. The initial chapters set the stage by exploring indirect sources and intermediaries of the early Chinese encounter with the Mediterranean – preceding the temporal scope of the MeTChE project and constituting the *antefacts* of its research activity. To this extent, they examine the cultural outposts of the Mediterranean (particularly Greek) in Central Asia during the Han era, and debate the identification of key Mediterranean toponyms in the earliest Chinese historical and geographical sources. Starting with Chapter 4, the focus shifts toward more specific and concrete descriptions of Mediterranean regions (although some are still debated), brought to life through travel accounts of Chinese individuals beginning from the Tang dynasty. These narratives progressively enrich the discourse with detailed observations and a deeper cultural understanding of the Mediterranean region.

In Chapter 2, Maurizio Paolillo begins our journey with an examination of ancient Chinese sources that mention the toponym Haixi 海西, identified by some with the eastern region of Mediterranean civilisation, particularly Egypt. Drawing on excerpts from *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀, and *Weilüe* 魏略, Paolillo locates Haixi in relation to other well-known toponyms such as Da Qin 大秦, Lijian 犁靬, and Lixuan 黎軒, and proposes an original association between the phoenix and the Chinese *fenghuang* 鳳凰, based on a previously overlooked Han dynasty poem. Following, Francesca Fariello's Chapter 3 explores the interchanges between China and the Mediterranean offering insightful details on the Chinese knowledge of Greek outposts in Central Asia, strategic settlements such as Alexandria Eschate in the Ferghana Valley, and Charax in Characene, along the maritime routes to Da Qin (associated with the Roman Empire or its eastern territories).

The following three chapters focus on unique travel experiences. Victoria Almonte in Chapter 4 proposes a transcultural appraisal of *Jing xing ji* 經行記 (*Memories of a Journey* or *Records of My Travels*), the lost travel account of the Tang army soldier Du Huan 杜環, who was sent westward during the Tang expansion military campaign. Du Huan's observations on several territories facing the Mediterranean – e.g. Folin Guo 拂菻國, Molin Guo 摩隣國, Dashi Guo 大食國, Shan Guo 苫國 – reflect a modern and careful anthropological perspective on the transcultural phenomenon of the coexistence of diverse peoples, who "*congci zhi Xihai yilai [...] canza juzhi*" 從此至西海以來[...]參雜居止 (from here to the Western Sea [...] live intermixed). Whereas in Chapter 5, Margaret Kim traces the extraordinary journey of Rabban Sauma (c. 1220–1294), a

Chinese-born Nestorian monk of Mongol origin who travelled west during the Yuan dynasty, highlighting how Sauma's travel account serves as a "mirror for princes", projecting ideals of governance and Christian unity onto Latin Europe, particularly through his descriptions of Genoa as "a paradise where no prince ruled." Finally, concluding this central section of the volume, Chapter 6 features Ileana Amadei's exploration of a 14th-century Chinese traveller account: Wang Dayuan's *Daoyi zhilüe* 島夷志略 (*A Synoptical Account of the Islands and Barbarians*, 1349/50). This study focuses on the 77th section of the text, dedicated to Taji'na 撻吉那, a region famous for its gardenia flowers and precious gems. The identification of this region remains a matter of ongoing academic debates, with hypotheses ranging from India to Persia to Morocco. Amadei explores the possibility that Wang actually reached the Moroccan coast.

The last two chapters deal with more specific representations of cultural and geographical elements of the Mediterranean region. In Chapter 7, Lara Colangelo takes a step forward in the tradition of the study of the reception of Roman law in China, arguing that it was perceived in Chinese sources not merely as a product of Rome and the Italian peninsula but as a transnational influence that extended across the Mediterranean, shaping Western and Mediterranean culture as a whole. This chapter therefore takes its cue from late Qing and early Republican sources, such as Edkins' *Luoma zhilüe* 羅馬志略 (1886) and Ma Jianzhong's 馬建忠 (1845–1900) writings, to demonstrate the universalistic and pan-Mediterranean value of Roman law as a fundamental element of non-material culture shaping Western and Mediterranean civilisations. Furthermore, in the final chapter (Chapter 8) Miriam Castorina conducts a case study on a specific Mediterranean island: Malta, a small territory in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea long neglected by most traditional geographical sources. Malta emerges as a vivid example of the Mediterranean melting pot and transculturality, as perceived by late Qing Chinese travellers, for whom it served as a necessary and sometimes entertaining stopover.

Finally, the Afterword by Valentina Pedone enriches and deepens the volume's scope by bridging historical analysis with contemporary perspectives. Crossing the canonical chronological borders of this research project, the author transports readers into the present and illustrates how the perception of the Mediterranean has evolved to present days through the lived experiences and works of contemporary Sino-Italian writers. By reflecting on the narratives of contemporary Sino-Italian authors, the afterword highlights diverse interpretations of the Mediterranean as a place of encounter, a symbolic threshold, and a space of daily life, offering a contemporary and dynamic perspective on this region. It attests the enduring perception of plurality and hybridity in Chinese narratives of this maritime region, which continues to be a vital point of connection between civilisations and identities, in continuity with the past.

To conclude, if a unifying thread can be identified in this volume, beyond the chronological sequence of historical periods, sources, and authors, it is the gradual spatial progression toward a more detailed view of the Mediterranean region. This will achieve even fuller development in subsequent diaries of the

late Qing era, beginning with the first Chinese diplomatic mission to Europe in 1866, and extending into the early Republican era. As mentioned in Chapter 1, these direct forms of knowledge – along with the secondary literature on this topic – represent an indispensable platform for the research group involved in the MeTChE project, as do the undeniable contribution of Jesuit and Protestant geographical knowledge from the Ming and Qing periods and their influence on Chinese sources (also briefly addressed in Chapter 1 and 8). However, a deeper investigation of these sources is currently beyond the scope of this preliminary volume. The exclusion of these sources from this initial collective outcome does not imply a lack of recognition of their value; rather, it reflects a deliberate intention to focus on less well-known and explored aspects that better illustrate the shift in the methodological perspective.

The studies in this volume therefore result from a shared willingness to transcend narrow, nation-centric investigations. They mark the first step in a project that will move forward to addres the many questions still left open, ultimately aiming to provide a comprehensive and interdisciplinary contribution to Sino-Mediterranean exchanges.

This volume would not have been possible without the invaluable support and expertise of my colleagues and project units coordinators, who have consistently offered stimulating perspectives and contributions to this project: Victoria Almonte (Tuscia University of Viterbo Research Unit Coordinator), Federica Casalin (Sapienza University of Rome Research Unit Coordinator), and Miriam Castorina (Florence University Research Unit Coordinator). As editor of this volume, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the authors, whether directly or indirectly involved in the MeTChE project, who enriched this platform of discussion with their works. Lastly, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Antonio Leggieri for his meticulous proofreading and careful review of the chapters, as well as to all the friends and colleagues whose insights and contributions have been meaningful to the success of this project.

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Why Should We Look at Chinese Sources on the Mediterranean from a Transcultural Perspective?

Renata Vinci

Abstract: In the postnational era, the demand to rethink national borders and embrace inclusive sentiments of shared interests and belonging is prompting scholars to explore new avenues of research. This introductory essay positions the research project *The Mediterranean Through Chinese Eyes* (MeTChE) within the context of recent scholarship on Sino-Western exchanges and aims to provoke debate on a new approach that integrates Chinese Studies and Mediterranean Studies. The MeTChE project seeks to understand how China perceived the Mediterranean as a transcultural space during the Imperial era, specifically from the Song to the Qing dynasties. Three key questions guide this preliminary investigation: why should we embrace the concept of a "transcultural" Mediterranean? What are the conventional methods used in researching Chinese sources on the Mediterranean, and why is a fresh approach necessary? Finally, is it appropriate to discuss a "transcultural" perception of the Mediterranean from the Chinese perspective? The analysis of Chinese sources on the Mediterranean reveals a rich tapestry of cultural interactions and exchanges. Valuable insights come from geographical works, maps, travelogues, and diplomatic accounts that shed light on how China viewed the Mediterranean. Among the notable authors are scholars such as Kang Youwei and Xue Fucheng, whose writings serve as case studies in this essay, as they weave ancient Mediterranean civilisation and historical figures into their accounts. Examining their works from a transcultural perspective allows us to move beyond traditional national identities, exploring the interconnectedness and complexity of historical relations between China and the broader world. Simultaneously, by acknowledging the Mediterranean as a space of converging yet fragmented identities, we recognise its role as a place of coexistence and hybridity, blurring cultural differences and national boundaries.

Keywords: Mediterranean; China; Perception; Transculturality; Travel Diaries

> [...] Yo he visto tus orillas, troyanos o fenicios
> en tu borde meditan las esfinges rosadas
> los frisos de vendimias y guerras entre olivos
> rosa espuma del mosto para desnudas danzas. [...][1]
> [Agustín de Foxá, Mediterráneo, *Obras completas,* 1963]

1. For a "New Thalassology" in the Study of Sino-Western Relations

In today's postnational era (Habermas 2001), as sinologists and scholars interested in the circulation of reciprocal knowledge between China and foreign

[1] "[...] I have seen your shores, Trojans or Phoenicians / on your edge the rosy sphinxes meditate / the friezes of the grape harvest and wars between olive trees / pink foam of the must for naked dances. [...]"

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countries, we too are called to reconsider the relevance of national borders in our own research. This comes as a response to an extended demand to rethink the ties imposed by concepts such as nation, language and heritage in favour of essential inclusive sentiments of shared interests and belonging. This is even more true in light of the new perspective in regional history that has been encouraged by an inclination toward the "erasure of established disciplinary and historical frontiers" (Horden and Purcell 2006, 723). In this perspective, the history of seas (both physical and virtual) developed as a form of reinterpretation of traditional geography. Horden and Purcell have labelled this new historical and geographical perspective "a new thalassology," stemming from the Greek word *thalassa* (sea). They proposed to focus on seas as politically neutral areas that ignore national boundaries and subvert hierarchies of powers, not only as geographical spaces. This does not intentionally exclude the role of politics and power, being that a Sea-based political hegemony was already part of traditional Western historiography since Herodotus and Thucydides had coined the idea of "thalassocracy" (sea rule) in the 5th century BCE. It also considers that the Mediterranean Sea has staged conflicts and imperialist narratives from remote times until World War II (Horden and Purcell 2006, 723–4), not to mention the 21st century migrant crisis.

This, together with the Greek etymology behind the name of this new proposed approach, may already be considered proof of the central role that the Mediterranean region plays in this postmodern mode of investigation. In fact, it constituted as a paradigm for maritime historians to reflect upon other sea regions all over the world. This allows the Mediterranean to become a "non-Mediterraneist" concept, a model that interlaces "new alliances and agglomerations capable of generating novel and interesting heuristic options" rather than focusing on the limited space of its enclosed coastal perimeter (Herzfeld 2005, 50).

A modest attempt to draw a path to a further "novel and interesting heuristic option" is what the research project *The Mediterranean Through Chinese Eyes: An Analysis Based on Geographical and Travel Sources from the Song to Qing Dynasties (960–1911)* aspires to do. Stemming from a research group which connects four Italian universities located at the centre of the investigated geographical and cultural region, this project explores the formation of the Chinese perception of the Mediterranean from the Song to the Qing dynasties (960–1911), taking into account geographical works and travelogues written during the last four imperial dynasties. In particular, it assesses through which channels and to what extent the Mediterranean came to be described and perceived as a "transcultural space" in China in the concerned period.

This opening chapter serves as a theoretical and methodological foundation to introduce the discourse on the possibility of identifying a transcultural awareness in the Chinese perception of the Mediterranean. This discussion will be explored through individual evidence and case studies, starting from paragraph 3 of this chapter and continuing in subsequent chapters. The proposed perspective of this volume is thus based on three initial theoretical and methodological questions:

1. Why should we embrace the concept of a "transcultural" Mediterranean?
2. What were the conventional methods used to investigate Chinese sources on the Mediterranean in the past, and why is a fresh approach needed?
3. Is it appropriate to discuss a "transcultural" perception of the Mediterranean from the Chinese perspective?

To address these three questions and investigate Sino-Western relations, the exchange of knowledge between China and foreign countries, and the Chinese perception of "the others," various disciplines and fields of study come into play. As evident from this brief introduction, we must not only consider Chinese Studies, but also include disciplines such as History of Geography, Mediterranean Studies and Transcultural Studies. Additionally, Comparative Literature, particularly the branch of Imagology, plays a crucial role, extending its focus beyond literary analysis to encompass broader areas within the human and social sciences (Beller and Leerssen 2007, xv). Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge not only Sino-Western interactions, but also Sino-Arab contacts and the History of Arab Geography. Finally, we must consider the traditional national historiography of the countries and regions involved in this research. By incorporating these diverse disciplines and perspectives, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics that shaped the relationship between China and the wider world throughout history.

2. Why "Transcultural" Mediterranean?

Fernand Braudel, considered the pioneer of Mediterranean Studies, is known for his expanded definition of this region which, according to him, also stretched onto the surrounding non-coastal internal area. His famous answer to the question "What is the Mediterranean?" is often quoted:

> A thousand things at once. Not one landscape, but landscapes without number. Not one sea, but a succession of seas. Not one civilisation, but a number of civilisations, superimposed one on top of the other (Braudel 1985, 8).

Braudel's manifest relation of this sea with the surrounding lands is explicit in its Latin etymology: *Medi-terranĕus* ("among lands"). This mirrors a long series of names adopted by the many people which crossed its waters and their respective languages: *Mare Nostrum* ("Our Sea") by the Romans, *Akdeniz* ("White Sea") by the Turks, or *Yam gadol* ("Great Sea") by the Jews, just to mention a few. The latest definition of the "Liquid Continent" by David Abulafia intends to label it as "a real continent, [which] embraces many peoples, cultures and economies within a space with precise edges" (Abulafia 2011, xxiii). Unlike Braudel, he adopts a stricter stance, focusing solely on the Mediterranean's water and coastal landscape, including its islands and port cities, while disregarding "sedentary, traditional societies […] who never went near the sea" (Braudel 2011, xxiiii)."

Because it existed as a homogenous political entity only at the time of the Roman Empire (1st cent. BCE–3rd cent. CE), and despite embracing many "people, cultures and economies," the Mediterranean is a fragmented space po-

litically and economically (Abulafia 2023, 14–15). What we know today as the Mediterranean is actually the result of centuries of travels, trades and exchanges, but also a result of epidemics, conflicts and wars, which have always been a relevant power in human history. However, the cultural mixture inaugurated by the era of peace and travel during the Roman Empire still continues today. At certain points, it even extended with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, when the role of maritime connection with the Indian Ocean and East Asia became more explicit.

Whether one approaches it in Braudelian perspective, considering the Mediterranean as a space of unity, or as Abulafia suggests, resembling a cauldron of fragmented identities,[2] one cannot overlook the undeniable diversity within this region. In this regard, Abulafia aptly adds that

> we should note diversity. At the human level, this ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity was constantly subject to external influences from across the sea, and therefore in a constant state of flux (Abulafia 2011, 641).

Hence, due to its unique geographical and physical characteristics, the Mediterranean has historically been — and continues to be — a place of both plurality and unity, where cultural differences and national boundaries tend to blur, creating an inclusive and cohesive territory. Thus, the concepts of coexistence and hybridity among various people, traditions, and cultures have become the central theme of the Mediterranean discourse.

The countless historical events and happenings that are seen as a direct consequence of geographical closeness of people facing the sea have been largely explored in the past by historiography studies on the Mediterranean, including studies by Braudel (1985, 1986, 1998) Norwich (2006) and Abulafia (2011), among others. Yet, one must not forget that the strategic position of this peculiar sea also made it historically relevant for encounters among civilisations located very far from each other, at the opposite sides of two continents. This is the case for China, whose sources mention the Mediterranean as far back as the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), when it was addressed as *Xihai* 西海 (Western Sea). This toponym persisted for centuries until it was eventually supplanted by the semantic loan of Romance etymology, *Dizhonghai* 地中海 (translated as "sea between lands"), first featured by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci on his world map in 1602.[3] In contrast to many other foreign toponyms translated in Chinese, which varied greatly from source to source, this remained the prevailing Chinese name for the "Mediterranean" until present times, which seemingly

[2] Abulafia also stressed that during the course of history, nations such as France and Italy took advantage of the idea of a "Mediterranean identity" as an excuse for imperialistic actions in North Africa (Abulafia 2023, 16).

[3] Regarding the earliest Chinese references to the Mediterranean and Chinese toponyms for this sea, readers can refer to chapter 8. Additionally, for a comprehensive exploration of Chinese ancient sources related to this topic, see Yu Taishan's *China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources* (Yu 2013).

conveys the idea of the Mediterranean as an interstitial space located among cultures (Tomas 2020, 1–6), a "transcultural space" where cultures cross and mix.

3. Chinese Sources on the Mediterranean and Existing Studies

3.1. A Brief Overview of Chinese Sources on the Mediterranean from the Song Dynasty

The Song dynasty was a time of transition to modernity, enhanced by unprecedented economic growth boosted by technological advancements and a network of commercial cities in which the government paid more attention to promoting maritime trade. As a consequence, Chinese interest toward foreign countries progressively grew, leading to the production of travel journals, pilot books and geographical works, which served as catalysts for more travellers and trades along the Indian Ocean and the Maritime Silk Road.

The flourishing exchange of goods and information, including those related to the Mediterranean, was facilitated by individuals from diverse countries. Notably, Arab merchants and travellers played a pivotal role in this process, given the growing presence of Muslim communities in Southeast China, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. In this era, several significant geographical works on foreign countries and trade, spanning over the Mediterranean region, were produced by Chinese authors such as Zhou Qufei's 周去非 (1135–89) *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 (Notes from the Land Beyond the Passes, 1178) and Zhao Rukuo's 趙汝适 (1170–1228) *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 (Description of the Barbarians, 1225). Throughout these works, researchers demonstrated the impact of oral transmission by Arab merchants and identified numerous similarities with Arab geographical accounts by Ibn al-Khurdādhbah (820 ca.–912 ca.), Al-Masʿūdī (896–956 ca.) and Al-Idrīsī (1099–1165) (Hirth and Rockhill 1911, 36; Park 2012, 48; Almonte 2020).[4]

During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), the Silk Roads facilitated an abundant movement of people, goods and knowledge due to the so-called *pax mongolica*. Amidst this backdrop, the Mongol Nestorian monk Rabban Sauma (c.1220–1294) and his younger companion Markos embarked on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a destination they actually never reached. Their journey took an unexpected turn when Rabban Sauma was appointed as an ambassador to the Pope and the kings of Europe on behalf of the Persian *ilkhan* Arghun in Baghdad. This appointment marked a historic moment, as Rabban Sauma became the first individual from Chinese territories to travel through the Mediterranean Sea and visit Europe, particularly Italy and France. The Syriac rendition of his travel account, briefly known as the *History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma,* presents the earliest first-hand description of the Mediterranean written by a traveller from the Chinese region (Budge 1928).[5] Similar to other Song

[4] Regarding this topic, see Chapters 4 and 6.

[5] Rabban Sauma's travel account is the focus of Chapter 5.

sources, his account of the Etna eruption of 1287 was strongly influenced by Arab iconography, recalling the words of geographer Al-Qazwīnī (1203–83) (Borbone 2008, 227).

During the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a significant shift occurred in the influence of foreign geographical sources on Chinese knowledge, particularly regarding the Mediterranean region and European countries. This transformation was brought on by the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in China. Notably, alongside their proselytising endeavours, the Jesuits made a concerted effort to disseminate Western knowledge, aiming to demonstrate the significance and merits of Christianity to their Chinese interlocutors. Sharing information on world geography was crucial to their strategy. After Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who first introduced a caption with a short description of the Mediterranean on his world map *Kunyu wanguo quantu* 坤輿萬國全圖 (Complete Map of All the Countries in the World, 1602), Giulio Aleni's (1582–1649) *Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀 (Records of the Places Outside the Jurisdiction of the Office of Geography, 1623) exerted a long lasting influence in China for centuries.

Not only was it quoted and partially integrated by Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) in his *Kunyu tushuo* 坤輿圖說 (Illustrated Explanation of the World, 1672), but in the 18th century, after the Rites Question (1723) banned Christian missionaries in China, *Zhifang waiji*'s descriptions of the world were still mentioned in Chinese works such as *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming, 1735) and *Qingchao wenxian tongkao* 清朝文獻通考 (Complete Analysis of the Documents of the Qing Dynasty, 1747). Both were commissioned by the imperial court and continued to be influent during the late Qing dynasty, as we will see in the last paragraph of this chapter.

It was during the 19th century, notoriously marked by the two Opium wars (1839–1842; 1858–1860), when updated information about the outside world was introduced in China. The protagonists of this new knowledge transfer wave were Protestant missionaries, first from northern Europe and then from the United States. They translated, adapted and sometimes composed a vast array of short essays and longer manuals on world geography. Treatises such as *Wanguo dili quanji* 萬國地理全集 (Complete Collection on World Geography, 1848) by Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851) and *Dili quanji* 地理全集 (Complete Collection on Geography, 1853; enlarged in 1883) by William Muirhead (1822–1900) provided a brand-new worldview and richer details on the Mediterranean landscape, economy and culture to the Chinese literati. These literati then largely quoted (i.e. Xu Jiyu's 徐繼畬 *Yinghuan zhilüe* 瀛寰志略, 1848), anthologised (i.e. Wei Yuan's 魏源 *Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志, 1842, 1847, and 1852) and reprinted them (i.e. Wang Xiqi's 王錫祺 *Xiaofanghu zhai yudi congchao* 小方壺齋輿地叢鈔, 1891–97) for decades until end of the 19th century, when a new protagonist became a cultural mediator: Japan.

Geographic works by Protestant missionaries, often adapted and revised by the intervention of Chinese editors, became essential preparatory readings for the first Chinese explorers and diplomats to reach Europe between and after the Opium Wars. Moved by official duties or personal interest, these Chi-

nese officials and literati – such as Binchun 斌椿 (1803–?), Zhang Deyi 張德彝 (1847–1918), Hong Xun 洪勳 (1855–?), Guo Liancheng 郭連城 (1839–66), Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838–94), Wang Tao 王韜 (1827–98) and Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) – crossed the Mediterranean ensemble of "roads by sea and by land, linked together" (Braudel 1985, 76–7). To them, the Mediterranean Sea became the door to Europe. Their knowledge of the foreign world was no longer mediated by foreign sources, and their descriptions on maritime routes, places and cities, as well as their accounts of feelings and experiences, represent a new Mediterranean narrative.

3.2. How Have Chinese Sources on the Mediterranean Been Analysed Until Now? Studies on the Chinese Perceptions of Mediterranean Countries

For the earliest Chinese travellers and envoys, the Mediterranean Sea served as the gateway to Europe. Departing from the Egyptian coast (or crossing the Suez Canal after its completion in 1869), they journeyed to the shores of Italy and France. The utmost importance of maritime routing therefore lays mainly in facilitating not only concrete voyages made by individuals, but also in fostering the exchange of knowledge. It thus became a focal area where numerous individuals played significant roles in nurturing the circulation of knowledge between the West (Europe) and China.

The discovery of "the other" was in fact developed through a complex interplay of knowledge provided by both Chinese and non-Chinese works, including those composed by foreign scholars from various eras and cultural backgrounds, as well as Chinese scholars, geographers, official envoys and travellers. Most of the studies examining the descriptions of Mediterranean and European countries in Chinese sources tend to systematise this intricate framework by concentrating on individual nations and their respective national identities. Some of the most relevant works worth highlighting include Meng Hua's *Tazhe de jingxiang: Zhongguo yu Falanxi* 他者的镜像：中国与法兰西 (Visions of the Other: China and France) (2004), which investigated the image of France in China, and Giuliano Bertuccioli and Federico Masini's *Italia e Cina* (Italy and China) ([1996] 2014), which offered a comprehensive examination of Sino-Italian relations and representations of Italy in China, laying the foundation for subsequent in-depth studies by several Italian scholars.[6] Furthermore, numerous essays

[6] Among them, we should mention Federica Casalin, who contributed to this research field with several essays on the representation of Italy, Italian cities and the Italians national character in late-Qing sources, and has recently published an Italian translation of the travel diary by Xue Fucheng: *Un diplomatico cinese a Roma. L'Italia di Xue Fucheng (1838–1894)* (A Chinese Diplomat to Rome. Italy According to Xue Fucheng (1838–1894)) (2023). Seemingly, Miriam Castorina worked on late-Qing travel diaries to analyse the representation of Italy and Western women. Her latter contribution to the topic is *In the Garden of the World. Italy to a Young 19th Century Chinese Traveler* (2020). Alessandra Brezzi, who mostly works on the early reception of Italian literature, also translated the travel diary by Grand

and articles have delved into the portrayal of individual countries within specific travelogues, as done by Fidan and Janovič in their work *Kang Youwei's Visit to Serbia* (2015). Nevertheless, the transnational perspective embraced by this project finds resonance in other studies too, including Yu Taishan's *China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources* (2013) and Lee's *China and Europe: Images and Influences in 16th to 18th Centuries* (1991).

Regarding Sino-Mediterranean exchanges that took place until the end of the imperial domination, an outline of the perceptions and representations of the Mediterranean transcultural space should be elaborated in order to "de-border" the study of Sino-Western, especially Sino-European, contacts. This should be achieved by looking at the larger system of shared culture and enhancing common elements emerging from the encounter of civilisations across history. Rather than addressing "the origin and function of characteristics of other countries and peoples, as expressed textually, particularly in the way in which they are presented in works of literature, plays, poems, travel books and essays" (Beller and Leerssen 2007, 7), as traditionally done by the studies on Literary Imagology, we should instead overpass the concept of national boundaries and identities.

This will show us how borders and geopolitical partitions varied throughout history, including elements of non-material culture such as the circulation of ideas (e.g. common traditions and beliefs, mythology, scientific discoveries or inventions) as well as material culture (trade and goods circulation, one of the main catalysts of human mobility and interest toward "the other").

4. Transcultural Mediterranean in the Chinese Cultural Sphere

To underscore the significance of adopting a transcultural perspective when examining Chinese sources on Europe and the Mediterranean region, this chapter will provide examples extracted from late-Qing travel diaries, which represent the final and most refined stage of Chinese observation and interaction with the West.

Information presented in the odeporic production was collected first-hand, representing "first-sight" encounters, rather than being solely mediated by written accounts composed by Westerners, as had been the case in previous centuries. To this end, Kang Youwei's diary can be considered a valuable and privileged source of observation for at least two reasons. First, because of his syncretic background, Kang Youwei emerged as a pivotal figure during the final years of the imperial regime. Hailing from the province of Guangdong, he received an education in Confucian Classics, which he complemented with an in-depth study of numerous Western works translated into Chinese, including Wei Yuan's *Haiguo tuzhi* and Xi Jiyu's *Yinghuan zhilüe*. This synthesis of Eastern

Minister Qian Xun's 錢恂 wife: *La diplomazia vista dall'interno: Il Diario di viaggio di Shan Shili* (Diplomacy form the Inside: The Travelogue of Shan Shili) (2021). Lastly, the author of this chapter contributed to this topic with research on the representation of Italy in the Shanghai newspaper *Shenbao* and with the volume *La Sicilia in Cina. Una raccolta di testi cinesi sull'isola (1225–1911)* (Sicily in China: A Collection of Texts (1225–1911)) (2019).

doctrines and Western culture allowed him to use Confucianism as a bridge to embrace and assimilate Western ideas. Secondly, at the time of his travels, Kang had already become an experienced globetrotter, with first-hand everyday life experiences in several foreign countries. It is well known that after the failure of the Hundred Days Reforms in 1898, he sought refuge in Hong Kong to evade a death sentence. Subsequently, in 1899, he journeyed to Japan, and later Canada, from where he also visited Great Britain. Between 1900 and 1901, he sojourned various Asian destinations, including Singapore, Malaysia, and India. In the autumn of 1903, he returned to Hong Kong briefly, only to embark on an extensive journey lasting until 1909, during which he visited Europe, the United States, Canada and Mexico. Throughout this period, he moved restlessly, making multiple visits to France and England, as well as traveling to Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Turkey and Greece. Though he wasn't confined to the European continent alone, as he extended his explorations to Morocco, Egypt, Palestine and Jerusalem. He ultimately returned to China in 1914 after 16 years of exile.

His travel notes are collected in his book *Ouzhou shiyiguo youji* 歐洲十一國遊記 (Notes on my Travels to Eleven European Countries), from which only the diaries about Italy and France have been published. One of the opening chapters of *Yidali youji* 意大利遊記 (Notes of my Travel to Italy, 1905), where he recounts the sea crossing from Port Said along the Mediterranean until he lands in Brindisi in Southern Italy, is dedicated to the Mediterranean Sea and therefore titled *Dizhong hai* 地中海 (Kang 2016, 77–79). As soon as he departs from Port Said on the Egyptian coast on June 14th, 1904, and throughout the entire northwestward sea crossing of the Mediterranean, the description of the view from the boat seamlessly intertwines with inspirations from his knowledge about ancient Mediterranean cultures. This boat trip also provides him with the opportunity to compose a quatrain (*jueju* 絕句) and a 63-verse song (*ge* 歌) dedicated to the Mediterranean. These poetic works, along with the prosaic section of the account, which all together cover approximately 1,200 characters, are filled with references to Mediterranean civilisations and historical figures from the Classical, Hellenic, and Roman eras, as well as from more recent times (Kang 2016, 77–80). Here is a synoptic overview of these references arranged in chronological order:

Mediterranean civilisations	
Aijji [*wenming*] 埃及[文明]	Egyptian [civilisation]
Feinishi [*wenming*] 腓尼士[文明] *Feiniji* 腓尼基	Phoenician [civilisation] Phoenicia
Yashu 亞述	Assyria
Babilun 巴比倫	Babylon
Jiataiji 迦太基	Carthage
Xila [*wenming*] 希臘[文明]	Greek [civilisation]
Luoma 羅馬	Rome

Historical figures	
Yaoli 邀釐	Ulysses[7]
Hemei'er 賀梅爾	Homer
Luomulu 羅慕路	Romulus
Bigutala 畢固他拉	Pythagoras
Suoladi 索拉底	Socrates
Bolatu 柏拉圖	Plato
Yalishiduode 亞里士多德	Aristotle
Yalishan dadi 亞力山大帝	Alexander the Great
Hanniba 漢尼巴	Hannibal
Bengbiao 繃標	Pompey
Kaisa 愷撒	[Julius] Ceasar
Nai'ersun 鼐爾孫	[Horatio] Nelson
Napolun 拿破侖	Napoleon

In Kang's account, the diverse people of the Mediterranean and the prominent figures from its shared history come together to create what can be aptly described as a "cultural landscape." This intricate context is shaped not only by the physical environment, but also by historical and social intersections, contributing to its multifarious nature. In Kang's account, the remarkable personalities of Aristotle, Plato and Homer, as well as the achievements of conquerors like Hannibal, Alexander the Great and Romulus, go beyond celebration. They become part of a collective cultural heritage that transcends the conventional concept of national borders and plays a vital role as fundamental models in Kang Youwei's discourse on the advancement of modern Chinese society.

However, this discourse owes much to the contribution of Jesuit missionaries who began promoting the excellence of studies and scholars in ancient European culture a couple centuries before Kang Youwei. In this sense, Giulio Aleni's description of Sicily in his *Zhifang waiji* is particularly noteworthy. In his account, he narrates the extraordinary achievements and inventions of figures like Dedalus (*Dedalu* 德大禄) and Archimedes (*Ya'erjimode* 亞而幾墨得), both exemplifying the profound knowledge and heritage of Classical Mediterranean civilisation. By examining this source, we can trace the roots of Kang's fascination with the cultural world he was about to encounter and explore:

> Long ago, there lived an ingenious craftsman named Daedalus, who crafted a hundred birds capable of flying on their own, even the tiniest ones resembling insects. Additionally, an astronomer named Archimedes had three extraordinary

[7] Despite being a fictional character, he is included in this table due to the cultural value that this figure has exercised throughout the Mediterranean area.

> ideas. Once, when an enemy country with a hundred ships approached the island, the inhabitants believed there was no escape; he built an enormous mirror that reflected the sun's rays, directing them against the enemy fleet and igniting a fire that swiftly burned down hundreds of ships. Later, the king tasked him with constructing a colossal ship who could cross the sea; as the ship was completed and they had to send it to sea, it was estimated that even the combined strength of the entire country, using a thousand or ten thousand oxen, horses, and camels, would not be enough to move it; but Archimedes devised a method to transport it, so that the moment the king raised his hand, the ship moved gracefully and smoothly descended into the sea. Finally, he created an automatic armillary sphere with twelve levels, each one distinct from the others. Each of the seven Regulators of Time had its own movement, precisely mirroring the motions of the sun, moon, five celestial bodies, and various constellations in the heavens. This remarkable glass sphere allowed one to see through it, layer after layer, making it a truly rare and extraordinary treasure (Aleni 1996, 87).[8]

The enduring presence of such descriptions in Chinese imagery, as well as their diffusion throughout the Chinese cultural sphere, is further evidenced by the fact that similar passages can be found in other works and travelogues dating up to the 19th and 20th centuries. Aleni's *Zhifang waiji* enjoyed remarkable success and significant influence, as it was frequently cited in various geographical treatises and encyclopaedias, including those authored by Verbiest, Xu Jiyu and Wei Yuan. In the travel account *Xiyou bilüe* 西遊必略 (Brief Account of a Travel to the West, 1921) by Guo Liancheng 郭連成, which records his travel between 1859 and 1860, one can still discern precise traces of Aleni's words on the two Greek inventors, demonstrating the longevity of certain *topoi* from the Classical Mediterranean cultural heritage in the Chinese cultural context for centuries (Guo 2003, 51–52).[9]

The cultural permeability of the Mediterranean civilisations' heritage also emerges from the pages of Xue Fucheng's *Chushi Ying Fa Yi Bi si guo riji* 出使英法義比四國日記 (Diary of an Embassy to Britain, France, Italy, and Belgium, 1889). In the section dedicated to Romania, the long-lasting influence of Roman customs and traditions can be observed, showcasing the enduring impact of the Classical Mediterranean culture on distant lands:

[8] 有巧 工，德大禄者，造百鳥能飛，即微如蠅虫，亦能飛。更有天文 師，名亞而幾墨得者，有三絶:昔敵國駕數百艘，臨其島，彼 則鑄一巨鏡映日，注射敵艘，光照火發，數百艘，一時燒盡。 又其王命造一極大舶，舶成，將下海，雖傾一國之力，用牛馬 駱駝千萬，莫能運。幾墨得，營運巧法，第一舉手，舟如山岳轉動，須臾下海。又造一自動渾天儀，十二重，層層相間，七 政各有本動，凡日月五星列宿，運行遲疾，與天無二。以玻璃 爲之，重重可透視。 A complete translation in Italian is provided by Paolo De Troia (Aleni 2009).

[9] Guo was a young Chinese convert who, when he was only 19 years old and after receiving a traditional education, embraced Catholicism and joined a delegation going to Rome in 1859. Miriam Castorina provided a comprehensive Italian translation of his travelogue (Castorina 2008).

> In the present day, Romania stands as an independent nation, dispatching its envoys to numerous countries, with a territory surpassing that of Denmark and Belgium. One can trace its origins back to its Ancient Roman heritage; their customs and culture are shaped on those of Ancient Rome, as Rome's power extended to these distant lands (Xue 1985, 328).[10]

Braudel and Abulafia offer distinct and evolving perspectives on the concept of the Mediterranean as a transcultural space: Braudel's approach is more encompassing, highlighting historical interactions and exchanges between all of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean, even those more internal and lacking direct access to the sea; on the other hand, Abulafia's perspective is more focused on the water and coastal landscape, including mostly islands and port cities, disregarding the influence of "sedentary, traditional societies" that have not had direct contact with the sea. On this point, the example of Romania in Xue Fucheng's travelogue provides an interesting case study to consider in the context of Braudel and Abulafia's perspectives: Xue Fucheng highlights the influence of the Ancient Roman heritage on Romania's customs, suggesting a continuity of cultural interactions that have shaped the region over time. This resonates with Braudel's vision of the Mediterranean as a space of unity, where civilisations and cultures have been superimposed on each other over centuries.

The Mediterranean, whether seen as a space of unity or a cauldron of fragmented identities, represents a region where cultural differences and national boundaries blur, creating an inclusive and cohesive territory. Coexistence and hybridity among diverse people, traditions and cultures have become the leitmotif of the Mediterranean discourse. Looking at Chinese sources on the Mediterranean from a transcultural perspective allows us to appreciate the rich history of interaction, exchange and coexistence between China and the Mediterranean region. By understanding the Mediterranean as a "transcultural space," we can transcend the limitations of national boundaries and gain a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness and complexity of historical relations between China and the wider world. This approach opens new avenues for research and enriches our knowledge of the multifaceted cultural heritage that has shaped our global history.

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[10] 今羅馬尼亞遣使分駐各邦，儼然自立，且其地較丹馬、比利時諸國為大。然溯其淵源，實古羅馬之遺裔也；其土俗，則古羅馬之遺風也。羅馬之氣脈亦長矣。

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Following a Mediterranean Clue. A Reconsideration of the Sources About the Country of Haixi 海西國 (2nd–3rd Cent. CE)

Maurizio Paolillo

Abstract: Beginning with Zhang Qian's mission during the reign of Emperor Wu, the Han expansion westwards brought new geographical knowledge. Gan Ying's arrival on the shores of the Persian Gulf in 97 CE established a new and extreme boundary for knowledge of the West: the purpose of his mission was direct contact with the political entity known as Da Qin. Within the historiographical sources where references to Da Qin and the West appear, the toponym Haixi 海西 recurs in *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀, and *Weilüe* 魏略. This chapter lists the historical sources on Haixi to discuss some related issues and proposes some hypotheses for identifying the place names in these texts, potentially aiding in locating Haixi geographically. Finally, a concluding paragraph addresses a previously neglected source, which appears to support the hypothesis identifying Haixi with Egyptian territory, thereby associating it with a region within the Mediterranean area.

Keywords: China and the West; Haixi; Egypt; Ancient Eurasian Sea Routes; Phoenix and *Fenghuang*

1. Chinese View of the West from the Zhou to the Han: A Complex Interaction

In the early Zhou 周 period (c. 1046–256 BCE), it is challenging to identify a clear distinction between a "Chinese" world (often referred to as Xia 夏 or Huaxia 華夏: Chen 2004) and a "barbarian" world: in the clash between the Zhou and other external political entities, there is hardly trace of any manifesto of cultural or moral superiority. On the contrary, practical necessities often favoured alliances between the lineages of the Central Territories (*zhongguo* 中國) and "barbarian" peoples (Di Cosmo 2002, 93–8; see also Goldin 2015).

This recurrent interaction between the Zhou (as well as the principalities of the Central Plains) and other peoples was perhaps one of the causes (together with the consolidation of a bureaucratic state structure) that starting from the period of the Springs and Autumns (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) led to a redefinition of the identity of the political and social group, that we can include under the definition of Huaxia. This new self-perception had as its *raison d'être* an exclusive view of the "barbarians" (Li 2006, 279–96).

With the Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國 453–221 BCE), the differentiation from the "barbarians" appears to be increasingly founded on a kind of culturally

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based paradigm, reinforced by the further consolidation of a hierarchical social structure based on ritual normativism (von Falkenhausen 1999). The view of foreign peoples does not seem to be based on ethnic markers, but on the observation of an environmental distinctiveness, which takes on not only cultural, but also political and economic aspects (for a later example of this point, related to the southern peoples known as Man 蠻, see Lycas 2019). The very definitions of an ethnically distinguished "Han people" and a *Hanzu* 漢族 seem to be *a posteriori* constructions, "linguistic products of 'translingual practices'" (Chin 2012), resulting from a long literary and historiographical tradition that reaches up to modernity.

The blurred boundary between the Zhou and the "others" finds in some cases an echo in the not always conflictual relationship with foreign peoples entertained by single principalities. A clear example is the interaction between the western Principate of Qin 秦 and the group known as Rong 戎 (a pseudo-ethnonym, indicating "bellicosity": Li 2006, 286; Goldin 2011, 235), in the period between 8th and 4th century BCE (Lewis 2007; Li 2013; but also Pines 2005–06).

Within this framework, the West very soon became a territory characterised by the interweaving of actual geographical data and fantastic details in texts such as the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Fracasso 1993; Fracasso 1996; Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 2003) and the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (Mathieu 1993; Shaughnessy 2023; Frühauf 2024).

The era of the Western Han (Xi Han 西漢, 206 BCE–9 CE) saw the appearance of another type of source, which we could define as anchored to more practical aspects: the travel reports composed by imperial emissaries sent westwards, beyond the areas that from 60 BCE by were under the control of the Protectorate General (*Duhufu* 都護府). The increase in knowledge would have led to the introduction, as early as the *Hanshu* 漢書, of a geographical section within dynastic histories and, more generally, to the inclusion of a certain amount of toponyms and ethnonyms that appear to be phonetic transcriptions from external idioms: for the Han period, a large portion of them refer to western territories (Schuessler 2014).

The costly strategy of control of the routes to the western territories was not, however, embraced by the entire court. A well-known passage from the *Yantielun* 鹽鐵論 recounts a dispute that took place in the Han court in 81 BCE, in which two factions faced each other: one defending the traditional "centralist" view, and the other more inclined to extend Chinese influence beyond the borders (Lewis 2006). The second intended to continue Emperor Wu's (Han Wudi 漢武帝, r. 141–87 BCE) monopolistic policy of economic engagement: in the *Yantielun* it appears inspired by the cosmographic vision of Zou Yan 鄒衍 (c. 305–240 BCE), according to whom China was only one of the 81 parts of the world (Sima 1982, 2344).

Zou Yan's theory also appears in Daoist Han texts, such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Liu 1989, 39b). Daoist currents may have played some role in the dissemination of this *tianxia* 天下 theory during the Han era: one may in this regard recall the widespread narration (found in the *Shiji* biography of Laozi) of Laozi's final journey to the West (possibly to India or to Da Qin 大秦); the traditions (including iconographic ones) that associated the immortality of the *xian* 仙 not only with the islands of the Eastern Ocean, but also with the far West; or, finally,

one can cite a passage in the *Qiushui* 秋水 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, in which the Central Territories within the Four Seas are compared to "a small grain in a large granary" (計中國之在海內，不似稊米之在大倉乎: *Zhuangzi* 1989, 87a).

The conflicts inherent in the interaction between Han China and the world beyond its western borders are particularly evident in the contrast between Chinese expansion and the Xiongnu 匈奴. However, this should not overshadow the many inclusive aspects of the relationship between these two political entities, as reflected in the "historiography of the barbarians" itself (Di Cosmo 2010). Even the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE), who in the *Hanshu* often depicted the barbarians as irredeemable "different" and resistant to the Chinese civilisation (Pines 2005), had partial Xiongnu or *hu* 胡 ancestry (Chen 2011), dating back to the Xiutu Prince (Xiutu *wang* 休屠王, ?–121 BCE). His brother Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE) gave impetus to the deepening of knowledge about the Far West, through his decision to send Gan Ying 甘英 in 97 CE to hitherto unreached territories in order to make contact with the political entity called Da Qin 大秦.

2. Haixi: The Sources

Within the context of historiographical sources which references to Da Qin and the West, the toponym Haixi 海西 recurs in the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, the *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀 (for this source see Eicher 2018) and the *Weilüe* 魏略. Haixi has mainly been identified with the Italic peninsula or Rome itself (Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 263–4; Yu 2013, 40, n. 68), and with Egypt ("Country of the Red Sea" in Hirth 1885, 163–4, 180–5; Egypt in Hill 2004; Hill 2015). I will review these passages, and then elaborate on a few points:

Hou Hanshu (*juan* 86)

> 永寧元年，撣國王雍由調復遣使者詣闕朝賀，獻樂及幻人，能變化吐火，自支解，易牛馬頭。又善跳丸，數乃至千。自言我海西人。海西即大秦也。撣國西南通大秦。
>
> In the first year of the Yongning era [121 CE], the ruler of the Kingdom of Shan, Yong Youtiao, sent again an ambassador, who, in the presence of His Majesty, offered musicians and illusionists, capable of performing transformations and breathing fire, of freeing their limbs, and of exchanging the heads of oxen and horses. They were also skilled at throwing up to a thousand balls into the air. Of themselves they said: "We are men of Haixi". Haixi is none other than Da Qin; the region south-west of the Kingdom of Shan communicates with Da Qin (Fan 1973, 2851).

Hou Hanji (*juan* 15):

> 及安帝元初中，日南塞外檀國獻幻人，能變化吐火，自支解，又善跳丸，能跳十丸。其人曰：「我海西人。」則是大秦也。自交州塞外檀國諸蠻夷相通也，又有一道與益州塞外通。

During the Yuanchu reign of Emperor An [114–120 CE], the kingdom of Shan, outside the borders of Rinan [central Vietnam], offered illusionists, who were able to perform transformations and breathe fire, free their limbs, and were also skilled at throwing ten balls into the air. They claimed: "We are from Haixi". It is therefore Da Qin. In the region outside Jiaozhou [North Vietnam], the Shan kingdom and the Man and Yi peoples are in communication; there is also a route connecting to the region outside the border with Yizhou [Sichuan] (Yuan 1780, 15.6ab).

Hou Hanshu (*juan* 88)

九年，都護班超遣甘英使大秦，抵條支。臨大海欲度，而安息西界船人謂英曰：「海水廣大，往來者逢善風三月乃得度，若遇遲風，亦有二歲者，故入海人皆齎三歲糧。海中善使人思土戀慕，數有死亡者。」英聞之乃止[...]。自安息西行三千四百里至阿蠻國。從阿蠻西行三千六百里至斯賓國。從斯賓南行度河，又西南至於羅國九百六十里，安息西界極矣。自此南乘海，乃通大秦。其土多海西珍奇異物焉。大秦國一名犁鞬，以在海西，亦云海西國[...]。或云其國西有弱水、流沙，近西王母所居處，幾於日所入也。漢書云「從條支西行二百餘日，近日所入」，則與今書異矣。前世漢使皆自烏弋以還，莫有至條支者也。又云「從安息陸道繞海北行出海西至大秦，人庶連屬。十里一亭，三十里一置，終無盜賊寇警。而道多猛虎、師子，遮害行旅，不百餘人，齎兵器，輒為所食」。[...]。

In the ninth year [of the Yongyuan era of Emperor He: 97 CE], Governor Ban Chao sent Gan Ying as ambassador to Da Qin. He arrived at Tiaozhi; being on the coast of the Great Sea, he wished to cross it. But the sailors on the western border of Anxi addressed him, saying: "The waters of the Sea are vast. If those who cross it encounter favourable winds, it can be crossed in three months. If they encounter unfavourable winds it can also take two years. For this reason, those who face the Sea always carry provisions for three years. In the sea, something makes men long for land, feeling love at a distance; many are those who have died". Hearing this, Ying stopped [...]. From Anxi, proceeding west for 3,400 *li* you reach the kingdom of Aman. From Aman, proceeding west for 3,600 *li* you reach the kingdom of Sibin; from Sibin going south you cross a river, and then going southwest you come after 960 *li* to the kingdom of Yuluo, which is the extreme western border of Anxi. From here you proceed by sea southwards, and communicate with Da Qin. In this territory there are many precious, extraordinary and rare objects from Haixi. The country of Da Qin is also called Lijian. Since it is located to the west of the sea, it is also called the country of Haixi [...]. It is also said that to the west of this country are the Weak Waters and Flowing Sands, close to the place where the Queen Mother of the West resides, near the point where the sun sets. The *Hanshu* states that "if you go west from Tiaozhi for more than two hundred days, you get close to the place where the sun sets": therefore there is a difference with the present documents. The Han envoys of previous generations all returned from Wuyi, there were none who

reached Tiaozhi. It is also said that leaving Anxi (Parthia) by the land route, you follow a curved route through Haibei ("North of the Sea"); you go out from Haixi and reach Da Qin. The population is well connected: every ten *li* there is a rest stop, and every thirty *li* there is a post station. So there are no alarms due to the attack of marauders, but on the way there are many tigers and ferocious lions that block and harm the travellers: if [the expedition] does not include a hundred or more armed people, they invariably end up being devoured [...] (Fan 1973).

Weilüe (in *Sanguozhi*, *juan* 30):

大秦國一號犁靬。在安息條支西。大海之西。從安息界安穀城乘船。直截海西。遇風利二月到。風遲或一歲。無風或三歲。其國在海西。故俗謂之海西。有河出其國。西又有大海。海西有遲散城。從國下直北至烏丹城[...]。凡有大都三。卻從安穀城陸道直北行之海北。復直西行之海西。復直南行經之烏遲散城[...]。

The kingdom of Da Qin is also called Lijian. It lies to the west of Anxi and Tiaozhi, and of the Great Sea. From the city of Angu on the border of Anxi, if you take a boat, you go directly to Haixi. With favourable winds it can be reached in two months, with unfavourable winds it can take up to a year, and if there are no winds, three years. This kingdom is located west of the sea: for this reason, it is popularly called Haixi. There is a river that flows out of this kingdom. To the west [of Haixi] there is another great sea. In Haixi lies the city of Chisan. If you go straight north from the end of the kingdom, you come to the city of Wudan [...]. In all there are three great cities: from the city of Angu, proceeding straight north you reach Haibei; proceeding west again you reach Haixi; and proceeding south again you reach the city of Wuchisan [...] (Chen 1975).

3. Some Considerations on the Sources

In the passage in *juan* 86 of the *Hou Hanshu* there is an early mention of Da Qin, a place-name about which countless interpretations have been made, most of which tend to identify it with the Roman Empire or its eastern territories (Egypt and the Near East). Da Qin seems to have been very popular at the end of the first century CE: it is mentioned as a symbol of the extreme west in *Dongjingfu* 東京賦 by Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE), composed in the Yongyuan 永元 era (89–105 CE) of the reign of Emperor He 和帝 (Knechtges 1982).

The jugglers-illusionists sent to the Chinese court by the ruler of the kingdom of Shan 檀國 (located probably in northern Burma) in 121 CE (or shortly before, if one follows the *Hou Hanji*) are defined as coming from Haixi, while in *juan* 88 their place of origin is Lijian 犁鞬; in earlier sources the reference is to Tiaozhi 條枝 (a country where "people are skilled in the arts of illusionism", *guo shan xuan* 國善眩: Sima 1982, 3163) or Lixuan 黎軒 (Sima 1982, 3173; the toponym corresponds to Ligan 犁靬 in the *Hanshu* and *Weilüe* 魏略).

The identification of Lixuan has been the subject of a considerable interpretative debate, also due to the choice of a different punctuation of a passage in *juan*

123 of the *Shiji*: this led to different conclusions and geographical collocations of this place-name (see e.g. Leslie, Gardiner 1996; Pulleyblank 1999). Tiaozhi, on the other hand, appears to correspond with the territory of Characene/Mesene in southern Mesopotamia or its political centre Charax Spasinou (Fariello 2025). Charax was located at the western end of the Iraqi coast of the Persian Gulf: it was a centre of great importance both in the maritime trade route connecting the Indian coast to the Red Sea emporiums, and in the land connections with centres such as Palmyra. The site of Charax has been the subject of recent archaeological exploration (Campbell 2019). In the past, it retained a certain *de facto* autonomy under both the Seleucids and the Parthian empire, maintaining great economic prosperity until the early 3rd century CE, when Parthian rule was replaced by the more centralised Sasanian empire.

The kingdom of Shan seems to have been located near the communication route that according to *juan* 123 of the *Shiji* (1982, 3166) would have connected Bactria (Da Xia 大夏) to the territory of Shendu 身毒 (identified with the Ganges river valley), passing through Sichuan and Yunnan. The Chinese attempt to control this route under the reign of Han Wudi would not succeed.

The passage in *juan* 86 of the *Hou Hanshu* identifies Haixi with Da Qin (however we do not know whether in whole or in part). Da Qin is also mentioned in *juan* 88, in the famous account of Gan Ying's mission, sent in 97 CE by the *duhu* 都護 Ban Chao. According to this passage, Da Qin's name was therefore already known, and was the trigger that prompted Ban Chao to dispatch the mission (as already pointed out in Pulleyblank 1999, 78). Here we find a route from Anxi 安息, i.e. the Parthia (or, more likely, from its capital), to Sibin 斯賓 and finally to Yuluo 於羅, identified by J. Hill respectively with Susa and Charax itself, which is "the extreme western border of Anxi" (Hill 2015; but see also Zanous, Yang 2018; Fariello 2025 for considerations on the toponym Yuluo as a probable phonetic transcription of Charax). A sea route departed from Yuluo, making it possible to reach Da Qin in two months if the winds were favourable (three months in a similar passage in the *juan* 15 of *Hou Hanji*). The passage notes that in the territory of Yuluo "there are many precious, extraordinary and rare objects from Haixi", a place-name that can be explained in geographical terms: it is so called because it lies west of the sea. However, here we also find the statement that Haixi is an alternative name for Da Qin (and also for Lijian).

The passage shows the evident presence of different documentary sources on the territories of the Far West. The *Hou Hanshu* fits into a particularly rich historical phase of the Chinese historiographical tradition (Durrant 2019): its compilation, directed by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–446 CE) in the years 432–445 CE in Jiankang, capital of the Liu Song dynasty, was based on various sources from the 2nd–4th centuries CE, such as the *Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢記 and the *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀. For the section on the Western Territories, the privileged source seems to have been the *Xiyu fengtu ji* 西域風土記, the report written in 125 CE by General Ban Yong, son of Ban Chao, and delivered to Emperor An 安帝.

The compilation work was likely not without difficulties, as evidenced by various aspects of the text: for instance, in the passage from *juan* 88 quoted

above, in Yuan Hong's 袁宏 (330–378 CE) *Hou Hanji*, Gan Ying's mission and the reference to the "illusionists of Haixi/Da Qin" are more logically placed in the section on Da Qin. However, similar examples of a weak systematisation of sources should not automatically lead to discredit the value of the geographical information in the *Hou Hanshu* (see for a different position Thierry 2005).

In the passage from the *Hou Hanshu*, the location of traditional Western *topoi* (the Weak Waters *Ruoshui* 弱水, the Flowing Sands *Liusha* 流沙 and *Xiwangmu* 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West) west of Da Qin does not replicate the *Hanshu*, where such places are located west of Tiaozhi (Characene) (Ban 1975: 3876–7). It is also recalled that, in the generations before Gan Ying's mission, Han envoys who were sent on a western mission returned to China from Wuyi 烏弋, a term that appears to be a shortened version of the toponym Wuyishanli 烏弋山離.

Wuyishanli, described in the *Hanshu* as a warm, lowland country, is generally identified with Alexandria in Arachosia, founded in 329 BCE by Alexander the Great and corresponding to present-day Kandahar in Afghanistan (Pulleyblank 1999; Pulleyblank 1962, 116, 128; Zanous, Yang 2018, 127–8 associate the toponym with the Indo-Parthian kingdom in the 1st century CE). Wang Tao (2007) instead identifies Wuyishanli with Alexandria Prophthasia (Farāh), south of Herat. In any case, the phonetic reconstruction of the toponym Wuyishanli seems to corroborate its correspondence to an Αλεξάνδρεια (Schuessler 2014, 267; Baxter, Sagart 2014, 66, 96, 116, 137).

Arachosia and its capital city were characterised by Hellenistic culture (Bernard 2005): in the Parthian Stations (Σταθμοί Παρθικοί) of Isidore of Charax (late 1st century BCE-early 1st century CE), this territory is the easternmost stopover of the overland route that connected Antioch to the East via a series of trade centres located in the territory of the Parthian empire (Fariello 2025). It therefore seems perfectly logical that, prior to Gan Ying's journey, the Chinese envoys who undertook the voyage along the southern route from Yumenguan, some 90 km west of Dunhuang, or Yangguan (43 km south-west of Dunhuang), would pass through Loulan and Yarkand, cross the Congling Mountains (Pamir) to the south, and reach the Kushana-controlled territories and Anxi/Parthia, with Arachosia as their final stop. This location was also the easternmost starting point of the other trade route, ending on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Gan Ying's voyage, which probably took place along this geographical guideline, was clearly in accordance with Ban Chao's desire to learn more about this international trade network. However, the Chinese envoy made a diversion along the way (likely from the Susa area), – which in my opinion was planned from the beginning –, taking him south to Tiaozhi/Characene coastal area. From here, the sea route to the Mediterranean begun, following the coast of the Arabian Peninsula south by sea, then went up the Red Sea and reached one of the trading emporiums of the Egyptian coast, controlled by the Romans from the end of the 1st century BCE, such as Myos Hormos or the more southern Berenice Troglodytica/Baranis: the relevance of this centre is underscored by the recent discovery by archaeologists of a 2nd century CE statue of Buddha at the

entrance to a temple area dedicated to Isis (Sidebotham 2023; for trade routes between Rome and the East, McLaughlin 2010; Cobb 2018).

The last part of the passage I quoted from *Hou Hanshu*, however, seems to indicate at least a geographical distinction between Haixi and Da Qin: "It is also said that, leaving Anxi (Parthia) by the land route, you follow a curved route through Haibei ("North of the Sea"); you go out from Haixi and reach Da Qin". The difficulty in interpreting the sentence lies mainly in the rendering of *rao* 繞, usually understood as the verb "surround, encircle, move or circle around". For some, *rao* takes *hai* 海 as its object, suggesting a land route that from Anxi would "encircle the sea" moving north to Haixi and eventually to Da Qin (see e.g. Zanous, Yang 2018). I personally agree with the view expressed by F. Hirth (1885; reprised broadly in Hill 2015) that *rao* here takes the binomial *haibei* 海北 has as its object.

Haibei would denote a territory encompassing Mesopotamia and the area to the west, extending to present-day Jordan and the territory of the Nabataeans (under Roman control from the end of the 1st century CE and fully absorbed into the empire in 106 CE), which included the Gulf of Aqaba and the Sinai peninsula. The final stages were Haixi and Da Qin: it is not far-fetched to identify the first toponym as the Egyptian territory (under Roman control from 30 BCE), from which one could reach Da Qin (perhaps here the Italic territory of Rome).

The last passage I quoted belongs to the *Weilüe*, composed between 239 and 265 by Yu Huan 魚豢 (fl. 3rd century CE), an official of the Cao Wei kingdom (220–265 CE). Only the section of the work on western peoples and regions survived as a long quotation in *juan* 30 of the *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (late 3rd century CE). The information in the surviving section dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE (Hill 2004; Leslie, Gardiner 1996). Here we find again the equation Da Qin = Lijian. The *Weilüe* also seems to indicate that Haixi is a part of Da Qin; in the text, the port "at the border of Anxi" from which one can embark for Da Qin is no longer Yuluo but Angu 安穀, a site of difficult identification (Orchoë in Hirth 1885, 187; Gerrha in Hill 2004; Antioch in Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 67). For the Later Han period, Angu is rendered as *ʔan - *kok (Schuessler 2007). Perhaps the toponym Αντιόχεια may be closer to the Chinese phonetic reading: in this case, the reference could be to Antioch, the name given to Charax in 166–5 BCE by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, who rebuilt the city destroyed by river flooding. One would have to assume in this regard that this name survived over time: a plausible possibility in a region where Hellenistic culture continued to flourish throughout the Parthian period.

The identification of Haixi here can be clarified by other elements. Rather than the reference to the "river that flows out of this kingdom" (the Nile?) and the "great sea" that would still lie to its west (the Mediterranean?), it is the city of Chisan 遲散, also called here Wuchisan 烏遲散, that appears to provide more solid elements. The identification with Alexandria, already proposed by Hirth (1885) and rejected by Leslie and Gardiner (1996, 185), was in fact defended on solid linguistic grounds by E. Pulleyblank (1999, 76).

As for the toponym Wudan 烏丹, the identification appears uncertain. Hirth (1885, 181) proposed it as the important trading emporium of Myos Hormos on the Egyptian Red Sea coast; regarding the construct *cong guoxia* 從國下, he stated that it could mean "before one arrives in the country". The phonetic reconstruction for Wudan, particularly for the Eastern Han period, is ʔa-tân (Schuessler 2007, 204, 507); Old Chinese *ʔˁa-*tˁan according to Baxter and Sagart (2014). If the meaning of *guoxia* is "the end of the kingdom (or country)", this may indicate the southern part of the Egyptian territory, known as Upper Egypt. The phrase *cong guoxia zhibei zhi Wudancheng* 從國下直北至烏丹城 might also be translated as "if you go down straight to the north you reach the city of Wudan", imagining the text as elucidation of a map where the north was represented at the bottom, as was traditional.

Additionally, based on Wudan's possible location, it might be associated with Aten, an ancient city located near Luxor, founded in the 14th century BCE. This archaeological site, excavated only in 2020, has already been identified as the most important administrative centre of this region under Amenhotep III (r. 1386–1353 BCE) (Hawass 2021). However, identifying Wudan from the Chinese text with Aten would imply the toponym survived through the Ptolemies and beyond: a hypothesis that, despite the existence of settlement layers on the site dating to the Coptic era (3rd–7th century CE), remains unconfirmed.

4. A New Source for a Mediterranean Clue?

The possibility that Haixi corresponds to the Egyptian territory may be further supported by another element that, to my knowledge, has so far escaped research. The phoenix, a mythical bird of Western tradition, appears in a well-known passage by Herodotus (5th century BCE: *Histories*, II, 73), which refers to its longevity and describes its journey from Arabia to Egypt, to the temple of Heliopolis, where it buries its deceased father preserved in a myrrh egg. The longevity of the phoenix is also noted in an earlier passage attributed to the poet Hesiod, cited in Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum* (11, 415c) (van den Broek 1972; Lecocq 2022).

The symbolism of the phoenix has also been linked linguistically to the sacred bird of ancient Egypt called *benu*, associated with the supreme solar deity Atum and Re, the sun god. The phoenix has often been compared to the traditional Chinese bird known as *feng* 鳳 or *fenghuang* 鳳凰, defined as a "numinous bird" (*shen niao* 神鳥) in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (1st century CE) (Xu 1991, 79a). In a more detailed study, I have noted that the functional elements shared by the phoenix and the *feng* (both auspicious animal, linked to essence, sincerity, loyalty, sacred royalty, crimson colour, Sun, fire, cyclicity, oneness, centrality, axiality) are more numerous than previously emphasised (Paolillo 2025).

In this regard, it is useful to cite a source that has so far escaped the notice of previous studies. It is a poem by Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278 CE), entitled *Hongyan sheng saibei xing* 鴻雁生塞北行 (Ballad of the Swan Goose Born North of the Wall). Here is my translation attempt:

鳳凰遠生海西。及時昆山岡。
五德存羽儀。和鳴定宮商。
百鳥並侍左右。鼓翼騰華光。
上熙遊雲日間。千歲時來翔。
孰若彼龍與龜。曳尾泥中藏。
非雲雨則不升。冬伏春乃驤。
退哀此秋蘭草。根絕隨化揚。
靈氣一何憂美。萬里馳芬芳。
常恐物微易歇。一朝見棄忘。

The *fenghuang* bird was born far away in Haixi and has come timely to the crest of Kunshan (i.e. Mount Kunlun).
The Five Virtues are present as a model on its wings; with its harmonious call, it establishes the *gong* and *shang* notes.
The hundred species of birds surround him; he beats his wings, spreading the light. He wanders on high, shining between the sun and the clouds. After a time of a thousand years, he comes in flight.
How could the dragon and the turtle be like it, dragging their tails and concealing them in the mud!
Without clouds and rain, they would not ascend; in winter they conceal themselves, to soar in summer.
Orchids and autumn grasses here retreat in sadness; broken roots rise following change.
One is the holy *qi*: why be concerned with beauty? Fragrance spreads for ten thousand *li*.
Constant, the fear of the minuteness of things and their easy coming to an end; seen for a moment, they are put aside and forgotten (Zhao and Wang 2014, 438).

There are interesting elements in the poem, such as the reference to the Five Virtues (*wu de* 五德) on the body of the *feng*, which is also mentioned in the *Shuowen jiezi*, and the cyclical temporal nature associated with the bird. However, what stands out most is the opening line, with its mention of Haixi in relation to the *fenghuang*. Haixi is described here as the bird's place of origin: if one considers the possibility of Greek-Hellenistic ideas on the relation between the phoenix and Egypt, this provides a strong clue supporting the identification of Haixi with Egypt.

It is also noteworthy that Fu Xuan (biography in Fang and Chu 1973), the author of the poem, was selected in 245 CE (when he held the position of Editorial Director *zhuzuolang* 著作郎 of the Palace Library) as one of the main figures responsible for compiling the *Weishu* 魏書, the historical chronicles of the Cao Wei kingdom, which were later lost. This work appears to have been the source Yu Huan used for composing the *Weilüe* (completed before 265 CE), with its account of Da Qin and the Western territories.

In a recent study, Fu Xuan has been included among the court literati of the Cao Wei and Jin periods whose writings often focused on the exotic lands, revealing "the 'shared codes' among Chinese, Central Asians, and Indians through

religious and commercial exchanges" (Kong 2022, 16). It is thus plausible Fu Xuan was aware of information about the distant lands where the sun sets, and perhaps – through a form of cultural assimilation – drew this unique (and quite rare in Chinese sources) association between the *fenghuang* and a place that we may – tentatively – identify with Egypt.

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Μεσόγειος Θάλασσα (Mesogeios Thalassa) in the Reflection of Dizhonghai 地中海: Routes and Connections Between the Greek World and China

Francesca Fariello

Abstract: This chapter examines the historical and cultural intersections between the Mediterranean Sea (Mesogeios Thalassa – Dizhonghai 地中海 in Greek-Roman and Chinese sources), particularly the Greek-Hellenistic world and China. Beginning with Herodotus' depiction of the Mediterranean as an intercultural space and tracing connections through the expansion of Alexander the Great's dominion, the chapter explores the strategic role of settlements such as Alexandria Eschate in the Ferghana Valley. By analysing Chinese sources, including the *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書, it is possible to highlight the transcontinental networks linking the Mediterranean world to China, emphasising the symbolic and economic importance of trade commodities like silk. Special attention is also given to the toponym Tiaozhi, identified with Characene, and the maritime routes to Da Qin 大秦 (commonly associated with the Roman Empire or its eastern territories). The chapter concludes that Da Qin in Chinese sources provides a sophisticated perspective on the Greek-Hellenistic world, shaped by intercultural exchanges across Central Asia and the Mediterranean world.

Keywords: Sino-Mediterranean Exchanges; Silk Routes by Land and Sea; China and the Greek-Hellenistic World; Alexander the Great; Da Qin.

子曰。道不行。乘桴浮海。
The Master said: "If my Way fails to spread, then I will float on the sea with a raft".
(*Lunyu* 論語, *Gongye Chang* 公冶長)

1. Introduction

In the first book of *Histories,* Herodotus – rewinding the narrative thread on the origins of the tensions that escalated into wars between Asia and Europe – refers to the Phoenicians, whom he blames for kidnapping Io, daughter of the king of Argos (I, 5). He reports that "the Phoenicians had come from the sea called Red to 'this' sea" (ἥδε ἡ θάλασσα), meaning the Mediterranean Sea. To Herodotus, the sea is θάλασσα: that pool of salty water shaped by Poseidon's trident (the deity who personifies it) below the temple of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis of Athens, besides the olive tree given to the Greeks by Athena (VIII, 55).

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This is a reference to the 'sea between the lands', that the ancient Greeks called Mesogeios (Μεσόγειος): an *ante litteram* intercultural space, that would later, in Latin translation, be called *Mare Nostrum*, borrowing the expression from Herodotus. In Book I, the historian proceeds in his exposition stating that the Greeks decided to kidnap the Phoenician princess Europa in revenge for the injustice they had suffered. Greek mythology attributes Europa's abduction to Zeus, who, in the guise of a white bull, carried her to Crete. From the union of Zeus and Europa came king Minos, marking how the *mythologein* – the allegory of myth – created a prehistory of the long memory of Mediterranean travels, bringing to the centre of the Mediterranean world 'that East' known to the Greeks at the time of Herodotus.

By retracing some significant passages from Greco-Roman and Chinese historical sources, this chapter offers a brief review of the places and trajectories that constituted the earliest traces of the so-called silk routes by land and sea. Beginning with the first book of *Histories*, it is possible to identify the foundations of what would become – to borrow David Asheri's evocative phrase – the entire "journey of the archaic world in two hundred and sixteen chapters", where the historical drama will unfold (Asheri 1988, C), and to discover the polychrome civilisations – with their deeds and monumental works – revealed by Herodotus, who portrayed ancient communities from West and East as engaged in a continuity marked by conflicts and transformations.

2. Alexandria Eschate and the Ferghana Valley: Greek Strategic Settlements Between East and West in Chinese Sources

From the 4th century BCE, thanks to the conquests of Alexander the Great, the Greeks stretched further and further eastwards: the king's strategy of conquest evolved from a pan-Hellenic plan of legitimacy to an innovative project of universal monarchy, in which the Macedonian ruler skilfully became a demiurge of a multicultural political dialogue to legitimise himself with the communities of the territories he conquered. In 329 BCE Alexander founded his farthest city, Alexandria Eschate (Arr. IV, 4, 1): a military settlement located in the southwestern part of the Ferghana Valley (present-day northern Tajikistan), approximately four hundred kilometres away from the Tarim Basin.

Alexandria Eschate was a frontier foundation, located precisely in the *eschatià*, in the marginal territories: it served the very specific purpose of controlling the migratory flows of nomadic confederations that gravitated around the northern bank of the Iaxartes. Its location likely corresponds to the area of the Khodjent fortress. This geographical position held strategic importance, especially for the trade routes. From this point onward, within the oasis of the Ferghana Valley, the Greek presence began to coexist with the local populations.

In this region, interactions between nomads and sedentary people had always underpinned the local economy of the Sogdian territories north of Bactria (Fariello 2024). Moreover, on the Eastern side, Scythians confederations had driven their horses to the gates of the Great Wall, establishing and securing di-

rect and indirect contacts with China and other groups that exchanged goods and contributed to a large-scale dissemination of cultural and technological influences (Di Cosmo 2006).

Since the Qin 秦 era (221–206 BCE), Central Asia horsemen had been meeting the Chinese demand for horses from the Ferghana area, which constituted a powerful warfare mean thanks to their mobility. Tribal clan leaders often succeeded in becoming wealthy by selling livestock at the frontiers and gaining important positions in the Qin court. In fact, in chapter 129 of the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), it is recorded that Luo 倮, the leader of the Yuezhi 月氏 (Wuzhi 烏氏), became so rich and influential that the First Qin Emperor admitted him to seasonal court audiences (Sima 1982, 3260). The Yuezhi are likely identifiable among the groups of peoples who exchanged Chinese silks for other products. The Da Yuan 大宛 political entity (located in the Ferghana valley, where Alexandria Eschate itself had once been founded by Alexander the Great) acted as mediator between the emissary Zhang Qian 張騫 and the Yuezhi.[1] The Da Yuan were probably the same successors of the Greeks who had settled there, and eventually mixed with the native populations (Fariello 2024 for a more detailed discussion).

In 323 BCE, following the death of Alexander, the Greek presence in the East appears to have entered an even more remarkable phase of expansion. A passage by Strabo is particularly noteworthy: in the eleventh book of his *Geography* (XI, 11), based on the *Parthika* Παρθικὰ (History of Parthia) of Apollodorus of Artemita, he states that "the Greeks of Bactria extended their dominion as far as the peoples called Seres and Phrynoi" (*mechri Seron kai Phrynon exeteinon ten archen* μέχρι Σηρῶν καὶ Φρυνῶν ἐξέτεινον τὴν ἀρχήν: XI, 11, 1). It is widely accepted that this area mentioned by the geographer corresponds to the contemporary province of Xinjiang 新疆 (Fariello 2024). The Seres are the silk peoples often mentioned in Greek and Latin sources (Cœdès' 1910 study remains unsurpassed), mostly in connection with the silk trade. The identification of this mysterious group, as is well known, has led to many different theories among scholars (Fariello 2024; Gallo 2025). Without delving further into this aspect, it is important to affirm that the various occurrences of the term Seres reveal portraits of numerous ethnic groups who acted as trade intermediaries: these range from the vast array of nomadic Scythian confederations (some of which had close contacts with the Greeks), to Himalayan peoples and the Indo-European speaking communities (Tocharian) located in Xinjiang, among whom the Yuezhi likely constituted, at least in part, a significant component (Narain 1957, 128–34; Janvier 1984; Benjamin 2007; Aydemir 2019).

[1] Zhang Qian's diplomatic mission (139-126 BCE) was ordered by the Emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE). He was the first Chinese envoy to visit some territories of Central Asia. The *Shiji* 史記 by Sima Qian 司馬遷 contains Zhang Qian's account on the Western Territories (Xiyu 西域).

Silk also held a fundamental symbolic meaning for these communities, as it was received in exchange for the tributes they offered to the Han court: silk was not only a commodity traded on the Eurasian caravan routes, but it also served as emblem of power, as it played an instrumental value for the hierarchisation of nomadic or semi-nomadic societies in Central Asia, a token symbolising a unique status (Liu 2016, 22–3; Selbitschka 2015; Honeychurch 2015). However, the Han Court was not actively involved in this trade: in fact, it has been described as 'an involuntary agent of the intercontinental silk trade' (Selbitschka 2018). Moreover, during the Han dynasty, silk became the most reliable form of currency, used alongside grain and coins to pay soldiers and mercenaries (Frankopan 2016, 11; Wang 2004). It also became the most sought-after luxury good in the Mediterranean basin during the apogee of Roman power.

The determination of the Greek territorial borders in the East is strictly linked to the chronology of the expansion of the Greeks of Bactria, attested by Strabo in the above-mentioned passage of his *Geography*: proposed chronology ranges from the second half of the 3rd century BCE to the middle of the following century, during the reign of Eucratides (r. 172/1–145 BCE; for the chronology problem see Coloru 2009, 213; Fariello 2024). According to some recent studies, during the first thirty years of the 1st century BCE a new wave of Greek influence from Bactria reached Sogdia: this influence is thought to have resulted from a kind of exodus, possibly caused by two nomadic incursions by the Saka and the Yuezhi who arrived in Bactria between 145 and 130 BCE (Lyonnet 2021; for the Yuezhi in Bactria, Benjamin 2007).

Sogdia and Bactria (Kangju 康居 and Da Xia 大夏), together with Da Yuan 大宛 (Ferghana valley), are attested in *Shiji* (c. 100 BCE), particularly in *juan* 卷 123, based on Zhang Qian's 張騫 report. Kangju – which Zhang Qian probably visited in 129 BCE, only two or three years after Yuezhi passed through on their way to Bactria – is described as a small itinerant political entity with a strong army; its customs were similar to Yuezhi's (Sima 1982, 3158). In the narrative of the *Shiji*, Da Xia – located south of the Oxus– was, at the time of Zhang Qian's arrival (128/7 BCE) under the control of the Yuezhi. Their political centre was located near the northern shore of the river (Sima 1982, 3161). Da Xia's description in the *Shiji* depicts a still rich and densely populated territory, full of walled cities, and a large population engaged in rice and wine farming, as well as trade. There is no mention of the destruction caused by the Yuezhi invasion, which had taken place only a few years earlier, nor of the prior incursion by the peoples known as Saka, who had penetrated into Bactria from the east around 145 BCE.

Zhang Qian's report on Da Xia is particularly significant because it highlights the existence of a trade route, described by E. V. Rtveladze (2010) as 'the Great Indian Road':

> 騫曰：「臣在大夏時，見邛竹杖、蜀布。問曰：『安得此？』大夏國人曰：『吾賈人往市之身毒。身毒在大夏東南可數千里。其俗土著，大與大夏同，而卑溼暑熱云。其人民乘象以戰。其國臨大水焉。』以騫度之，大夏去漢萬二千里，居漢西南。今身毒國又居大夏東南數千

里，有蜀物，此其去蜀不遠矣。今使大夏，從羌中，險，羌人惡之；少北，則為匈奴所得；從蜀宜徑，又無寇。」天子既聞大宛及大夏、安息之屬皆大國，多奇物，土著，頗與中國同業，而兵弱，貴漢財物；其北有大月氏、康居之屬，兵彊，可以賂遺設利朝也。且誠得而以義屬之，則廣地萬里，重九譯，致殊俗，威德遍於四海。天子欣然，以騫言為然［…］。終莫得通。然聞其西可千餘里有乘象國，名曰滇越，而蜀賈姦出物者或至焉，於是漢以求大夏道始通滇國。

[Zhang] Qian said: "When your humble servant was in Da Xia, he saw bamboo reeds from Qiong and textiles from Shu. He asked how he could get them, and a villager from Da Xia replied: 'Our merchants go to Shendu, which is several thousand *li* southeast of Da Xia. They have settled habits, mostly similar to those of Da Xia, but [the country] is low-lying, humid and hot. Its people fight on elephants. This country is located by a big river'". According to Qian's measurements, Da Xia is 12,000 *li* away from the Han, and it is located southwest. Now, since Shendu is located several thousand *li* southeast of Da Xia and Shu products can be found there, this means that it is not too far from Shu. Now, if you should send a mission to Da Xia, it would have to pass through the Qiang: it would be dangerous, and the Qiang would oppose it; if you should pass just to the north, then you would be captured by the Xiongnu. From Shu the path is suitable, and moreover without bandits. The Son of Heaven has just heard about Da Yuan and all the great countries subjected to Da Xia and Anxi, about the abundance of their extraordinary products, their indigenous populations, the differences and similarities of their customs to those of the Central Territories, but also about the weakness of their armies, and the value they placed on the luxury products of the Han. To the North, away from them, there are [the territories] subdued by the Da Yuezhi and Kangju: their armies are strong, but it is possible through the offering of gifts to establish a plan to bring advantage to the Court. If you really succeed in this, and subdue them through justice, then you will expand [our] territory by ten thousand *li*. Through translation, we will be able to reach their different customs, and [His Majesty's] authoritarian virtue will spread throughout the Four Seas". The Son of Heaven appreciated the truthfulness of it all, and considered Qian's account authentic […]. [But] in the end it was not possible to make a way. However, it was heard that westwards, at a distance of more than 1000 *li*, there was the country of those who mounted the elephants, whose name was Yue of Dian. Shu merchants who exported products illegally often went there. For this reason, the Han, in search of a way to Da Xia, entered into communication with the country of Dian (Sima 1982: 3170–1).

This passage reveals the presence of an "unofficial" trade network linking Bactria to the Chinese south-west (Shu area): it crossed Burma and Bangladesh and then reached India, in the area of a "great river", likely Ganges or Indus. The Chinese search for a safer route to Da Xia would have led to create a connection with the autonomous Dian kingdom 滇國 located near today's Kunming, capital of Yunnan. However, some archaeological traces seem to attest exchanges with Central Asian areas or even further west (Xianggang lishi bowuguan 2004, 186). The existence of a route linking Central Asia to India as early as the 2nd century

BCE, and the presence of some findings, suggest that during this period the network of contacts were already extended westwards via the sea routes, towards the Persian Gulf and the territory known as Tiaozhi 條枝 (Sima 1982, 3163).

The Han era was also characterised by significant advancement in navigation techniques. The tower-shaped warships (*louchuan* 樓船), already in use during the Qin era, and the bridge ships (*qiaochuan* 橋船), were not only employed in battle but also in commercial navigation along the coasts of southern China (Lin, Chen 1994). Evidence of these maritime exchanges extending into the Indian Ocean includes the discovery of a state-supervised shipyard in Guangzhou in 1974, which was probably active as early as the Qin period (late 3rd century BCE) (Guangzhou wenwu guanlichu 1977; Stein 2017, 60). Additionally, miniature ceramic ship models dated to the Eastern Han period demonstrate that, at least by the 1st century CE, stern-mounted rudders were a common feature of Chinese long-distance ships (Needham 1986, 627–8).

A brief section of the geographical chronicles (*dili zhi* 地理志) of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (Book of Han) records several Chinese maritime trade activities: the departure point for the Han-controlled trade was primarily Rinan 日南, corresponding to the central strip of Vietnam, between Quảng Bình and Bình Định provinces (Ban 1975, 1671; see also Yu 1967, 172–3; Schottenhammer 2012, 68–9). The furthest point of this trade network was the country of Huangzhi 黃支國, identified with the present-day territory of Madras on the east coast of India. Furthermore, a passage from the *Weilüe* 魏略 (Concise History of Wei, Chen 1975, 863) states that the waterways (*shuidao* 水道) connecting Jiaozhi 交趾 (northern Vietnam) to Da Qin constituted the most ancient route. Thus, the two passages from the *Hanshu* and the *Shiji* seem lend plausibility to the *Weilüe*'s claim.

According to studies on the ancient trajectories of maritime trade networks stretching from China to the south and west, there must have been a sort of "segmentation of the maritime space". Following this hypothesis, merchants departing from southern China rarely went beyond the east coast of India, where other cargoes arrived and departed along the western maritime routes (Zhou 2015; see also Wheatley 1957). Whether or not this hypothesis aligns with the historical reality, what seems certain is that from the 1st to 2nd century CE, with the new westward expansion, Chinese world crossed this invisible border and set out in search of Da Qin: by the sea route.

3. Characene, the "Last" Alexandria on the Tigris and the Sea Route to Da Qin 大秦

The westward expansion of the Han Empire during the reign of Wudi 武帝 experienced a revival in the years between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Traditional historiographical sources, such as the *Hanshu*, along with other manuscript documentation recently found in different locations within the Chinese region, demonstrate a deepening of knowledge about the westward regions of Central Asia. This is evidenced by numerous annotations detailing the distances between the various political centres, as well as other ethnographical and commercial data (Korolkov, Lander 2023).

Within the network of maritime contacts between the Mediterranean world and China, the toponym Tiaozhi 條枝 played a very fundamental role (Fariello 2025). The first occurrence of this toponym is found in the *Shiji* (Sima 1982, 3162–4). The description of Tiaozhi is not based on the direct experience of Zhang Qian but it is the result of information he likely acquired in Bactria:

> 條枝在安息西數千里，臨西海。暑溼。耕田，田稻。有大鳥，卵如甕。人眾甚多，往往有小君長，而安息役屬之，以為外國。國善眩。
>
> Tiaozhi is situated some thousands *li* west of Anxi [Parthia]: it is located in front of the Western Sea. The climate is hot and humid. The land cultivated there produces rice. A large bird is found there, whose egg is like a jar. The population is particularly large. In many places there are local governors, but Anxi has subjected them to a state of vassalage, considering it as an external kingdom. In the kingdom there are experts in the art of illusionism.

The second mention of Tiaozhi appears in the *Hanshu* (Ban 1975, 3876-7). *Juan* 96 (*Xiyu zhuan* 西域傳, Records of the Western Regions) likely benefited from the new data on western regions, contained in reports sent by Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE), the Han general and elder brother of Ban Gu, main compiler of the work. It was Ban Chao who, in 97 CE, sent the emissary Gan Ying 甘英 westwards in search of the Da Qin. The geographical position of Tiaozhi is recorded in relation to the kingdom of Wuyishanli 烏弋山離, located east of Tiaozhi, at the southern end of the overland route starting from Yumenguan and Yangguan, south of Dunhuang. The majority of scholars have identified this toponym with Alexandria in Arachosia (Ἀραχωσία), the city founded in 329 BCE by Alexander the Great corresponding to present-day Kandahar in Afghanistan (Pulleyblank 1962, 116, 128). The city, which preserved its Hellenistic characteristics even after losing autonomy around 100 BCE, was the terminal point of the trade network described in the *Parthians Stations* by Isidore of Charax.

The third source on Tiaozhi is found in *juan* 88 of *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han, Fan 1977, 2909–32). Here appears the reference to Gan Ying, the first Chinese that reached Tiaozhi – sent by the General Governor (*duhu* 都護) Ban Chao in 97 CE – to create a contact with Da Qin. This toponym must have already been known in China during that period, as evidenced by its mention by Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE) in his *Dongjingfu* 東京賦 (Rhapsody of the Eastern Capital) (Knechtges 1982, 228, 299):

> 九年，班超遣掾甘英窮臨西海而還。皆前世所不至 [...]。條支國城在山上，周回四十餘里。臨西海，海水曲環其南及東北，三面路絕，唯西北隅通陸道。土地暑濕，出師子、犀牛、封牛、孔雀、大雀。大雀其卵如甕。轉北而東，復馬行六十餘日至安息。後役屬條支，為置大將，臨領諸小城焉[...]。甘英 [...] 抵條支。臨大海欲度，而安息西界船人謂英曰：「海水廣大，往來者逢善風三月乃得度，若遇遲風，亦有二歲者，故入海人皆齎三歲糧。海中善使人思土戀慕，數有死亡者。」英聞之乃止 [...]。論曰：西域風土之載，前古未聞也。[...] 其後甘英乃抵條支而歷安息，臨西海以望大秦。

> In the ninth year [of the Yongyuan era of Emperor He (97 EC)], Ban Chao sent his subordinate Gan Ying to the shores of the Western Sea and returned. No one had come there in previous generations […]. It faces the Western Sea, whose waters surround it to the south and northeast. Access routes are [therefore] interrupted on three sides: only in the north-west corner there is communication with the land route. The area is hot and humid, and there are lions, rhinos, humped buffaloes [zebu?], peacocks and ostriches. The ostriches' eggs are like jars. If one turns north and then east, proceeding on horseback, one reaches [the capital of] Anxi [Parthia] in more than sixty days. Afterwards, [Anxi] made Tiaozhi a vassal and placed a military governor there who controlled all the small towns. […]. Gan Ying […] came to Tiaozhi; standing on the coast of the Great Sea, he wished to cross it. But the sailors on the western border of Anxi turned to him and said: 'The waters of the Sea are boundless. If those who sail them encounter favourable winds, then it is possible to cross them in three months. If one encounters unfavourable winds, it could also take two years. For this reason, those who travel by sea always carry provisions for three years. In the sea there is something that makes men have a yearning for the land, that makes them feel a strong longing for it; many are those who have died. Ying heard this, and then stopped. […] The commentary states: the geographical and ethnographical aspects of the Western Territories were not known in ancient times […]. Later, Gan Ying reached Tiaozhi and crossed Anxi, and he went to the shores of the Western Sea to observe Da Qin from a distance.

Gan Ying must have travelled on his route from Wuyishanli/Arachosia to Tiaozhi. Numerous attempts have been made to identify Tiaozhi (Hulsewé 1979, 113, n. 255). In my opinion, the toponym can be identified with the territory of Characene, also known as Mesene, mentioned by Pliny (Pl. *Nat. Hist.* VI, 31), Strabo (Strab. XVI, 4, 1) and the geographer Ptolemy (VI, 5), where in 324 BCE Alexander the Great founded his 'last Alexandria' on the Tigris. Despite periodic destruction by river flooding, the international commercial purpose of this city would have been maintained and strengthened over the centuries. According to Pliny, Alexandria on the Tigris, situated at the innermost point of the Persian Gulf, corresponds to the toponym Charax (Χάραξ) (*Nat. Hist.* VI, 31, 138), the birthplace of Isidore, whom Pliny calls Dionysius of Charax. Isidore, who lived between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, authored of the *Parthian Stations* (Σταθμοὶ Παρθικοί), describing Charax as an important station along the trade routes in Parthian times. The city was connected to Palmyra by land, and by sea to the routes linking India with Mesopotamia by sea via the Persian Gulf (Gregoratti 2011, 209).

The phonetic reconstruction of the place-name Tiaozhi is *l$^{\varsigma}$iw-*ke (Baxter, Sagart 2014, 110, 152–3) or *liû-ke (Schuessler 2014, 277; for similar conclusions see also Pulleyblank 1999, 73–4), which closely resembles the place-name Seleucia. This may refer to Seleucia on the Eulaios, the name given to Susa during the Seleucid period. For later times, the reconstructed phonetic form for the Eastern Han period is *thieu-kie (Schuessler 2007, 579, 614). The phonetic

similarity to Αντιόχεια (Antioch) – the name of the city on the Tigris founded by Alexander and rebuilt in 166/5 BCE by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV – is notable. This commercial and political settlement on the shores of the Persian Gulf would have been known from around 140 BCE as Charax Spasinou, the "Fortress of Hispaosines", named after its governor of Bactrian or Sogdian origin.

The importance of Charax trading settlement increased due to its strategic location at the mouth of the river routes leading to the sea: by navigating the Euphrates and the Tigris to the Persian Gulf – a route probably taken by Gan Ying from Susa to Charax –, trade routes arriving from the east maintained some autonomy, particularly during the period of intense conflict between the Roman and Parthian empires (late 1st–early 2nd century CE), when Parthian controlled overland trade routes to the east, and the Romans attempted to bypass intermediaries by opening alternative trade channels. According to Isidore's description, the trade route followed a direct line to the Euphrates, reaching Seleucia on the Tigris. Eastwards, it continued north of the Euphrates and reached the Media highlands, crossing the Caspian Gates to the banks of the river Herat, and finally turning southwards to Kandahar (Schoff 1914, 17–9). This last station of the itinerary in Arachosia (Wuyishanli in Chinese sources) marked the extreme point reached by the Chinese envoys during Han times, before Gan Ying's voyage – a deliberate attempt to avoid Parthian intermediaries to establish direct contact with the Mediterranean world of Da Qin via sea routes from Charax.

The name Charax also seems to echo in another passage in *Hou Hanshu*, where a place called Yuluo 于羅 is described as "the extreme western boundary" of Anxi (Parthia): "From here if you take the sea southwards, you can reach Da Qin. In this land one can find many precious, bizarre and exotic products of Haixi" (Fan 1977, 2918). Thus, Tiaozhi would be the territory of Characene, while Yuluo would refer to Charax (its capital city), the "extreme western border" of Parthia from which it was possible to embark southwards, towards Da Qin. The sailors who dissuaded Gan Ying were at this western point under indirect Parthian control (Baxter and Sagart 2014, 72, 141). Old Chinese reconstruction for Yuluo, G^{w}(r)a-$r^{ɕ}$aj, plausibly corresponds to the Greek Charax.

The indications of the southern route is another key piece of information, along with the reference to Haixi 海西, a place of origin for exotic and precious products. Described in *juan* 86 of *Hou Hanshu* (Fan 1977, 2851) as a territorial entity corresponding with Da Qin, Haixi seems to correspond to Egyptian territory (a Roman province since 30 BCE).[2] The sea voyage Gan Ying avoided would likely have involved circumnavigating the Arabian Peninsula to reach the Red Sea, where significant trading emporiums were established by the Ptolemaic kingdom in the 3rd century BCE, and later controlled by Rome after Egypt's annexation.

According to the text, Gan Ying, having reached the shores of the West Sea, may have had the opportunity to "observe from a distance" (*wang* 望) Da Qin. Even though this may be interpreted as a poetic expression, another explana-

[2] See the contribution by M. Paolillo in this volume.

tion could be considered. The compilation of the *Hou Hanshu* in the 5th century CE involved the collection of different documents, dating back some three centuries earlier. If one accepts the possibility that reports about Tiaozhi in the *Hou Hanshu* were collected not only by Gan Ying (97 CE), but also by Ban Yong (around 120 CE), when territories under the Roman rule were not so far away – this could clarify how Da Qin could have been observed – metaphorically – "from a distance". In 116 CE, Mesopotamia had fallen under the control of Roman armies, during the Trajan's campaign (98–117), who personally visited Characene, a territory that temporarily became a tributary of the Roman Empire (Young 2001; Gregoratti 2011; Celentano 2016).

4. The Sea and Da Qin: An Open Conclusion

The above-mentioned passage describing Da Qin as a country reachable by sea from the Persian Gulf inevitably leads us to address, albeit briefly, the problem of this toponym in the conclusion of this contribution. Da Qin (not mentioned by the sources before the 2nd century CE) has been described using concrete geographical references (not unanimously interpreted), as well as literary clichés derived from utopian visions in sacred geography treatises and (especially Daoist) descriptions of ideal lands (Bertuccioli, Masini 2006).

Western, Chinese and Japanese studies have identified Da Qin with the Roman empire (in some cases more specifically with the Italic peninsula), or with its eastern areas, in particular the Near East (Hirth 1885; Shiratori 1956; Leslie, Gardiner 1996; Yu 2013). In a passage in *juan* 88 of *Hou Hanshu*, it is stated that Parthia (Anxi) had tried to prevent direct contact between Da Qin and China (same statement in *Weilüe*: Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 51, n. 79). Immediately after this account, the presumed and famous diplomatic mission ordered by Da Qin in 166 CE reached the coast of central Vietnam by sea. Most scholars doubt the official nature of this expedition, although the identification of Da Qin's ruler "Andun" with Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161) or, perhaps more likely, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (r. 161–180) seems plausible (Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 153–8).

A few decades later, in 226 (or 233), according to *Liangshu* 梁書 (Book of Liang), a merchant from Da Qin reached Jiaozhi (northern Vietnam) (Yao 1973, 798). The source adds that merchants from Da Qin often visited the areas of Funan (Cambodia and South Vietnam), Rinan (Central Vietnam) and Jiaozhi (North Vietnam).

In conclusion, it seems safe to assume that a significant portion of the knowledge about Da Qin may have come via the maritime route. Expanding on this point, it becomes clear that the central role of the Egyptian area and the Mediterranean East is crucial to the possible "identikit" of Da Qin. The importance of regions formerly controlled by the vast Seleucid dominion cannot, therefore, be overlooked in the spread of knowledge of real or imaginary aspects of Da Qin, justifying the inclusion of this new toponym in the historical chronicles of the 2nd–3rd centuries CE.

This conclusion finds confirmation in the *Naxian biqiu jing* 那先比丘經 (Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra), a Buddhist dialogue between the Indo-Greek ruler

Milinda (Menander I, 165/155–130 BCE) and the monk Nāgasena, which is a translation from the *Milindapañha* (Questions of King Milinda, composed during the 2nd century CE) (Guang 2009; Kubica 2021). In the Chinese text, the king claims that he was born in Da Qin, in the city of "Alisan". Even though this statement finds no correspondence with the original Pali version of the text, it contributes to offer an important interpretative key.

Alisan is most probably Alexandria on the Caucasus, in southern Bactria (Alasanda in Indian texts; Bopearachchi 1991, 78–9). Therefore, the anonymous Chinese translator considered this Central Asian region naturally included in that vast *Oikoumene* that during that period was labelled as "Da Qin", because it had been influenced by the Greek *koiné* that emerged after the expedition of Alexander the Great. In conclusion, Chinese sources on Da Qin appear to refer more to the Greek-Hellenistic world than to the Roman-Italic milieu.

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Du Huan's 杜環 Perception of the *Ecumene* in the 8th Century

Victoria Almonte

Abstract: This chapter deals with a preliminary analysis of the journey that Du Huan 杜環 took toward Western countries, during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In particular, it investigates the perception of the Mediterranean area, conceived as a transcultural and transnational territory, as reflected in the eyes of a Chinese traveller of the 8th century. Du Huan is thought to be one of the first Chinese travellers to have visited and recorded his observations about the north-western coast of Africa and other territories, under the influence and the control of the Arab-Islamic empire during the 8th century. His work reveals a prominent interest in the customs and habits of the local populations, which he described with great ability. Unfortunately, his work *Jing xing ji* has been almost completely lost except for a few extracts found in the *Encyclopaedic History of Institutions* (known as *Tong dian*) written by Du You – a relative of Du Huan, which was compiled in 801 CE. Du Huan's manuscript gives a crucial contribution to the studies regarding China's contacts with the rest of the world, in particular about the historical exchanges between China and Africa, and China and the Arab-Islamic world. (Song 2011, 8; Smidt 2001, 3). Furthermore, his writings testify to the extent of the knowledge of the far West (intended as the Mediterranean area) that the Chinese already had in the 8th century, and reflect Du Huan's interest for new original aspects (never mentioned in earlier works), likely based on first-hand observations noted down by the author himself: for instance, the expressions related to concept of multiculturalism and to the perception of religion appears in Du Huan's description of the Arab-Islamic world, and in other sections.

Keywords: Du Huan; Perception; Western Territories; Mediterranean Area; Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

This chapter deals with a preliminary analysis of the journey that Du Huan 杜環 took toward Western countries, during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In particular, it focuses on the perception of the Mediterranean area, conceived as a transcultural and transnational territory, as reflected in the eyes of a Chinese traveller of the 8th century. The idea for this study emerged from research questions that arose through discussions with colleagues. Among these research questions were: did the Chinese know the Mediterranean area in ancient times, before the arrival of the Jesuits in China? How did the Chinese perceive this portion of the *ecumene* during the Tang and Song dynasties? These inquiries prompted me to delve into the past and examine one of the earliest travel works written in Chinese by a real traveller, thereby exploring how the Chinese image and representation of the Mediterranean territory evolved over hundreds of years.

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One of the most important studies in this field was carried out by Yu Taishan 余太山, who collected and analysed Chinese references to the Mediterranean territory (including the Eastern Roman Empire) in ancient Chinese sources, labelled according to literary genre. He scrutinised dynastic histories, travel works, geographical treatises, Taoist and Buddhist works as well as supernatural writings (Yu 2013; Li and Yu 2009). He studied Du You's 杜佑 (735–812 CE) work, *Tong dian* 通典 (*Encyclopaedic History of Institutions)*, which mentioned Du Huan's work several times, but he did not mention Du Huan's travel book, *Jing xing ji* 經行記 (*Memories of a Journey* or *Records of My Travels*).

Du Huan is thought to be one of the first Chinese travellers to have visited and recorded his observations about the north-western coast of Africa and other territories, under the influence and the control of the Arab-Islamic empire during the 8th century. His work reveals a prominent interest in the customs and habits of the local populations, which he described with great ability. Unfortunately, his work *Jing xing ji* has been almost completely lost except for a few extracts found in the *Tong dian* written in 801 by Du You – a relative of Du Huan. These fragments contain 1,513 Chinese characters and form just two out of 200 chapters (or scrolls) of the *Tong dian*. They reveal some very insightful observations of various places that Du Huan visited, and pioneering impressions about faraway places almost unknown to the Chinese in the 8th century. I tried to read Du Huan's work with an overall vision of his knowledge of the Mediterranean area (and regarding the *ecumene* as a whole), not focusing on one country at a time. This analysis will bring out how already in the very early geographical sources the Mediterranean area was seen as a transcultural entity and his perception went beyond all imperial, national and geographical borders.

Du Huan's work has been analysed and annotated by several Chinese scholars. Among them, Ding Qian 丁謙 (1843–1919), who wrote the essay *Jing xing ji dili kaozheng* 經行記地理考證 (*Philological Analysis of the Geographical Work Jing Xing Ji*), deserves a mention, as well as Zhang Yichun 张一纯 who in 2000 compiled the *Jing xing ji jianzhu* 经行记笺注 (*Commentary on Jing Xing Ji*), a fully annotated version of Du Huan's work. Zhang's study includes a rich preface and has been inserted in the book series *Zhonghua jiaotong shiji congkan* 中外交通史籍丛刊 (*Series on Historical Contacts between China and the Rest of the World*). In more general terms, in 2011 the Chinese Arabist Song Xian 宋岘 wrote the history of the cultural relationships between China and the Arab empire (*Zhongguo Alabo wenhua jiaoliu shi hua* 中国阿拉伯文化交流史话) and largely quoted Du Huan's manuscript, since it can be considered one of the most relevant works about Chinese Arabic contacts (Song 2011, 11). In 2022 Xiao Chaoyu 肖超宇 wrote a very interesting essay, highlighting the ethnographical value of Du Huan's work, *Minzuzhi shijiao xia de Jing xing ji* 民族志视角下的《经行记》 (Xiao 2022).

Although the first complete translations only came to light very recently (in the last two decades as we will soon see), over the last two centuries various scholars dedicated articles to specific chapters of the work, providing useful annotated translations; moreover, short mentions of passages from *Jing xing ji* are

scattered throughout several other works and papers, such as H. Yule (1871), Hirth (1885), Chavannes (1903), Pelliot (1929),[1] and W. Smidt (2001) who focused on the section about Molin 摩隣 country (Smidt 2001, 4). It is worth noting that a very incisive graphic biography of Du Huan's life and journey is available online, provided by the Khan academy, that offers young readers an important tool for understanding Du Huan's value.[2]

Two annotated translations of Du Huan's manuscript are available so far: one published by Alexander Akin (2000) and one by Wan Lei (2017). Their works reveal remarkable differences: in describing the countries visited by Du Huan, Wan followed the order reported by Du You's *Tong dian*, whereas Akin preferred to follow an imaginary geographical line of Du Huan's journey from the East to the West and *vice versa* (his journey back to China).[3] We will see this in more detail in the next paragraph. I am extremely grateful to all of the scholars who approached this work before me for inspiring me to further investigate Du Huan's *Jing xing ji*.

Du Huan's manuscript gives a crucial contribution to the studies regarding China's contacts with the rest of the world, particularly about the historical exchanges between China and Africa and China and the Arab-Islamic world (Song 2011, 8; Smidt 2001, 3). Furthermore, his writings testify to the extent of the knowledge of the far West (intended as the Mediterranean area) that the Chinese already had in the 8th century, and reflect Du Huan's interest for new original aspects (never mentioned in earlier works), probably based on first-hand observations, noted down by the author himself: for instance, the expressions related to the concept of multiculturalism and to the perception of religion that Du Huan mentions in his description of the Arab-Islamic world, and not only in this section.

This chapter offers an innovative interpretation of Du Huan's work, looking into it with a more open and flexible approach than the traditional method,

[1] H. Yule (1820–1889) mentions Du Huan several times, when he describes the Women country, quoted by Marco Polo (Yule 1871, vol. II, 684; vol. I, 518). F. Hirth (1845–1927) studies the identification of the toponyms Molin 摩隣 and Laobosa 老勃薩, used by Du Huan and in the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書: according to Hirth these two toponyms indicate territories on the Eastern coast of Africa (Hirth 1885, 204–205). E. Chavannes (1865–1918) translates the brief passage about Suiye 碎葉 country, in Central Asia (Chavannes 1903, 298, note). P. Pelliot (1878–1945) deals with Du Huan and his journey on his work regarding the Chinese historian Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) in 1929 (Pelliot 1929). Wang Guowei collected the quotations from the *Jing xing ji,* contained in the *Tong dian* by Du You, annotated by Li Yuanyang 李元陽 (1497–1580). Wang inserted the *Jing xing ji* in a group of four works, titled *Gu xing ji jiaolu* 古行記校錄 (including also the *Xishi ji* 西使記, *An Embassy Towards the West* written by Liu Yu during the Yuan Dynasty).

[2] See the pdf at https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/whp-origins/era-4-regional/43-a-dark-age-betaa/a/du-huan-graphic-biography.

[3] Akin adopts the order proposed by Chen Yunrong 陳運溶 (1858–1918) in 1911 in the work *Lushan jingshe congshu* 麓山精舍叢書, *Gu Haiguo yishu chao* 古海國遺書鈔, (1898–1911), pp. 42–46.

which confines his words within geographical borders. It presents a multicultural and transnational viewpoint of the *ecumene* as reflected in Du's accounts, aiming at grasping the extent to which his perception of the ancient world was global, globalised and cosmopolitan (Frankopan 2015, 28).

To address the previously proposed research questions, this chapter will examine not only Du Huan's narrative regarding encounters with the Mediterranean portion of the *ecumene*, but also the political landscape he described. His account of alliances and conflicts further emphasises the interconnected nature of ancient civilisations. These political dynamics frequently transcended regional boundaries, impacting multiple territories and peoples, thereby contributing to a globalised perspective.

The chapter is divided into two sections: the first section provides some information about Du Huan's life and the events that led him to reach such faraway territories; the second section is focused on his work, *Jing xing ji*, and some interesting and noteworthy aspects about it, seen from a multicultural point of view.

2. Du Huan and His Lost Travel Record

We have very little information about Du Huan's life. While his exact dates of birth and death remain unknown, we know from Du You's writings that Du Huan was a Chinese soldier of the Tang dynasty army, who was involved in the Talas battle in 751, near the city of Ṭarāz, in what is today southern Kazakhstan. Most likely, he was born in Wannian 万年, near what is today the city of Xi'An, in Shaanxi province.

In the battle of Talas, the Abbasid military army, sent by the first Abbasid ruler Abu al-'Abbas al-Saffah (721/2–754, who ruled from 750 to 754) alongside their Tibetan allies, and the Tang military general Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝 (died in 756) fought for the control over the territories in Central Asia.[4] The defeat of the Chinese army allowed Muslim soldiers to conquer a large portion of those lands and marked both the end of the Chinese western expansion and the Abbasid Caliphate's eastern expansion. Control of this region was economically beneficial to the Abbasid because it was important on the Silk Roads (Bo 1979, 547).[5] Following the defeat of the Tang army, Chinese soldiers were captured; among them Du Huan, who embarked on a long journey through Arab coun-

[4] In Arabic sources there is little information about the Talas battle: a brief description in the *Kāmil* by Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1233), quoted by Sir Hamilton Alexander Gibb (1895–1971) in his work *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*, Project Gutenberg, ebook 2020, pp. 95–6; al Fasawī (806–890 circa) better described the Chinese debacle (Dunlop 1965, 328–30). Even though nobody provided a precise description of the battle (Akin 2000, 98). The main Chinese source is the *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*), volumes 215, 216 and 217, an historiographical work written by Sima Guang 司馬光 in 1084, which deals with the history from 403 BCE up to 959 CE.

[5] About the control of the Silk Roads after the Battle of Talas see also Thubron, Navajas 1989; Tucker, Tozer 2003; Hannawi 2012; Liu 1995; Donvito 2015.

tries to Yajuluo 亞俱羅 (the ancient capital of the Arab empire, in Iraq, near Baghdad) (Smidt 2001, 4). After eleven years he returned by ship to the city of Guangzhou in Southern China in 762.

Du Huan travelled a long away through Arab countries from Talas up to the northern coast of Africa by land via the traditional Silk Roads, then he returned by ship via the maritime Silk Roads, to Guangzhou, in southern China (Xiong 2019, 89; Liu and Shaffer 2007). There he wrote his travel diary, titled *Jing xing ji* 經行記 (*Record of my Travels* or *The Travel Record*), which deserves to be considered one of the earliest works dedicated in its entirety to the description of the western populations, in particular the Arab empire and the Islamic religion in the 8th century (Song 2011, 8).

Unfortunately, the *Jing xing ji* was almost completely lost, except for a few fragments chosen by Du You as a portion of his 200-volume encyclopaedic work, *Tong dian*. The *Tong dian* is a well-organised collection of laws, regulations, and general events from ancient times to his own time. Du You was one generation senior to Du Huan and a member of the same clan, he was therefore familiar with Du Huan. Right from its publication, Du You's work represented a rich source of information for officers and literati in the Tang court. (Hoyland 1997, 244; Wan 2017, 8).

Du You mentions Du Huan first in volume 191, chapter 7, entitled *Bianfang dian* 邊防典 (*Border Defense*), sub-chapter *Xirong zongxu* 西戎總序 (*Summary of the Sub-chapter about the Xirong-Tribesmen of the Western Borders*). He writes:

> Huan, a person of my clan, followed the military governor (Hucker 1985, 144) of the city of the West, Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝, marching westward. The tenth year of the *Tianbao* reign (about 751) they reached the Western Sea (Xihai). At the beginning of the *Baoying* reign (762), thanks to a merchant ship he returned to Guangzhou and there he wrote the *Jing xing ji*.[6]

3. The *Jing Xing Ji*

Du You's selections of the *Jing xing ji* all appear in volumes 192, chapter *Bianfang ba* 邊防八 (Border Defense Number 8), sub-chapter *Xirong si* 西戎四 (Western Border Tribes Number 4), and 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九 (Border Defense Number 9), sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五 (Western Border Tribes Number 5), and include fragments related to the following countries:[7]

[6] The English translation is mine. The Chinese text is as follows: 族子環隨鎮西節度使高仙芝西征，天寶十載至西海，寶應初，因賈商船舶自廣州而回，著經行記. See the Chinese Texts Project: https://ctext.org/tongdian/191/zhs. Otherwise, the annotated version of *Jing xing ji* by Zhang Yichun (Zhang 2000, 2). Please compare with the English translation provided by Akin 2001, 78.

[7] Actually, section number 6 does not deal with a specific country, but it is focused on three different religious creeds, as encountered by Du Huan on his western journey.

1. *Bahanna Guo* 拔汗那國: Ferghana valley, the territory to the north of Samarkand;
2. *Kang Guo* 康國: Samarkand in today's south-east Uzbekistan;
3. *Shizi Guo* 師子國: Ceylon, the island of Sri Lanka;
4. *Folin Guo* 拂菻國: Roman Eastern Empire or Byzantine empire;
5. *Molin Guo* 摩隣國: Morocco or Eritrea;
6. *Dashi fa* 大食法, *Da Qin fa* 大秦法, *Xun Xun fa* 尋尋法: the law of the Dashi countries, the law of Da Qin countries and the law of Xun Xun;[8]
7. *Bosi Guo* 波斯國: Persia;
8. *Shi Guo* 石國: Tashkent territory, the capital of the modern Uzbekistan;
9. *Suiye Guo* 碎葉國: Tokmak in Kyrgyzstan;
10. *Dashi Guo* 大食國: Arab-Islamic empire;
11. *Molu Guo* 末祿國: Merv city in modern Turkmenistan;
12. *Shan Guo* 苫國: Syria.

These twelve sections appear in this order in Du You's work, and they are often combined with other information collected from earlier sources or travel books. Since Du You was a fine and conscientious philologist, he handled the quotation references with care, and almost always indicated where he copied *verbatim* Du Huan's work.[9]

It is worth noting that we have no way of knowing for certain the order and the structure of the original work. Although the order of Du You's selections does not seem to be the most congruent and fitting with Du Huan's theoretical route, I chose to follow the organisational scheme of *Tong dian*.[10] It is extremely difficult to understand the motivations that led Du You to mention these territories in this order. The writer does not seem to have followed either a geographical criterion (from the nearest to the farther country taking Talas as point of departure) or a chronological criterion (from the first country Du Huan visited throughout Central Asia to the last one). If we assume that Du Huan followed this route on his journey, then we have to admit that his travel plans were haphazard, at best. He would have had much more time to travel from Kang Guo (Samarkand) to Sri Lanka Island, and then from there to Folin country (Roman Eastern Empire), or even more unlikely from Molu country (Merv in today's Turkmenistan) to Shan country (modern Syria).

[8] Wan Lei's translation is as follows: Islamic Law, Nestorian Law and Zoroastrian Law (Wan 2017, 13–4). I prefer to use the original Chinese terms. Besides, Akin's translation includes this section in the description of Molin country (Akin 2000, 95–6).

[9] Du Huan's quotation is always preceded by a sort of disclaimer, saying "Du Huan *Jing xing ji* yun" 杜環經行記云: "The *Jing xing ji* by Du Huan affirms", otherwise "Du Huan ji yun" 杜環記云: "Du Huan's memories affirm".

[10] As already mentioned, the scholar Alexander Akin preferred the order proposed by Chen Yunrong, in which the sections order seems to have been restored and rearranged in the original sequence, on the base of Du Huan's real route, overland from Talas to the Arabs land and then back to China by boat via Sri Lanka (Akin 2000, 98). Chen's restored scheme is: Suiye, Shi, Kang, Bahanna, Zhulu, Shan, Da Shi, Bosi, Fulin, Molin, Shizi.

Du You probably organised his work following the typical structure of the encyclopaedic treatises about historical events and institutional issues: from the smallest details, up to the macrostructure. In fact, in the first chapter we find information regarding food and trade (all related to the subsistence of the people); then, in the second chapter, the selection of imperial officers, their careers, the rites related to the imperial administration, the music for the official ceremonies, military issues, laws and regulations, the administrative division of the imperial territory, and so on. In the ninth chapter, Du You finally deals with the border defence, and here he quotes Du Huan, since the latter was very familiar with many foreign countries.

Now two questions arise: how much of Du Huan's data did Du You use for his work? And how did he treat that information?

We can argue that Du You only used information that could be considered useful for his treatise: for filling in gaps about certain topics and for satisfying the knowledge requirements regarding foreign countries and customs. In my opinion, Du You's selection could have followed two different paths: in copying Du Huan's section, Du You may well have decided to leave out some details, including those considered unimportant and useless (or unsuitable, inappropriate) in his eyes; as an alternative, he could have decided to completely omit some "unnecessary" sections of the *Jing xing ji* (maybe because he already had other more accurate sources or because he gave more importance to some countries over others). Therefore, it is quite conceivable that Du Huan's work was much more complex and composite than those few sections copied by Du You. Additionally, it is plausible that those few sections were manipulated by removing some aspects, by re-elaborating sentences and by changing words in order to make them suitable for the encyclopaedic work compiled by Du You.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, most of the literati, devoting themselves to transmitting (geographical) knowledge, did not have the opportunity to travel beyond the empire's borders. Du You was not an exception in this sense. He probably only compared Du Huan's data with the previous dynastic histories, earlier geographical works and local gazettes, all of them compiled thanks to second-hand information.[11]

[11] Some of the sources used by Du You and quoted in chapters 192–193 and 194 were *Hou Wei shi* 后魏史 (or *Hou Wei shu* 後魏書), (The Book of the Northern Wei), the official dynastic history of the Northern Wei dynasty (Bei Wei 北魏, 386–534); *Xi fan ji* 西蕃記 (The Record of the Western Barbarians), written by the Chinese envoy to Central Asia, Wei Jie 韋節, during the reign of the second and last Sui emperor Yangdi 煬帝 (605–616); *Futu jing* 浮屠經 (The Buddhist Classic), one of the earliest works on the transmission of Buddhism in China, (orally) compiled by Yi Cun 伊存, an envoy from the country of Da Yuezhi, during the first century BCE; *Baopuzi* 抱樸子/抱朴子 (Master Embracing Simplicity) is a Daoist treatise written in the Jin 晉 period (265–420) by Ge Hong 葛洪; *Guang ya* 廣雅 (Extended [Er]ya), a glossary edited by Zhang Yi 張揖 during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE); *Suishi* 隋史 or *Suishu* 隋書 (The Book of the Sui), the official dynastic history of the Sui dynasty 隋 (581–618); *Weilüe* 魏畧/略 (The People of the West), composed between 239 and 265 CE, by Yu Huan 魚豢 (see the translation online at https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/

Below, I highlighted the *Jing xing ji* sections that contain the most relevant statements on Mediterranean transculturality and transnationality as reflected in Du's eyes, providing:[12] a) sections titles, volume numbers, chapters and subchapters from the *Tong dian*; b) probable title of the related *Jing xing ji* sections; c) Chinese excerpts; d) a comment on Du Huan's transnational perspective reserved to these countries.[13]

Before delving into the text analysis and attempting to provide the most accurate analysis of Du Huan's perspective on the Mediterranean area, it is essential to note that Du Huan used the toponym Xihai 西海, literally "Western Sea," seven times in his descriptions. Scholars should carefully consider his choice of terminology, as the term Xihai in Du's context does not necessarily refer to the Mediterranean Sea, contrary to what later travellers and geographers might lead us to believe (as discussed in other chapters of this volume). Additionally, it is important to recognise that Du occasionally employed other toponyms to denote the Mediterranean Sea. For instance, in the section on Folin, he mentions not only Xihai (Western Sea) but also Nanhai 南海 (Southern Sea).

The sections in which Du Huan mentioned this toponym are: *Bahanna Guo* 拔汗那國, *Folin Guo* 拂菻國 (twice), *Suiye Guo* 碎葉國, *Dashi Guo* 大食國 (twice) and *Molu Guo* 末祿國. Du Huan's use of the toponym Xihai consistently serves as a geographical reference point, indicating either a point of departure or a direction of travel. He never provides a comprehensive description of this sea. In my view, only the sections on Folin and Dashi, where the connections to the Mediterranean area are clear and undeniable, deserve a more accurate analysis.[14] Additionally, two other sections warrant closer examination due to their descriptions of this area, despite Du Huan not mentioning the toponym Xihai: *Molin Guo* (the northern coast of Africa or Eritrea) and *Shan Guo* (Syria). Both regions bordered the Mediterranean Sea, and Du provided readers with substantial information about this geographical area. Therefore, these sections will be analysed in this context.

The following text analysis therefore focusses on the four territories or countries of 1) Folin Guo (Eastern Roman Empire), 2) Molin Guo (northern coast of Africa or Eritrea), 3) Dashi Guo (Arab countries), and 4) Shan Guo (Syria).

weilue/weilue.html); *Yiwuzhi* 异物志 (Record of Foreign Matters), an ethnographical treatise written by Eastern Han (25–220 AD) court advisor Yang Fu 杨孚, dealing with the people, fauna, rice cultivation and so on of the Lingnan area, South China Sea region.

12 For the original Chinese texts see Zhang 2000.

13 As two scholars in recent years have already published the English translation of Du Huan extracts, as I already said previously (Akin 2000; Wan 2017), I have not provided one here. More specific considerations about some descriptions reported by Du Huan will be analysed in a forthcoming paper (2025), focusing on Du Huan perception of the multi-culturalism and of the several faiths he approached within the Mediterranean Sea.

14 The section on Molu Guo, which focuses on the Merv territory in modern Turkmenistan, reflects significant aspects of transculturality, fluid boundaries, and multifaceted interactions as perceived by Du Huan. Although it is not included in the main text analysis, it has been briefly analysed at the end of this chapter due to its unique characteristics.

3.1. Folin Guo 拂菻國

Tong dian: Da Qin 大秦 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五)
Ji xing ji: Folin Guo 拂菻國
Chinese excerpt:[15] 杜環經行記云：拂菻國在苫國西，隔山數千里，亦曰大秦。其人顏色紅白，男子悉著素衣，婦人皆服珠錦。好飲酒，尚乾餅，多淫巧，善織絡。或有俘在諸國，守死不改鄉風。琉璃妙者，天下莫比。王城方八十里，四面境土各數千里。勝兵約有百萬，常與大食相禦。西枕西海，南枕南海，北接可薩、突厥。西海中有市，客主同和，我往則彼去，彼來則我歸。賣者陳之於前，買者酬之於後，皆以其直置諸物傍，待領直然後收物，名曰『鬼市』。又聞西有女國, 感水而生。[16]

Comment:

At the beginning, Du stated that the country of Folin is situated to the west of Shan (Syria) and is also known as Da Qin. After providing extensive information about the inhabitants, their customs, and local products, he mentioned that Folin's military was capable of defending against the Dashi countries (the Arab Empire).

Syria, referred to as Shan Guo by Du, had been lost by the Byzantine Empire to the Muslim armies shortly before, specifically between 634 and 638 CE. Midway through his description, Du delineates the borders, using the verb *zhen* 枕, meaning "to occupy." He notes that to the west and south, Folin is bordered by the sea, specifically the Western Sea and the Southern Sea, while the northern part is connected with the Khazar Turkic tribes.

The Southern Sea (Nanhai) refers to the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, situated between Asia Minor and Egypt. The Western Sea (Xihai) likely denotes the Mediterranean as it curves westward of the Anatolian landmass, possibly the modern Aegean Sea, as argued by Akin (2000, 94). Towards the end of his section, Du elaborates on the barter system, known as the Ghost Market, describing it as a harmonious and widespread exchange of goods among people who could not communicate verbally. Notably, Du explicitly states that this market took place in the Western Sea.

Two primary aspects highlight and convey the notions of transculturality and transnationality for Du:

[15] Due to space limitations, I did not copy Du You's section. Please see the Chinese Texts Project for the Chinese text. https://ctext.org/tongdian/193/zhs.

[16] Folin country is described in the wider section focused on the Eastern Roman Empire, called Da Qin, to which Du You dedicates almost 1,000 characters. Du Huan in his description mentioned the toponym Da Qin as the second name for Folin country. After his description, Du You adds 200 characters dealing specially with Folin country, copied from the *Jing xing ji*. The scholar Song Xian affirms that Folin could be identified with modern Egypt or in some cases with the Byzantine Empire. (Song 2011, 9).

1. The Mediterranean Sea is depicted as a significant cradle of regional interactions, with Du Huan referring to the Western and Southern seas. He recognised it as a crossroads of civilisations.

2. The Ghost Market, as termed by Du, can undoubtedly be seen as an indicator of the maritime connectivity and cultural syncretism of the Mediterranean since ancient times. Despite the diversity of civilisations surrounding it, the Mediterranean fostered a shared maritime culture. This included common practices in shipbuilding, navigation, and maritime law, which facilitated smoother interactions and exchanges (Lopes 2010).

3.2. Molin Guo 摩鄰國

Tong dian: Da Qin 大秦 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五)
Ji xing ji: Molin Guo 摩鄰國
Chinese excerpt: 又云：摩鄰國，在秋薩羅[17]國西南，渡大磧行二千里至其國。其人黑，其俗獷，少米麥，無草木，馬食乾魚，人餐鵲莽。鵲莽，即波斯棗也。瘴癘特甚。[18]

Comment:

The precise identification of the country of Molin remains challenging. The debate regarding the exact location of Molin has drawn attention to several ancient African sites along the Mediterranean Sea coast, the Red Sea coast, and the Indian Ocean. The identification process could be aided by examining the toponym Qiusaluo 秋薩羅, which offers two distinct perspectives:

1. On one hand, Qiusaluo is believed to be situated in the ancient territory of Castille, in Southern Spain. According to Zhang Xinglang, Laobosa 老勃薩 (another name for Molin) is a transcription of Tuolemusen, located east of Morocco, specifically the city of Tlemcen, the capital of central Maghreb in North Africa (Zhang 2003, 45). This city was a significant centre for a large Christian population for many centuries following the Arab conquest in 708 CE. This historical context could explain Du Huan's depiction of the region as characterised by a multitude of religions, including Islam and Christianity.

2. On the other hand, Qiusaluo (or Yangsaluo 秧薩羅) may be identified as Jerusalem. Following this theory, Smidt posits that Laobosa can be easily identified as "al Habasha," the ancient Arabic term for the Ethiopian highlands and its kingdom (Smidt 2001, 5–6).

In both scenarios, this passage enhances our understanding of the extensive knowledge Du Huan had amassed about the Mediterranean area as a transna-

[17] The toponym could be transcript also as Yangsaluo 秧薩羅.

[18] In the same above section, titled *Da Qin*, soon after Folin description, you find the extract about Molin country as well. It identifies the northern coast of Africa, under the control of Eastern Roman Empire. Du You copied 65 characters from Du Huan's work.

tional and transcultural territory. He provided significant ethnographic information, illustrating a world that was interconnected and diverse, with rich cultural exchanges. The presence of dark-skinned people, Persian dates, and the fact that even horses consumed dried fish (noting that coastal regions along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were described by Greek geographers as fish-eaters, as noted by Laufer 1919, 389) are all indicative of the region's multiculturalism.

3.3. Dashi Guo 大食國

Tong dian: 大食 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五)
Ji xing ji: Dashi 大食
Chinese excerpt: 杜環經行記云：一名亞俱羅[19]。其大食王號暮門，都此處。其士女瑰偉長大，衣裳鮮潔，容止閑麗。女子出門，必擁蔽其面。無問貴賤，一日五時禮天。食肉作齋，以殺生為功德。繫銀帶，佩銀刀。斷飲酒，禁音樂。人相爭者，不至毆擊。又有禮堂，容數萬人。每七日，王出禮拜，登高座為眾說法，曰：人生甚難, 天道不易。姦非劫竊，細行謾言，安己危人，欺貧虐賤，有一於此，罪莫大焉。凡有征戰，為敵所戮，必得生天，殺其敵人，獲福無量。率土稟化，從之如流。法唯從寬，葬唯從儉。郛郭之內，閭閈之中，土地所生，無物不有。四方輻湊，萬貨豐賤，錦繡珠貝，滿於市肆。駝馬驢騾，充於街巷。刻石蜜為盧舍，有似中國寶羣。每至節日，將獻貴人琉璃器皿、餘石瓶缽，蓋不可算數。粳米白麵，不異中華。其果有偏桃人、千年棗。其蔓菁，根大如斗而圓，味甚美。餘菜亦與諸國同。蒲陶大者如雞子。香油貴者有二：一名耶塞漫，一名沒,（女甲反）師。香草貴者有二：一名查塞莘（蒲孔反），一名梨蘆芰。綾絹機杼，金銀匠、畫匠、漢匠起作畫者，京兆人樊淑、劉泚，織絡者，河東人樂環、呂禮。又以橐駝駕車。其馬，俗云西海濱龍與馬交所產也。腹肚小，腳腕長，善者日走千里。其駝小而緊，背有孤峰，良者日馳千里。又有駝鳥，高四尺以上，腳似駝蹄，頸項勝得人騎行五六里，其卵大如二升。又有薺樹。實如夏棗，堪作油，食除瘴。其氣候溫，土地無冰雪。人多瘧痢，一年之內，十中五死。今吞滅四五十國，皆為所役屬，多分其兵鎮守，其境盡於西海焉。

Comment:

The description of the Dashi territory is quite extensive, comprising approximately 607 characters. This indicates that Du Huan had a profound impression of the Dashi Empire. In this chapter, two aspects particularly warrant further investigation:

[19] Du Huan used the toponym Yajuluo 亞俱羅 as second name to indicate this territory. It could stay for the center of Abbasid caliphate (near Baghdad in Iraq) according to Smidt (2001, 6), or the term that the Arabs used to call the Mesopotamia, according to Zhang (1998, 46). Yajuluo might correspond to the Arabic toponym Aqūr (Al Jazira) or Upper Mesopotamia.

1. Wealth and commerce: At the core of the description, Du Huan provides information about the wealth and abundance of various products available in the shops, stating that they come "from four directions" (*sifang fucou* 四方輻湊). This highlights the pivotal role of the Arabs during this period, especially as merchants along the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Indian Ocean trade routes.

2. Territorial expansion: Towards the end, Du Huan notes that the borders of this country encompass all the Western Sea regions. He writes that the Arabs conquered (*tunmie* 吞滅) forty or fifty countries, which all became its subordinates (*yishu* 役屬). They expanded their borders to the Western Sea. Indeed, the Arabian Empire controlled vast territories, including North Africa from the Pyrenees Mountains, Syria, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia.

Du Huan depicted the Dashi Empire as a vibrant and cosmopolitan centre. Alongside relevant ethnographical information about the beauty of the women and the Islamic faith (among others), Du Huan effectively highlighted the transnational flow of knowledge and the interconnectedness of different regions through trade routes, particularly within and around the Mediterranean Sea framework.

3.4. Shan Guo 苫國

Tong dian: 大食 (vol. 193, chapter *Bianfang jiu* 邊防九, sub-chapter *Xirong wu* 西戎五)
Ji xing ji: Shan Guo 苫國
Chinese excerpt: 又云：苫國在大食西界，周迴數千里。造屋兼瓦，壘石為壁。米穀殊賤，有大川東流入亞俱羅，商客糴此糶彼，往來相繼。人多魁梧，衣裳寬大，有似儒服。其苫國有五節度，有兵馬一萬以上，北接可薩突厥。可薩北又有突厥。足似牛蹄，好噉人肉。

Comment:

The section focusing on the region of Shan (modern-day Syria) is 100 characters long and once again demonstrates Du Huan's extensive knowledge of largely unfamiliar territories. He reiterated the importance of the trade networks among merchants from various countries, stating: 商客糴此糶彼，往來相繼 ("Merchants buy grain here and sell it there, coming and going in succession"). He described a river flowing eastward into Yajuluo (previously mentioned in the section on Dashi countries), which may be identified as the Tigris or Euphrates. Additionally, there are references to two northern tribes: the Khazar Turks and, further north, another branch of Turks known for practicing cannibalism. In these lines, Du Huan refers to the Khazars, a semi-nomadic Turkic people who, from the late 6th century, established a commercial empire encompassing the southwestern part of modern Russia, southern Ukraine, and western Kazakhstan. The Khazars emerged as one of the foremost trading empires of the early medieval world, controlling the western routes of the Silk Roads and serving as a crucial commercial nexus between China, the Middle East, and the regions that include present-day Ukraine and southwestern Russia

4. Final Remarks

I am conscious that Du Huan's work and its historical value are certainly worthy of deeper investigation. With these limited notes I hope I can provide new insight into such a rich topic: Chinese knowledge about foreign countries and in particular, Du Huan's perception of the *ecumene*.

My intent is to emphasise that the relationship between Chinese and Arabs from the 7th century onwards should not be underestimated, given the circulation of knowledge (and goods) from East to West and *vice versa*.[20] Du Huan was one of the most representative characters of these contacts: suffice it to know that he was able to travel as far as the westernmost territories "thanks" to the encounter of the Arabs and Chinese in the Talas battle. His words reveal a very extensive knowledge of Arab-Islamic territories (and not only), and he was able to gather many pieces of original material (drawn from personal observations), reflecting his astonishing aptitude in seeing and perceiving the "Other" (foreignness) without prejudices. His curiosity about different characteristics related to the "Other" permeates his work. Indeed, he appears to be interested in various aspects of the foreign countries: the markets, the way people used to do commercial exchange (as in the section about Dashi), the richness of their cities, their religious creeds and so on. He did not waste words in describing military events (not even the Talas battle), and judging from the content of his words, one actually has the impression of a man much more interested in describing the ethnographic and anthropological features of the people.

Du Huan's work deserves further investigation, since it offers new insights into the circulation of geographical (and ethnographical) knowledge during the Tang period. Additionally, his bird's eye perspective is a precious source to assess the extent of Chinese geographical knowledge at the beginning of the 9th century and to what extent the Mediterranean came to be perceived as a transcultural space in China.

It suffices to read the Molu section (Merv in Turkmenistan). Although in this chapter I do not take in account the 320-characters long description about the country of Molu, I believe that this extract deserves more attention. Du Huan testified that in the area of the Mediterranean Sea (Xihai 西海), Dashi people and Bosi people (from Persia) live in a mixed manner (*congci zhi xihai yilai, dashi, bosi canza juzhi* 從此至西海以來，大食、波斯參雜居止). I contend that this quotation could be considered, since the 8th century, the most representative idea of the Mediterranean area, described as a liquid region, that embraces many peoples, cultures and economies, which cannot be enclosed by the traditional concept of national borders (Abulafia 2011, xxiii).

Du Huan's work, when viewed through this lens, reveals an ancient world that was far more interconnected than traditionally perceived. His detailed observations and descriptions of various cultures, economies, religions, and po-

[20] See the toponym Yajuluo 亞俱羅, a clear transliteration of the Arabic toponym Al Jazira, the upper portion of Mesopotamia, in the section focused on Dashi countries.

litical systems illustrate a world where boundaries were fluid, and interactions were complex and multifaceted.

By adopting this innovative interpretation, we can appreciate the extent to which Du Huan's perception of the ancient world was global and cosmopolitan. His writings serve as a testament to the rich tapestry of human civilisation, woven together by countless threads of cultural, economic, religious, and political exchanges.

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Princes and Paradise: Rabban Sauma in the Western Mediterranean

Margaret Kim

Abstract: This chapter is an analysis of the China-Mediterranean connection of the Nestorian monk Rabban Sauma, the first known Chinese-born person to visit the European Mediterranean, in the *History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, a Syriac work of unknown authorship about the Ilkhanate composed early in the fourteenth century. Born an Önggüd Turk in Beijing sometime between 1220 and 1230, Sauma and his pupil Mark left Khubilai Khan's China for the Holy Land around 1275. They settled in the Ilkhanate when war re-directed them there. Early in 1287, the Ilkhan Arghun, seeking an alliance with Latin Europe against Islamic states, dispatched Rabban Sauma on a mission to the Latin West as his envoy. An abridged and redacted Syriac translation of Sauma's now lost Persian account of his visit to Latin Europe survives in the *History*, and Sauma's influence on the anonymous author in the composition of the historical work was significant. This chapter suggests that the China-Mediterranean connection of Sauma's story in the book is centered on the imagination of political power within the framework of his journey. The *History* is a mirror of princes that projects good governance and enlightened civilisation onto the Latin European other as a lesson for the Ilkhans. From the Mongol elite to princes of the Latin West, the book delineates Sauma's journey as a series of encounters with princes. And this engagement and study of power is inextricably bound up with the notion of the journey as a process of undergoing trial and attaining visionary fulfillment in the Chinese Buddhist tradition of travel. The European Mediterranean marks Sauma's vision of benevolent rule, order, and paradise beyond a border of ordeal and death. The *History* holds up this vision of the European Mediterranean as a mirror to the princes of the Ilkhanate, a land the anonymous author saw beset by strife.

Keywords: Sino-Western Contacts; Travel Literature; Mongol; Rabban Sauma; Governance

1. Introduction

In 1287, a man from China named Rabban Sauma arrived in Europe as the Ilkhan Arghun's envoy. He was a monk from the Church of the East, popularly known as the Nestorian Church. His visit to Latin Europe marked a significant landmark in history, for it was the first time that a man of Chinese birth reached the western Mediterranean from Asia. Sauma was, technically, the first known Chinese-born person in history to reach the European Mediterranean, even though Isa Kelemechi, a Syriac Christian of western Asian origins based in Khubilai Khan's China, had reached Italy two years earlier (Boyle 1973, 558–60; Borbone 2008, 221–22, 240; Rossabi 1992, 22–23).

Sauma's writing about his mission to Europe has survived, albeit in an abridged and altered form (Borbone 2008, 222). Upon his return to the Ilkhanate

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from the Latin West near the end of the thirteenth century, he wrote an account of his journey to Latin Europe in Persian. That original is now lost, but a shortened redacted version of it in Syriac survives in a work of history of unknown authorship, entitled *History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma* (referred to hereafter as *History*). This Syriac work documents the lives and times of Rabban Sauma and Mark, two Nestorian monks who made great contributions to the leadership of the Church once they reached the Ilkhanate from China. In the *History*, the two monks' personal stories chronicle the way the Nestorian Church weathered the vicissitudes of power under the Ilkhans.

As Pier Giorgio Borbone, editor and translator of the *History*, has shown, the portion of the book based in Sauma's writing about Europe retains at least some of Sauma's own phrasing and intentionality as a writer (Borbone 2008, 226–34). Moreover, what has survived of Sauma's writing cannot be understood apart from the *History* as a whole, since Sauma's personal influence shaped and enriched the entire narrative of the *History*. The anonymous author, almost certainly a member of the Church's clerical elite, most likely knew both subjects of his book and worked on the book while the two men were alive, eliciting information and advice from them (Borbone, 2008, 223; Borbone 2021 Introduction, 17–18; Vinci 2013, 344). The book was completed sometime between Mark's death in November 1317 and the middle of 1319 (Borbone 2021 Introduction, 14–15).

This chapter, therefore, analyses the China-Mediterranean connection of Sauma's story in terms of the *History*'s form and expression. In particular, it suggests that this connection is centered on the imagination of political power within the framework of the monk's journey. The book is a mirror of princes that projects good governance and enlightened civilisation onto the Latin European other as a lesson for the Ilkhans. The narrative of Sauma's journey unfolds as a sequence of visits to different regions of Asia and Europe, and it serves as a precious witness to the historical encounter between a man from Mongol China and political personalities of two continents. From the Mongol elite to princes of the Latin West, the *History* delineates the monk's journey as a series of encounters with princes. And this engagement and study of power is inextricably bound up with the notion of the journey as a process of undergoing trial and attaining visionary fulfilment in the Chinese Buddhist tradition of travel. The western Mediterranean marks Sauma's vision of benevolent rule, order, and paradise beyond a border of ordeal and death. The *History* holds up this vision of the European Mediterranean as a mirror to the princes of the Ilkhanate, a land the anonymous author saw beset by strife.

2. *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*

The *History* provides most of the known facts about Sauma and Mark. Both protagonists of the book were Önggüd Turks from Nestorian families (Rossabi 1992, 23–24, 34). Born in Beijing sometime between 1220 and 1230, Sauma was an only child. When Sauma demonstrated an interest in monastic life as a young man, his parents pressured him to marry. They, however, eventually con-

sented to their son's wish to become a monastic. Mark was Sauma's pupil and about two decades younger. He was the youngest of four sons of an archdeacon from Koshang, a city south of the Gobi Desert.

Around 1275, the two men left the country of their birth for the Holy Land. War re-directed them to the Ilkhanate, where Mark was elected Patriarch of the Nestorian Church. He was enthroned as the Catholicos Mar Yahballaha in 1281. Early in 1287, on the advice of the young patriarch, the Ilkhan Arghun, seeking an alliance with Latin Europe against Islamic states, dispatched Rabban Sauma on a mission to the Latin West as his envoy. Returning to the Ilkhanate by late 1288, Sauma would live out his life there. The narrative of the *History* continues beyond his death in January 1294, to describe increasingly adverse circumstances for the Church under later Ilkhans. Mar Yahballaha's death in 1317 marks the end of the *History*.

The lexicon of the *History*, as Borbone has pointed out, makes "cosmopolitan" use of words from languages as different as Turkic, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and Latin (Borbone 2021 Introduction, 21–22; Borbone 2023, 333). The text also embodies a plurality of literary forms and rhetorical traditions from diverse civilisations, from the exemplum and historiography to Syriac hagiography and Biblical narrative (e.g., Borbone 2021 Introduction, 15–17). My analysis suggests that the text systematically draws upon the exemplum in the tradition of advice to the prince and the Buddhist pilgrimage writing of Chinese literature. Just as Rabban Sauma visited with princes as a wise man of the Church, the *History* engages with the Mongol political elite in lessons of order and sound rule. The Chinese Buddhist trope of travel as a process of undergoing conditions of ordeal and ideal, trial and bliss, frames the moral basis of the *History*'s politics of counsel.

3. The Ilkhanate and the Study of Power in the *History*

As Nestorians both Rabban Sauma and Mar Yahballaha belonged to a minority community within Persia and China that historically depended on the protection of rulers (Baumer 2016, 183, 224). The narrator openly acknowledges the political basis of Mar Yahballaha's elevation to the patriarchate: "They chose him for this reason: the kings who held the reins of government in the entire inhabited world were Mongols, and no-one was more familiar with their customs or proficient in their language" (85).[1] It was because of Mar Yahballaha's connections and familiarity with the Mongol elite and its ways that the Church fathers elected him as catholicos (Borbone 2008, 226). The narrator's comment on the relation between political condition and the Church's leadership affirms the Church's historical policy of deference and accommodation to reigning power (Borbone 2021 Introduction, 29, 32).

[1] References to the *History*, ed. and trans. Borbone, are to page numbers and they will appear in the text proper.

In the *History*, the Ilkhanate under rulers from Abaqa to Öljeitü represents the political centre that is the basis of the book's study of power, for the survival of the Church is intimately bound up with elite power for the anonymous author. Ilkhans receive more concrete and detailed descriptions on the whole than other rulers. With the exception of Ahmad, who is openly denounced in the book, the *History* refers to individual Ilkhans with flattering characterisations, regardless of their religious faith and personal moral condition. Geikhatu, whose brief reign as Ilkhan ended in violent death, is the "undefeated king Geikhatu," "blessed king Geikhatu" (139, 141). Likewise, Öljeitü, who ruled as a Muslim despite having been baptised as a child, is the "undefeated king" (213, 229).

The two protagonists reached this centre after undergoing extreme conditions of war and famine in Central Asia. Indeed, the period between the two men's westward journey from China and Mar Yahballaha's death in 1317 saw turbulent struggles between Mongol princes, as Khubilai's ascension as Khagan in 1260 marked the irreversible fragmentation of the Mongol empire (e.g., May 2018, 181). Informed by this historical reality, the book alludes to the horror and devastation of Mongol warfare that Sauma and Mark braved to reach the Ilkhanate. The war between Mongol princes and specifically the atrocities afterwards were disastrous, in the two monks' recollections:

> At the time of their arrival in Khotan there had just been a conflict between the King of Kings, the Qa'an, and King Oqu. The latter, having escaped from the Qa'an, had arrived there, where he had slaughtered thousands of people. The roads and tracks were interrupted, and the wheat supplies had run out. Since wheat could not be procured, many died of starvation (73).

After their stay at Khotan, the two protagonists came upon Kashgar, yet another community that was "depopulated," having been "looted by enemies" (73).

The two men reached the Ilkhanate as the new centre of their lives after suffering the extreme trial of their journey. In the narrative, the ordeal of travel vividly demonstrates the protagonists' resolve to make the Ilkhanate their new home: "We have not come from there to return, and we do not think we would be able to endure all the hardships we have experienced a second time" (81). The trope of enduring unspeakable pain and suffering to reach one's new home in a foreign country in the narrative here draws on the discourse of Chinese Buddhist travel writing (Tian 2011, e.g., 88–110). This trope, in fact, frames the entire narrative of the *History*. As a Nestorian monk Sauma came from a religious tradition that had assimilated the influence of Buddhism in its doctrinal articulation and aesthetic expression in his native China (Baumer 2016, e.g., 188–89, 220–22). Both he and Mark as well as the anonymous author would also have been familiar with Buddhists at the Ilkhanate, where they prospered under the favor of three generations of rulers, from Hülegü to his son Abaqa, and then to his grandson Arghun, before the fourteenth century. Certainly, during Sauma's lifetime, Buddhists interacted with Muslims and Nestorians at court, and like the other religious groups they sought to engage the Ilkhans in their ideas of kingship and authority (Brack 2023, e.g., 19–82).

The political centre of the Ilkhanate that Sauma and Mark achieved after risking their lives to travel through Central Asia was itself fraught with danger and suffering. The Mongol-ruled state periodically lapsed into crises of authority, as it was increasingly plagued with succession disputes and factional tumult (De Nicola 2017, e.g., 65). Changes in fortune for the Church under different Ilkhans inform the core of the *History*'s study of princely power. After Abaqa's approval for his elevation to the patriarchate, Mar Yahballaha was imprisoned by the Muslim Ilkhan Ahmad, who, "devoid of far-sightedness and wisdom," accused him of attempting to turn Khubilai Khan against him (89, 91). At the heart of stories of princes and the two Nestorian monks' relations with them is the *History*'s politics of legitimation. The figure of the ruler who respects counsel and surrounds himself with wise men is a major trope of authority in the political tradition of the steppes of Inner Asia (Amitai 2014, e.g., 16–18). Whereas Ahmad was a tyrant who oppressed a holy man such as Mar Yahballaha, his successor Arghun was the good ruler who respected the patriarch's leadership of the Church.

In the *History*, to investigate power is to peel off or to remove irrelevant and superfluous material, to condense the historical narrative down to its proper focus, and to extract the lesson of wise counsel from the dense reality of history. While the book is conceived overall as a work of history (Borbone 2021 Introduction, 15–17), its narration constantly distils historical material in order to present the essential lesson of political counsel, that is, "essential" in authorial terms. Such a strategy does not just apply to the content of the book, but also to its very style. Within the text, the effect of this is an overall abstraction of the historical narrative into a series of emphatic contrasts and exemplary forms.

The anonymous author maintains that his abridgement of the narrative material about Sauma is intentional: "Since it is not our aim to write a full account of what Rabban Sauma did and the things he saw, we have considerably shortened what he personally wrote in the Persian language" (131). Speaking in the first person, he leaves out Sauma's description of non-religious architecture of Rome in order to focus strictly on the religious buildings of the city (Borbone 2008, 230–31). The author characterises the excluded material as distracting from the "aims of our narrative" (113).

Beyond the detailed material descriptions of the Ilkhans, economy of expression shapes mentions and characterisations of rulers in the *History*. All Mongol rulers discussed in the book are named except Khubilai, who is "King of Kings, the Qa'an" (71, 91). The Khagan Möngke, to distinguish him from Khubilai, is named: "King of Kings Möngke Qa'an" (157). The caliphs are "Arab kings" (153). Borbone has shown that the author retains in the text Sauma's practice of identifying rulers of Europe as embodiments of their nation or dignity rather than by their regnal names (Borbone 2008, 234). Philip IV of France is "King Fransis" (115, 117). Edward I of England is "King Ingaltar" (119), and the Byzantine emperor is "King Baselios" (101, 103). The King of Aragon is "Irad Arkon" (103), that is, *roi d'Aragon*, as it would have been a practice in Sauma's Turkic to add a vowel before the initial "r." Sauma's identification of the Angevin ruler of Naples, however, is by his regnal name, "Irad Sharlado," *roi Charles deux* (105;

Borbone 2008, 228; see also Borbone 2021 Commentary, 276). For both Sauma and the author, the comparison with the Mongol ruling elite underlines references to European kings. Sauma notes that the "king of kings," the Holy Roman Emperor and the Latin European counterpart to the Khagan, was crowned and invested by the pope (111).

The *History*'s pursuit of the pure idea and abstraction of princely power even strips women from its narrative, especially in association with power. Remarkably for a book about two men from the Turkic-Mongol elite, the book takes little interest in the powerful ladies of the Mongol nobility, whose political influence and advice Sauma and Mar Yahballaha must have been aware of at the Ilkhanate. Besides victims of unspeakable violence, most of the other women in the *History* are portrayed flatteringly as sweet royal mothers and kind religious patrons. The book minimises any political influence that they wielded in the kingdom.

The *History* corroborates the fact that the Ilkhan Ahmad released Mar Yahballaha from prison on the advice of his mother and others. But the royal mother, Qutui Khatun, a formidable political personality who was known to have been actively involved in her son's rule, is not named in the book (De Nicola 2017, e.g., 94–95, 97–99, 107). Downplaying her role as a royal manager and adviser, the *History* ascribes the catholicos' release to the "guardian angel who protected the holy patriarchal see" by making use of the "king's mother and the amirs" (93).

The effect of this radically masculine imagination of political power is to elevate the stature of the Nestorian clergy, a male body represented in the *History* by Sauma and the *catholicos*, as advisers to the Ilkhans. In scene after scene of visits with rulers, the two men appear as wise men whose blessing and kind advice legitimate the Ilkhanid throne. Geikhatu, who did not "stray or depart from justice" (135), "remained for three days with the *catholicos*; he rejoiced greatly and presented lavish gifts" (137). The narrative also portrays Ghazan as a good king who received Mar Yahballaha and other high churchmen as holy men: "The king [. . .] had him seated to his right and, having had wine brought, he bid the *catholicos* and all the bishops who accompanied him a cup" (155). Even Öljeitü, a Muslim ruler, sought religious advice from Nestorian monks (185). Despite his favor for Islam, wise counsel prevailed. His decision to reverse his adversarial policy against the Church was the result of visits with Mar Yahballaha: "The king honoured the *catholicos* a great deal"; "the king again summoned him to Tabriz, where he presented him with a saddle mule and a precious robe. [. . .] God had reawakened the mercy in him" (185, 187). The politics of counsel as portrayed in these instances reflects a prevailing trope as well as time-honored practice in Mongol history. Famous Chinggisid princes such as Khubilai and Hülegü frequently staged the reception of counsel and cultivated the image of themselves as rulers who sought learning and wisdom (Rossabi 1988, 137–39; Amitai 2014, 16–18).

The narrative refers to the hospitality of two kings who married Khubilai's daughters when the two protagonists visited Koshang, Mar Yahballaha's hometown. The two royal sons-in-law's effort to retain them indicates their interest in recruiting wise learned men in their government: "We strive to summon fathers

and monks from the West; how can we afford to let you leave?" (71; e.g., Rossabi 1992, 50). Their lavishing them with "gold, silver, and robes," gifts and supplies for their journey, is another sign of their appreciation of wisdom and talent (71). A crucial scene took place between Mar Yahballaha and Arghun after the fall of Ahmad: "The *catholicos* thus saw King Arghun and blessed him, praying for the stability of his reign. The king honoured him and exalted his position" (95). Even though Arghun had removed Ahmad from power violently, the scene was meant to legitimate his ascension as Ilkhan.

4. The Paradise of Christian Order: A Vision of the Western Mediterranean

Sauma's recollections of his visits with Christian princes of Europe are consistently favourable, compared with his varied assessments of rulers in Asia. The European Mediterranean represents the westernmost point of Sauma's journey. While Sauma's personal journey from China to the Ilkhanate had taken place within the Mongol empire, his visit to the Latin West marked his movement beyond Mongol dominion. His vision of the western Mediterranean as a land of Christian order and unity came not only at the end of an extended journey, but it was attained by crossing a major divide between continents and civilisations. Beyond the familiar empire of the Mongols, Sauma entered a land that was utterly unknown to him. Sauma's favorable impressions of the European Mediterranean and its Christian princes, therefore, were inextricably bound up with the dynamic process of his crossing boundaries and engagement with otherness.

As Renata Vinci has pointed out, the *History*'s economy of expression and basic simplicity of observation in its account of Sauma's diplomatic mission reflect the influence of Chinese travel writing (Vinci 2013, 344). This influence, moreover, can be traced specifically to Buddhist pilgrimage writing that has had a powerful impact on the popular imagination in China from the early fifth century, when the account of the Chinese monk Faxian 法顯 (337–422 CE) about his journey to India began circulating in China. In her pioneering scholarship on Chinese travel literature, Tian Xiaofei has shown that the tale of the Buddhist monk journeying from China to India to obtain sacred texts is a prevailing "cultural narrative," a story long embedded in the Chinese imagination with popular themes and images of travel (Tian 2011, 89). In this cultural narrative, the votary crosses borders under dire conditions to reach the far western land of India, where he witnesses an ideal society under good rule and peaceful order. The extreme opposition of hell and paradise organises the narrative in temporal as well as spatial terms, for paradise is achieved only after the pilgrim endures the hell of deadly terrain in the deep interior of Central Asia. The very act of moving through an area of catastrophic devastation signals the crossing of a crucial border beyond which lies paradise (Tian 2011, e.g., 88–118).

Sauma's westward journey also resembles the Buddhist monk's pilgrimage to India in its paradoxical conception of encounter as the achievement of one's true centre or identity (Tian 2011, e.g., 3, 97–104). The Chinese monk braved unfamiliar terrain to arrive at India as the spiritual centre of his world. Travel

through foreign and harsh terrain to attain the ideal state of enlightened Buddhist teachings was bound up with who he was as a Chinese Buddhist. Likewise, Sauma and Mark were joyful to arrive at the home of the Nestorian Church in Mesopotamia. Immediately upon arrival, they settled in a monastery as their new home (81).

In Sauma's account of his mission to Latin Europe, paradise lay beyond the infernal conditions of travel. While Latin Europe was entirely alien to him, well beyond the vast Mongol empire that he had travelled, it was also a place of Christian dominance that appealed to him. The sight of an active Mount Etna served as the liminal boundary of otherness that Sauma crossed to reach the civilised world of the western Mediterranean:

> Then he got on a ship and, once out in the open sea, he saw a mountain from which smoke rises all day, while at night fire appears on it; no-one can venture nearby because of the smell of Sulphur. People say that there is a great snake there, and that is why the sea is called Sea of the Dragon. It is indeed a scary sea, where many ships full of men have been lost (103).

The recorded eruption of Mount Etna on 18 June 1287 marked Sauma's arrival in Sicily and his very first moment of encounter of the western Mediterranean. The *History*'s description of the active volcano, however, is based on a formula in the work of geography, *Athar al-bilad wa-akhbar al-ibad* (*Monuments of the Lands and Historical Traditions about Their Peoples*), written in 1275 in Arabic by Persian writer Zakariyya al-Qazwini. While Qazwini's work might have been familiar to the anonymous author as well as to Sauma, geographical lore about volcanoes was printed and circulated in China before Sauma departed the country, and it might also have shaped Sauma's own observation of Mount Etna (Vinci 2013, 342–45; Vinci 2019, 39–44; Borbone 2008, 227–28; Borbone 2021 Introduction, 21). The fact that this passage is taken from a stock description in Arabic geography suggests that it serves a formal function of marking a liminal, unstable site of deadly otherness which the traveller must cross in his undertaking to reach the land of the Christians.

Beyond the border of disastrous nature and death lay an ideal place of grace and order. In contrast to Mongol turmoil and pluralism, this ideal place shone forth as a mirror of Christian discipline and unity. Even a war between Christian kings stood in sharp contrast to the conflict between Mongol rulers. Sauma stresses that Europeans did not harm civilians, as he and his entourage watched the battle between the troops of Aragon and Charles II from afar on the rooftop of his residence and "wondered at the customs of the Franks, who did not harm anybody, apart from the combatants" (105). Borbone reasons that Sauma very likely never witnessed the killing and devastation of civilians that occurred after this particular battle (Borbone 2008, 228). Beyond Sauma's historical experience, the assertion that European soldiers did not kill civilians is a deliberate rhetorical projection of the land of the Franks as a community of order and good rule. While in Central Asia Sauma and his pupil Mark suffered the ordeal of famine, violence, and death in the wake of military conflicts, in the European Mediter-

ranean, warfare became a picturesque experience observed from the rooftop, removed of any sense of threat. Certainly, the assertion of the orderliness of European warfare in the *History* is meant to contrast with Sauma's experience of the dire conditions of Mongol conflicts in Asia.

At the heart of this mirror that Sauma holds up for the princes of the Ilkhanate is Genoa. No prince ruled there. The brief allusion to the city's popular election of its leader is quickly followed by an extensive description of the city's great church that shows the piety of its citizens (115). Designated specifically as a "paradise," it is the city where Sauma met his counterpart in the Roman Catholic Church, a visitor-general: "We went back to spend the winter in the city of Genoa. When we arrived there, we saw once again that it resembled the garden of paradise: its winter is not cold, nor is its summer hot; there, greenery lasts all year round" (121). It is there, in a city blessed with ideal natural conditions and without monarchs, that he spoke candidly about why he served infidel rulers. He spoke about princes rather than to them. To his equal in the Roman Church, he made the case for Latin Europe's alliance with Mongol power in political terms. The Mongol rulers were not the model of Christian piety; their heart was "harder than rock," he admitted to the Catholic prelate. But Christians could work with them to achieve the Holy Land: "Yet they are hoping to conquer the Holy City, while those whose duty it would be do not even consider doing it or think of such an undertaking" (121).

The natural affinity between Sauma as a wise man of the Nestorian Church and the Catholic prelacy extends beyond the conversation with the visitor-general in Genoa. The cardinals of the Roman Church accepted Sauma as their equal. Their first concern, upon meeting him, was to make sure that he was rested and had received proper care and attention in Rome (105). Other princes of Latin Christendom, from the kings of France and England to the newly elected Pope Nicholas IV, also presented themselves as figures of empathy and intimate conversation. The pope "honoured Rabban Sauma more than usual" (123). Philip IV of France, a gracious host to Sauma, responded favorably to the envoy's proposal of alliance (117). Edward I eagerly received Sauma's embassy and likewise indicated an interest in his proposal (119). He impressed upon Sauma the unity and complete dominance of Christianity in the Latin world: "In the land of the Franks there are no two religions, only one, the one professed by Jesus Christ, and everybody is Christian" (119).

Later in the narrative, the ideal of faraway lands remains a powerful trope. Responding rhetorically to a political proposal to force Christians under siege at Irbil to leave the citadel, Mar Yahballaha resorted to the trope. Rather than support such a proposal, he would wish to "return to the East," his homeland, or end his life in "the land of the Franks," the home of Christian unity that could never be for him (165). The rhetorical appeal of Sauma's memoirs continued to exert an influence, even after his death, on both Mar Yahballaha and the anonymous author.

The account of Sauma's mission in the *History* holds up the land of the European Mediterranean as a mirror of ideal governance and order under which civilians lived unharassed by princes, blessed and united in their faith in the one

true God. Informed by Chinese-Buddhist ideas of crossing extreme borders and attaining enlightenment, the story of Sauma's mission to the Latin West functions as a masterful rhetoric of counsel in the *History*'s study of princely power. Rabban Sauma, the wise man of the Nestorian Church, tells the story of his journey to the ideal land to address the turmoil of the Mongol ruling elite.

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Wang Dayuan's 汪大淵 *Daoyi Zhilüe* 島夷志略: Did the World Beyond Chinese Borders Stretch to Morocco?

Ileana Amadei

Abstract: Wang Dayuan (14th century) travelled far and wide during the Yuan dynasty. On his two voyages he sailed to hundreds of places in Southeast Asia and India, also reaching the Near East and the coast of Africa. His work, the *Daoyi zhilüe* (1349/50), gathered information on places and local traditions, offering a Chinese view of the world beyond the imperial borders. This chapter examines Wang's work and provides an analysis of the 77th section of the *Daoyi zhilüe*, entitled *Taji'na* to enhance our understanding of how far the known world outside Chinese extended at that time and to determine whether Wang Dayuan actually crossed the Mediterranean Sea, as some scholars claim.

Keywords: Yuan dynasty; Travel Literature; Chinese Geography; Chinese Toponymy; Maritime Silk Road.

1. Wang Dayuan's Travels to the West

The Middle Ages in Europe provide us with numerous examples of travelogues and accounts of journeys filled with incredible stories about the distant lands of the Orient, such as those told by Marco Polo and Odoric of Pordenone. A few decades after these explorers, the travels of Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9) began from the Mediterranean shores of Morocco, providing us with a magnificent literary record of the Arabs' interest in the East. Another traveller worthy of consideration, albeit less famous than the aforementioned explorers, is the Chinese Wang Dayuan 汪大淵 (c. 1311–?). During the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), he too travelled, but in the opposite direction, i.e., from East to West (Park 2012, 115). His literary legacy, the *Daoyi zhilüe* 島夷志略 (*A Synoptical Account of the Islands and Barbarians*, 1349/50) (Ptak 1996, 127), can be considered a geographical work based on his experience of traveling, as the title has it, to various "Islands" among "barbarians". In his two voyages Wang Dayuan explored the so-called Southern Sea (*Nanhai* 南海), heading westward until he reached the coast of Africa.

His travelogue reflects the openness of the Mongol Era (Park 2012, 91) that witnessed a growing interest in contact between East and West, especially between the Chinese and the Islamic worlds (Park 2012, 92). When China became

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the centre of one of the largest empires in human history, the overland routes reopened and expanded, facilitating contact between distant lands (Park 2012, 8, 93). Nonetheless, maritime routes had been established even longer and they were diffuse (Chaffee 2013, 124), merchants often choosing the sea for trading purposes in order to avoid the wars between the khanates (Park 2019, 55; Schottenhamer 2019, 12). Indeed, much more trade went on than what was attested by official documents. The mainstream view in imperial times was that commerce was a marginal sector of the economy, the only acceptable form of which was represented by taxation, and this tended to overshadow the importance of the Chinese trading tradition in all its forms (Abu-Lughod 1989, 317–318). Maritime trade and trade routes, already well established under the Song dynasty (960–1279) (Schottenhammer 2015a, 437–525), reached their peak under the Mongols leading to a growth in the volume and quality of goods exchanged (Park 2019, 55). Not only did merchants and their commodities make use of these maritime routes, but ideas and knowledge also spread, accompanied by a broader vision of the world (Park 2019, 58–59). The increase in maritime contacts and commercial networks led to a new curiosity about the world and these are all elements that underpin Wang Dayuan's travelogue (Park 2012, 91). The known world outside Chinese borders was vast at that time, but how far did it stretch? Wang Dayuan travelled extensively on merchant ships, but did he actually get to cross the Mediterranean Sea and reach Tangier as some scholars claim? To investigate these questions, this chapter analyses the 77th section of the *Daoyi zhilüe*, called *Taji'na* 撻吉那, by examining scholarly publications on the subject. Following this brief introduction, the next section will introduce the *Daoyi zhilüe* and the ongoing scholarly debate; the final part of this chapter will focus on a description of *Taji'na,* offering a preliminary examination of the 77th section of the *Daoyi zhilüe*.

2. The *Daoyi Zhilüe*

The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Yuan dynasty, together with the expansion of maritime trade routes, made it possible for a work like *Daoyi zhilüe* 島夷志略 to see the light of day in 1349. Wu Jian 吳鑒[1] asked Wang Dayuan to publish it on the local gazetteer of Quanzhou bearing the title *Daoyi zhi* 島夷志. Published also as separate work,[2] what is now known as *Daoyi zhilüe* is divided into one hundred sections, of which ninety-nine focus on individual places that the author claims to have visited. Even though it may sound incredible for a young man in medieval times to have reached so many distant lands,

[1] Wu Jian 吳鑒, *zi* 字 or courtesy name Mingzhi 明之, was a writer from the Yuan dynasty. Originally of Sanshan 三山 in Fujian, was the editor of the local gazetteer of Quanzhou entitled *Qingyuan xuzhi* 清源续志 (*Continuation of the History and Topography of Qingyuan*) and author of the *Qingjing si ji* 清净寺記 (*Notes on the Qingjing Temple,* 1350).

[2] Some scholars have doubted that the *Daoyi zhilüe* and *Daoyi zhi* are the same work (Liao 2001, 135–42).

most scholars hold that it is impossible to disprove it, although doubts do persist (Rockhill 1913, 475; Ptak 1996, 130). Thanks to his first-hand experiences, Wang must have been considered the person most qualified to write about foreign lands (Su 1981, 11; Ptak 1996, 127), and even today his brief treatise remains an important source on medieval geography, commerce, local costumes and the economy of the Yuan era.

The sections of the *Daoyi zhilüe* follow the same structure throughout. After the title, which is usually the only source of information about the name of the place, each short section starts with a description of the location, topography, and weather, followed by information about the traditions and customs of indigenous populations; the final part is about the local products and trading interests. The sections, however, are not arranged in any geographical or chronological order,[3] which makes it difficult to determine the actual itinerary of the writer. In fact, we do not know much about Wang's life or his travels except for what is narrated in this work. The location of the toponyms mentioned in the *Daoyi zhilüe* and the extent of Wang's itinerary are thus topics that deserve further investigation, even though some questions may remain unanswerable (Ptak 1996, 137).

Between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the *Daoyi zhilüe* caught the attention of scholars, which led to the publication of the first annotated editions and translations. Shen Cengzhi (Xu 2019) and Fujita Toyohashi (1936) were the first scholars to analyse the work, but one of the most significant studies on the *Daoyi zhilüe*, both in terms of its depth of analysis and the number of sources consulted, is Su Jiqing's annotated edition, published posthumously in 1981. In the 1990s, Shen Fuwei devoted several chapters of his works on China's relations with foreign countries to *Daoyi zhilüe*, providing a fresh perspective on the work, the author, and the itinerary of his journeys: here Wang Dayuan is seen as one of the first Chinese travellers to sail across the Mediterranean as far as Morocco. Western academics also studied the *Daoyi zhilüe*. Between 1913 and 1916 Rockhill, for example, translated some passages of the *Daoyi zhilüe* in the journal *T'oung Pao*.[4] The first annotated editions and Rockhill's translation do not clarify the location of some of the toponyms; this is in contrast to Zheng Suhuai – who edited the *Daoyi zhilüe* with Wang Bei in 2022 – and Su Jiqing, who provide numerous examples and hypotheses that occasionally differ from those of Shen Fuwei (Ptak 1996, 135–36). According to Su Jiqing, Wang travelled across the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to the coast of East Africa, while according to Shen Fuwei, he explored the Indian Ocean on a first expedition. On a second, he started from the Indian Ocean and, having reached Aden, headed towards Mecca. After visiting Egypt, he sailed across the Mediterranean to Tangier and it was on his return that he reached the coast of East Africa (Shen 1990, 390–92). As Ptak has pointed out, Su Jiqing and Shen

[3] Ptak (1996, 130–1) suggests that there is a symbolic structure in which numerology also plays a part.

[4] A more recent translation is that of Chen Hurng Yu (2023).

Fuwei disagree most strongly with regard to the African sections. This leads us to the core question: did the world beyond the borders of China stretch as far as Morocco for Wang Dayuan? Unlike most scholars, Shen Fuwei states that when sailing from Egypt, Wang crossed the Mediterranean and reached the Moroccan port of Tangier (also the hometown of Ibn Battuta). The latest translation published in 2023 also assumes that Wang Dayuan sailed to the Mediterranean, called *Guowang hai* 國王海, and reached the Sicilian town of Licata, *Lijiata* 哩伽塔 (Chen 2023, 177–78), although excluding Morocco from the itinerary.[5] Su Jiqing states that he did not get that far in the West, thus offering a different perspective on the subject when discussing the *Taji'na* section.

3. Overview of the *Taji'na* Section

> *Taji'na*
> The country is in the land of *Dali*, which is the ancient Western territory. Mountains are few and fields are barren. The climate is frequently hot, the sky is often gloomy. Costumes are like those of Qiang. Men and women have faces and bodies like lacquer, with round eyes, and uncombed grey hair. They wear clothes made of soft brocade. Women make a living by spinning, men by collecting *yahu* gemstones. They boil seawater to obtain salt and ferment pomegranates to make liquor. There is a leader. The land produces *anxi* aromatics, glazed vases, borax, and gardenias; the latter are particularly superior to those of other countries. The goods traded are things such as placer gold, silver, multicoloured satin, iron tripods, copper wires, sulphur, and mercury.

The *Taji'na* section is the 77th of the *Daoyi zhilüe* and, like the other parts, is structured as explained above. The title, *Taji'na*, identifies the name of the place described, and this in itself has been the source of much debate. The annotated translation by Rockhill states that *Taji'na* was famous for its gardenia flowers, quoting from the text, but without providing any specific location. In China, the gardenia was called *chanyou* 禅友, 'the meditative friend' (Yetts 1941, 1–21), and it was appreciated for its scent and was sometimes even elevated to artistic subject status. Its fruit was used in traditional medicine or as a dye, since a maize colour can be extracted from it, to create yellow, one of the five official colours, other than white, that were used at court. These flowers and their fruits were among the chosen "ancient and honourable vegetable dyes" together with Chinese indigo, madder, acorns, and gromwell that were used to produce blue, red, black, and purple respectively (Schafer 1985, 208). The Chinese were thus interested in this product and saying that *Taji'na* grows gardenias "superior to those of other countries" would have had a certain significance. Botanical and medical treatises also mentioned this flower, which some believed to be originally from Western territories, *Xiyu* 西域.

[5] *Lijiata* 哩伽塔 is the section n. 91 of the *Daoyi zhilüe*. Chen (2023) locates the 77th section's *Taji'na* in India.

In the *Bencao gang mu* 本草綱目 (*Compendium of Materia Medica,* 16th cent.) the gardenia is described as a flower "as large as a wine cup" whose fruit was used "for dyeing an orange colour" (Bretschneider 1894, 502).[6] As noted by Bretschneider (1894, 501), gardenias are also described by Su Song 蘇頌 (11th century) in his work *Bencao tujing* 本草圖經 (*Illustrated Pharmacopoeia*, 11th cent.). The Chinese *zhanbo* 詹葡 would be equivalent to the Sanskrit *campaka,* also rendered in Chinese as *zhanbojia* 瞻葡伽, *zhanpojia* 旃波迦, *zhanpo* 瞻波. The champak, *michelia champaka* and its fragrant flowers were often confused with frangipani or jasmine (Schafer 1967, 199). During the Tang dynasty, Chinese gardenia was believed to be a native champak, generating thus even more confusion (Schafer 1967, 199).

According to Su Jiqing, Wang Dayuan in the *Daoyi zhilüe* perhaps used *zhizi hua* 梔子花 to mean the *fan zhizi* 番梔子, the foreign or western gardenia – i.e., the *Michelia champaka* rather than the *Gardenia florida* (or *jasminoide*) – adding that they may have been erroneously considered the same thing (Su 1981, 48). Some types of gardenia,[7] like the *Gardenia jasminoide,* were also confused with saffron (*Crocus sativus*) as attested in the in the *Huihui yaofang* 回回藥方 (*Muslim or West Asian Recipes*) compiled in Yuan times,[8] or with safflowers.[9] They are also mentioned in geographical works like the *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 (*Notes from the Land Beyond the Passes*, 1178) and the *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 (*Description of the Foreign Lands*, 1225) as well as the one in question.[10] In Zhou Qufei's 周去非 *Lingwai daida*, gardenia flowers are listed among the products of the Arab region, specifically in the description of the country of Meilugudun 眉路骨惇, which Almonte suggests may be the city of Merv in modern-day Turkmenistan.[11] Another section of the *Lingwai daida*, the 133rd, focuses on foreign gardenias (*fan zhizi* 蕃梔子), celebrated for their perfume and originally from *Dashi* countries 大食國, the Arab territories (Hirth, Rockhill 1966, 203). The second part of the *Zhufan zhi,* called *zhiwu* 志物 (products), dedicates an entire section to garde-

[6] Bretschneider (1894), quotes and translates, among others, Li Shizhen's 李時珍 *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 and Su Song's 蘇頌 *Bencao tujing* 本草圖經.

[7] According to Han (2015, 236), different types of gardenias had different uses.

[8] The *Huihui yaofang* is a medical encyclopaedia that survives only in fragmentary form; it was compiled in the late Yuan dynasty and is based on earlier Persian medical texts (Schottenhamer 2015b, 86; Buell, Anderson 2021, 261). Saffron was barely known in China until the Yuan dynasty and was not well distinguished from safflower or turmeric (Shafer 1985, 125).

[9] Safflower (known as *honghua* 紅花, red flower) was introduced to China from Western regions along the silk route around the third century CE, while saffron (*fan honghua* 番紅花, meaning western red flower), was imported to China during the Mongol period. The colour effect produced by the former is largely red, while the latter has only yellow or orange dye components (Han 2015, 233–34), like gardenias.

[10] In the *Daoyi zhilüe*, this flower is listed among the local products of *Taji'na* and of *Longxianyu* 龍涎嶼, which, according to Su and the edition by Zheng and Wang, is the Indonesian island of Pulao Rondo to the north-east of Sumatra (Su 1981, 44–45; Zheng, Wang 2022, 12), while Rockhill and Fujita identify *Longxianyu* with Pulao Beras (Rockhill 1915, 158; Fujita 1935, 15).

[11] The identification of the toponyms remains a much-debated topic (Almonte 2017, 1–43; 2020, 148–49).

nia flowers under the name *qizihua* 梔子花, comparing them to safflowers and locating them, again, in the territory of *Dashi* 大食, the Arabs (Hirth, Rockhill 1966, 202). According to those sources, gardenias were generally associated with the West, particularly with Arab regions.

Shen Cengzhi and Fujita Toyohashi situated *Taji'na* in India. As noted by Su Jiqing, the former considered *Dali* 達里 a toponym for Delhi, thus locating *Taji'na* in central India, while the Japanese scholar locates it in the northwestern part of the same subcontinent (Su 1981, 305–6; Fujita 1936, 134–35). In his annotated edition, Fujita cites the *Zhufan zhi,* raising the question as to whether the toponym *Taji'na* 撻吉那 might have been mistakenly derived from *Chanaji* 茶那咭, the position of the last two characters having been inverted. *Chanaji* 茶那咭 in the *Zhufan zhi* is the capital of *Pengjialuo* 鵬茄囉, which corresponds to a place located in present-day India (Hirth, Rockhill 1966, 97). Fujita then suggests that *Taji'na* might be in the area of the desert of Jahar, but without specifying where (Fujita 1935, 134–135; Su 1981, 306), although another Japanese scholar, Kuwata Rokuro, is of a different opinion, and his notes on *Taji'na* in "New Annotations on *Daoyi zhilüe*" (*Daoyi zhilüe shin shō* 島夷志略新證, 1969) can be found translated in Chinese at the end of Su Jiqing's scholarly edition. Kuwata states that *Taji'na* is Deccan, in present-day Mysore in southern India. According to him, this toponym derives from Dakshina, the Sanskrit name for Deccan (Su 1981, 403–10). Although Su Jiqing's annotated edition excludes this hypothesis (Su 1981, 306), the local products that are reported make this claim not entirely implausible.

Having considered all the above, Su Jiqing situates *Taji'na* in Persia. According to him, *Taji'na* would have sounded quite similar to Tahiri, the ancient city also known as Siraf, which between the 9th and the 10th centuries was one of the most famous international and commercial ports of call in the Fars region. According to Su Jiqing, the *-hi* sound can be read as *-ki*, and *-ri* can be read as *-ni* or *-na*. However, it is worth noting that when Wang travelled to the Persian Gulf the glory days of Siraf had already passed.[12] At that time, as Su Jiqing also stresses, the island of Qeys (Kish) had already taken its place as the principal port of the gulf (Su 1981, 306). Moreover, Wang's contemporary, the writer Wu Jian, mentioned Siraf in his *Qingjing si ji* 清淨寺記 (*Notes on the Qingji Temple,* 1350) using its ancient name *Sanawei* 撒那威 rather than the name Tahiri (Su 1981, 306). Su Jiqing also quotes the annotated translation of *Zhufan zhi*, observing that when analysing the section *Dashi*, Hirth and Rockhill encountered the toponym *Silianguo* 思連國, which they considered to be either Siraf or Shiraz, but without making a definitive choice (Hirth, Rockhill 1966, 122; Su 1981, 306–7).

From India to Persia, the location of *Taji'na* then shifted further to the West as Shen Fuwei claimed that Wang Dayuan reached the even more distant land of Morocco. Shen backs up his argument on the ground of phonetics, stating that if the Minnan dialect, which is typical of Fujian, is taken into account, then *Taji'na*

[12] Siraf's importance lasted until the city was destroyed by earthquake in 977 (Schottenhammer, Xiao 2016, 145–6).

should be considered similar to Tangier, since the *r* of Tangier is pronounced as an *n* (Shen 1990, 397). If his assumption is correct, Wang Dayuan could be considered the perfect counterpart of Ibn Battuta, who reached Quanzhou from Tangier in approximately the same period.

The different hypotheses on the location of *Taji'na* continue on each side of the debate when other details are examined. From the text, *Taji'na* is in the land of *Dali* "*guo ju Dali zhi di* 國居達里之地", which indicates Tabriz in Iran according to Su Jiqing, reiterated in Zheng and Wang's annotated edition (2022, 99), the toponym resembles the name Tauris which is used to identify the Iranian city. In Yuan times Tabriz was the capital of the Ilkhanate domain and was considered a metropolis, a multicultural and economic centre lying on the trade routes between East and West (Rossabi 2010, 98). Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta described the magnificence of Tauris, celebrating its markets and the refined products one could find there, such as its silky fabrics and precious stones.[13] On the contrary, Shen Fuwei (1990, 398), arguing in favour of a Moroccan origin of *Taji'na*, states that *Dali* refers to the Berber tribe of Darisa, quoting the medieval historian Ibn Ḵhaldūn (1332-1406). The costumes of the people of *Taji'na* are compared to those of Qiang ("*suyu qiang tong* 俗與羌同"), whose main characteristics were nomadism and sheep herding (Wang 2002, 134). In this sense, apart from the phonetic similarities, *Dali* might arguably refer to Berber people who were often transhumant stock-breeders.

The section continues with the description of the location of *Taji'na*, and even a simple expression such as *Xiyu* 西域, generally translated as "Western territory", gives rise to such considerations. The text states that Dali corresponds to the ancient Western Territory, or to what once was the Western Territory ("*ji gu zhi Xiyu* 即古之西域"). Traditionally, *Xiyu* indicated everything to the west of the Chinese border. In a broad sense, this included India, the Near East and northern Africa, as stated by Zheng and Wang (2022, 99), although it was generally used to refer to India or the Middle East. According to Shen Fuwei, *Xiyu* should be read as a translation of the word Maghreb, which means the West, Western territory. However, it seems that there were already toponyms for Maghreb or Morocco in Song times, such as *Lingwai daida*'s *Mojiaguo* 默伽國[14] and *Mojialieguo* 默伽獵國 of the *Zhufan zhi*,[15] while the *Shilin guangji* 事林廣記 (*Vast Record from the Forest of Things,* 1264) mentions *Mojialaguo* 默伽臘國: all names that indicated the region of Maghreb or Morocco according to Ptak (2022, 21).[16]

[13] On Marco Polo's description, see Polo, Moule, Pelliot 1938, 104-105; Rossabi 2010, 97. On Ibn Battuta's description, see Gibb 2005, 101.

[14] Chapter *Waiguomen xia* 外國門下, Section 52 *Hanghai waiyi* 航海外夷 (Almonte 2020, 183-6).

[15] Volume 1, *juan shang* 卷上, chapter *Zhiguo* 志國 (Countries), section 38, *Haishang zaguo* 海上雜國 (Countries in the sea). See also Hirth and Rockhill (1966, 154).

[16] Almonte (2020, 183–86) when discussing Zhou Qufei's work is not entirely convinced that *Mojia* 默伽 referred to Maghreb or Morocco, not only because of the great distance separating Song China from northwest Africa – which, however, might justify the lack of information – but because of the position of the *Mojia* section in the work.

Even though it is not improbable for Wang Dayuan to use a different toponym to his predecessors, it is interesting to note that, if Shen is correct and *Xiyu* stands for Maghreb, Wang would have added a new meaning to the original, thus making *Xiyu* a semantic loan (Masini 1993, 129).

When analysing the section, there are also other details relating to the description of the local population and customs that need to be taken into consideration. For example, examining how people from *Taji'na* made a living, which was by collecting *'yahu shi'* ("*Cai yahu shi wei huo* 採鴉鵲石為活"). According to Su Jiqing the word *yahu* is a phonetic loan from *yāqūt* ياقوت, meaning "precious stone, gem" in Arabic, but also "ruby" in Persian (Su 1981, 154).[17] Central Asia was famous for its gems, as we read in Marco Polo's travelogue or in the account of Ibn Battuta, who, in describing Tabriz market, observes that the Ilkhanate capital was rich in precious stones (Gibb 2005, 101). In the *Daoyi zhilüe,* the section called *Mingjialuo* 明家儸[18] explains that if the gems are red coloured, they are called *yahu* ("*qi se hong huo, ming yahu ye* 其色紅活，名鴉鵲也"). It seems that *yahu* stones were red gems, or at least are considered as such in this travelogue.[19] Another text from the Yuan period, the *Chuogenglu* 輟耕錄 (*Retirement to the Countryside,* 1366) by Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀, mentions *yahu* stones and their red colour.[20] If *yahu* specifically indicates rubies rather than a gemstone in general, our attention again shifts, since the most famous ruby mines in ancient times were those in Badakhshan in Afghanistan (Bezhan 2011, Melikian-Chirvani 2001), in addition to those in Sri Lanka (Block, Figg 2000, 209).[21]

4. Final Remarks

Wang Dayuan travelled to very distant lands recording information on places that had never been mentioned by previous Chinese sources and would not occur in later ones. Some of Wang's notes may have been derived from indirect sources, as is common for ancient geographical works, making it more difficult to determine if the author had truly visited all the places he described. While many toponyms have already been identified by academics, many unsolved

[17] The dictionary *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典 states that *yahu shi* 鴉鵲石 are blue gemstones. A phonetic loan from *yāqūt* ياقوت would be the homophone *yahu* 鴉忽.

[18] The consulted version of *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature*) recorded this toponym as *Mingjialuo* 明家儸, while other editions use *Pengjialuo* 朋家儸. According to Su Jiqing, the place name is only found in this text, and he identifies it with Maggona, Sri Lanka. According to Zheng and Wang's annotated edition, this was an ancient Sri Lankan port near Kalutara (Su 1981, 152–3; Zheng, Wang 2022, 46).

[19] According to Zhou Yunzhong (2014, 118), the *yahu shi* are black pearls, which would confirm his hypothesis of the location of *Taji'na* in southwest India.

[20] For a translation of the passage see Bretschneider (1910, 174). The Chinese text is available on the Chinese Text Project. https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=389039&searchu=%E9%B8%A6%E9%B9%98&remap=gb.

[21] Although Wang Dayuan may have ignored the fact that these products could have been imported from other countries.

questions are still subject to scholarly debate, including the case presented here. Even though the hypotheses are detailed and accurate, at present it is not possible to state definitively where *Taji'na* was located or to prove that Wang Dayuan reached Morocco. However, the Mediterranean Sea was probably known in Yuan times, as the *Kangnido* map (*Map of Integrated Regions and Terrains and of Historical Countries and Capitals, Honil gangli yeokdae gukdo jido,* 1402) shows. The Korean map, based on previous Chinese, Arabic and Persian geographical sources (Park 2012, 104–5), depicts Asia, Europe, and Africa, mentioning numerous countries and towns in the Mediterranean area, even though the Mediterranean Sea per se was not well delineated (Kenzheakhmet 2016, 113–14). Previous Chinese sources had mentioned a "Western Sea *Xihai* 西海" to indicate the Mediterranean (Liu 2011) and at that time Morocco had already appeared in geographical treatises (Ptak 2022); even Sicily had been presented to Chinese readers through Zhao Rukuo's work (Fracasso 1982; Vinci 2013), but still very little was known. Thus, it is not clear whether Wang Dayuan ever crossed the so called "Sea between lands" and reached the extreme West. Nonetheless, the mere idea of this possibility opens up new horizons, providing the opportunity for further research and debate.

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Roman Law in Late Qing and Early Republican Chinese Sources: A Founding Element of the Mediterranean and Western Civilisation

Lara Colangelo

Abstract: One aspect still scarcely investigated in the literature on the reception of Roman law in China is the image of the Romanist legal tradition emerging from Chinese sources during the late Qing and early Republican Era. This was a fundamental phase in China's decision to draw inspiration from the continental system for legal reform. A significant element, still under-examined, is the perception of the role exerted by Roman law well beyond the Italic territory, primarily within the vast cultural area of the Mediterranean. This chapter, therefore, aims to highlight how Roman law is presented in Chinese sources of the aforementioned period not only as an element connected with Rome and the Italic peninsula, but as a transnational element that transcends Italic borders, influencing the entire Western and Mediterranean culture.

Keywords: Roman Law; Reception of the Romanist Legal Tradition in China; Roman Law in Chinese Sources; The Mediterranean in Chinese Sources; Roman Law and the Mediterranean

1. Introduction

The reception of Roman law in China is a complex process rooted in more remote periods, manifesting itself concretely during the second half of the 19th century. Despite a handful of interesting isolated studies (for example, Wang 2002), it remains overall little known.

One aspect still scarcely investigated is the image of the Romanist legal tradition emerging from Chinese sources during the late Qing and early Republican Era. This was a fundamental phase in China's decision to adhere to the continental system, or to draw inspiration from it in its implementation of national legal reform. In this sense, a significant yet under-examined element is the perception of the role of Roman law exerted well beyond the Italic territory, primarily within the vast cultural area of the Mediterranean. This concept, in fact, has long been known and self-evident in the Western world, but it begins to become clear in China between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, by being included in a small but increasing number of valuable sources.

This chapter aims to highlight how Roman law is presented in Chinese sources of the aforementioned period. More specifically, it examines how Roman law

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is presented not only as an element strictly connected to the city of Rome and the Italian peninsula, but also as a transnational[1] element that transcends Italic borders, influencing Western and Mediterranean non-material culture.

2. The Expansion of Rome and Roman Law in the Mediterranean

In this introductory paragraph, I will present contents that are well-known in scholarly literature but necessary to fully understanding the following paragraph which is specifically related to the primary Chinese sources analysed and therefore constitutes the core of this study. Starting from general considerations on various intrinsic characteristics of the Mediterranean reality and the Romanist legal experience, I will try to outline a synoptic picture of the primarily political, but also social and cultural role of Rome. This therefore will lead to an outline of Roman law in the Mediterranean, ranging from shortly after the unification of the Italic peninsula (3rd century BCE) to the first phase of the Eastern Roman Empire. During this period, Rome and its legal tradition developed a relationship with the Mediterranean, a vast aquatic (but not only) entity that witnessed the birth or blossoming of multiple civilisations. The Mediterranean, as pointed out by Norwich (2016, 37–38), "is a miracle. […] Something utterly unique, a body of water that might have been deliberately designed, like no other on the surface of the globe, as a cradle of cultures. […] It links three of the world's six continents; its climate for much of the year is among the most benevolent to be found anywhere. Small wonder, then, that the Middle Sea […] nurtured three of the most dazzling civilisations of antiquity". In this sense, it is easy to understand how the Mediterranean has been the subject of numerous academic investigations, especially in the West. Starting with Braudel, several scholars have dedicated their research to the Mediterranean (to mention a few: Braudel 1985; 1986; 1998; Abulafia 2011; Horden-Purcell 2006; Matvejević 2006; Norwich 2006). Due to obvious spacial limitations, a full review of these studies is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, what is most relevant is one distinctive feature of the "Liquid Continent,"[2] an element on which most scholars substantially agree, regardless of the variety of analytical perspectives adopted. Specifically, it is the intrinsically unitary character of the vast Mediterranean cultural area: the Mediterranean is a conglomeration and amalgamation of peoples, customs, and cultural traditions; it is a hybrid and, in some respects, fragmented[3] space in which different national identities and boundaries tend to blur.

[1] In this chapter, the term 'transnational' is used broadly, not only referring to the current nations that occupy the Mediterranean area and, generally speaking, Europe and the Western world. It also refers to the various countries (regions, territories) that were formerly independent and were subsequently conquered and incorporated into the Roman Empire.

[2] For this definition of the Mediterranean, see Abulafia 2011, xxiii.

[3] On the presumably fragmentary nature of Mediterranean civilisation(s), see Abulafia (2011), whose perspective is generally in antithesis with that of Braudel.

At the same time, another nearly universally acknowledged characteristic is the long-duration of the Mediterranean's history, originally highlighted by Braudel. In his renowned answer to the question "What is the Mediterranean?", cited countlessly (therefore not quoted here fully), he defines the "sea between lands"[4] as "non pas une civilisation, mais des civilisations entassées les unes sur les autres" (1985, 8) and subsequently specifies that "les civilisations […] traversent le temps, elles triomphent de la durée. […] elles restent maîtresses de leur espace, car le territoire qu'elles occupent peut varier à ses marges, mais au cœur, dans la zone centrale, leur domaine, leur logement restent les mêmes. […] et cette longue durée s'incorpore forcément à leur nature" (1985, 160). Later studies, specifically archaeological ones, have pointed out the vastness of the Mediterranean's phenomenological landscape, leading us to avoid generalisations that do not fit well with the richness and diversity of what can be physically contained in the Mediterranean area (Tusa 2014, 100). However, the concept of long duration remains applicable to the Mediterranean reality, as "les civilisations ne sont pas mortelles […]. Elles survivent aux avatars, aux catastrophes. Le cas échéant, elles renaissent de leurs cendres" (Braudel 1985, 160). In this sense, the history of the Mediterranean and its varied yet unitary civilisation shows a remarkable analogy with the dimension of law, primarily of Roman law. In fact, the latter has remained grounded in the fundamental principle of the long, or even eternal, duration of law despite constantly evolving over the centuries. The eternity of law was transmitted from the archaic ages up to Emperor Justinian I (527–65). It is he who in the constitution *Dedoken*,[5] opposing the absolute perfection of divine things to the condition of human law, affirmed the latter *in infinitum decurrit*. This concept was contested in more modern centuries, yet without shaking the multi-millennial idea that the authority of law lies in its long duration. In fact, after the French Revolution, the jurists of the *Code Napoléon* (1804) once again justified the force of codified law as founded on the eternal laws of nature (Casavola 2004).

With these preliminary remarks, I will now try to recall the main stages in the history of Rome and Roman law in the Mediterranean, necessarily synthesising them in an extremely schematic manner. Following Abulafia (2011, xvii), I will expound "the process by which the Mediterranean became in varying degrees integrated into a single commercial, cultural and (under the Romans) political zone". As is well known, the prominence of Rome in the Italic peninsula by 300 BCE was the result of land-based wars. At that time, Rome had no aspirations of becoming a naval power, nor did this change until the Punic Wars. Their significance extended far beyond the western and central Mediterranean. With the fall of Carthage, Rome consolidated its control over Greece, opening up the possibility of intense competition with the rulers of Egypt and Syria for

[4] Meaning suggested by the etymology of the Latin name *Mĕdĭterrānĕus*.

[5] Bilingual (Latin-Greek) constitution, issued by Justinian in 533 and introductory to the *Digest*.

mastery over the eastern Mediterranean (Abulafia 2011, 189). From the fall of Carthage to Egypt's conquest, the Romans extended their control over the entire Mediterranean, which then became their "Mare Nostrum" (Our Sea), constituting a vast area characterised by political, economic, and cultural unity. By the reign of Emperor Hadrian (117–138 CE), "the outline of the Empire represented an immense ellipse around the Mediterranean, […] with the sea providing the basic shape: essentially the Roman Empire was the land surrounding the *Mare Nostrum"* (Braudel 2002, 632). Single rule over the "Mare Nostrum" and the resulting so-called *pax romana* ensured freedom of movement and cultural mixing in the Mediterranean on an unprecedented scale. This political and economic unity began to weaken around the 5th century, with a gradual detachment of the western Mediterranean from the eastern Mediterranean. By the 6th century, the unity of the Mediterranean had been shattered politically and commercially (Abulafia 2011, 241). However, the cultural unity developed in previous centuries continued to endure in a number of ways. As previously mentioned in scholarly literature (Ivetic 2022), a truly integrated world was created, one that wasn't undone by later divisions in the Mediterranean. Romanisation was not a unidirectional process: on one hand, the vast area of the Mediterranean conquered by Rome had absorbed its cultural and social elements; on the other hand, Roman culture itself had become Mediterraneanised, in the sense of adapting to the political and economic circumstances of the Mediterranean, even before the unity of Roman Italy (Augustus' Italy) was achieved. In this sense, Roman law is one of the primary manifestations of this shared cultural substrate. Particularly, the *ius gentium,* beyond constituting a sector of Roman private law, acted as transnational law by regulating relations between individuals of different nationalities and served to facilitate commercial exchanges in the Mediterranean. After the First Punic War, it was increasingly understood and accepted as the law of the Mediterranean world, often applied standardly at the provincial level in relations between foreigners or between foreigners and Romans (Giliberti 2015, 5–7). As previously pointed out by Braudel (2001, 312), Rome "could not maintain contact with its Empire – the rest of Italy, the provinces, the cities – without the legal regulations essentials to the maintenance of political, social and economic order", and Roman law, extending to the conquered territories, was a key element in maintaining the unity of the empire. It continues to impress with its "extraordinary success story […] which has remained in evidence to the present day". Today, the crucial role of the Romanist legal tradition is not only recognised from a strictly political and institutional point of view by legal literature. It is also acknowledged from a broader cultural perspective by scholars of Mediterranean Studies. For example, Matvejevic includes Roman law among the main components of the "Mediterranean mosaic" (2006, 18). Braudel not only underlines its importance in the Imperial Era, but also highlights its imperishable character as a legal tradition that outlasted the fall of the empire and became the foundation of Western law and, in several aspects, of Western civilisation (2001, 312). This concept, as we will see, is frequently mentioned in late Qing Chinese sources and this is presumably one of

the main factors that led the Chinese intelligentsia and government to opt for a Romanist-style legal reform in the beginning of the 20th century.

3. Roman Law in Late Qing and Early Republican Chinese Sources: A Constitutive and Transnational Element of the Mediterranean and Western Civilisation

As is well known, the history of Roman law did not end with the fall of the empire. After a period of stagnation in the evolution of the Romanist science, a revival of Romanist studies occurred with the Bolognese School of Glossators (11th–13th centuries) and with the Commentators (14th century), reaching the era of the great codifications in the 19th century. It is therefore undoubtedly true that Roman law has constituted the foundation of all Western law (partially influencing the countries of the Common Law as well). Similarly, it is well known that in modern times, extra-European countries, including China, reformed their national legal system inspired by the Romanist one. This occurred for a series of reasons that cannot be completely summarised here. However, the primary reason was the systematic and universalistic character of Roman law.

As has been mentioned, the reception of Roman law in China began towards the end of the 19th century. Regarding Chinese sources, there are three main phases that characterise this process: 1) the appearance of the earliest references to Roman law in works translated (or, rarely, composed) by Western missionaries; 2) the inclusion of references to Roman law in documents directly composed by Chinese authors; 3) the writing of the earliest Roman law manuals translated or composed in Chinese. Of this vast quantity of documents, this paper limits itself to analysing some of the works aligning closely with the subject of investigation (i.e., those that describe Roman law as a transnational element in relation to the Mediterranean civilisation) and provides a specific example for each of the three types of sources.[6]

As for the first type of sources analysed, one of the main works containing relevant references for the present study is *Luoma zhilüe* 羅馬誌略 (Brief History of Rome, 1886) which is the translation of M. Creighton's *History of Rome* (1879) by the English missionary J. Edkins. This volume is rich in references to specific laws and institutions of ancient Rome. Above all, it highlights how Roman law constituted an indispensable cultural heritage on which the law of the European nations (and more specifically, the peoples of the Mediterranean) was based. In the first pages of the volume, it is clearly illustrated how Roman law was extended to the areas of the Mediterranean conquered by Rome and inhabited by peoples defined as "civilised" precisely because of this law:

> The people of Rome first of all overcame all the other people of Italy and then went on to overcome all the nations that lived round the Mediterranean Sea. Also, besides conquering these nations, they governed them, and gave them their

[6] This study will not investigate the first mentions of the Mediterranean which appeared in much earlier sources, starting from the Han period, 202 BCE–220 CE (Yu 2013). For further details on these aspects, readers may refer to Chapters 1 and 8.2 of this volume.

> own laws, and made them all like themselves in some degree or another. Now, these nations who lived round the Mediterranean Sea were the only people who lived in cities, and made themselves laws, and wrote books, and were what we in these times call *civilised*. […] Rome was a great link in the history of the world, for all the nations of old times were conquered by Rome, and so came under Rome's power, while all the European nations of our own days were formed out of Rome's overthrow and learnt a great deal from her (Creighton 1879, 5–6).[7]

In the following pages, the history of Roman expansion is narrated in detail. Therefore, it is reinforced how Rome, starting from the Punic Wars, conquered the entire Mediterranean area, placing itself at the head of the "civilised" world:

> Thus, you see that in the year 133 <BCE> Rome, besides ruling Italy, was ruler also of Macedonia, Greece, Asia, Spain and Africa, in fact all the countries round the Mediterranean Sea, which thus became a Roman lake. Also, these were all the countries which at that time were civilised, that is, had made themselves into regular states, whose citizens lived together for their common good, and built cities, and made and obeyed laws. You see, then, how important was the position of Rome after these wars: she was the head of the civilised world. (Creighton 1879, 51).[8]

The use of the expression "Roman lake" to refer to the Mediterranean is quite widespread in Western historiography (Abulafia 2011, 199; Norwich 2006, 143; etc.). Although in this specific case, the Chinese translation ("是瀕地中海之諸國，幾盡服屬羅馬矣" or "all of the countries around the Mediterranean Sea were subject and belonged to Rome") is not literal, the meaning is faithfully conveyed by the translator and highlights the extent of Roman dominion over all of the countries of the Mediterranean area. This unity was not only political but also cultural, as "the Mediterranean had become *Mare Nostrum,* 'our sea', but the 'our' referred to a much larger idea of Rome than the Senate and People of Rome itself, *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. Roman citizens, freedmen, slaves and allies swarmed across the Mediterranean: traders, soldiers and captives criss-crossed the sea. They carried with them a predominantly Hellenistic

[7] The Chinese translation of Creighton's work is faithful to the original. Therefore, for this quote and the subsequent quoted passages, I directly provide the text of *History of Rome,* including the corresponding passages of the Chinese version by Edkins (for which the 2014 edition was used) in the footnote: 閱乎此書，則知羅馬先如何據有意大利諸他國地，繼如何評定瀕臨地中海之四周諸國。不惟有是，並能分設方伯，治理諸地頒予羅馬律例，教導多人，使與羅馬人有多寡不等之相似，而瀕地中海之諸國，與未經王化者不同，俱旅居城內。自訂有條例，書籍成卷紩，且禮儀制度，文雅有序，益可顯羅馬之声威矣。[…] 羅馬國實為歐洲古今數代之樞紐也。往古歐洲諸國，舉經羅馬征服。邇時諸國，當羅馬衰落時，乘勢自強興。於其往昔之條教號令，決有心得耳 (Creighton 2014, 195–96).

[8] 觀上所載，是於漢武帝即位八年時，羅馬已得有意大利、馬其頓、希臘、小亞洲、西班牙、亞非利加，是瀕地中海之諸國，幾盡服屬羅馬矣。希臘人、西米族人均彬彬而遵國制王化。且諸國盡城居，制有律例，為久有風化者，益可昭明羅馬威權之大。(Creighton 2014, 241–42).

culture, which had penetrated deeply into Rome itself" (Abulafia 2011, 199). In particular, the Greek influence on Roman culture, by way of "Mediterranean" syncretism, also emerges from Creighton's work, thus reaching the Chinese readership of the late Qing period:

> Of course, when the Romans conquered Greece and the East, they saw a great many things which they had never seen before […]; all the best books and statues and pictures of the old world had been made by the Greek writers and artists. So, the Romans not only learned many new things from the Greeks, but gave up a great many of their own early beliefs (Creighton 1879, 52).[9]

Subsequently, following the foundation of the Empire, a crucial step in its consolidation was the extension of Roman citizenship to all free men of the provinces, an aspect clearly illustrated in Creighton's volume (and in its Chinese translation):

> One good thing, however, came out of this; Caracalla gave the rights of Roman citizenship[10] to all the provinces, so that all who were governed by Rome called themselves Romans alike. Italy and the provinces were now equal, and there were no differences between one free man and another. […] It drew the Empire much more together, and made it entirely one. Roman ideas had long been spreading among the people of the provinces, but now everyone was in name, as well as in thought, a Roman (Creighton 1879, 105–6).[11]

In this sense, it is worth recalling that granting of Roman citizenship to all free men of the provinces, as sanctioned by the *Constitutio Antoniniana* (212 CE), was the "solution to strengthen the unity of the empire, centred, as is known, on the Mediterranean part" (Ivetic 2022).

As for the second type of analysed sources, I focus on *Bali fu youren shu* 巴黎復友人書 (Letter from Paris to a Friend), a document written by Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠 (1845–1900) in 1878 and included in the anthology *Shike zhai ji yan* 適可齋記言 (Annotations from the Shike Study), vol. 2, published in 1896. It is significantly relevant regarding the universalistic character of Roman law as well as its pan-Mediterranean and transnational value. In this work, after underlining how Greek and Roman cultures are the cradle of Western civilisation,

[9] 羅馬人於平服希臘亞洲地時，素未經見之事。[…] 羅馬人多加之意。[…] 彼時極善之書籍，多為希人著作，雕鏤、繪畫等工，亦擅长著名。羅馬人步趨追隨希人之習俗時，將夙昔信守之條道，棄置多端 (Creighton 2014, 143).

[10] The translation of the expression 'rights of Roman citizenship' is not perfectly faithful to the original (羅馬民所有之利益, 'all of the advantages of Roman citizens'). However, immediately afterwards, it is clearly indicated how the inhabitants of the provinces could now define themselves as full-fledged citizens of Rome, being in an equal position with them.

[11] 時帝政於極虐中，而得有一至善者，即以羅馬民所有之利益全賜與諸省民人。俾諸省人，除奴隸外，皆與意大利人平等，咸可自稱為羅馬民之一事也。[…] 按噶喇此命，實可使天下人合而不散，前此羅馬風教，皆由漸而遍傳行於諸省內。茲諸省人，既皆同於羅馬，則不能與羅馬殊 (Creighton 2014, 300).

Ma Jianzhong briefly summarises the history of Rome.[12] On one hand, it is first illustrated how Roman dominion gradually extended beyond the city of Rome by conquering Greece and the entire Mediterranean area.[13] On the other hand, it is correctly stated that, in ancient times, the original nucleus of Roman law (*ius civile*) and the rights provided for therein applied exclusively to Roman citizens (while foreigners were excluded).[14]

Afterwards, Ma Jianzhong continues to briefly narrate the history of Rome until the reign of "Justinian, emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, who fixed the laws".[15] In this regard, to properly understand the importance of this reference for this study, one should recall the relevance of the role of Justinian in the legal field, as well as in the broader cultural field. His role was so crucial that it is the subject of great attention beyond legal literature, also in Mediterranean studies. For example, Norwich describes Justinian's complete recodification of Roman law as astonishing, as he removed all contradictions, substituting clarity and conciseness for confusion and chaos (Norwich 2006, 190). Similarly, Braudel underlines the essential function of Roman law for the maintenance of social order and communications between the centre and the periphery of the empire (Braudel 2001, 311). Therefore, even though concise, this reference by Ma Jianzhong to the Byzantine emperor and his monumental codification work is both precious and accurate.

Finally, Ma Jianzhong's work is noteworthy for yet another reference to the role exerted by Roman law in the West (and thus in the Mediterranean area, although the Mediterranean Sea is not directly mentioned). It is contained in *Ni she fanyi shuyuan yi* 擬設翻譯書院議 ("Proposal on Establishing a Translation Academy"), written by Ma in 1894 and included in the aforementioned *Shike zhai ji yan* (vol. 4). This document describes the laws of Rome as the foundation of the laws of all countries ("羅馬律要為諸國定律之祖"). The concept of Rome as "the place of origin of the laws of all countries" had already been illustrated in earlier volumes translated into Chinese, but this is one of the earliest references of this kind that can be found in a document composed by a Chinese intellectual. It illustrates how the process of reception of Roman law had progressed further.[16]

[12] Ma Jianzhong was one of the first Chinese students sent by the Qing government to study abroad. He studied law in Paris (1877–1880) where he had the chance to acquire a relatively deep knowledge of Roman history and law. For further information on his study experience in France, see: Colangelo 2022.

[13] 羅瑪創始之初，地廣人稀，[...] 遂奄有地中海周圍諸國 (Ma 1896).

[14] 然後閉門謝使，禁絕外人，即有至者，不得與本國人民同享權利 (Ma 1896). In a later phase, following the intensification of trade relations with foreign people, the need to regulate business relationships between Roman citizens and *peregrini* led to the formation of the *ius gentium,* a normative system subsequent to the original core of the *ius civile* and intended to provide legal protection to foreigners in Rome (see, for instance: Talamanca 1989, 153–64).

[15] 東羅馬瑪至儒斯定王大修律例 (Ma 1896).

[16] For a more in-depth overview of Chinese sources containing similar references, see: Colangelo 2015.

Lastly, a specific reference to the Romanist legal tradition as typical of the Mediterranean area (but not only) appears again in a more recent work which belongs to the third type of sources analysed. It is the third edition (1930) of the Roman law manual composed by Huang Youchang 黃右昌.[17] In this volume, the author presents Constantinople as the place where Emperor Justinian had the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (534 CE) compiled ("優帝編纂法典之地，在東羅馬君士但丁堡"), describing the city as a majestic urban centre, located on the western shore of the Bosphorus strait ("該城地勢居博斯破魯斯［Bosphorus］海峽西岸，雄壯秀麗"). From here, one could observe the strategic junction of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea ("其險要扼地中海黑海之咽喉"). As a central place of connection between Europe and Asia, Constantinople is portrayed as a crossroads of cultures where the customs and traditions of the East and the West meet (Huang 1930, 18–19). The crucial role of Constantinople in the Mediterranean area and its cultural and political significance is an objective fact, repeatedly highlighted in Mediterranean Studies. As pointed out by Norwich (2006, 28), the city itself perhaps commanded only the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara, but the two successive empires of which it was the capital (the Byzantine and the Ottoman) occupied well over half the shoreline of the Mediterranean at various times. Similarly, Abulafia (2011, xxiii) includes this city inside the boundaries of the "Liquid Continent", because it functioned as a bridge between the Black Sea and the White Sea.[18] At the same time, the importance of Constantinople from a specifically legal point of view is also emphasised, not only in legal literature but also in the field of Mediterranean studies. For example, Braudel underlines that law schools in Rome, Constantinople and Beirut in the late Empire[19] "played a leading role in the fifth century" and they "would preserve Roman law, enabling the renaissance under Justinian to take place" (Braudel 2001, 312). Therefore, the description of Constantinople and its cultural and legal value as presented by Huang, being one of the earliest of this kind included in Chinese sources, is particularly valuable.

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, the Chinese sources analysed clearly illustrate the process of Rome's expansion throughout the entire Mediterranean area. At the same time, they also emphasise how Roman law was used throughout this vast ter-

[17] The volume by Huang (first edition: 1915) dates back to the early republican era. For information on earlier Roman law manuals written in Chinese in the late Qing period, see: Colangelo 2015; Colangelo 2020.

[18] "White Sea" is the name by which the Turks used to call the Mediterranean.

[19] Justinian decreed that no other law school except Beirut and the ones of Rome and Constantinople shall be recognised by the imperial authorities. In this sense, it should be kept in mind that the city of Beirut, in the heart of the Mediterranean area, also greatly contributed to the development of the Romanistic legal tradition and was therefore given by the emperor the title *Berytus Nutrix Legum* ("Beirut, Mother of Laws").

ritory, characterised by legal unity and (more generally) cultural syncretism. From this analysis emerges a perception of the Romanist legal tradition as a pillar and common denominator of Western and Mediterranean legal science in a transcultural sense. One can understand it as an element that is not only Italic, but instead of a Western (and specifically Mediterranean) civilisation that transcends regional and national boundaries. As has been said, this concept has long been well known in the Western world, but it was undoubtedly not so obvious in late Qing and early Republican China.

As mentioned, the image of Roman law emerging from the sources is firstly that of an essential tool for guaranteeing the cohesion and management of a vast empire and, subsequently, that of the foundation of all Western law. In other words, it is described as the indispensable political and legal basis of the "Western powers" that appeared to late Qing intellectuals as strong and "civilised". This image therefore not only contributed to increasing knowledge of the external world in China, but it very likely oriented, to some extent, the Chinese government towards the adoption of the civil law system within the national legal reform's implementation.[20] In this sense, the information provided in the primary sources examined can be considered even more valuable.

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[20] At the beginning of the 20th century, the Chinese government specifically sent a delegation (1905) to various Western countries in order to observe their legal and institutional systems and to identify the model that best suited the reform of the national legal system. China at that time was therefore undoubtedly aware of the existence of the Common Law system, but chose to refer to the Romanist tradition for various reasons that, as metioned, cannot be illustrated in this brief essay (for further informazion see: Colangelo 2015). A concrete first step in this direction was the draft Civil Code (*Da Qing Min lü cao'an* 大清民律草案, 1911). Although the document never came into force, due to the collapse of the empire in the same year, China confirmed, in the following decades, its willingness to reform the national legal system drawing inspiration from the Romanist legal tradition. For further information on this process, see: Colangelo 2015.

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The Mediterranean Island of Malta and Its Names in Chinese Sources

Miriam Castorina

Abstract: This chapter aims to examine Chinese knowledge and narratives about Malta over the centuries, providing a general overview of Chinese sources citing and/or describing this island, to reconstruct a historical panorama concerning the knowledge of the island of Malta in China. To this end, the research focuses on written texts, beginning with Chinese geographical sources, followed by travel literature from the Ming-Qing period before 1866. This chapter opens with a brief discussion of the Mediterranean Sea in ancient Chinese texts, followed by a selection of Ming and Qing sources on Malta, presenting it as a land that embodies the concepts of interculturalism and transculturality. Virtually absent from Chinese sources for centuries, descriptions of Malta from both geographical works and travel accounts up to the first half of the 19th century provide an idyllic depiction of a fertile land inhabited by industrious, generous, brave, and contented people.

Keywords: Mediterranean Sea; Malta; Chinese Travel Writing; Perception; Transcultural

1. Introduction

The life work of Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) establishes the Mediterranean Sea not only as a physical space but also as a historical and cultural one, fundamental for the human history of civilisation. Cardinal to the cultural construction of 'Western' civilisation, or better yet, Mediterranean civilisation, this 'internal sea' should not be conceived as a singular space, but rather a plural one. As Braudel warns ([1998] 2001, 23), the "plural always outweighs the singular. There are ten, twenty or a hundred Mediterraneans, each one sub-divided in turn." 'Mediterranean' is not only a toponym, but also an adjective that recalls different lands, peoples, coasts, islands, stories, heroes, mores, wars, travels, trade routes, and much more.

Recently, another articulation of plural 'Mediterraneans' comes from those arriving from elsewhere—visions from the Far East. For these 'outsiders', whose origin resides far away from the cradle of civilisation *par excellence* (according to an attitude of European cultural hegemony), the Mediterranean was of small significance, and its central role in European, Asian, and African history had to be 'discovered' by these other distant societies—first through word-of-mouth transmission, and then through increasingly more detailed writings and sources.

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This chapter aims to investigate the Chinese knowledge and narratives about the Island of Malta over the centuries. This choice depends on several factors, one intertwined with the other. The first reason has to do with space: Malta, as an island,[1] offers interesting research insights. The central role of islands in shaping the economy, societies, and cultures of the Mediterranean Sea has already been emphasised by Braudel ([1949] 1995), who defines some of them—such as Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily, Cyprus, Crete, and Rhodes— "miniature continents", and "indispensable landfalls on the sea routes" (Braudel [1949] 1995, 148, 149). Despite their 'isolation', some of the Mediterranean islands were, for geographical or historical reasons, "integrated into shipping routes" since ancient times, becoming "one of the links in a chain" ([1949] 1995, 150). This is the case of Malta, right in the middle of the "ancient geological 'bridge' stretching from North Africa to Sicily" (Braudel [1949] 1995, 116), whose inter- and transcultural connections with Sicily and southern Italy are increasingly supported by archaeological evidence and recent studies (Cazzella, and Recchia 2013), and which has been a "hub for mercantile trade for at least 7000 years" (Avellino 2016, 25). Notwithstanding its historical significance as a mercantile hub, Malta has typically been situated outside the primary vessel routes due to prevailing wind conditions.

The second important reason for choosing Malta is, in fact, time. The history of Malta, with its succession of migration, ethnic and religious mix, foreign occupations, smuggling spots, and colonialism, is a good example of Mediterranean multiculturalism, transculturality and hybridity, both ancient and modern. This may be one of the reasons why the Maltese identity has been shaded for centuries, and was only fully formed (and even imprinted with other kinds of shade and ambiguity) after its independence. Given that the 'identity' of Malta has been so nuanced and transcultural for centuries, one might wonder whether or not some of these characteristics have also been noted by Chinese travellers. Regarding Malta's modern history, in modern times it has been a disputed territory. In 1530 Malta was given to the Knights of the Order of St. John, then in 1798 it was occupied by the French and became a colony of the French Revolutionary Republic, until the arrival of the British, who set up a protectorate. In fact, Malta was under British power from 1813 until its independence in 1964.

Far from reviewing all the existing Chinese sources on Malta, this research provides a general overview of the Chinese sources citing and/or describing the island and drawing a panorama concerning the knowledge of Malta in China. To this end, this research concentrates on written texts, first exploring Chinese geographical sources and then Chinese travel literature taken from the Ming-Qing period and written before 1866. This period has been chosen for two main reasons. First, new maritime trade routes were opened along with the arrival of Christian missionaries in China during the Ming period (1368–1644). This ini-

[1] In this essay, the use of the term 'Malta', and sometimes 'the isle of Malta', refers more in general to the archipelago of the Maltese islands, if not otherwise specified.

tiated a period of direct contact between China and the Mediterranean world which altered the world's cultural landscape. Prior to this period, there had been sporadic contacts between China and the Mediterranean world in the course of history. The first ones date back to the Han dynasty and the Roman Empire. These earlier attempts in the classical era failed to establish direct and lasting contact and, from both sides, succeeded only in producing a vague knowledge of the 'Other'. Secondly, 1866 has been chosen as the cut-off year for this study because it marks the first Chinese mission to be sent to Europe. Afterwards, travels from China to the rest of the world increased, influencing the Chinese publishing world with the popularisation of the *youji* 遊記 (travel notes) genre.[2] Consequently, knowledge about Malta also improved, moving in many cases from hearsay to first-hand experiences. As a result, this attempt to reconstruct Chinese sources about Malta up to the second half of the 19th century should be considered a short anthology of the most significant sources on the subject.

2. Chinese Geographical Knowledge of the Mediterranean Sea and Its Islands

Before focusing on Malta, a few words on the Chinese knowledge of the Mediterranean Sea are necessary. Since ancient times, people coming from Asia reached the European continent following many 'silk roads', by land or by sea. Depending on the period, and especially starting from the 16th century, people from the Far East had to sail the Mediterranean Sea, whose existence was known since ancient times, as Chinese classical sources testify. The existence of the sea is acknowledged, but the name and the precise location of this sea is a question that has intrigued scholars for decades.

A careful analysis of ancient sources—including the *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書—allowed Yu Taishan (2013, Chap. 1) to reconstruct and identify the Mediterranean Sea with the toponym *Xihai* 西海, in use at least until the Han-Wei period (ca. first century BCE to third century CE). In his work, Yu reconstructs the knowledge and location of the Mediterranean Sea by reviewing Chinese historical and geographical sources from the past, both official and unofficial. Over the years, the difficult task of determining the geographical location of some toponyms such as *Tiaozhi* 条枝, *Lixuan* 黎軒, and *Da Qin* 大秦 has engaged many prominent scholars.[3] In Yu's review, the presence of the sea called *Xihai* 西海 (lit. the Western Sea) is fundamental to locating these toponyms, even though the "Western Sea" as Yu writes (2013, 6), "is not a specific term in Chinese historical works for a particular sea: it is also used of the Qing Sea, the Aral Sea, the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf in distinct cases", and for the Mediterranean

[2] The success of this travel literature from overseas was so considerable at the time that, as early as 1897, Wang Xiqi 王錫祺 (1855–1913) collected many of the geographical and travel books written in Qing period in the third series of his *Xiaofanghu zhai yudi congchao* 小方壺齋輿地叢鈔 (Collected Books on Geography from the Xiaofanghu Studio). This third part of the series, in 12 volumes, includes 180 books.

[3] On these aspects, see also chapters 2 and 3 of this volume.

Sea as well. It is noteworthy that despite the limited knowledge of this sea, its plurality was reflected in the many uses of the toponym *Xihai*. Nevertheless, the ancient sources analysed by Yu do not mention this sea with any precision, therefore it is very difficult to find explicit information about the countries that surround it or the islands that characterise it, including Malta.

The place name *Xihai* continued to be used for some time, but the toponym for the Mediterranean Sea did not remain fixed. This can also explain why a more complete and concrete idea of the Mediterranean Sea, so cardinal to European history and culture, entered so slowly into the Chinese world. The source texts that reached China provided only a vague idea of the Mediterranean Sea and never mentioned Malta explicitly, making it easy to see why the island remained enigmatic.

Over time, the situation did not improve significantly. As Ronald Po highlights, despite the great voyages undertaken by the Chinese in the following centuries, and despite their geographical writings, "most geographers and literati in the Ming were nevertheless almost unaware of the Mediterranean" (Po 2015, 347). We must wait for the Ming-Qing transition period to have more and precise information on the Mediterranean Sea and the island of Malta. New geographical notions, as well as a new concept of the world, came to China mostly through the contribution of Jesuit missionaries. It was the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (Li Madou 利瑪竇, 1522–1610) in his *Kunyu Wanguo Quantu* 坤輿萬國全圖 (Complete Map of all the Nations of the Earth, 1602)[4] who coined the term *Dizhonghai* 地中海 (lit. Sea in the middle of lands) to indicate the Mediterranean Sea, a term that gained significant success and remain part of Chinese modern lexicon. Based on the Latin term *medius* (middle) and *terra* (land), Ricci made a literal translation using *di* 地 (land) and *zhong* 中 (middle) adding the suffix *hai* 海 (sea). It is interesting to note, as Paola Zaccaria underlines, that "most European and Eastern names for this sea signify that it is sea between lands/earths/continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia)", and that:

> in many different languages – from the German *Mittelmeer* to the Hebrew *Hayam Hatikhon,* to the Berber *ilel Agrakal,* to the Albanian *deti mesdhe* and even the Japanese *Chichūkai*[5] – have drawn on the Latin word "*Mediterraneus*" thus establishing an almost worldwide perception of the Medi-terranean sea as the water that laps the shores of three continents which are apparently seen as a continuum, a terra which has been parted into three territories by the infiltration of the water. (Zaccaria 2012, 106)

[4] For Ricci's biography see Pfister (1932, 22–42) and Dehergne (1973, 219–20). Regarding his *Map,* it was first published in 1584 with the title *Yudi shanhai quantu* 輿地山海全圖 (Complete Map of the Continents and Oceans of the Earth). On the cartographic work of Matteo Ricci see, among others, Foss 1984.

[5] This term is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *Dizhonghai* coined by Ricci, which later entered the Japanese lexicon through Chinese influence.

The persistence and success of this place name coined by Matteo Ricci is also due to geographical books by Giulio Aleni (Ai Rulüe 艾儒略, 1582–1649)[6] and Ferdinand Verbiest (Nan Huairen 南懷仁, 1623–1688),[7] respectively titled *Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀 (Record of the Places Outside the Competence of the Office of Geography, 1623), and *Kunyu tushuo* 坤輿圖說 (Illustrated Explanation of the Entire World, 1674). The first, in particular, is quoted in almost all Chinese geographical works up until the second half of the 19th century, to the point that the description of the Mediterranean Sea written by Giulio Aleni is also included in the famous *Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志 (Treatise on the Maritime Countries) by Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), published for the first time in 1842 and enlarged in the following years.

Aleni also composed the first description of this sea, in *juan* 6 of his *Zhifang waiji,* entitled *Sihai zongshuo* 四海總說 (General Remarks on the Four Seas). Explaining the seas of the world, the Italian Jesuit writes: "There are two kinds [of seas], the sea surrounded by land is called the Mediterranean Sea [*Dizhonghai* 地中海]" (Aleni [1623] 2009, LXI).[8] Aware of the large area and rich diversity of the Mediterranean, Aleni does not provide here a general description of the sea (its climate, products, etc.), which instead can be inferred from brief descriptions of the countries and islands for each continent. In *juan* 1, entitled *Yaxiya* 亞細亞 (Asia), Aleni mentions the many islands of the Asian continent stating that "several islands in the Mediterranean Sea can be considered part of this continent" (Aleni [1623] 2009, I, XII)[9]. Only a few of these Asian "Mediterranean islands" (*Dizhonghai zhudao* 地中海諸島) are cited: Chios, Rodhes, and Cyprus (Aleni [1623] 2009, I, XX). In the chapter dedicated to the European continent (*juan* II, *Ouluoba* 歐邏巴), the Jesuit missionary lists some Mediterranean islands he believes worthy because of their dimension or their historical relevance, citing "the isles of Candia" (Aleni [1623] 2009, XXIV).[10] When describing the Mediterranean islands of the European continent, Aleni only adds some details on Candia/Crete and very little information on the sea itself (Aleni [1623] 2009, XXXVII).

3. Malta in Ming-Qing Geographical Sources

Among the many Mediterranean islands, only a few captured the imagination of the Chinese audience, who were most fascinated by one in particular: Sicily. This

[6] Pfister (1932, 126–36); Dehergne (1973, 6–7). On the life and work of Giulio Aleni, see also Menegon, Eugenio. 1994. *Un solo cielo. Giulio Aleni (1582-1649). Geografia, arte, scienza, religione dall'Europa alla Cina*. Brescia: Grafo Edizioni.

[7] Pfister (1932, 338–62); Dehergne (1973, 288–90).

[8] 有二焉海在國之中國包乎海者曰地中海[…]。See also the Italian translation by Paolo De Troia (Aleni [1623] 2009, 183).

[9] 更有地中海諸島亦屬此州界內。Italian translation in Aleni ([1623] 2009, 52).

[10] The name Candia stands for Crete. On the use of the plural, see the note by De Troia (Aleni [1623] 2009, 85, note 138).

island is the first geographical region of the Italian peninsula to appear in a Chinese source, and also a constant presence in many Chinese texts, as it was an essential stopover for all travellers heading to northern European regions.[11] Despite being in the middle of the Mediterranean and the centre of people's mobility, many islands were—and still are—considered peripheral, even in European sources, and remained unknown (or semi-unknown) to Chinese readers until Ricci's world map.

Although neglected in the sources, Malta is an excellent example of interculturalism and transculturality. As a result of its characteristics, it is possible that the development of a well-defined national identity may have been gradual (considering that the concept of nation-state was only developed in the 18th century). On the other hand, its mix of cultures, religions, people, and architectures has made Malta the perfect example of the many different 'souls' of the Mediterranean region, that coexisted and evolved on the island for centuries. This is especially true when we consider Malta's most characteristic institution, the Knights of Malta, for which the island has been internationally known for centuries, and which is itself an 'international' institution,[12] bound to the Catholic Church which, *de facto,* is a religious and cultural element that characterises different areas of the Mediterranean.

As for Chinese sources on Malta, in the *Kunyu wanguo quantu* Ricci coined a toponym by simply transcribing its sound as *Ma'erda* 馬兒大. The place name coined by Ricci did not achieve the same popularity as *Dizhonghai,* since in Aleni's work of geography, it already appears in two forms: *Ma'erda dao* 馬爾達島, and *Ma'er dao* 馬兒島 (lit. Island of Malta) (De Troia 2007, 254). While Ricci's map allowed Chinese readers to locate Malta in the world, Aleni's geography gave a brief description of the island in two different passages. The first one is in Chapter 2, dedicated to the general description of Europe, and refers to the Knights of Malta:

> In addition to the regular armies maintained by the governments in these countries, there are heroic individuals, both intelligent and brave, coming from noble families, who in the past formed an association of thousands of people. Each of them is worth ten men, and each of them has the will to defend the country and protect its people. Those who join this association for the first time are tested [to verify] their resolution, and once [it is proved] they are not afraid of the [many] difficulties [of this task], then they can join the association. This association is based on the island of Malta [*Ma'erda dao* 馬兒達島] in the Mediterranean Sea, and its oldest member serves as its leader. When an alarm is raised, they gather into an army and always manage to repel the invaders.[13] (Aleni [1623] 2009, XXVIII).

[11] On the subject see Vinci, Renata (2019). *La Sicilia in Cina. Una raccolta di testi cinesi sull'isola (1225-1911).* Palermo: Unipa Press.

[12] For a brief presentation of the history of the Order see: https://www.orderofmalta.int/history/1048-to-the-present-day/ (Accessed 27 July 2024).

[13] 本國除常設兵政外又有世族英賢智勇兼備者嘗以數千人結為義會大抵一可當十皆以保國護民為志其初入會者試果不憚諸艱方始聽入焉會在地中海馬兒達島長者主之遇警則鳩集成師而必能滅寇成功。Italian translation in Aleni ([1623] 2009, 96).

It should be noted that in his *Kunyu tushuo,* Ferdinand Verbiest replicates this passage almost word by word but omits the reference to Malta:[14]

> In addition to the regular armies maintained by the governments, in these countries there are heroic individuals, both intelligent and brave, coming from noble families who formed an association of thousands of people, to defend the country and protect its people. Those who join this association for the first time are tested [to verify] their resolution, and once [it is proved] they are not afraid of the [many] difficulties [of this task], then they can join the association. When an alarm is raised, they gather into an army and always manage to repel the invaders.[15] (Verbiest [1674], 13a).

It is worth noting that in both of these accounts, written by Jesuits, significant emphasis is placed on the presence of a Catholic institution on Maltese soil. Malta itself is not described in terms of its unique characteristics—Verbiest did not even mention it, perhaps because the Order was also present on other Mediterranean islands—but rather highlighted solely for its association with noble and heroic men. In these descriptions, it is not 'nationality' (so to speak) that matters, but rather moral virtue, which serves as a tool to reinforce the message the Jesuits sought to communicate in their missions to China.

A longer but still quite short and vague description of Malta is in the part dedicated to Italy, where Aleni explains that "in Italy, there are three famous islands" (*Yidaliya zhi ming dao you san* 意大里亞之名島有三, Aleni [1623] 2009, XXXIII), before actually listing four of them: Sicily, Malta, Sardinia, and Corsica, in this order. After a description of Sicily, the author writes:

> Not far from here is the island of Malta [*Ma'er dao* 馬兒島], where no poisonous animals are born. Snakes and scorpions that live here do not bite humans. Poisonous animals brought from elsewhere die slowly on arrival on the island. (Aleni [1623] 2009, XXXIV)

This description obviously refers to the fact that the snakes living on this island are not poisonous, and especially to the legend of the Apostle Paul who survived being bitten by a snake after his arrival on this land.

Malta is also described in the work *Wanguo dili quanji* 萬國地理全集 (World Geography, 1844), written by the Protestant missionary Karl F.A. Gützlaff (Guo Shilie 郭實獵, 1803–1851).[16] More than two centuries after *Zhifang waiji,* Gützlaff's work is one of the few providing new information on the island. Apart from geographical works like those illustrated here, Malta is in fact almost absent in other Chinese sources dating from the 17th to 19th century. Contrary to

[14] 本國除常設兵政外復有世族英賢智勇兼備者數千人結為義會以保國護民初入會時試果不憚諸艱方始聽入遇警則鳩集成師一可當十必能滅寇成功。

[15] 本國除常設兵政外又有世族英賢智勇兼備者嘗以數千人結為義會 [...] 會在地中海馬兒達島長者主之遇警則鳩集成師而必能滅寇成功。Italian translation in Aleni ([1623] 2009, 96).

[16] Wylie (1867, 54–66).

what happened in the Jesuits' works, Gützlaff's account is not included under a generic description of Italy, but under a description of the Kingdom of Naples (*Napoli guo* 拿破利國):

> The southwest terrain of the Island of Malta [*Malita dao* 馬里他島] is characterised by huge rocks. Nevertheless, its inhabitants work hard to heap up the soil in order to plough the fields. [The island] is densely inhabited, people make moderate use of food and beverages because they gratify their hearts by giving food and beverages to the troops [...].[17] (Gützlaff [1844] 2019, 257)

The author then goes on to recount the legend of St. Paul's miraculous shipwreck and healing from a snakebite. He concludes the description with a brief reference to Malta's recent history. A very similar description, but written in a more elegant Chinese, can also be found in *Yinghuan zhilüe* 瀛環志略 (Brief Survey of the Maritime Circuit, 1849) by Xu Jiyu 徐繼畬 (1795–1873). Here we read:

> In the southwest of Italy, there is an Island called Malta [*Malita dao* 馬里他島], which is mostly rocky, [so that] its inhabitants have terraced the soil in order to plough the fields. They are frugal and hardworking, and the population is very numerous. In ancient times, Paul sailed the sea and ended up on [these shores] swimming until he reached the island. He cured people's diseases, leaving traces of his miracles, and because of this, the fame of this island spread to all the Western lands. As the Ottoman empire grew stronger, its armed forces threatened the island, but Malta's chieftains led its brave and valiant soldiers to withstand the invaders and, in the end, the Ottomans could not conquer it. During the reign of Jiaqing [1796–1820], The French lured the chieftains into surrender but shortly after [the island] was taken by the British [empire] and guarded by a large number of troops; it then became a mooring point for [their] warships in the Mediterranean Sea.[18] (Xu ([1849] 2001, 186–7)

As can be seen from these examples, descriptions of Malta in Chinese geographical sources are brief and vague, and do not provide the Chinese reader with any real knowledge of the island, its history, its geographical features, or its system of government. If we turn to travel literature, details remain scant, but we can occasionally find more personal and emotive descriptions of Malta.

5. Malta in Chinese Travel Notes of the Qing Period (Up to 1866)

As discussed above, people from Asia were reaching the European continent by sea with increasing frequency, especially after the 16th century. More mean-

[17] 西南形勢馬里他島，磐石。但居民勤勞堆土，俾得耕田，人户稠密，飲食節用，以簞食壺漿爲足心焉。[...]

[18] 意大裡西南有馬里他島，地多磐石，居民積土為田以耕。其俗儉嗇勤苦，戶口極繁，昔保羅浮海擱淺，泅登此島馬，為人疾病，著神異之跡，故此島名傳西土。當回部方強，以兵力脅此島，島酋率驍卒拒之，回部竟不能取。嘉慶年間，佛朗西誘降其酋，旋為英吉利所奪，守以重兵，為地中海停泊戰艦之處。

ingful encounters between Chinese and Europeans, especially missionaries, had a great impact on all fields of knowledge, and led to a gradually growing number of Chinese travellers to Europe. However, it was only in the 18th century that Chinese written accounts of their experiences in Europe began to appear. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, several Chinese travellers documented their European journey, with most having to sail the Mediterranean Sea to reach the European continent. Few of them, however, happened to land in Malta or recorded anything about the island. Below, I will provide some examples of the travel notes where I found traces of this 'Chinese passage'.

One of the first Chinese travellers to write about his stay in Europe is the Catholic Fan Shouyi 樊守義 (1682–1753) in his *Shenjianlu* 身見錄 (Report About What I Saw in Person, 1721).[19] Fan Shouyi arrived in Europe with the Italian Jesuit Francesco Giuseppe Provana (Ai Xunjue 艾遜爵, 1662–1720)[20] and stayed in Italy between 1709 and 1719. Once he was back in China, he wrote a report for the emperor in 1721.[21] Although Fan does not explicitly refer to Malta, the passage cited below suggests that Malta is the land he is reporting about:

> There is also a land, whose inhabitants are all happy to do their duty, shy away from riches and honours, [and they] love distinction and nobility, pleased only with what they have. More or less, they're all like that.[22] (Fan [1721] 1999, 384)

As Giuliano Bertuccioli writes in his Italian translation (1999, 359, note 64), it is evident that Fan Shouyi refers to Malta and its knights. In other travel sources of the first half of the 19th century, Malta is rarely mentioned, even indirectly.

Among Chinese travellers' accounts on the West, one of the first and most exhaustive reports is that of Guo Liancheng 郭連城 (1839–1866). Guo had left China in September 1859, when he was only twenty years old, in the company of an Italian priest, Luigi Celestino Spelta (1818–1862). Spelta, working as a missionary in the province of Hubei, had taken the young convert under his wing and decided to take Guo with him to Italy. Before leaving the motherland, Guo Liancheng decided to keep a daily journal of his experience far from home, starting from day one, April 6, 1859, and ending the day he returned safe and sound on July 27, 1860. His journal was published the following year under the modest title of *Xiyou bilüe* 西遊筆略 (Brief Account of the Journey to the West, 1863).[23]

[19] Known in Europe also as Luigi or Louis Fan, he "was the first Chinese person to write impressions of Europe" (Meynard 2017, 21) and his book is considered the "first travel account on Europe" (Fang 2007, 502).

[20] Pfister (1932, 477–79); Dehergne (1973, 211–12).

[21] On Fan Shouyi and his book, see Bertuccioli (1999) and Piastra (2012).

[22] 又一地人皆安分不炫富貴愛淸雅惟喜亭囿大率如是。

[23] The title of the account immediately recalls the famous Chinese classical novel *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West) attributed to Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 (1504–1582) and published in the sixteenth century. The book is very well known also outside China; a first abridged version of the work was translated into English by Arthur Waley (1889–1966) with the title *Monkey* in 1942. On Guo's personal story and his journey in Italy see Castorina (2020).

Guo provides his readers with a detailed account of the countries he had seen along the way. His attention is attracted by the 'exotic' people and lands he sees along the way, including the island of Malta. His account of Malta, where he arrived on September 10, 1859, can be considered the first Chinese description that provides the readership with a more intimate understanding of its government and history, while also trying to give some touristic and cultural information. Furthermore, it was on the island of Malta that Guo Liancheng had his first real encounter with European culture. In his journal he writes:

> September 10, 1859. Sunny. At dawn, we reached the Sea Island of Malta [*Ma'erda haidao* 馬爾大海島]. A missionary from Siam and I went ashore and entered the city. Inside, [everything, from] palaces to human beings, has an exceptional charm. The churches are majestic, and on the corners of the streets, columns rise with statues of old saints [that] take your breath away. Its inhabitants believe in the Holy religion of the Lord of Heaven [i.e., Catholicism], and behave toward other people with extreme courtesy and love. In the city, soldiers and civilians were all surprised by the different colours and style of my clothes, and a crowd of children began to follow me very closely. Soon after, we passed a church. After seeing how extraordinary the outside looked, my companion and I decided to enter. Marble covers the ground, gold ornaments and gems adorn the walls, and the engravings are exquisite. People say this is the Church of St. John.[24] (Guo [1863] 2003, 46)

As can be inferred by the reference to St. John's church, the young convert and his friend visited the capital city, La Valletta. That same day, Guo continues:

> We then walked by a school where little girls from all over the world study writing, etiquette, and other [subjects]. We then visited a garden with a stone lion spouting water. This garden has a coffee house (similar to our teahouse) and a reading room filled with amazing books from everywhere. People are allowed to browse them only at that place, but cannot take them home, [because] the rules of this place are very strict. Seeing that I was from far away, the locals sat down and chatted with me. After resting for a while, we returned to the boat, which left at 4 p.m.[25] (Guo [1863] 2003, 46)

Guo and his travel companions remained on the island only for one day; the next day, they were back at sea and arrived in Sicily. Even though his sojourn

[24] 天晴。早晨，船泊馬爾大海島，余與一暹羅國傳教士登岸入城。城內宮室人物，別有天地，聖堂巍峨，街口多立石柱，上匠古聖遺像，以便觸目驚心。居民盡奉天主聖教，待人極其禮愛。城內軍民見余服色不類，俱起而異之，眾兒童呼三喚四，緊緊相隨。少頃，過一堂，余見其外製超凡，因與同人進而觀之，但見地下俱面花石，上下飛金飾玉，雕刻精緻，人曰：此若望堂也。

[25] 後又過一女學館，內有各國女童攻習文字禮數等學。後又至花園，內有石獅噴水澆花，園內有茄菲館[如吾鄉茶室然]、閱書館，館內羅列四方奇書異籍，只許該處翻閱，不能隨帶片紙，其例甚嚴。土人見余乃遠方之人，俱留坐敘談。餘等少憩片時，隨即回船，午後四下鐘開頭。

was brief—like this entry in Guo's journal—the change of scenery is immediately apparent in the author's words. Both the buildings and the people possess a kind of charm that can only come from the sense of estrangement felt when travelling so far from home. Besides the grandeur of the streets and the visible presence of the Christian religion in every building and church they pass, Guo considers the international school for girls and the 'reading room' worthy of mention, probably because they represent absolute novelties. But what intrigues the Chinese traveller most is the reaction of local people, who seem to marvel at him as much as he does at them. Thanks to his knowledge of Latin and familiarity with the Italian language (Castorina 2020, 35–7), he is able to "sit down and chat" with them.

Guo Liancheng returned to Malta on his trip back to China some months later. This time he stayed for a week, but his journal at this point is very laconic; he only wrote a few lines each day, recording that the ship moored at Malta [*Ma'erda* 馬爾大] on the dawn of March 14, 1860, and that he lodged with a noble family together with Father Spelta. The day after he roved the gardens of the city, probably La Valletta, and attended a military training session of the British troops (Guo [1863] 2003, 96). On the 16th of March, Guo described and praised the use of windmills, while the day after he went to visit the catacombs of St. Paul's in Rabat:

> March 16, 1860. Sunny. In the afternoon we rode in a carriage up to this island's sanctuary of St. Paul. Below the church, there is a large hole which is the cave where Saint Paul lived in strict asceticism.[26] (Guo [1863] 2003, 96)

The travel notes of Guo Liancheng offer readers a more personal touch to the island of Malta, delighting in what he finds exotic, while being also aware of his own status as an outsider from a strange and foreign land. His descriptions, however, remain brief, since his sojourn is too short to have more than a glimpse of Malta, its culture, and its uniqueness.

6. Final Remarks

Up to the first half of the 19th century, the Chinese knowledge of Malta was vague and incomplete. Geographical works written by European missionaries, later used by Chinese authors to compile their books on the geography of the world, were the main source for the Chinese audience; however, these works did not consistently even employ a single, standardised name for the island. As shown in Table 1, the varied names of Malta reflect a period of travel and knowledge based on limited sources and recycled citations. Eventually, the Chinese name for the enigmatic isle would settle on the conventional transcription of *Ma'erta* 馬耳他/馬爾他.

[26] 天晴。午後，車至本島保祿聖堂。堂下有凹處，乃聖保祿穴居苦修之處。穴內沙石可愈病恙，旅人多攜帶之。

Table 1. Names for the island of Malta in the sources analysed

Place name	Source	Author
Ma'erda 馬兒大	*Kunyu Wanguo Quantu* 坤輿萬國全圖 (Complete Map of all the Nations of the Earth, 1602)	Matteo Ricci
Ma'erda dao 馬爾達島	*Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀 (Record of the Places Outside the Competence of the Office of Geography, 1623)	Giulio Aleni
Ma'er dao 馬兒島	*Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀 (Record of the Places Outside the Competence of the Office of Geography, 1623)	Giulio Aleni
[none]	*Kunyu tushuo* 坤輿圖說 (Illustrated Explanation of the Entire World, 1674)	Ferdinand Verbiest
Ma'erda dao 馬兒達島	*Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志 (Treatise on the Maritime Countries, 1842)	Wei Yuan 魏源
Malita dao 馬里他島	*Wanguo dili quanji* 萬國地理全集 (World Geography, 1844)	Karl F.A. Gützlaff
Malita dao 馬里他島	*Yinghuan jilüe* 瀛環志略 (Brief survey of the Maritime Circuit, 1849)	Xu Jiyu 徐繼畬
[none]	*Shenjianlu* 身見錄 (Report about What I Saw in Person, 1721)	Fan Shouyi 樊守義
Ma'erda haidao 馬爾大海島	*Xiyou bilüe* 西遊筆略 (Brief Account of the Journey to the West, 1863)	Guo Liancheng 郭連城

Apart from the instability of the Chinese toponym, it should also be noted that the geographical works and travel accounts of the Ming and Qing periods do not describe in detail the island of Malta, often treating the place as an *appendix* to some other country, or a secondary stopover in their journeys. On the other hand, it is significant to note that all the sources translated here share a common utopian view of the islands and their inhabitants, portrayed as industrious, generous, noble-spirited, brave, and happy. As seen above, the Jesuits provided the first descriptions of Malta before the idea of nation-states had emerged. Travellers in the following centuries inherited this view, sometimes unconsciously, and this prevented them from placing the Maltese islands accurately, as the 'mobility' of the toponym also demonstrates. At the same time, the blurred contours of Malta in Chinese sources indirectly confirm the transcultural and hybrid character of the islands, which collect traces of a wider 'Mediterranean culture'.

Of course, a much more in-depth study is necessary to have a more complete perspective on the history of the knowledge of Malta and its diffusion in China. There is a vast amount of material, especially from the second half of the 19th century, which needs to be fully explored. The excerpts presented here represent an important first attempt to demonstrate the presence of Malta in Chinese travel, knowledge, and culture.

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Afterword. The Mediterranean Sea in the Writings of Italian Chinese Immigrants

Valentina Pedone

The Mediterranean Sea has held evolving significance for the Chinese throughout history, primarily as a far-reaching connection point that symbolised the trade and cultural exchanges facilitated by the Silk Road. While direct Chinese presence in the Mediterranean was not common in ancient times, this sea represented a gateway to the rich civilisations of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Goods such as silk, porcelain, and spices from China were transported westward and traded for Mediterranean products like glassware, wine, and art, fuelling mutual fascination and respect between Eastern and Western cultures. The Mediterranean ports were hubs where merchants, scholars, and explorers exchanged ideas, contributing to a diffusion of knowledge, art, and technology that indirectly influenced Chinese perspectives and development. In modern times, the region continues to evoke interest for its strategic trade routes and as a cultural bridge in China's Belt and Road Initiative, fostering deeper economic and geopolitical connections with the wider world.

Today, around 300,000 Chinese citizens live in Italy. What does the Mediterranean Sea represent for them? What experience do they have of it? How do they experience it? How do they imagine it? What do they write about it?

In the last 50 years, the contribution to Italian culture of Chinese citizens and Italians of Chinese descent has been steadily growing. This important segment of Italian society produces art, literature, theatre, cinema. Their cultural production remains, for various reasons, marginal, but it nonetheless continues

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to develop and offer unexpected, original and sometimes enlightening visions. The perspectives and interpretations of Sino-Italians themselves are indispensable when trying to represent such a heterogeneous group, a patchwork of different communities and individuals who, over a century, have chosen Italy to live, work and 'start a family'.

For individuals who were born to Chinese families in Italy, the perception of the Mediterranean Sea is not that different from that shared by their peers; however, for those who have arrived as adults seeking better opportunities, the sea is not merely a scenic or romantic landscape but also a challenging frontier. The Italian beaches, often a symbol of leisure and prosperity, become sites of intense, often precarious work for Chinese immigrants, involving street vending and other unauthorised occupations. These settings reveal the stark economic and social contrasts between the immigrant workforce and native Italians, highlighting the unequal distribution of opportunity. This contrast is poignantly illustrated in Shi Yang Shi's 石阳 play *Tong Men-g* (now known as *Arle-Chino)*, where the Mediterranean shores transform into a dramatic stage that magnifies the disparities faced by immigrant communities. Through a powerful, translingual monologue, Shi recounts his teenage experiences accompanying his father, a street vendor, to the beach. His narrative unveils the struggles of Asian and African immigrants as they navigate the asymmetrical power dynamics with the native Italian population. These beaches, with their sunny, carefree allure, contrast sharply with the hidden stories of labour, vulnerability, and resilience embedded within the immigrant experience.

> It's 1994.
> My father returns to Italy for good. He tries to set up a business, but there are difficulties and therefore, to make ends meet in the summer, we start selling junk on the beach.
> I was ashamed to go to the beach, to me it felt humiliating. At first it was just a matter of putting something on the ground and selling it, then we discover that in Italy there were pains that we know how to cure in China and not here. To show that the red flower oil, a typical product of ours, worked, my father started treating people with massages.
> But the problem was that there were controls, because the merchants had asked for the police to intervene against the street vendors. And so, we began our transhumance towards the north: Bellaria, Igea Marina, Gatteo Mare, Valverde, Cesenatico, up to Villa Marina: our Eldorado, two or three hundred pedlars in total.
> We had our own "security service", and when the controls came, our security service would go: 'Police, police, police, everyone leave!', and in the blink of an eye there was no one left.
> I was in my bathing suit, as a friend had told me: 'You're eighteen, you're attractive, take off your clothes and you'll sell more, right?'. And my father agreed, because that way we looked like bathers. When the controls came, it was easier for us to run away into the sea.

> We spent seven summers like that, until one day my father and I got caught, taken to the police station and registered.
> They caught us in the water.
> Usually if you ran into the water they would stop, but not that time. They kept running even in the water.
> "I no understand…"
> I pretended not to speak Italian, and we declared ourselves illegal immigrants, for not wanting to compromise my father's application for a family reunification permit.
> They took us inside, but they didn't put handcuffs on us.
> They took our mug shots, they took our fingerprints and they confiscated many remedies and ointments, a big economic loss for us. Then they gave us a deportation order, which is useless, because they don't take you to the border, they just tell you that you have to leave the country by a certain day.
> The only thing that paper does is allowing you to take trains for free on that day.
> There was a silent walk that evening. Dad and I walked a bit in the dark along the highway to go home. It was in Forlì, where they had locked us up. Late at night in silence, people passing by on vacation, I followed my father without saying a word (Shi, Pezzoli 2014).

But even for Chinese immigrants in Italy today, the Mediterranean retains its multiplicity of meanings, symbolic richness, and variety. In Sino-Italian writings, many different representations of this sea emerge. It is vividly portrayed through its natural beauty, but also through the thick weave of *wen* 文, of culture, under whose embroidered blanket its waves have floated since the dawn of time.

For Chi Xiaoyu 池晓豫, who immigrated to Italy in 2002, this sea has become essential in promoting his services for Chinese tourists in Sicily. In his text *Il sole della Sicilia illumina Pechino* (*The Sun of Sicily Illuminates Beijing*), included in the anthology *Noi restiamo qui* (*We Stay Here*, 2020), published by the publishing house Cina in Italia, Chi Xiaoyu expresses his love for the Mediterranean. The anthology, compiled in response to the wave of Sinophobia that swept through Italy in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, features Chi Xiaoyu recounting his nostalgia for his beloved Sicily from Beijing, where he was stranded after returning to China for the Spring Festival in January 2020.

> I was lucky enough to settle in the most beautiful region of Italy. On the Mediterranean Sea, with enchanting shores, surrounded by three important places which gave origin to different human civilisations, from ancient southwestern Asia to ancient Egypt, up to ancient Greece. The geographical position of the island, the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, is particularly favoured by nature. In ancient times, Sicily was an important transit station in the trade system, as well as an important crossroad that connected the Mediterranean Sea in four directions. Furthermore, it had rich and fertile soil, with abundant harvests. It has always been a rich "basket" for every ruler who governed it, a strategic point. Precisely for this reason, many historical events and conflicts between Magna Graecia, ancient Rome and the Carthaginian civilisation founded by the Phoenicians were concentrated there. […]

> Almost every phase of the development of European civilisation has left deep traces there. It can thus be said that Sicily is undoubtedly the golden key that started the history of Europe.
> I love Italy, but I love Sicily even more! After twenty years of living there, that land made me grow. […]
> It has started to get hot in Beijing, and sometimes the sun burns, like the bright sun of Sicily. Every time the sunlight invades the house, I close my eyes and I enjoy its warmth as much as I can; it manages to merge with my heart. In my head, that emerald sea always appears in front of my Sicilian house, and I can almost see the white birds flying towards the clouds in the sky. (Chi 2020, 194)

In the novel *Zouru Ouzhou* 走入欧洲 (*Entering Europe,* 1994), immigrant writer A Hang tells the fictional story of a young Chinese couple, Tao Ze and Su Huansang, who enter Europe illegally. Young and in love, they leave China behind, and move to Italy in search of fortune. However, life as migrants proves to be far more challenging than they had anticipated. In one passage, the two lovers are homeless in Sicily, searching for a place to spend the night, and end up on a beach in Palermo. Although their situation is tragic, the view of the Mediterranean on a spring night creates an atmosphere imbued with romantic exoticism. In a classic Chinese literary trope, one of the protagonists quotes classical Chinese poetry, which echoes his tumultuous emotions. The sight of the sea evokes nostalgia for his homeland, excitement for the adventure they are experiencing, hope for the future, and even hints of sexual arousal.

> They arrived at a row of small wooden huts on the beach. The huts were separated one by one, specifically for those who came to swim to use as changing rooms and places to rest. Now, the doors of these small wooden huts were all locked, with no one watching over them.
> Tao Ze broke off several tree branches and cleared a spot on the platform at the end of the huts. He said, "Spending the night here will be great. It's romantic enough, as long as there's a roof over our heads and we don't get wet from the dew." Su Huansang, however, seemed somewhat disheartened and sighed, saying, "Coming all the way to Europe just to sleep on the floor by the sea, and you call that romantic!"
> Tao Ze sat down on the spot, leaned back against the wooden railing, and stretched out his legs, saying, "This is so comfortable!" Su Huansang soon sat down beside him.
> Tao Ze embraced Su Huansang and said, "As long as we're together, even the hardest days feel sweet, and even the simplest shelter is better than a five-star hotel." Su Huansang sat there silently, her expression unreadable.
> The moon rose above the sea, and the whole world became ethereal and translucent in silence.
> Tao Ze said, "Choosing to spend the night here was the right choice. 'I raise my head and gaze at the bright moon; I lower my head and think of my beloved hometown.' I feel a bit melancholic, but it's a sweet kind of sadness, pure and aesthetic."

> Su Huansang buried her head in Tao Ze's embrace and softly said, "I really miss home." Tao Ze stroked her long hair, kissed her on the cheek, and said, "Don't think about it. As long as we are together, we are home."
> Tao Ze started unbuttoning Su Huansang's clothes, but she stopped him, saying, "Do you really feel like doing that now?" Tao Ze replied, "Why not?"
> After a moment, Tao Ze said, "Back in the day, Su Dongpo was exiled to Hainan Island and called that place the ends of the world. Today, we have exiled ourselves to Sicily. It should count as the ends of the world too. Let's make love here, at the ends of the world." (Hang 1994, 72)

The final passage offers yet another perspective on the Mediterranean. It is taken from the autobiographical novel *Wo zai Ouzhou de rizi li* 我在欧洲的日子里 (*My Days in Europe,* 2005), serialised in an Italian Sinophone periodical aimed at Chinese-Italian communities in the early 1990s. The author, Deng Yuehua 邓跃华, a sweatshop worker of Fujianese origin, has lived in Italy for decades. In the excerpt, he recounts a summer spent working in a garment factory run by a fellow compatriot in a resort area in northern Italy. In August, as the pace of deliveries at the factory slows down, the protagonist finds moments of quiet solitude by the sea. The contrast between his experience and the excitement of the Italian holidaymakers creates a space of intimate connection with the sea. In this narrative, the Mediterranean transforms into a horizon of respite from the mundane demands of daily life and a source of spiritual elevation. In the narrator's mind, it evokes a melody that will stay with him for years to come.

> The nightlife in seaside towns is very lively. Usually, in Italy all the shops are closed at night, except for bars, restaurants and little else, but seaside towns are tourist destinations and therefore the shops stay open until late. The central streets of these cities shine with a thousand lights at night, especially the pedestrian streets, and are crossed by multicolored crowds.
> Where we were, the seafront was very busy. Bars and restaurants had added outdoor seating, so that tourists could enjoy the cool air while sipping a coffee. When my fellow villagers and I passed by that area, we always smelled the scent of coffee floating in the air.
> Some streets were full of stalls that attracted a large number of tourists. These were stalls run by people of all origins and of course there were also quite a few managed by Chinese. When we passed by a stall run by Chinese people, we stopped to exchange a few words with the owners, ask how business was going, things like that. We had all lived in Italy for many years and we knew very well how many risks there were in having a stall like those. Seeing those stalls reminded me of when I was the one who was behind a stall. That's right, it's not easy at all for Chinese people abroad to survive.
> The factory was very close to the sea, it was only a ten-minute walk. In the late hours we went swimming, to enjoy the last rays of the sun, we lay down on the beach and relaxed, caressed by the sea breeze. Looking at the kites in the sky, I often remembered the many vicissitudes I had gone through in my life. "I am a kite and I must fly", that sentence I said as a child came back to my lips.

> Maybe wandering was my destiny.
> Emotions shook me.
> A melody came to mind that I could not stop whispering. I repeated it until I could no longer forget it. (Deng 2005)

The literary narrative brings forth diverse ways of conceptualising the Mediterranean within the Sino-Italian imagination, shifting with the sensibilities of the authors and the audiences they address. From Shi Yang Shi's portrayal of fleeing at sea to escape the police; to Chi Xiaoyu's depiction of the emerald sea as a crossroads of 'Western' cultures; to A Hang's portrayal of it as a mysterious and dreamy stage for romantic encounters; and Deng Yuehua's view of it as an enigmatic horizon that evokes poetry—the Mediterranean is represented in multiple, nuanced ways.

The art, literature, and performances created by Sino-Italian communities provide valuable insights and challenge marginalisation, presenting original and thought-provoking perspectives that enrich Italian cultural discourse. Although often on the periphery of mainstream recognition, their voices contribute to a deeper understanding of what it means to bridge these rich cultural narratives, viewing the Mediterranean as both a home and a launching point for stories of struggle, adaptation, and creativity. For the Chinese in Italy, the Mediterranean Sea is a living, multifaceted entity, offering refuge, solace, inspiration, and tranquillity—an integral part of their lives that they embrace without hesitation or doubt about their right to claim it as their own.

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Navigating the Mediterranean Through the Chinese Lens. Transcultural Narratives of the Sea Among Lands. In the postnational era, as scholars investigating the circulation of reciprocal knowledge between China and foreign countries, we are called to reconsider the relevance of national borders in our own research. This comes as a response to an extended demand to rethink the ties imposed by concepts such as nation, language and heritage in favour of essential inclusive sentiments of shared interests and belonging. This volume is the initial outcome of the research project *The Mediterranean Through Chinese Eyes* (MeTChE), which aims to investigate the perception and representation of the Mediterranean region in Chinese sources, conceptualising this 'region among lands' as a transcultural and debordered space, as advanced by contemporary Mediterranean Studies.

Renata Vinci is Associate Professor at the University of Palermo. She specialises in Sino-Western contacts, reception of foreign literature in China and the modern periodical press. In *La Sicilia in Cina* (2019), she examines Chinese perceptions of this island as a strategic crossroad for Sino-Western relations. She is Principal Investigator of the MeTChE research project.

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