

Introduction

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“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/>.

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 *Weilue* 魏略, Paolillo locates Haixi in relation to other well-known toponyms such as Da Qin 大秦, Lijian 犁靑, 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 苦國 – 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* 島夾志略 (*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 address 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.

References

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