

The Mediterranean Island of Malta and Its Names in Chinese Sources

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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 Huairén* 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 徐繼畲 (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，人戶稠密，飲食節用，以簞食壺漿為足心焉。 [...]

¹⁸ 意大裡西南有馬里他島，地多磐石，居民積土為田以耕。其俗儉蓄勤苦，戶口極繁，昔保羅浮海攔淺，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 bilue* 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清雅惟喜亭園大率如是。

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