

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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