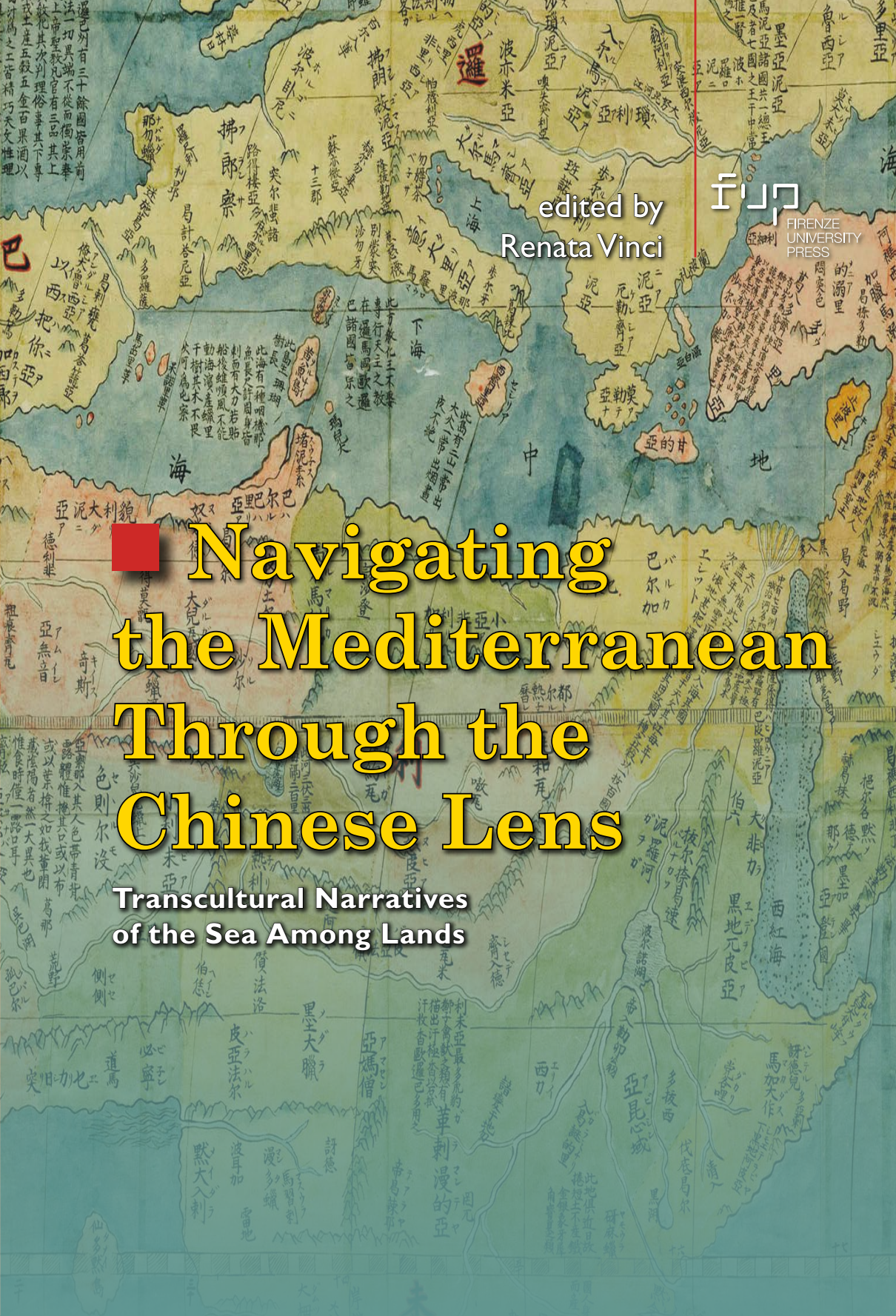

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Transcultural Narratives of the Sea Among Lands

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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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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.

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