

THE IMAGE OF ITALY IN THE LATE QING CHINESE PRESS: The role of the *Shenbao* (1872-1911)

For a long time, Chinese readers relied primarily on second-hand information to shape an image of Western countries, their populations and cultures. It was only with the first investigative missions abroad that Chinese envoys started to compose first-hand reports about the West. As for Italy, it has been demonstrated that the Chinese 'image' of the country was influenced a variety different kinds of sources from different periods of Sino-Italian cultural interaction: after the considerable contribution of the Jesuit's works in the 16th century – for it was they who shaped and embellished an idealized portrait of their native land and the birthplace of the Roman Catholic Church – the European and North American Protestant missionaries of the early 19th century compromised this idyllic portrait of Italy, providing an antithetic description of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean peninsula.

In the same period, another modern medium started to compensate for the lack of current and relatively impartial information about the Western world: the modern press. Foreign and Chinese entrepreneurs began to develop commercial newspapers and magazines, and among them was the *Shenbao*. Its considerable contribution to the formation of a Chinese public sphere and its status as a medium, collocated between tradition and modernity, are some of the primary reasons why it represents a privileged source of analysis – an enormous thesaurus of the most widespread imagery and opinions circulating on different matters in late Imperial society.

As for the representation of Italy: at the time of writing, it was possible to collect a total of 2,134 articles published before 1911, covering a variety of topics, that contribute to a portrait of general knowledge about Italy circulating through the Chinese press. This includes articles on science and technology (e.g. communication technologies, transportation, sciences, and recent inventions), production and trade, diplomatic and military affairs, the economy, geography and geology and more.

After a systematic analysis of a relevant selection of articles extracted from this corpus, we can affirm that a growth in the quantity and quality of news can be identified. As a matter of fact, the modern press, together with the travel literature of the first Chinese visitors to Italy, moved away from the eulogistic depiction of Italy made by the 16th-century Jesuits and the critical view of the Protestants of the 19th century to adjust the balance of Italy's representation in China to become more realistic and contemporary. At this time, the editorial staff were autonomously searching for news in the foreign press and agencies, translating reports into Chinese or commenting on some recent events in diplomatic relations between the newly-born Italian government and the Chinese court.

Through the analysis of a number of case studies selected from the corpus of articles, my PhD study thus illustrates the constant struggle of the young European nation in its attempt to gain a position on the geopolitical stage represented by late Qing Chinese society, where the voice of other, more powerful, foreign countries had a strong influence in shaping Chinese public opinion.