

## An Exploration on the “Misunderstandings” in the Contemporary Sino-Italian Relation

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### Abstract

In the contemporary Sino-Italian exchanges and cooperation, due to the lack of mutual understanding keeping abreast with the times, the two countries often have to take some “expedients” to guide the practical cross-cultural communication. The most influential representative is the “East-West dichotomy” understanding and interpretation. Such an “expedient” has obvious flaws, which are mainly reflected as: Clear definition and classification criteria are absent; classification is too broad and ignores cultural identity; features of the “reference object” are mistaken as the common features of a class of objects. The consequences are likely to artificially create a series of difficulties and obstacles, misleading the people of two countries and communications astray. This article aims to introduce and analyze the “misunderstandings” in Sino-Italian relation from a cross-cultural perspective, reveal the reasons for these misunderstandings, restore the process generating the errors and provide advice and reference for an accurate and effective “recognition”.

**Key words:** Sino-Italian relations; Misunderstandings; East-west dichotomy

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### INTRODUCTION

The friendly exchanges between China and Italy have a glorious history. However, the praising such as “historic” and “long-standing” from politicians’ speeches cannot conceal the reality of several problems. A considerable number of root causes of the problems and misunderstandings are due to the lack of necessary mutual understanding, and the identification of the bilateral relation is seriously lagging behind the reality.

When the two countries lack a necessary mutual understanding, but must communicate and cooperate with each other, the officials and masses would naturally choose a method which they believe to be reasonable and convenient to “understand” and “grasp” the other side. The most convenient and popular way in the “reasonable” and “convenient” methods is to classify and analogize: People firstly classify an object into a certain class, then take a specific object which they know best in this class as a reference to speculate the object that they do not know.

In the increasingly frequent exchanges and cooperation, the most popular method for the Chinese and the Italians to know each other is the “East-West” dichotomy, by which they divide the world into two parts; Italian people include China into the East, and Chinese people include Italy into the West, then they guide the communications with the analogy and speculation of the most representative object. The consequences are likely to artificially create difficulties, obstacles and lead astray. Based on literature, field survey and the author’s personal experience, this article explores the risks of such an “expedient”, introduces and analyzes the common misconceptions in the exchanges, reveals the error generation mechanism and causes, and provide a reference and advice for the “recognition” of Sino-Italian relation.

## 1. THE “EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY” LACKS A CLEAR DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION CRITERION

In mutual understandings and exchanges, Chinese people are used to regard Italian people as “the Westerners”, and try to use some so-called “commonness” to understand and interpret the Italians. Their grasp of “commonness” is mainly from Britain and the United States, and more exactly, is from the United States. The Italians, on the other hand, rely on the “Orient” to understand China, and what they use as a “reference object” is firstly Japan, and secondly the traditional China in sinology and the “Four Books and Five Classics”. This is purely a “forced” type of expedient, reflecting the two sides’ inertia in cognition instead of practical research and careful confirmation, and would inevitably mislead people in the exchanges.

Firstly, the connotation and denotation of the concept “East-West” are quite vague. What is the East? What is the West? The answer has been in constant change and controversy, yet having no convincing classification criterion so far. This concept has experienced evolution over the years, but still has different synchronic interpretations between individuals and groups. People cannot even clearly answer the question “is today’s world in the end the East or the West, or a third type of culture and people in addition to the East and the West exists”.

The Earth is round, and the East and the West are relative. We can say that the United States is to the east of China, and also can say that it’s our west. However, more people can only recognize it as a “Western country”, which is determined by history, culture and custom. Even using this concept only in the historical, cultural or custom context is risky, because no one can accurately define the territories of the East and West. Even if someone believed that he can define them accurately, he would immediately attract numerous criticisms. Lewis and Wigen of Stanford University pointed out after explored the changing positions of these assumed regions on the map, and tried to explore the puzzling changes of the boundaries (Lewis & Wigen, 2011, p. 75), over the last few centuries, with the gradual expansion of the concept of West in European people’s mind, the corresponding Asian East has also expanded. (Ibid.) We agree the general expansion of the so-called East and West scopes, otherwise we cannot explain that why the “Orient” which was originally used to refer to the Levant region (il Levante)<sup>1</sup> dissociated from its homeland, and includes China thousands of miles away. The East and West have not been a clear definition of themselves. It should be noted that the Easterners did not initially call themselves as “the Easterners”.

<sup>1</sup> Levante, present participle of the Italian verb *levare*, literally meaning “place where the sun rises”, referring to countries at the eastern coast of Mediterranean, including Greece, Egypt, Turkey and other countries. The Italians still call this region as *il Levante*.

For example, Chinese people have regarded themselves to be in the central earth for thousands of years, and “central country”, the Chinese name for China is the best evidence. China firstly had only the concepts of the West, such as “Western regions”, “Western paradise” and so forth. Leaving aside the concept of the Western Zhou Dynasty and the so-called “Eastern barbarians” concept by our ancestors, generally speaking, our ancestors had no explicit cultural concept of “the East”. Because of the ages that technical conditions were not developed, and in thousands of years that Chinese dynasties were content to be a terrestrial power, the East in Chinese people’s geographical knowledge was only an ocean which “waters and mists conceal beyond approach”.

Over the long term, the Italians also did not consider themselves as the Westerners, and even regarded themselves as the “central” people, because they was located in the Roman Empire and at the center of the “known world”. Before the decline of the Mediterranean trade, they have been at the center of commercial and cultural exchanges. Their concept of “East” extended only to India until the beginning of the Age of Discovery. Although China was considered to belong to the East, it still existed in an illusory imagination. Today, the so-called “Easterners”, especially Chinese people, passively received the appellation of “Easterners” after the “Westerners” geographical discovery and their aggression to Asian nationalities. As E. W. Said proposed, the concept of “East” was nothing but created out of thin air by Western countries. The concept of the so-called “Westerners” was correspondingly produced and widely used in the West after the term of “Easterner” was passively accepted by Asian nations.

On the definition and classification of the East and West, people lack an explicit consensus. Explaining the Sino-Italian exchange with an inaccurate classification is risky, and may probably go to a wrong direction at the starting point.

## 2. THE “EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY” IS TOO BROAD AND IGNORES CULTURAL IDENTITY

Scholars have tried to classify the East and West by means of different cultural sources, religions and physical characteristics, etc., this is reasonable and explanatory to some extent. But the author believes that, relying too much on the dichotomy of study Sino-Italian relation and guide communications does more harm than good. Because the forms of human civilizations are various, and classifying them into two categories (or a limited number of categories), each of which bears so many different peoples and cultures, is a bit too generalized and ignores personality. Studying the bilateral relation according to this classification will inevitably lead to emphasis on

certain commonalities, but ignore the valuable characters in different cultures. When people summarize the commonalities of a class, it is likely to take the risk of trimming the toes to fit the shoes

The author holds that the division of the “East-West” was initially derived from lack of knowledge and inertia in cognition. Chinese people’s distinction of the East and West, in fact, is the prevalent variant of the “domestic-foreign” division or the traditional “Han nationality-ethnic minority” division. Influenced by Confucian culture, the nations with yellow skin, black eyes and black hair were included into the East, and the nations with blond hair and white skin were included in the Western. In the long history, Chinese people had no idea of the world geography, and poorly understood the places outside the so-called “middle-earth”. Just have a read of *Shan Hai Jing*, *Flowers in the Mirror* and other books alike, it is easy to get a glimpse of our forefathers’ concept of world geography: There were all magical islands, grotesque people, animals and plants outside China. When people describe in imagination the other people and things that they do not understand, they often take themselves as the prototype to make a bizarre transformation. No wonder that *straniero* (foreigners in Italian), *forestiero* (stranger from the woods in Italian), *foreigner* in English (still retains the trace of “forest”), or *étranger* in French all connect “foreigner”, “stranger” with the meanings of “strange”, “wretched” and the like. The great voyages of Zheng He also failed to change Chinese people’s geographical concept fundamentally, because he never was able to reach a great country which can compare to China. Those unimportant, unobtrusive and unfamiliar things were naturally classified into a same category. The division between China and foreign countries and the division between Han nationality and ethnic minorities are fairly self-explanatory.

Although Matteo Ricci and his successors brought *Wan Guo Kun Yu Map* and the advanced Western world geography knowledge into China, their influences were only confined to a few intellectuals and social elite, and with the Controversy of Rites and Kangxi’s prohibition against the Catholicism, the fire of foreign knowledge was gradually extinguished. Afterwards China’s gate was opened by Western gunboats. The intelligentsia saw more of the outside world, but Chinese people still failed to carry out equal exchanges with foreigners. After twists and turns and until the reform and opening up, Chinese people could have opportunities to carry out equal and all-round exchanges with other countries, and ordinary people can really participate in the exchange activities. However, people’s understanding of the outside world still lags behind the everyday communications, and was still shackled by the general dichotomy in varying degrees. Although ordinary people clearly know that there are United States, France, Italy and many other countries, and know the names of these countries, they

still cannot get rid of the “we—they” cognitive inertia in potential consciousness. Many people believe that “we” are a homogeneous group, ignoring the significant differences in China’s multi-ethnicities and multi-regions. “Foreigners” or “Westerners”, as “they” or “outgroups”, are often considered to have a considerable degree of commonalities, and are even “referred to as though they were ‘homogeneous and monolithic’” (Hewstone & Giles, 1997, p.272). Such ideas cannot stand the test of practice, because in many “Western” nations, the differences between Italy and the United States, Britain, Netherland, Germany and other countries are extensive and obvious. For example, Italian people’s emphasis on tradition, interdependence and support among family members, and special interpersonal relationship among neighbors are considerably similar with Chinese people, but differ a lot from the United States, Germany, etc.. In Southern Italy, such as Sicily, people’s eating habit is more like the Arabs, and is quite different from Britain, the Netherlands and other so-called “Western” countries.

These two concepts of “Easterners” and “Westerners” contain too many different peoples and civilizations respectively, wherein the numerous ethnic groups and social groups can be described to differ in thousands of ways. If the East and West dichotomy can fully distinguish and understand the world, it does not have to involve so many contemporary scholars to carry out nationality culture and community culture studies.

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### 3. THE “EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY” WILL MISLEAD EXCHANGES

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When people believe that two things belong to the same kind and have an obvious better understanding of one of them, they’re likely to daringly and even recklessly assume the other relatively unfamiliar thing by means of the more familiar thing. This is a natural cognitive habit, although it is often imprecise.

Chinese people who have the opportunity to participate in Sino-Italian exchanges mostly receive a good education, and have a certain understanding to the cultures of English-speaking countries, especially that of the United States. In their “Western country” category, their most familiar language is generally English, and their most familiar country is usually the United States. When they have to speculate Italy, which is relatively unfamiliar to them and belongs to the “Western countries”, they naturally chose the United States as a reference to develop a vision, the result was usually very painful.

People normally hold that women in Western countries would take her husband’s surname after gets married. Such a common sense is not bad, but it will inevitably make mistakes if this replaces serious study and careful preparation, especially in foreign affairs activities. In 2006, Prime Minister R. Prodi made a visit to China

with his wife. In the welcome show, a Chinese translator randomly called his wife as “Mrs. Prodi”, not knowing that as per Italian law, a woman doesn’t have to change her surname after marriage, and if voluntary, she can also add her husband’s surname after her name. The husband’s surname usually does not appear in the woman’s passport, identity card, driving license and other official documents. There are many well-educated Italian women with special background and status who normally adhere to their own names after marriage. Fortunately, the couple did not raise an objection to this mistake, but the Italian side still kindly reminded the Chinese party to “pay careful attention next time”.

People usually hold that the Westerners, especially the Americans value planning, and will develop a cautious plan in advance and execute it carefully in every important event. However, they do not know that the Italians, who are classified as the “emotionally expressive” nation by F. Trompenaars and other scholars are more inclined to take the plan only as a reference, and change frequently. The Chinese officials who were involved in Sino-Italian exchanges always made complaints in private that, the Italians’ plan could only arrive at the last moment after Chinese party’s repeated urges, and would always make a “sudden attack” on the excuse of new situations and new changes, especially for those high-powered officials. Prodi was greatly satisfied with the Chinese party’s preparatory work in the “Year of Italy in China” in Guangzhou, and also appreciated the Italian classic songs interpreted by Chinese artists at the Friendship Theatre. He was in a great mood and expressed immediately to send the World Cup just won by Italy to exhibit in Guangzhou. This well-intentioned move was far beyond the Chinese party’s expectation, and made the security personnel feel much stress fearing for late arrangement. In November 2010, N. Vendola, the President of Puglia region came to Guangzhou to visit Wang Yang, Zhu Xiaodan and other leaders. At the reception dinner in White Swan Hotel, Vendola exclaimed over the picturesque scenery of Pearl River, and required to take a walk on the beach after dinner. This expression of praise and gratitude was beyond the Chinese party’s expectation, so the working staff had to quickly change the plan and arranged the security issues. If we’d had more understanding to the Italians’ “creative action”, our preparatory work would have been more careful and the change would have been more calm. It was surprised that, five years later when S. Bonaccini, the president of Emilia Romagna region visited Guangdong, he raised a similar request in a similar circumstance, and the Chinese staff once again felt surprised and puzzled.

People are used to hold that the Westerners should be able to skillfully use English, and in a considerable number of domestic occasions, “foreign language” refers to English. Although people know the existence of Italian, they tend to inexplicably believe that the Italians’ English

should be good, but the actual situation is just the opposite. Until thirty years ago, the foreign language learnt by most people in Italy was French, followed by Spanish. Even today, Italian young generation’s English proficiency is also far from our expectations to the “Westerners”. If such an expectation has been brought into foreign affairs, it will inevitably cause errors. During the 2012 Shenzhen World University Games, Italy sent a delegation with the largest number of participants in history. However, the delegation of hundreds of people had only a few accompanying English translators and no Italian interpreter. The reality was that the Italian’s English communication competency was not good, English translation was hard to meet their daily needs, so that the author who was in the emergency interpreters’ team (According to the division of responsibilities provided by the organizing committee, daily affairs of the delegations were not within the service scope of the emergency interpreters’ team.) had to receive the Italian delegation members coming for help every day. Based on the circumstance of the time, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in the same province was entirely competent to supply a sufficient number of qualified volunteers to act as the interpreters but it did not receive such a request throughout the game. It’s attributed to the organizer’s taking-for-granted.

Peoples’s taking-for-granted is also reflected in many particulars. Three years ago, when a foreign affairs office in a mainland province received friendly delegations from Italy, they arranged an Italian delegate into a room with room number 17, and a Chinese accompany took the initiative to live in a room with the number 13. This was because the organizer believed that Christian countries regarded the number 13 as an unlucky number which they should try to avoid, so they assigned the room No. 17 to the Italian guest. However, this “considerate” arrangement caused displeasure to the representative. The Chinese organizer who arranged accommodation didn’t know that, different from most of the “Western” countries, Italian culture regards 13 as an lucky number in most cases, instead, Roman number 17 (xvii) will be “vixi”<sup>2</sup> after changing alphabetical order, meaning “I lived (long time ago)”. In order to avoid the taboo of “death”, they usually try their best to get around.

Among the so-called “Eastern countries”, the one that most Italians know best is Japan rather than China. They often cannot clearly distinguish China from Japan, and try to take Japan as a standard to build a cognitive tool to speculate China. Such an understanding approach has a historical cause. The diplomatic relation between Italy and Japan was established in 1866, which has never been interrupted, and got strengthened during World War I, World War II, G8 and other proper or infamous alliances.

<sup>2</sup> It should be *vixi* when written in modern Italian, and is the first-person singular form of the past tense (*passato remoto*) of the verb *vivere* (live).

With the help of sustained economic and cultural exchanges, Japan's image in the eyes of Italian people is no longer confined to conjecture and speculation in the opera *Madame Butterfly*, but has become increasingly clearer. The exchange between Italy and China, however, has an obvious historical break, and lags behind significantly compared to the communication between Italy and Japan.

"Made in Japan" got into Italy much earlier than "Made in China." Japanese food<sup>3</sup>, industrial products and immigrants have more opportunities to enter Italian people's vision. Most Italians have a certain understanding of Japan, although it's not comprehensive, it's much better than the understanding of China. They cannot clearly distinguish China from Japan, and often make mistakes. For a long term, the Japanese in personal contact with the Italians are far more than the Chinese. When the Italians see a tourist with yellow skin and black hair, they will firstly guess he is a Japanese, and greet to him "こんにちは" (How are you).

In a considerable number of occasions, Japan seems to become a representative of the "Eastern" countries, and becomes a "walking stick" by which Italian people know and understand the "East", even the academics are no exception. A good many Italian universities had no Chinese Department in the past, and when Chinese department was established, a lot of teachers were switched from Japanese teachers. In *Scusa ma ti voglio sposare (Excuse Me, but I Want to Marry You)*, an Italian movie released in 2010 and popular among young people, the director teased the Chinese interpreter and added two seconds "Chinese music" to enhance the comic effect, not knowing that it was typical Japanese musical instrument and Japanese melody.

For the reasons well known, when being confused with the Japanese, most Chinese people will show a displeasure or indignation. Italian officials have a good understanding in this regard, thus in diplomatic occasions they are able to hand it carefully to avoid disputes. However, in non-official occasions, such confusion is inevitable. In many important negotiations, Italian representatives often mistook "Chinese" as "Japanese", fortunately there were shrewd interpreters helping to broker a compromise.

Another considerable part of Italian people do not know that "circumstances change with the passage of time", and adhere to observe and speculate China which has experienced so many profound changes in hundreds of years with the old paradigm of Confucian culture, which is inevitable to cause deviations. If they speculate China's young generation who grow up learning English, eating at McDonald's, singing RAP, imitating Michael

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, most Italian restaurants' cooking level is not much higher than the author, is just a synonym of low quality cheap food, and is completely unable to reflect the richness and exquisiteness of Chinese food culture.

Jackson and playing the "Apple" in the old views of "when your parents are alive, do not travel far", or "a person should be gentle, modest and courteous", they will fall into stalemate like many Italian companies encountered in China. Chinese young people's pursuit of equality, protection of privacy and emphasis to personal space is beyond the expectation of their Italian bosses.

It should be noted that the rigid understanding to China is related with the tradition of Italian Chinese language teaching circle. Italy is one of the first countries in Europe carrying out exchange activities with ancient China. They "firstly contacted Chinese language in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Italian people learned Chinese in order to preach" (Yang, 2014, p.141). To win the respect and recognition from the Chinese Intellectuals, Ricci, G. Aleni and other missionaries not only learned Chinese language assiduously, but also concentrated on studying the Confucian classics, leaving a tradition of "esteeming the ancient culture" to later Chinese language teaching. For a long history, the Italians' Chinese teaching "attached importance to ancient Chinese language. Until 1970 when diplomatic relation was established between China and Italy, and the bilateral trades and cultural exchanges have been increasingly prosperous, Italian schools began to pay attention to modern Chinese language" (Liu, 1988, p.183). Most Italian sinologists are immersed in the study of ancient China, but lack an interest in the changes taking place. Even in today's Chinese language classes in Italy, this "stressing the ancient" atmosphere is still strong, students learn the traditional Chinese culture, have a good knowledge of Tai Chi, eight diagrams, philosophers in pre-Qin times, martial arts and calligraphy, but know little about the contemporary Chinese society (Zang, 2013).

To carry out communications with contemporary China, Italian academia must pay attention to "Chinese people's changing trends and internal differences" (Kulich & Prosser, 2007, p.5), so as to be able to "challenge our 'East - West' concept and the concept viewing 'Chinese people' as a homogeneous whole" (Ibid.), and to understand "China's increasingly prominent diversity in different contexts" (Ibid.).

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## CONCLUSION

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In the Sino-Italian exchanges, analogy is a barely satisfactory cognitive tool, but is also the cause of many misunderstandings. Due to the lack of mutual understanding, some people are still not fully aware of the necessity to build a reasonable cognitive tool and to achieve "recognition" in the bilateral relation. Some ideas of inertia and wrong thinking habits are still interfering with our understanding and communications.

In 2014, the exchange visits of the two premiers and China's 8 billion euros investments to Italy "opened a new

chapter of friendship and cooperation” (Andornino, 2015, p.9). The bilateral relation has entered a new stage, which “fundamentally changed China’s peripheral position in Italy’s national strategic plan.” (Ibid.) In 2015, the bilateral cooperation in various fields developed rapidly, putting forward a higher requirement to the extent and level of mutual understandings. Cross-cultural research circles of the two countries should take active actions to build the bridge of communication.

Chinese academia’s cross-nation study is still at an exploratory stage. The level of Italian study lags behind the researches to the other members of G8, and is even less than the understanding of Italy to China. Concerns and resources allocated in this field are also inadequate. Development of the study requires more attention and investment from relevant departments. Italian academia should also focus more on the present and the future, get out of the study to carry out field surveys and identify practical problems. Based on this, we can expect to build a more comprehensive and accurate “recognition” to the Sino-Italian relation, and provide intellectual supports for the exchanges between Italy and China.

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