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Navigating the Mediterranean through the Chinese lens: transcultural narratives of the sea among lands

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and the slave trade. Its insights into trade with Portugal and the Portuguese Atlantic are especially revealing, offering crucial perspectives on Lisbon's place in Venetian trade networks. It is essential reading for scholars interested in Atlantic–Mediterranean connections.

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In the year 97 CE, the Chinese imperial envoy Gan Ying stood on the coast of the Persian Gulf. He was on his way to the great kingdom of Daqin, known to us as the Roman Empire. The existence of a great empire in the far west and its keen interest in Chinese silk was known to the Chinese for some time. Indeed, the term Daqin ("Great Qin"), reflected a perception of Rome as the mirror image of the imperial China, Qin being the name of the first dynasty to unite China under a single emperor in 221 BCE. However, no direct contact existed between the two empires. Commerce with Rome was conducted through middlemen, primarily Persians and Central Asians who travelled along the East–West axis that would later be known as the Silk Roads. Indeed, much like the European imagination of the East and its earthly paradise, perceptions of the West were infused with the popular myths of Laozi riding his ox past the western border, the Queen mother of the West and the travels of the eight immortals (26). Gan Ying had been sent to bridge the gap and establish a direct link to Rome. This, however, was not meant to be. The Persian merchants, probably fearing a threat to their trade monopoly, told Gan Ying that even with unfavourable winds, the sea journey could take up to two years. They seem not to have informed him that by travelling on land across the Syrian desert he would arrive in Roman territory within several weeks. Disheartened, Gan Ying decided to return home.

Gan Ying's story is related in the History of the Later Han (*Hou Hanshu*) and discussed both in Maurizio Paolillio's article on the relations between Han dynasty China and the Roman Mediterranean, and Francesca Fariello's enlightening discussion of maritime routes to the Greek east. In many ways Gan Ying's mission and its conclusion are emblematic of Chinese contact with the region. Thus, while Rome is imagined as a centre of civilization, on par with China and standing in contrast to the "barbaric" nomadic peoples of Eurasia, it is in actuality too distant from the Chinese world to be of any real importance. Accordingly, after Gan Ying's failed mission, the

region continued to be shrouded in myth and legend for several hundred years. Indeed, reading this interesting collection of articles on Chinese–Mediterranean relations from ancient times to modernity, one may forget that Chinese interest and knowledge of the region remained negligible up to early modernity. It was only after the crisis of the First Opium War in 1840 and China's subsequent decent into a state of semi-colonial rule that knowledge of the west past and present became essential to reformers like Kang Youwei, whose voyage to Europe is discussed by Renata Vicci (18–22) and modern Chinese perceptions of Roman law described by Lara Colangelo.

The book is centred around the idea of the Mediterranean as a transcultural space. While the significance of the transcultural nature of the region is more clearly evident in modern-era encounters, at times the idea of transcultural space seems somewhat artificial. Victoria Almonte's discussion of the report provided by the eighth-century Du Huan, a Tang Dynasty soldier taken captive in the Battle of Talas (751 CE), who spent several years in the Middle East, provides a picture of the region as a crossroads of civilizations, supporting a shared maritime culture (62). At the same time, overall the region's transcultural nature seems not to be quite as noteworthy as the relative lack of a political centre and a distinct cultural orthodoxy (while Almonte cites Du Huan's descriptions at length, it is a shame that no English translations are provided).

Margaret Kim's excellent discussion of Rabban Sauma and his 1287 voyage to the West seems to make the opposite point. Sauma, a Beijing-born monk from the Church of the East, is a fascinating example of a worldview that is Chinese yet theologically centred outside of China in the heartlands of Christianity and in Jerusalem. As Kim notes, Sauma's cultural perspective and writing may be seen as an emulation of the voyages of Buddhist monks like the renowned Xuanzang (602–664 CE) from China to the heartland of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. Sauma's experience of Europe is not one of cultural plurality and transculturalism but rather a sense of wonder at the non-centralized political order of Italian cities such as Genoa, and the religious unity and overarching dominance of Christianity (77). Reading Kim's description of Sauma's impression of Europe as "a place of order and grace, in contrast to Mongol turmoil and pluralism" (76), one cannot help thinking of the way in which Marco Polo marvelled at the harmony of the Khan's court and empire compared to European division, only a few years earlier.

Other articles in the collection include a discussion (Ileana Amadei) of the little known fourteenth-century Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan, the varied Chinese names for the Island of Malta (Miriam Castorina), and a cogent literary analysis of the writings of several contemporary Chinese immigrants to Italy.

Overall, the book's articles make meticulous use of the sources, are well written and will be helpful for scholars of the Silk Road and China at large. What seemed somewhat lacking was an in-depth discussion, analysis and integration of the material presented. What can be said about the meaning of Chinese perceptions of the Mediterranean, their evolution and transformation over time? Moreover, how do these perceptions relate to Chinese worldviews regarding the world outside China, the civilizations lying to the West and the traditional Chinese divide

between the civilized and barbaric? These questions seem to invite further discussion.

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