

## Teaching Chinese in Italy: Past and present

### 1. Tradition

Italy is probably one of the first European countries where the Chinese language was taught. It is well known that the first news about China arrived in the West only at the very end of the 16th century, when Spanish and Italian missionaries began to publish information about the Chinese empire. Merchants and missionaries, who had arrived in China during previous centuries, had made no mention of the Chinese language. Italian merchants such as Andalò da Savignone, Pietro Lucalongo, Luchetto Duodo, Giovanni Loredan, Franceschino Loredan, the Viglione family buried in Yangzhou, or the Polo family, including the celebrated Marco Polo, who dictated the story of his journey – none of these made reference to languages spoken in China. Franciscan missionaries who reached China, then ruled by the Mongol Yuan dynasty, did little to improve upon that record. In fact, with the exception of a short reference to the "lingua tartarica", none of them mentioned languages spoken in China in the various accounts of their journeys.

The first news about the Chinese language reached Europe only when Italian missionaries began to study it in order to spread their faith in China. During the 17th and 18th centuries especially, Italian missionaries prepared various materials to present the language to Europeans. Michel Ruggeri and Matteo Ricci in 1583-1588 developed the first systematic scheme of romanization of Chinese sounds. Eventually enhanced by Ricci and other missionaries, this system, with its clear indications of tone values, nasal finals and aspirations, laid the foundation for other systems, such as the one employed in the *Xizi qiji*, published in Beijing in 1605. In 1653, Martino Martini prepared the first explanation of Chinese grammar. Although this text was published only recently, it exerted great influence on those Europeans attempting to understand the functioning of the language. Basilio Brollo from Gemona, in 1694-1698, compiled two Chinese-Latin dictionaries, one according to the traditional order of radicals and one arranged alphabetically according to phonetics.

In 1732, the Italian priest Matteo Ripa established in Naples the Collegio de' Cinesi. Although the institution was conceived with the aim of training young Chinese converts to spread the catholic faith in China, it operated also as the first school of the Chinese language in the West. This was the place where, in 1791, Sir G. L. Staunton was able to obtain two Chinese interpreters for the mission to China headed by Lord Macartney, eventually conducted in 1793-1794. Naples at that time was the only city in Europe where it was possible to find Chinese interpreters.

Following the Italian unification and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Chinese and Japanese empires in 1866, the Collegio de' Cinesi was

transformed into the Real Collegio Asiatico di Napoli in 1868. It was divided into two sections: the old missionary arm and a new department open to laymen for the study of Asian languages. Eventually the school's name was changed to the Istituto Orientale, becoming the first Italian institution to offer Chinese language courses.

Antelmo Severini (1829-1909) opened the first seat of Languages, History and Religions of the Far East at the Real Istituto di Studi Superiori of Florence. He was followed by Carlo Puini (1839-1924). Much later than in France where, in 1814 at the Collège de France, Abel Rémusat (1788-1832) had occupied the first seat of Chinese language in Europe. The position in Florence, however, was soon closed again.

In 1883, Lodovico Nocentini (1849-1910) was posted as a Chinese student and interpreter to the Italian Consulate in Shanghai, where he served for five years. In 1899, he became the first professor of Chinese at the University of Rome. He was followed by Giovanni Vacca (1872-1953), Pasquale D'Elia (1890-1963) and Giuliano Bertuccioli (1923-2001).

Given that the Florence teaching position had been closed, the third position for Chinese teaching after Naples and Rome was opened in 1967 at Venice's Ca' Foscari University. This was followed by similar positions at the universities of Milan (1995) and Turin (2006).

During the first decades of the 20th century very few students were studying Chinese in Italy. In Rome, for example, in the early 1950s there were only a handful of students of Chinese. In those years, the Italian Communist Party reached an exchange agreement with the Chinese Communist Party, and a number of Italians went to study in China, while some Chinese came to Rome to study Italian. The situation began to change rapidly in the 1960s, when the Chinese Cultural Revolution aroused great interest among Italian students, quite a number of which subsequently endeavored to learn Chinese. In the '70s the number of students at each university already mentioned was approaching 50. In that decade, a new department of Chinese was opened at the University of Venice.

With only a small decrease in students in the early '90s, due to the Tian'anmen events of June 1989, the number of Chinese language students in Italy has grown rapidly ever since, now going into the thousands.

## 2. Present

At present, Chinese is taught in almost 30 universities in Italy and is now one of the most popular foreign languages chosen by students at university level as a curricular language, probably second only to English.

The most active universities are Rome and Venice, each with over one thousand students of Chinese. The overall number of Chinese language students

in Italian universities is approximately 5,000. In the Italian university system, there are 12 full professors, 19 associate professors and 12 tenure research fellows of Chinese language and literature. Originally, Chinese was considered only as a curricular language; students enrolled at university solely to study Chinese language and literature, in addition to other courses in modern and ancient history, art, archaeology, etc. During the 1990s, mostly in Venice and Naples, language and culture courses were also included in economic and law programmes, while in Rome and in most other universities, BA courses in Chinese are still organized in traditional cultural curricula. Chinese language teaching in Italy, in comparison to the situation in other European countries, is still in the process of evolving from a curricular language studied only by "orientalist" students to a modern language taken by all types of students. Although new courses are opening almost in every university throughout the country, these are mostly taken by humanities students, while the interest in Chinese from students in the science branches is still very weak.

Recent years have also seen a growth in interest in the Chinese language within the public and private school system. At present, almost one hundred high schools in Italy are offering elementary courses in Chinese, but very few of them at curricular level, mostly as extra-curricular classes. The few curricular classes in Chinese are in the Veneto Region, where a project coordinated by the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Venice at Ca' Foscari offered support to some local high schools interested in teaching Chinese. Chinese as a curricular language was accepted by local authorities some years ago and, at the end of this academic year, the first group of students will graduate from an Italian high school with Chinese among their final examination subjects. Local education authorities have supported various projects for the diffusion of non-curricular courses in Chinese at high schools also in the Regions of Lombardy, Lazio and Liguria. However, Chinese has not yet been approved by the Italian Ministry of Education as a curricular language in the high school system. In the Milan area, the regional education office sponsored and organized Chinese and Arabic courses in a number of high schools of the region. In Lazio, the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Rome has received financial support from the regional education office to organize non-curricular courses in Chinese at over twenty schools. These courses offer two hours of Chinese language instruction per week, for a total of 50 hours per year.

During a one-day colloquium on Chinese teaching in Italy, recently organized by the Veneto Region with the support of Venice University, one of the most widely discussed topics was the background of teachers. Experience has shown that when and where courses (curricular or non-curricular) were organized or supported by the universities, the quality of teachers (mother-tongue and not mother-tongue) was somehow controlled. However, in cases in Northern Italy, where courses were directly organized by the regional school offices, there

was no control on the language competence of teachers, meaning the quality of teaching was not guaranteed. The main point is now that if and when the Ministry of Public Education rules to allow high schools all over the country to choose Chinese as a curricular language, the problem of quality standard definition for Chinese language instructors will immediately arise. A possible solution will be the involvement of major Italian universities in organizing special post-MA Chinese teacher training courses.

In Italy, one Confucius Institute has already been functioning since September 2006 in Rome, each semester enrolling 200 students in elementary Chinese. Four other institutes have just been opened in Pisa, Naples, Turin and Milan. The experience of the Confucius Institute in Rome has been particularly positive in terms of expanding the possibilities to support regular university teaching activities while opening the courses to include non-university students. Teachers working for the Institute in Rome have contributed in various ways to the didactic activities designed for university students during the day, while teaching late afternoon or Saturday morning classes at the Institute.

### 3. Teaching materials

In order to standardize as much as possible the various teaching activities, the following teaching materials were prepared in Rome with the collaboration of three types of teachers:

- a. Italian teachers of Chinese who completed a minimum of two years' study in China;
- b. Chinese mother-tongue teachers with experience in Italy, teaching Chinese to Italians in Italy;
- c. Chinese mother-tongue teachers with experience in China, teaching Chinese to Italians in a Chinese environment.

The teaching materials published include:

1. Masini, F./Zhang, Tongbing/Bai, Hua/Di Toro, A./Liang, Dongmei: *Il cinese per gli italiani 意大利人学汉语, Corso di lingua in 40 lezioni*, Milano: Hoepli, 2006.
2. Masini, F./Zhang, Tongbing/Sun, Pingping/De Troia, P./Liang, Dongmei: *Il cinese per gli italiani, corso avanzato 意大利人学汉语, 提高篇*, Milano: Hoepli, 2008.
3. Masini, F./Zhang, Tongbing/Bai, Hua/Liang, Dongmei: *Impariamo il cinese 我们学汉语, Corso di lingua per studenti italiani*, Milano: Hoepli, 2007.

The first book, *Il cinese per gli italiani 意大利人学汉*, is designed to serve as material for teaching Chinese in university classes. It is divided into 40 units. Broken down into 10 units per semester, the text covers two academic years and includes all the grammatical features, characters and words of the elementary

level of *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK) exams. It is used for classes with semesters of 12-13 weeks, with 6 to 8 hours per week (usually 2 hours with an Italian teacher and 4 to 6 hours with a mother-tongue instructor). Therefore the course requires 280-380 classroom hours for completion. The second half of the book, from lesson 21 onwards, also includes reading texts in traditional full-form characters.

The second book, *Il cinese per gli italiani, corso avanzato* 意大利人学汉语, 提高篇 is the continuation of the previous book, composed of 20 lessons regarding various aspect of Chinese society and culture. It is used for the third year of the course, in Italy during the first semester (10 units) and in China at the Beijing Waiguoyu Daxue, our university partner, during the second semester (10 units). It covers the intermediate level of HSK exams in terms of vocabulary and syntactic structures.

The third volume mentioned above was prepared to meet the needs of high school Chinese language courses. It is organized in 20 lessons and includes short texts in Italian presenting various aspects of Chinese culture and society. It can be completed during a two-year non-curricular course and needs a total of 100 hours of classroom teaching.

In conceiving and preparing these teaching materials, which are the only texts of their kind in the Italian language available in Italy and China so far, we have taken into consideration not only the HSK standards, but have also devoted special attention to difficulties frequently experienced by Italian speakers learning Chinese. For example, adjectives are easily employed in Chinese in the predicative function, without the need to use the verb 是 *shi* (to be) as copula. In Italian, on the contrary, adjectives have to be used with the assistance of the copula, when playing the predicative role. Therefore, Italian mother-tongue students tend to use the verb 是 *shi* in front of the adjective used as a predicate. Based on these peculiarities, we have moved the adjective-predicate sentences to a much later stage in the course than many other textbooks.

The teaching of Chinese in the Italian public school system has reached a crucial stage: On the one hand, the Chinese language should be considered a foreign language like any other, but on the other hand, it is such a remote tongue for European language speakers that it requires special handling. Nevertheless, a strong need exists to develop a stable and well-conceived framework for the teaching of Chinese at the European level.

Federico Masini