

Unending Wandering: visions of mobility in Zou Taofen's Italy

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Abstract: This paper focuses on visions and representations of Italy that emerge from the travel writings and narrative intersections of Sino-Italian mobilities. Taking its primary example from the travels of Zou Taofen (1895–1944), who enshrined his memories of Italy in *Pingzong jiyu* 萍踪寄语 (*Messages from an unending wandering*) while exiled from China, this critical exploration of mobility traces the spread of ideas between the Italian Peninsula and the Republic of China. Zou's new and original visions of Italy reached a broad readership during the republican period, spreading widely and making Zou a "central figure of the New Culture era." Despite his place as one of the most successful and influential journalists in the history of the Republic of China, Zou has not yet "received his full due" (Mitter 2004, 55).

Keywords: Zou Taofen, Chinese travel literature, Republican China, Italy, China, Mobility, Exile.

1. Introduction

As new technologies and global perspectives have given rise to new forms of travel and mobility in the 21st century, the emerging paradigm of New Mobility Studies has encouraged interdisciplinary discussions about human movements and the resulting cultural exchange and transmission. This critical perspective can apply to the past as well as the present, situating travel and mobility as fundamental activities of cultural construction. The New Mobility paradigm allows for us to observe and study social and other phenomena with a keen focus on the movement of human bodies (Sheller and Urry 2006).

Many of ancient literature's highest forms have a real or imagined journey at the center of their narration, such as the epic of Gilgamesh or the mythical journey of Ulysses. Still, much work is to be done to acknowledge the culture-forming importance of travel within academic scholarship. As Eric Leed laments in *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (1991, 4):

Travel has not yet been claimed as a field of history, nor is it clear that it need be, that an understanding of how mobility transforms individuals, social relations, cultures would add significantly to our understanding of the past and the present.

Elsewhere, Merriman and Pearce (2017) have enriched the incipient field of Mobility Studies by highlighting how much a humanistic approach to mobility (which also includes travel) can help better understand human dynamics.

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Recognizing multiple forms of expression and different types of mobility, this paper focuses on travel writing. Taking as a point of departure the journey of an important historical figure of the New Culture era —Zou Taofen 邹韬奋 (1895–1944)—this exploration of narrative travel presents material from Zou’s influential text *Pingzong jiyu* 萍踪寄语 (*Messages from an unending wandering*). A writer, publisher, and entrepreneur, Zou is considered one of the most successful journalists in the history of the Republic of China and probably one of the most read (Coble 1985, 294).

Zou Taofen made a trip to Europe between 1934 and 1935 and began to publish his travel experiences in *Shenghuo zhoukan* 生活周刊 (*Life Weekly*), a widely read weekly of the period. The final three volumes of his journey abroad—recounting travels in Europe, and the Soviet Union—had a decisive influence on Chinese youth of the time, as evidenced by a survey carried out by Olga Lang before the Second Sino-Japanese war and later reported in Gewurtz (1975, 7).¹ Zou Taofen’s (forced—as we will come to see) mobility and overseas travel account are taken here as a case study to examine how a mobility perspective is enriched by the valuable contribution of humanities in this field.

The choice to concentrate on Zou is particularly significant given the high number of his readers, his great influence on 1930s youth and the urban middle class, and the peculiarities of his writing. Laughlin confirms that Zou’s travel writings are “among the most widely read works of nonfiction in modern China” (2022, 53), while Gewurtz underlines that “the portion of Tsou’s writings that probably contributed the most to student radicalism in the mid-thirties was his travel books” (Gewurtz 1975, 23). Xu Xinmin (1999, 25) shares the same opinion and emphasizes how Zou’s reportage from abroad played a crucial role in the knowledge of the world and China, even among ordinary people. Zou’s movement from and within China not only shaped his creative expressions but also influenced Chinese public opinion, providing an original vision of Italy that so far has not been analyzed.

2. Zou Taofen’s life and career²

The life and works of Zou Taofen remain marginalized outside China despite his popularity and influence during the Republican period. Several works on the National Salvation Movement or essays dedicated to the history of journalism and publishing in China, especially in Shanghai, mention Zou’s contribution; however, his literary works, articles, and essays are rarely studied outside of the country.³ His political activism during the last years of his life and his role in

¹ In this survey, Zou ranked third among the students’ favorite non-fiction writers after Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) and Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895–1976).

² The biographical data on Zou Taofen are mostly taken from Chen (2009), Zou’s autobiographies (Zou 1937 and 1946), and partly from what he writes in his *Messages from an unending wandering* (Zou 1934, Ch. 2).

³ An exception is found in the monographs by Gewurtz 1972 (*non vidi*); 1975.

founding the National Salvation Movement and opposing Japanese aggression made him well-known in China (not to mention his deathbed desire to join the Communist Party). In addition, his name is closely bound to the Sanlian bookstore chain he established and is in “the list of martyrs commemorated on China’s National Memorial Day since 2014” (CGTN 2018).

Born as Zou Enrun 邹恩润 in 1895 from a poor literati family in decay, he spent his childhood in Fujian, where his father held a minor office in the administration of salt. The first of 15 children—six sons and nine daughters the father Zou Guozhen 邹国珍 (1876–1948) had from his wife and two concubines—Zou received a traditional education at home with his father and a private tutor. Due to the family’s economic constraints, his father decided to send him to one of the new “Western schools” opening up everywhere in the country, particularly in South China. There, pupils learned new and “modern” subjects, such as math, foreign languages, chemistry, and physics. In 1909, Taofen was accepted into the preparatory course at the Cangxia Public Middle School (Gongli cangxia Zhonxuetang 公立苍霞中学堂) in Fuzhou. Three years later, in 1912, he entered the *Nanyang gongxue* 南洋公学—today’s Jiao Tong University (Jiao Tong Daxue 交通大学)—founded in 1896 by an imperial edict to teach engineering and transportation science. While his father was nurturing the idea of having an engineer son, Taofen already knew this was not his future since math class “was simply like going to the guillotine” (Zou 1946, Chap. 2). Despite his dislike for scientific subjects, he committed himself to the course of study and emerged as one of the most brilliant students. At the same time, he realized his true passions lied elsewhere.

He was a passionate reader of *Xinmin congbao* 新民丛报 (*New Citizens’ Miscellanies*, published between 1902–1907) and a fierce admirer of Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), of whom he read the biographies published in the periodical.⁴ Thanks to these readings, he also learned about Italy, as he recounts in this passage of his autobiography:

According to the rules, we had to turn out the lights at ten o’clock in the evening and go to sleep. I, on the contrary, secretly lit a candle and secretly read under the covers, often till three o’clock in the morning, when I finally blew out the candle and went to sleep. In my dreams, I kept seeing the three Italian heroes⁵

⁴ The journal is one of the most important of the period for its reformistic ideas and its political concerns. It had an enormous impact on the intellectual society of the time and was published by a group of reformers led by Liang himself. The journal’s pages discuss, above all, democracy and modernizations of China. Among the scholarship on the subject, see Ma 2020.

⁵ Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Cavour. On the three heroes of Risorgimento, Liang Qichao wrote many times, and they are also the protagonists of his drama *Xin Luoma* 新罗马 (The New Rome). On the importance of these figures in Liang’s political ideas, see Li (2014). Italian scholarship also dedicated several works on this issue, see for example Borsa, and Beonio Brocchieri (1984); Bertuccioli (1981; 1984); Masini (2012; 2017).

and Madame Roland!⁶ [All realistic biographies written by Liang Rengong⁷ in *New Citizens' Miscellanies*.] With such premises, hopes of becoming an engineer were indeed very few! (Zou 1937, Ch. 2).

Zou decided to change his major and moved to St. John University in 1919, a missionary institution among the most exclusive in Shanghai (Mitter 2004, 56), where he graduated in July 1921 in literature and English language. After graduation, he went to work in the commercial field while still collaborating with some minor periodicals.⁸ Two events changed the life and career of Zou Taofen: first, an encounter with Huang Yanpei 黄炎培 (1878–1965)—one of the forerunners in the education of modern China; second, a proposal to work part-time at the *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* 教育与职业 (*Education and Vocation*), a journal linked to the Chinese Vocational Education Association (*Zhonghua zhiye jiaoyu she* 中华职业教育社) with a “limited circulation” (Gewurtz 1975, 4) and an audience mainly of teachers and educators.⁹

This opportunity allowed him to finally engage in professional writing and get closer to the aspirations and issues of Chinese youth. He also worked as an editor and translator of many books dealing with vocational training and testing, such as John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Additionally, his relationship to Huang Yanpei resulted in the invitation to be editor-in-chief of the new journal of the Association, founded in October 1925, entitled *Shenghuo zhouban* 生活周刊 (*Life Weekly*) or simply *Shenghuo* 生活.¹⁰ The magazine was suppressed multiple times, but ultimately “Zou's publications proved unsuppressible,” even when he was arrested upon return to China in 1936 (MacKinnon 1997, 11).

At the outset, Zou worked practically alone at the periodical; he alone was responsible for writing articles and essays, proofreading the contents, and managing all the processes, which he did using many pen names (Yeh 2007, 103–4). Zou recalls:

During that time, I often gave solo performances. First, only some friends in the cultural circles could help me; second, the remuneration for authors was zero, and the people from the Vocational Education Association were busy with their original jobs. The ridiculous thing was that I took six or seven different

⁶ Marie-Jeanne Philippon Roland (1754–93), whose life was narrated by Liang Qichao in *Jinshi diyi nüjie Luolan furen zhuan* 近世第一女杰罗兰夫人传 (*Biography of the most eminent modern heroine, Madame Roland*) in 1902. Mme Roland's life was illustrated to fully explore Liang's idea of *geming* 革命, revolution (Tsui 2015).

⁷ Liang Rengong 梁任公 is another name for Liang Qichao.

⁸ He collaborated with *Xuesheng zazhi* 学生杂志 (*Students Magazine*), published by the Commercial Press, and *Ziyou tan* 自由谈 (*Free Talk*), a supplement of the *Shenbao* 申报 (*Shanghai Journal*), one of the first and most famous newspapers of China.

⁹ On the history, development, and ideas of the Association, see Gewurtz (1978).

¹⁰ Yeh underlines that the magazine's mission was “to convert young urbanites, unhappy or otherwise, to the unique relevance of vocational education in connection with current concerns and future prospects” (Yeh 2007, 103). On *Shenghuo* and its editorial line, see Huang (2007) and Zheng and Cheng (2007).

pen names for myself and assigned a particular type of article to a particular pen name! For example, pseudonym A was responsible for biographies; B for self-cultivation; C wrote articles concerning health; D superintended the discussions; E was in charge of essays, and so forth. Simply put, each pen name developed a specific disposition. Nevertheless, this did not depend on my being omnipotent, for I worked hard only to collect every kind of material to fit each pseudonym's disposition. Much of this data was searched and found in various English language periodicals. [...] (Zou 1937, Ch. 27).

One of these pseudonyms was “Taofen 韬奋,”¹¹ the name he is often referred to, especially by his affectionate readers. He started to use it in November 1928 in another of his successful columns titled *Xiao yanlun* 小言论 (“Humble opinions”).

From January 1, 1933, the writer began to sign his articles with the name “Zou Taofen 邹韬奋.”¹² In *Life Weekly*, Zou's approach was innovative and fresh. He chose a smaller format, used a more informal style, and inserted photographs and pictures into the periodical. Zou also recruited overseas students to be correspondents from abroad (Gewurtz 1975, 5; Zou 1936, Ch. 27). His “revolution” yielded benefits; from 2000 copies per week in 1926, the weekly grew to sell 200,000 copies in 1933 (Chen 2009, Ch. 8; Mitter 2004, 56–7). This growth made the magazine one of the most read of the time and “the most influential journal among Shanghai's ‘petty urbanites’” (Yeh 2007, 102).

Life's readers particularly loved the *Duzhe xinxiang* 读者信箱 (“Readers' Mailbox”), where Zou answered many questions young men and women asked him about education, love, gender relations, new mores, and much more (Mitter 2004, 80–90). The column was so popular that Zou received from 20,000 up to 30,000 letters annually (Coble 1985, 295). Thanks to his experience in the publication field and the growing number of readers, Zou also decided to start his own enterprise, founding a society for subscriptions to newspapers and books in 1930. Later, he also founded the publishing house Shenghuo shudian 生活书店 (from 1948 Sanlian shudian 三联书店 or Sanlian Bookstore), which remains one of the most important Chinese publishing houses and book chains today.

¹¹ The first character *tao* 韬 could refer to the expression in the *Daodejing* 道德经 “*taoguang-yanghui* 韬光养晦,” hide one's light (i.e., talent) and bide one's time. The second character refers to “*qinfen* 勤奋,” to be diligent or assiduous. Taken together, the pseudonym invokes someone who hides his capacity to be diligent.

¹² Zou contributed to the special issue of *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志 (*The Eastern Miscellany*) entitled *Mengxiang de Zhongguo* 梦想的中国 (*The China of your dreams*). Chen Hui erroneously dates the article to 1931 (Chen 2009, 1). This special issue was published after the editor Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之 (1896–1986) had posed two questions to the readers: 1. “What does the future China of your dreams look like? (Please describe a sketch or an aspect of the future China.) What dreams do you have for your individual life? (Of course, these dreams do not have to be feasible)” (Spakowski 2019, 92). One hundred and sixty people answered the questions among which—apart from Taofen—some of the most illustrious writers and intellectuals of the time can be found such as Ba Jin 巴金, Yu Dafu 郁达夫, Mao Dun 茅盾, Lao She 老舍, and others (Spakowski 2019; ESSRA 2022).

Zou had a liberal approach to politics, but after the Manchurian Incident of September 1931 and the January 28 Incident in Shanghai in 1932, he became increasingly radicalized like many other intellectuals of that time. Zou began to call for resistance to Japan from the pages of *Shenghuo*.¹³ He wrote more than a few inflammatory editorials and joined the League for the Protection of Civil Rights (*Zhongguo minquan baozhang tongmeng* 中国民权保障同盟) in January 1933, together with some prominent figures of the time such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) and Song Qingling 宋庆龄 (1893–1981), the wife of Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925). The secretary of the League, Yang Xingfo 杨杏佛 (1893–1933), was shot to death in June 1933. In July, realizing his life was in danger too, Taofen decided to flee abroad or, as he writes, to go into exile (*liumang* 流亡) (Zou 1946, Ch. 1.1). A few months later, in December, *Shenghuo* was closed by the government.

The magazine changed its name first to *Xinsheng zhoukan* 新生周刊 (*New Life Weekly*, February 1934, suppressed in July 1935). Later, the periodical was named *Dazhong shenghuo* 大众生活 (*Life of the Masses*, November 1935–February 1936), and soon after became *Yongsheng* 永生 (*Eternal Life*), only to be suppressed three months later (Coble 1985). During this extended period of volatility, Zou was actively involved in the anti-Japan movement. He participated in the foundation of the Shanghai section of the National Salvation Association (*Jiuguo hui* 救国会) and was among the “Seven Gentlemen” arrested on November 22, 1936.¹⁴ Released in July 1937, he continued to oppose Japanese aggression and flee persecution throughout China, especially in the South. He was forced to live an “unending wandering” (i.e., exile) in China for most of the rest of his life. Finally returning to Shanghai in 1943, he died of cancer a few months later, in July 1944. His tomb is currently in Shanghai at the Longhua Martyr Memorial Park (CGTN 2018).

3. An “unending wandering”: exile and narrative resistance

As we have now discovered, Zou Taofen’s travel abroad was a form of exile and not a leisure trip to the West. Nevertheless, the journalist was able to turn necessity into an opportunity. Thanks to a loan of 3,000 yuan from friends and supporters, on July 14, 1933, he boarded the *Conte Verde*—one of the first Italian ocean liners of Lloyd Sabauda—and began weekly dispatches of his journey. The first of this bulletin was published the very next day (July 15) in a special column of *Shenghuo* entitled *Pingzong jiyu* 萍踪寄语 (“Messages from an unending wandering”).

Given the difficulties the magazine was experiencing, Zou soon decided to gather his travel writings in a volume with the same title.¹⁵ This intention is ex-

¹³ On his activism in these years and his calling for democracy, see Chen (2009), especially Chapter 11.

¹⁴ It was in prison that Zou compiled most of his first autobiography (Zou 1937).

¹⁵ According to Zhang (2019, 76) and Laughlin (2002, 54), after the suppression of *Life* at the end of the year, the column continued to be published first in *Xinsheng* and then in *Shijie zhishi* 世界知识 (*World Knowledge*).

pressed clearly in the Preface of the first volume, written six months later. Here he states that, having compiled 51 articles and written about 105,000 words, he would end the first volume. His travel account was later published in two different works: one titled as the column, i.e., *Messages from an unending wandering*; the other titled *Pingzong yiyu* 萍踪忆语, *Memories from an unending wandering* (1937).¹⁶

The first of his travel accounts, *Messages from an unending wandering*, is in three volumes published by the Shenghuo Shudian publishing house. The first volume was published in June 1934 and contains a Preface and 51 articles/chapters covering the period from July 14, 1933, to February 7, 1934. The first chapters are dedicated to travel at sea and coastal cities (Hong Kong, Singapore, Colombo, Suez), while the second part describes a few western Europe countries: Italy, Switzerland, France, England, and Ireland. The second volume was published in September 1934 (Preface and 14 chapters) and narrates the journey in eastern European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany), with a particular focus on Nazism. The last volume was released in October 1935 (Preface and 66 chapters) and exclusively covers the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Messages is a work of difficult classification. Xu Ximin, for example, finds it problematic to label it as a piece of travel literature (*youji* 游记), arguing that the work must be analyzed as a sub-genre and considered as “literature in the form of travel reportage” (*youjiti baogao wenxue* 游记体报告文学) (Xu 1999, 26). The argument, according to the scholar, is that very little space is dedicated to the actual journey; i.e., the descriptions of places and observations on customs and traditions. Such narrative omissions make the work stylistically distant from the coeval travel literature. Another difference is due to Zou’s journalistic writing style, which is more concise and shorter than a strictly “literary” one—a style that, from the first to the third volume, gradually changes in parallel with progressively broadening insights and analyses (Xu 1999, 26).¹⁸

I partially agree with this view: first, because a journalistic style can be compatible with a literary one; second, because his observations, even if not focused on places, are very centered on people and their mores and customs, despite what Xu writes. The observations reveal a keen and profound sensibility, laid bare in Zou’s descriptions of Europe’s social conflicts and hypocrisies (Castorina 2022). In addition, Zou’s literary style was deeply influenced by his experience as the editor-in-chief and columnist of the *Readers’ Mailbox*, which allowed him to be in continuous and direct dialogue with his numerous readers.

¹⁶ The change in title is due to the fact that the book was written not during the journey but after the author’s return to China. It recalls Zou’s sojourn in the United States.

¹⁷ The work has been digitized and is available online: <<https://www.xuges.com/xdmj/ztf/index.htm>>. The internal references to Zou’s account in this article are from this digital version, with the indication of the chapter.

¹⁸ In *Chinese Reportage*, Charles Laughlin is also uncertain about the classification. He first classifies Zou’s work as travel literature and then states that it “must remain at the fringes of what I am classifying here as reportage literature” (Laughlin 2022, 62).

Aside from the question of how the work must be classified, Taofen's writing certainly has elements that make it particularly compelling and original. Zou's prose is immediate, fresh, and easy to grasp. He eludes any form of erudite expression or elegant quotation—a temptation few modern Chinese writers have been able to escape—always using simple and straightforward vernacular Chinese. The tone is informal, subtly humorous, and often moving. Zou also introduces a linguistic peculiarity in his account: he often inserts sources and English words to be as clear and detailed as possible, as can be seen in the following examples, given also in Chinese:

本年二月六日—就是记者执笔作此《弁言》的前一天—在英国销路最广的一种日报《每日传知》(*Daily Herald*)上面载有一段新闻, 标题是《母亲为着子女饿死》(“Mother starves herself for children”), [...].

On February 6 of this year—the day before the journalist wrote this preface—the *Daily Herald*, one of UK's best-selling newspapers, ran an article entitled “Mother starves herself for children.” (Zou 1934, Preface)

八月六日下午四点钟佛尔第号到意大利的东南海港布林的西 (Brindisi), 这算是记者和欧洲的最初的晤面。

At four o'clock in the afternoon of August 6, the *Fo'erdi* [Conte Verde] arrived at Brindisi, a seaport in southeast Italy. This was the first encounter between this journalist and Europe (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

As can be seen from the excerpts above—although for the most part Zou addresses himself as the “journalist” (*jizhe* 记者) instead of using the first-person singular *wo* 我, maybe to convey a certain distance and objectivity—he continually addresses his words to “all his friends and readers” (*duzhe zhu you* 读者诸友), making them participate emotionally in his travel adventures. Furthermore, with the innovative use of English words, foreign sources, and place names in transcription, his Chinese readership found, for the first time, exotic writing to decipher in their favorite weekly.

2.1 Zou Taofen in Italy: Venice and Florence

Zou toured Italy from August 6–17, 1933. He arrived in Brindisi and then visited Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Pisa, Genoa, and Milan before leaving for Switzerland. The account of his sojourn in Italy can be found in five chapters (15–9) titled: “End of the sea journey,” “Venice,” “Florence,” “Outside and inside: Rome and Naples,” and “Random thoughts after leaving Italy.”¹⁹

According to Zou, Brindisi is the place where he first “encounters Europe.” In fact, Zou encountered a few Europeans before arriving in Italy; the ocean liner was full of people from all walks of life and different nationalities. For example,

¹⁹ So far, chapters 16–8 have been partially translated in Brezzi (2014) and Castorina and Pedone (2022).

while in Port Said, Zou met a large group of young Italians (“five hundred children between 8 and 20 years old”) coming from the Italian schools in Egypt, belonging to the Fascist youth and heading for Rome to celebrate the anniversary of the Fascist Party. The Chinese reporter admires their strong physique and good health, but after pressing them to define Fascism, he finds they cannot answer. They only know that “Mussolini is great” and “will make Italy richer and stronger” without knowing why. “As a matter of fact,” states Taofen, “not even their forefather Mussolini knows what exactly Fascism is, so we cannot blame these innocent young people” (Zou 1934, Ch. 15).

The very day he writes down this note (on August 6, 1933), the ship arrives in Brindisi; here, the journalist is in for a great shock:

[...] The ship stopped there only for two hours therefore, together with several travel friends, I went ashore and walked not a few streets. There is only one decent street, the rest are for the most part small lanes. Despite the tall monument built on the seaside, we found most of the people on the street to be in rags and could hardly find any with a proper tie. We passed through many lanes and there the poor aspect [of the people] was even more extreme. In front of several front doors sat an old woman, a flowered curtain hanging inside the door [behind her]. From time-to-time young half-naked women poked their heads out the curtain and smiled at the travelers or sang loudly. We had a pretty clear idea of what their intentions were (Zou 1934, 1, Ch. 16).

The following day, the liner ends its journey in Venice. Here the journalist joins a group of countrymen who wanted to visit Italy before other European destinations, where most of them were supposed to study.²⁰

The report on Venice was written some days later, on the morning of August 11, 1933, when the author was already in Rome. Writing about Venice, which “can simply be called the ‘City of water’ [shuicheng 水城],” the author observes the grandiosity of its past (before the Pacific Ocean robbed the Mediterranean of its primacy) and calls into question its presumed resemblance with the Chinese city of Suzhou—a literary *topos* in China since Matteo Ricci compared the two cities for the first time in the 17th century (Beltrame and Maggi 2022).²¹ In Zou’s eyes, the cities are not so much alike since “although in Suzhou there are many waterways, [it is not like here] because there is not a waterway at each door” (Zou 1934, Ch. 16). Even if Suzhou is not very similar to Venice, there are many other elements taken as an example to domesticate this exotic scenario.

²⁰ According to the report, Zou Taofen travels with some fellow countrymen: Li Ruliang 李汝亮, Guo Rutong 郭汝桶 (both from Canton) and Zhou Hongxi 周洪熙 (from the province of Jiangsu) “who are going to study in Germany.” In Venice, Li Ruzhao 李汝昭, Ruliang’s elder brother, joined the group to visit Italy.

²¹ On this subject, the University of Venice and Suzhou University organized an online exhibition (September 30–December 31, 2022) titled *Venezia and Suzhou. Water Cities along the Silk Roads* (see the news here: <<https://www.unive.it/data/agenda/1/63816>>. Accessed 9 Oct. 2022).

Gondolas (*xiaoting* 小艇), therefore, look like “the dragon boats of the Dragon Festival, with both ends upward, but not as long,” while the vaporetos (*gonggong qichuan* 公共汽船) are “like the tramcars or buses in the street of Shanghai, and the ships’ siren sounds like the buses’ horn in Shanghai” (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

Zou goes on briefly describing St Mark’s Square and then concentrates on the Lido (*Lidou* 利都):

We also went for a tour of the Lido, a small island located southeast of the city of Venice, where there are worldly famous swimming pools. Their backyards are beautifully decorated with flowers and plants, and many people walk down the streets. Most women wear very large trousers and a thin shirt on their upper parts. Some only wear one pair of these big trousers hanging with suspenders and, except for these two braces, the upper body is simply naked to the waist, [nevertheless] they shake and sway on the streets with their trousers barely kept up! (Zou 1934, Ch. 16)

Clearly captivated by the visual stimuli of his foreign surroundings, the journalist also observes beyond the superficial surface of things to analyze Italian society:

Of course, these men and women [at the Lido] are not ordinary Italians but a minority belonging to privileged classes of this country and of various countries of Europe and the United States. Only they have the opportunity to enjoy such a life. This venue is designed for the leisure class²² that has free time, and it goes without saying that the luxurious restaurants and hotels are well stocked with everything (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

Again, Zou’s attention goes beyond the surface; the simple observation of the “leisure class” having free time is an opportunity to disclose the inequalities and deformities of the capitalist system. The passage also suggests that the comfort derived from capitalism accompanies a lack of morality, a concept that returns many times in his description of Europe (Cfr. Castorina 2022).

The chapter closes with a comparison with Florence and, again, a comment on the poverty of the common people:

Is Venice beautiful? Indeed, it is! Florence, which is described by this journalist in the next chapter, also has its beauty, yet it is an Italian antique handed down from something like five, six hundred years to a thousand years ago, and therefrom we cannot make out any new construction achievements in this country. In Venice, [a city] that so many people endlessly praise, we also went to take a look at the area where the majority of poor people live; there is not one difference from what we saw in Brindisi (Zou 1934, Ch. 16).

Since Florence’s “imposing old buildings and works are too many, this journalist is ashamed of not being an artist and does not have a way to give a de-

²² Using this term, *youxian jieji* 有闲阶级, Zou most probably refers to the theory of the leisure class of Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929).

tailed account to all our friends” (Zou 1934, Ch. 17). He turns, instead, to the account of Italy by Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927), published 30 years before, and gives a “meager description” of the city. It must be noted that Kang did not even get off the train and limited his notes on Florence to some historical data, but he was the first among the Chinese travelers to link “the city to Italian art” (Castorina and Pedone 2022).²³ Without questioning Kang’s opinion, Zou dedicates but a few meager lines to art and buildings (he only cites the cathedral of Florence and Palazzo Vecchio). The journalist is much more interested in Italian customs and mores:

In front of Venice and Florence’s major churches, there are notices listing prohibitions in English, German, French, and Italian. Especially interesting and laughable are those regarding women. For example, women wearing clothes with sleeves above the crook of their arms are not allowed to enter. Those with more than two inches of flesh exposed on their necks are not allowed to enter. Those whose skirts and clothes are not longer than the knees are not allowed to enter. Those who wear transparent [clothes] are not allowed to enter. Very likely, the so-called modern women, once they arrive here, must have some complex problems, and perhaps have no choice but to blame God for disapproving of modern women! The prohibition for men is only to take off their hats—they [enjoy] much more freedom (Zou 1934, Ch. 17).

3.2 Zou Taofen in Italy: Rome and Naples

The evening and the morning after their arrival in Rome, the travelers are exhausted and decide to take a break and rest. This is the occasion for Zou to record some first impressions of Italy before concentrating on the capital city:

1. As I am writing this article, I have visited four places in Italy, Brindisi, Venice, Florence, and Rome. Yet I do not know how they come [the Italians] to feel so surprised at the yellow race. When we walk on the street, they always glance at us several times. Some even exchange whispered comments saying that we are Japanese. In our group, someone got angry when he heard [such comments], but since we cannot make clear to everyone [that we are from China], we can’t help but listen and forget about it. Why do they think only of Japan and not of China? Some say that they think that the Chinese are just those ragged Chinese street traders who lead a wandering life abroad in poverty, while those all-dressed-up yellow men are Japanese. I heard this old saying in elementary school from people who studied abroad, and, to my surprise, after so many years, the idea still exists that the above assumption is right. Yet I think that it would be too trifling if the Chinese tried to make a good showing only by dressing up.

²³ The account on Italy is in Kang’s famous travel account entitled *Ouzhou shiyi guo youji erzhong* 欧洲十一国游记二种 [Two diaries of journeys through eleven European countries]. In Zou’s account, the record on Florence was written the night of August 12, 1933.

2. Italian women's occupations are more advanced than those in our country, although I have heard that they are far from being as good as in the rest of Europe. In hotels, restaurants, and general stores, many positions are held by women. When this journalist sent some letters to a post office in Venice, he saw that all the workers were women, most wearing black garments with white collars. They were all neat and tidy. Almost all the "waiters" in the hotels are women; some are still-attractive women of middle age who look fairly pretty: they look like schoolgirls. Every day, after the guests go out, they enter the room to clean up and change the sheets.

3. In many of the hotels where this journalist stayed, he perceived a big difference compared to the Chinese ones; they are very quiet, and there are no cries or loud voices. There are also very few attendants, only one or two people in the account's office; otherwise, you often never see a soul. [...] (Zou 1934, Ch. 17).

As seen from the above record, Zou Taofen is much more interested in people and their lives than in tourism, art, or scenic spots. This peculiarity of Zou's account becomes increasingly more evident in his notes; Italy—with its ancient history and miserable present—is a good starting point for making reports about the European way of life.

Writing about Rome and Naples, Zou does not focus much on places and things but tries to go deeper in his understanding of the *Bel Paese*. For example, in Chapter 18—written on the 20th of August by candlelight when Zou is already in Berna—he finally has time to reflect on what he has seen and asks his readers permission to "talk about Rome, brilliant from the outside, and about Naples, which fully reveals its misery... The so-called outside and inside" (Zou 1934, Ch. 18). Despite the abundance of ancient beauty in Rome, Zou's visit is too strongly influenced by the Fascist regime to indulge in any other kind of observation than admiration for its architecture. Naples, on the other hand, reveals the blatant hardships and poverty of Italian society.

After a brief description of the glorious past of ancient Rome, Zou complains about a false advertisement that promised a discount on the train ticket but actually took people to a Fascist exhibition—a "real extortion," according to the journalist. The exhibition is nothing but a bunch of "photographs of murders" perpetrated by fascists, guns, and flags.

The small group of countrymen visit the Colosseum, a monument they "already encountered in the past, thanks to the photographs and illustrations in our elementary textbooks." Arriving there is "like meeting an old friend" (Zou 1934, Ch. 18). The group also visits St. Peter's Basilica and a catacomb, a very thrilling and comical experience for all of them. In the dark and cold of the underground paths, they fumbled for their way forward. Then, after Mr. Zhou believed he saw a will-o'-the-wisp, everyone rushed outside without checking.

Naples, where the group arrived on August 13, looks immediately very dirty and populated by "a multitude of beggars." As soon as they arrive, a man, who "looks like a beggar," cheats Zou and his companions and takes them to a different hotel than they booked. Reading what Zou recorded, the inn is an absolute hovel, looking more like a brothel, and situated in the slum area:

Needless to say, the streets are filthy, and the tumbledown houses are no less filthy than those seen in the slums of Mumbai, India. What strikes the most are the streets and lanes full of unkempt, emaciated, ragged, and dirty kids, boys and girls, who run up and down all day long with nothing to do. (Zou 1934, Ch. 18)

Neither Naples nor even Pompeii really appeals to the Chinese travel group, who are also disturbed while eating by a couple of musicians playing the most “unpleasant to the ears” Mengdelin 孟德林 at their table without the guests’ consent. Furthermore, insisting the group was from Japan, they played the wrong national anthem to the extreme disappointment of the Chinese travelers!

The final part of the narrative dedicated to Italy is Chapter 19: “Random thoughts after leaving Italy.” The first part is a brief account of what the reporter saw in Pisa (the Leaning Tower), Genoa, (where Colombo was born), and Milan (where the “Blackshirt Party” led by Mussolini set off for Rome). Pisa is the most appealing for Zou Taofen, who heard of it when “studying physics at the elementary school,” while Milan’s streets are compared to Nanjing Road in Shanghai. In the second part of the chapter, Zou tries to sum up his experiences in Italy and “narrate the random thoughts I have had after leaving Italy” (Zou 1934, Ch. 19).

The observations on the political and livelihood aspects of Italy were briefly mentioned in the last report. The impression [I had] on the aspects related to the habits and characteristics of ordinary people is not good either. Each time this journalist had the opportunity to come into contact with the people, for the most part, it was with people from the cities. Therefore, I do not dare to judge the situation in the countryside. No matter the country, it is not always possible to distinguish good from bad [aspects]; it is a mere question of degree, so it is not possible to generalize either. However, speaking of what I have detected, Italians’ negligence can be seen everywhere. (Zou 1934, Ch. 19)

The main object of this critical statement is the negligence of the Italian barbers, first on the Conte Verde and then in a barbershop in Naples. Similarly, the author notices the same careless manners when the group buys tickets at a travel agency in Venice and the clerk makes an error, giving them the wrong tickets. The judgment about Italy and its inhabitants in general is very harsh:

On Swiss trains, some notices prohibit smoking, i.e., smoking is not allowed. In Italy, [everything] is neglected: despite the no smoking signs on the train walls, everyone still carelessly smokes. Except for a few cities, almost everywhere in Italy is dirty for no other reason but negligence. Before leaving my country, several friends of mine who had been to Europe said that Italy was the most difficult [country] to travel to since you are often fooled or deceived (Zou 1934, Ch. 19).

In addition, the group was deceived twice, not only in Naples but also on a taxi in Milan. Nevertheless, Italy still has one advantage compared to China according to Zou. There is no doubt that their “transportation system is more convenient than China” (Zou 1934, Ch. 19). This comment, however, is not to praise Italy but to underline China’s backwardness, as the author reiterates the

trope a few lines below: “Italy is a ‘beggar’ compared to other European countries, and still, it is better than ours; what a shame to say!” (Zou 1934, Ch. 19).

4. Conclusions

As illustrated above, Zou Taofen was one of the most-read writers of his time, whose full impact and influence has only been partially considered. The visions and representations in Zou’s work spread widely in China thanks to his popularity, significantly affecting public opinion. Aside from the popularity of his journalistic work, Zou Taofen’s originality lies in his sensitivity to issues linked with human welfare and in his “search for solutions to China’s historical predicament” (Laughlin 2022, 53). His impressions of Italy are critically distinct from other writings by his contemporaries, which generally praise the country for its cultural heritage and for being the “cradle” of the European spirit thanks to the Renaissance (Castorina and Pedone 2022; Jin 2015).

This idea was particularly conveyed by Sheng Cheng 盛成 (1899–1996) in his *Yiguo liuzong ji* 意国留踪记 (*Traces from Italy*, 1937). Other travelers, such as Huang Juesi 黄觉寺 (1901–1988), exalted Italian art and its masters, praising Italy’s genius in his account titled *Ouyou zhishen* 欧游之什 (*Writings on my European travel*, 1944). Still others, like the former general of the Nationalist Army Cai Tingkai 蔡廷楷 (1892–1968) in his *Haiwai yinxiang ji* 海外印象记 (*Impressions from abroad*, 1935), focus on Italian politics, showing great admiration toward the Fascist regime. Unlike the traveling writers just cited, some peculiarities distinguish Zou’s prose.

The content and style of Zou’s writing contributed to the interest of past readers, regardless of their age and nationality. These narrative characteristics continue to attract new readers to this day. Moreover, despite the lack of realistic descriptions or the abundance of political consideration related to China’s situation, a vital asset in Taofen’s prose is that “his attention is always directed to people: to individuals as well as to society as a whole” (Xu 1999, 25). The exiled status of Zou affects his mobility as well as his writing. In going into exile, he is forced by circumstances to develop his capacity for looking beyond the superficial observations of many travel narratives, leading to direct encounters with the real social circumstances of human suffering. If humanities “can examine how movement is enacted, felt, perceived, expressed, metered, choreographed, appreciated and desired,” as Merriman and Pearce write (2017, 493), Zou’s travel account offers an excellent opportunity to further explore the relationship between exile and mobility. By chance, the author clearly expresses his ideas on mobility in the opening of his last autobiography:

On the surface, I seem to be very fluid, and seem to be very active. My first exile was in 1933 (the 22nd year of the Republic of China). Starting from Shanghai, I moved out from the Atlantic Ocean and came back from the Pacific Ocean in 1935. I just circled the earth once, moving around such a big circle! In the following ten years, except for the time I spent with a few comrades who helped

save the country in the prison of Suzhou, which cannot be considered exile, there was the second exile, the third, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth! It might seem like I never get bored! [But] Exile involves mobility, and actually, I am terrified of mobility (Zou 1946, 1.1).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to pass a comment on Zou's idea of Italy, but it is certain that Zou's exile and forced mobility influenced his perceptions of the Peninsula. These creative visions and representations reflect a unique voice, which spread widely among established and emergent Chinese audiences.

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