

Some artistic descriptions and ethical dilemmas in Shan Shili's travel notes on Italy (1909)

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Abstract In this paper I will analyze what were the emotions that Rome, and its artistic heritage, excited in a Chinese traveller's eyes and heart—rationally and unconsciously—at the beginning of the twentieth century. This paper will focus on the analysis of some pages of the *Guiqian ji* (归潜记), written by Shan Shili, the wife of the Ministry of China in Rome from July 1908 to November 1909. Unlike Chinese travellers of the previous period, she, during her sojourn in Rome, was more fascinated by art and culture than by scientific and technological marvels. This 'unknown territory'—art, history, mythology, in brief, the historical and cultural European past—unknown to her, but also to the Chinese at that time, attracted her curiosity inasmuch as to use artistic descriptions as means of cultural dialogue between her own culture and the other's culture. But what did the discovery of a different artistic expression provoke in a Chinese traveller? Did she appreciate these forms of art? Did they go along with her artistic and cultural tastes? The analysis of some explanations of artistic works (paintings and sculptures), offered by Shan to her readers, and the reading of emotions and feelings which these works presented to her—esteem, repulsion, admiration or disapproval—allow us to draw a brief cultural dialogue between a Chinese female traveller and the other (Italian), at the end of the Qing empire.

Keywords Travel literature · Shan Shili · Laocoont · Women literature · Italy and China

Remember that through a book you may become great travellers, putting the broom and the needle momentarily aside, to sail the oceans and to learn of the many ways in which God shaped distant nations to thrive where He placed them, enjoying the widely diverse scenarios of life, from the heat of Africa to the frozen Greenland (Higginson 1879, p. 70)

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Introduction

Travel literature is one of the literary genres which is most suited to transmit, and consequently to preserve, emotions, feelings and descriptions of subjective interior moods, which often arise from the discovery or the observation of a new country, a new culture or a new landscape, in brief from the discovery of the other.

In its nature, travel literature is able to express and to preserve the full range of emotions—positive and negative—which a travel-writer feels during this new experience.

Chinese culture has a long tradition of travel accounts and notes, with very different peculiarities, characteristics and subgenres, which can be included in the term ‘*youji*’ (Foccardi 1992; Strassberg 1994; Chen 2008), travel literature. As is also true in the western literary tradition, we are used to employing the label “travel literature” to include various forms of writing.

Until the middle of the Nineteenth century one of the peculiarities of Chinese travel literature was that it described a pilgrimage, a journey through a ‘known space’, a place which had already been visited by many people, which already had had a stratification of descriptions written about it. From the middle of the Nineteenth century, instead, the changing political and social situation, within the borders of the Qing Empire—the Opium Wars, autochthonous rebellions and the right of extraterritorial jurisdiction—caused changes also in the destinations; from than on Chinese travellers—mostly officials of the Manchu government—indeed started to travel, for official missions, through ‘unknown’ lands—particularly in Europe and America—or through a lesser unknown land: Japan.

The aim of these new travel itineraries was mainly to establish official relations with Western countries, to more closely examine their society and countries, and to try to worm out the secrets of their success and ‘strength’. The travel notes, which arose from these journeys, were official texts demanded by and intended for the court; they were thought of as one of the useful tools for the renovation and the strengthening of the Chinese Empire. They were aimed at transmitting new knowledge to the court; nevertheless, after their publishing in periodicals of that period, they slowly achieved a quite resounding success among Chinese readers. One of the possible reasons for this success lay in their newness, in the originality which these works were able to convey to the Chinese society of that time (Eggert 2006).

These travel notes, written by Manchu officials or diplomats, during the second half of the Nineteenth century, distinctly differ from the previous productions. First of all they describe, as we have already said, unknown countries and lands, very far from China: Europe and America. Secondly they do not have the landscape as their main character or protagonist—as was common in the Chinese *youji*, where nature was the favorite subject for authors. These new travel notes describe western societies, or better, they describe the technological and scientific “marvels” which were possible to observe in western cities at that time: trams, trains, public lighting, lifts and so on (Masci 1996; Tsui 2010; Chen 2008). Obviously they also illustrate the political and economic systems in use in those countries which were thought to be useful for the renovation of the Qing Empire, and occasionally they record impressions and descriptions of social behaviors or daily habits widespread among

those western “barbarians”, such as the etiquette for banquets or parties, women social behavior or theatrical shows, just to mention some examples.

However these narrations had the indisputable merit of rendering the West less exotic, closer, more familiar, even closer to Chinese readers than before, and indirectly they stimulated a new propulsive force to the Chinese fiction, which started to put the western countries or cities—and the theme of travelling—at the center of its narrative plots, as in *Niehai hua* 孽海花 (*Flower in a sea of retribution*, 1904) or *Guanchang xianxing ji* 官场现形记 (*Exposure of Officialdom*, 1906), just to mention few (Dolezelova-Velingerova 1980; Wang 1997).

Shan Shili and her journey

Precisely for their nature of being official documents—and not *youji* which stemmed from personal experiences—the personal subjectivity of the ‘writer-traveller’ had to be hidden in some of those travel notes, repressed or sacrificed for the “benefit” of the nation. If the traveller-writer was the leader of a delegation, his task was above all more to transmit useful information to the court than to take notes freely of his own personal experience and discoveries.^{f1}

Curiously the lack of a narrative subjectivity is even evident in the travel notes written by someone who did not belong to the imperial system, someone who could have been more free to choose a personal, subjective way of writing, seen her social role and her reason for travelling. The text we are talking about here, is a text dated back to 1909, a significant period for the new literature, a period in which the traditional “way of writing”, namely the traditional literary genres, was changing, leaving the stage to a new one. This text is the *Gui qian ji* (归潜记, *Records collected upon retirement*),² written by a woman Shan Shili 单士厘 (1856–1943),³

¹ Of course I do not want to affirm that these texts are completely lacking any expression of subjectivity or personal reflections; for example the lower the status was of a member of the delegation, the more free his style and content of writing was. We should not forget that in Chinese literature the manifestation of a subjective writing, where the “I” is markedly present, was a slow and gradual process, which started exactly at the end of the Qing Dynasty (Chen 2008; Tsui 2010; Lee 1985).

² The text was published by Qian family in 1910, and only at the end of the Eighties was it republished in the collection of travel notes edited by Zhong Shuhe (1985); for details about the text see also Brezzi (2012).

³ Born in 1856 at Xiaoshan in Zhejiang province, to a family of scholars; her great-grandfather was a high official in the Ministry of rites, her father Shan Sipu (单思溥) a famous scholar, the same for her uncle from her mother’s side, Xu Renbo (许王伯). It was thanks to the latter that she received a solid literary education, an instruction in both classic poetry and prose, and in Chinese history and historiography. She married in 1885, to Qian Xun, an official of the Manchurian government, whom she followed in the various charges he was appointed to abroad. The Qian family lived in the Japanese capital, more or less without interruptions, from 1899 to 1903. Shan was introduced here to the capital’s academic and reformist circles, striking friendships with many scholars, both men and women, in that city. During these years she also studied Japanese, which she would come to master in time. In 1903 she embarked upon another long voyage, which was to take her to Moscow, where her husband was appointed ambassador. Shan Shili recorded this experience in a text written during that period, the *Guimao lüxing ji* (癸卯旅行記, *Travels in the Guimao year*, 1903). After the Russian capital, the couple moved further West, going first to The Netherlands, and later to Italy. After the sojourn in Rome, Shan returned to China, where she took up political and philanthropic activities for women. She died in Peking, at the age of 87. For further readings on her life, see Hu (2006), Widmer (2006), Brezzi (2012).

the wife of the Minister of China—an ambassador as we would call him—in Italy, Qian Xun 钱恂 (1853–1927).⁴ Shan lived at the Chinese “embassy” in Rome,⁵ with her husband and the other members of delegation throughout the period of its official mission, from July 1908 to November 1909.

In some senses her text, *Gui qian ji*, can be considered to be a crossroad between two different ways of composing travel notes, travel literature: those written by Qing diplomats during their missions to the West and those written by Chinese intellectuals, students and writers during their sojourn in Europe to work or to study during the first decades of twentieth century.

In what sense can we consider this text to be a crossroad?

Fundamentally for the gender of the author, for the subject dealt with and for the form of writing.

First of all because it was written by a woman, a new literary figure who was appearing—more prominently—on the Chinese cultural scene in that period (Dooling and Torgeson 1998; Larson 1998). In addition to being a woman, Shan also was the official wife, not the concubine who usually accompanied men in their travel abroad. Throughout the second half of the 19th century it was not appropriate for the first wife to travel together with her husband, above all if the destination was to countries far from China where different social rules and codes regulated human relation between men and women and public behavior between the sexes.⁶ In reality Shan Shili always followed faithfully her husband and was curious to learn new knowledge and to discover new cultures. She lived with him in Japan, where Qian Xun had been appointed supervisor of Chinese students, and then in Russia, in The Netherland and later in Italy.

⁴ Born at Wuxing in Zhejiang province, eldest brother to the famous grammarian Qian Xuantong 钱玄同 (1887–1937), he was an official and ambassador to the Manchurian government, participating in a number of diplomatic delegations to Europe, including the one led by Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838–1894) coming to Europe in 1891. He was ambassador to The Netherlands in 1907, and to Italy the year after, where he would stay from April 23rd 1908 until November 29 1909. Between 1899 and 1903 he lived in Japan, where he had been sent by the Manchurian government as head of the education of Chinese students in Hubei. At the Japanese capital he was introduced to the reformist circles, which he was to seek out once more he returned to China on the eve of the 1911 Revolution. According to records of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs: “Tsien-Sun [Qian Sun] was born in 1854 in the province of Tchi-kiang [Zhejiang]... In 1890 he was appointed Attaché to the London Delegation, and later transferred with the same charge, in 1891 to Berlin, in 1892 to St. Petersburg, and in 1895 to Paris. The following year he returned to China where he took up the important charge of Secretary General to the Vice-Kings of Nanking and Hankow for six years. He was one of the delegates who in 1903 revised the treaty of trade with England. He was sent to St. Petersburg once more in 1903, as Councillor, and in 1906 he accompanied the Special Mission to Japan, charged with studying the new organisation of that Empire.”; see R. Legazione d'Italia n° 170/71, Ministro cinese, n° 24373, 5 aprile 1908, X C 2; and *Qingji Zhong Wai shiling nianbiao*. 清季中外使领年表, Pechino, Zhonghua shuju, 1985, pp. 14, 18.

⁵ The couple, with the other members of that delegation, sojourned in Via Palestro, where the Chinese embassy was located at the beginning of the 20th century; see Brezzi (2012).

⁶ It was inappropriate for the first wife not only to face long and tiring journeys, but it was even more inappropriate to abide by rules and behaviors considered dishonorable for a woman. An emblematic example was the fictional account of Hong Jun 洪钧 (1840–1893), a Qing ambassador, and his concubine Sai Jinhua 赛金花 (1874–1936), described in the novel *Niehai hua* 孽海花 (*Flower in a sea of Retribution*) by Zeng Pu 曾朴 (1872–1935), Hu Ying (2000).

The second peculiarity of the *Guiqian ji*, which makes it a watershed with respect to preceding Chinese travel notes, is the subjects dealt with: the Western artistic heritage. Shan Shili was the first Chinese author who tried to describe to her readership the art, or artistic heritage of the West, trying to share with her readers what she had been able to visit or admire during her sojourn in Rome. We can only hypothesize why she decided to deal with such topics, because she did not give us any explanation, but it is evident that through the description of the western artistic heritage she wanted, for the first time, to try a more challenging task: to try to explain the cultural history and grammar of the West. If her previous fellow countrymen were mainly attracted by Western scientific and technological knowledge—being convinced that these were the only contributions which Western countries could offer China—Shan instead turned her attention to art and culture in general. It seems to me that for Shan art was the finest element to illustrate the identity of a nation, and therefore she chose art as a tool with which to describe and analyze not only the ‘other’ identity, but also her own. In doing so, she was the first to introduce themes which had never been explored or presented previously, which had never been explained in detail by others before her.

The third feature that distinguishes the *Guiqian ji* from all other previous travel notes is the its narrative form. It is not a simple travel diary, nor a text arranged along a chronological order, as many other previous travel notes, but is composed of 10 chapters (and two appendixes), dedicated to various topics, historical and artistic, diachronic and synchronic, which can be read separately, as single text, a common characteristic in Chinese fiction and narrative in general (see Table 1).

The form chosen by Shan Shili to keep her memories of this experience abroad is uncommon for a woman, because this text does not fit easily into the traditional categories of female writing or literature. To be a woman surely would have allowed her to be more free in organizing and composing her memories, since she did not belong to the official system; she could have not abide by the strict rules of writing; she could have opted for a personal and subjective way of writing, and her pen would have been free to portray what she had discovered during her journey (Widmer 2006; Hu 2006; Brezzi 2012). But Shan renounced this freedom and chose to mold her work into a long, traditional and sophisticated essay. An essay in which she enlists the main phases of the encounter between China and the West, as for example the arrival of the monotheistic religions in China—Catholic and Judaism—or Marco Polo’s travels, and describes the artistic heritage of Rome, explaining all meanings which a statue or painting could conceal.

If this is the structure of her narration, her style of writing reminds us of the typical *youji* subgenre, *taige mingsheng* 台閣名勝 (writing on pavilions, towers and other famous sites),⁷ a manner which weaves together first hand experience and historical material dedicated to famous sites. For example in the chapter dedicated to Saint Peter’s Basilica, we can read detailed descriptions of every single artwork kept in the Basilica, as in a modern guide book, alternating historical, mythological and iconographical explanations while sometimes, though not very often, personal comments on what she is observing.

⁷ This likeness has been suggested by Hu Ying in her essay, 2006, p. 151.

Table 1 Index of *Guiqian ji*

归潜记		
Chapter 1	Saint Peter's Basilica	彼得寺
Chapter 2	The architectural components in a church	新释宫(景寺之属)
Chapter 3	Four statues in Belvedere courtyard in Vatican	章华庭四室
Chapter 4	On the Nestorian Stele and the spread of "Luminous" Religion	景教流行中国碑跋
Chapter 5	Tables on the spread of Catholic religion in China	景教流行中国表
Chapter 6	Notes on the spread of Judaism in China	摩西教流行中国记
Chapter 7	The Jewish area in Rome: the Ghetto	罗马之犹太区-格笃
Chapter 8	Zeus	育斯
Chapter 9	Marco Polo's story	马哥博罗事
Chapter 10	Remarks on decorations and awards of merit from Italian State	义国佩章记
Appendix 1	Remarks on decorations and awards of merit from Orange-Nassau	奥兰琦-拿埽族章
Appendix 2	Remarks on decorations	宝星记

Unlike the late Qing diplomats-travellers, who in their texts alternate erudition and emotions, historical description and personal comments or anecdotes (Chen 2008), Shan, instead, entrusts her narration mainly to historical and artistic descriptions, which seem to a contemporary reader to be aseptic and impersonal – without emotions—and only secondly, that is rarely, does she narrate through her eyes and memory, or trust her emotions and feelings. But this narrative solution may be more due to the historical moment in which Shan travelled and wrote rather than to her subjective literary choices. Shan did not voluntarily shape her text as a personal memoir, a personal dairy, because, as a woman, she needed to bestow ‘authority’ on her text, she wanted to ‘legitimize’ her work, and so she consciously chose an ‘official’ style, an essay form, which was, until that period, a prerogative of the scholar-officials class. It seems to me that Shan wanted to go beyond the boundaries of female writing; she wanted to go beyond the roles assigned to women by her society, and she did so by choosing a form of writing, which was the prerogative of male writers, the historical essay (how she was able to get historical and artistic sources and to possess such broad and detailed information on the artistic works and architectural structures is another significant question, which we can not deal with in these pages). Shan did not only want to leave a record of her travelling in Italy, she wanted to describe another culture, and in doing so she wanted to be “scientific”. For this reason she kept away from a ‘private’ writing form, most importantly a female writing form, opting instead for a genre which was the prerogative of male writers and thus one which was considered ‘High’ in the Chinese canon (Widmer 1997). But she did not completely give up on the idea of a text which would also bear witness to her personal experience while travelling in Italy. Her *youji* is narrated in the first person, although the “I” narrating does not often appear. What is surprising in her pages is that we rarely read a description of

the emotions so typical of a traveller who, for the first time, discovers and faces another culture: astonishment, curiosity, excitement, joy or fear, esteem or distaste, admiration or disapproval etc. However, when she lets her subjective perspective emerge, when she lets her emotions come out, often she is commenting on behaviors or describing paintings and images dealt by Western women, for example Juno-Hera, the wife of Zeus, and her jealousy for Zeus's infidelities; or Beatrice Cenci's story or the practice of women's confessions. Curiously, in all these examples she casts blame and disapproval on western women's behaviors and their moral conduct, as the Qing diplomats had already done before her, because, in accord with their own cultural and moral background, these 'behaviors' were not appropriate.

Western female behavior rules

Even the most common and correct behavior for a catholic worshipper—to go to confession—becomes, in Shan Shili's eyes, an immoral act, an action that aroused negative criticism and judgment; some of her criticism and judgment is exclusively determined by female conduct, in others circumstances by cultural and religious differences between the two cultures, Chinese and Italian.

Even if she does not clearly express any value judgment on the catholic religion as a whole, we can sense a hint of her displeasure for the moral values of that religion and her indirect hint of the moral "superiority" of her own culture from the reading of her descriptions of confession, an action which she had the opportunity to observe very often in Saint Peter's basilica or other churches in Rome. She writes:

顾一人生平，不必止一忏。设今年忏后，而入夕作恶，明晨一忏，复为完人。[...] 闻至久每七日必一忏，不若佛教中言，一忏不可复恶也。(Shan 1985, p. 785)

Throughout his life a man never ceases to confess; if, after the confession of the afternoon, at the evening he commits other sins, the next morning he can confess again, and he becomes a virtuous man again!

I have heard that every 7 days a worshipper has to go to confess his sins. This is not so in Buddhist doctrine, where confession is allowed once and it is not permitted to repeat an evil deed again.

She doubts the moral values of a religion which does not impede worshippers from committing bad deeds repeatedly, since it is sufficient only to go to confession whenever one commits a sin. Even more grave is it to allow women to practice this habit:

来忏者女多于男。夫使娉婷女子，步跪于大庭广众之中，诉私愿贪欲于非亲非故之男子，即罪恶果忏，其如廉耻之莫养何，教人者顾当如是耶？(Shan 1985, p. 785)

Women go to confess more often than men, and a husband allows his beautiful woman to kneel in public, in front of a multitude of people, and to recount her wickedness or rapacity to a man who is neither kith nor kin, only to confess

her sins, but what sense of shame they cultivate? Is this their way of educating people?

This sentence by Shan sounds like a moral judgment, since she uses the disyllabic word, *lianchi* (廉耻), which means a sense of shame to one who is incorruptible, honest and clean. In her eyes, western women, in abiding by religious dogma, commit a sort of immoral deed—immoral for the Confucian social rules, which consider it to be inappropriate for a woman to frequent a public place, or, even worse, to have contact with a man who was not a relative. What sense of shame must a society have if it allows its women to behave in this way?

Emotions for art

Reactions, different feelings and emotions were provoked in Shan Shili's mind not only by observing unusual behaviors—by the discovery of other identities—but also by learning episodes or events of Italian history and culture. One example is offered by the story of Beatrice Cenci (1577–1599)⁸—the daughter of the violent and aggressive Count, Francesco Cenci (1549–1598)—who lived in papal Rome at the end of sixteenth century. The excuse for narrating this story of the patricide which was carried out by the young girl was taken while Shan was admiring a mosaic,⁹ a copy of the famous painting by Guido Reni (1575–1642), *The archangel Saint Michael*, or *Saint Michael defeats Satan*, during one of her visits in Saint Peter's Basilica.¹⁰ This mosaic is certainly not one of the most relevant works kept in the Basilica, however Shan does not limit herself to describing the painting. She intertwines various narrative threads in order to explain to her readers not only what could be admired in San Peter's church, but also all the “unsaid”, the concealed meaning of a piece of art, every single fragment of Western history, Greek mythology or Italian culture, unknown to the Chinese reader, and sometimes even to a European one of our times. So Shan first describes the scene represented in the famous painting (see Fig. 1):

⁸ There have been many literary treatments of this story, the most famous is Shelley's verse-drama, *The Cenci* (1819); other writers drawn to the subject, for example Stendhal, Dickens and Alberto Moravia.

⁹ The mosaic is kept in the chapel of Saint Michael in Saint Peter's basilica, while the painting by Guido Reni (1575–1642) is in the church S. Maria Concezione in Rome.

¹⁰ Through what sources the Chinese woman traveller was able to obtain all the detailed and accurate information she wrote in her text, still remains one of the most challenging questions of this research. It is difficult to retrace and identify her bibliographical sources, since she does not mention them in her text, and at the beginning of the 20th century no sources, in the Chinese language, existed, which explained in such a detailed manner Western art and its metaphorical meaning. Probably she availed herself of some oral accounts, not written, which she heard in Rome or while travelling with the Chinese delegation from China to Europe. My hypothesis is that she was helped by Karl Kreyer (1893–1914), a Baptist missionary in China, who arrived in China in 1866, and after few years started to work in Jiangnan Arsenal as interpreter; in 1890 he was the interpreter for the Chinese delegation in Europe, headed by Xu Jingcheng 许景澄 (1845–1900). The problems concerning this issue are still the subject of research. Several hypotheses have been advanced in Brezzi (2012).

Fig. 1 The Archangel Michael defeating Satan (1636 ca.) by Guido Reni (1575–1642)



天使少年美貌，酷似某女(天使为男神，但相传谓美貌，故画家恒作妍笔，但张两翅，以示别于女)。魔鬼俯伏，仅露半面，酷似某景宗。¹¹ 虽传问异词，而为画家有意寓警则无疑。(Shan 1985, p. 789)

The angel is young and handsome, looks very much like a woman (angels are male divinities, but tradition demands they be beautiful, and this is why painters often portray them with features of feminine beauty, but the pair of wings differentiates them from women). The devil lying down shows only half of his face, and looks very much like a pope.¹² Even though there are many versions, it is however undeniable that the artist meant to give a warning [...]. (Shan 1985, p. 789)

After these lines, Shan starts to introduce the story of Beatrice, presenting every single ‘character of this tragedy’ one after the other: Beatrice, her father, her brothers, her stepmother, and for each of them she offers a brief biographical and

¹¹ Shan, throughout her text, uses the compound *jingzong* 景宗 to translate the word ‘pope’; in the first chapter of her text she justifies her choice, explaining two reasons: firstly *jingzong* is more faithful to original meaning of Latin word that indeed means “father” and not “king”, as the disyllabic word *jiaowang* 教王 or *jiaohuang* 教皇 indicate; secondly this is the word used in the famous Nestorian Stele erected during the Tang dynasty; see Shan (1985, p. 767).

¹² The tradition indicates Pope Clement VIII as the figure represented in this picture; he was the pope who condemned Beatrice and her brothers to death.

psychological description, often intertwining biographical and historical-artistic aspects. After a long disquisition, she concludes her tale with these lapidary sentences:

相传有法兰昔司钦奇者，乱及其女毗亚德里，女拒之，与母合谋弑父，景宗获而诛之。果尔法固禽兽，毗亦梟獍。[Shan 1985, p. 789]

A tradition narrates that Francesco Cenci was sexually promiscuous with his daughter, Beatrice, who pushed him away and, together with her mother,¹³ planned his murder. The Pope caught them and sentenced them to death. Francesco did in fact act in a brutal manner, but Beatrice was a disobedient daughter. (Shan 1985, p. 789)

The moral judgment on the undoubtedly brutal fatherly conduct, compared to the disloyal conduct of the daughter (*buxiao*, 不孝) towards her father, is expressed in two lapidary parallel sentences, symmetric both in style and metaphor:

法固禽兽，毗亦梟獍

Stylistically, the two four-character phrases are built with the two first characters *fǎ*, 法, and *pí*, 毗, which are the two first characters of protagonist's names, Falanxisi 法兰昔司, Francesco and Piyadeli 毗亚德里, Beatrice; both followed by two adverbs, *gù* 固, certainly, and indeed, and *yì* 亦, also, too, on the contrary, and then by two predicate, constructed with two disyllabic compounds, which semantically refers to the animal world: the first, *qínshòu*, 禽兽, is related to the wild beast, describes the violent and ferocious father; the second, *xiǎojīng*, 梟獍, associated to a bird is referred to the fragile and meek daughter.

Further, both these disyllabic compounds have a double semantic meaning that simultaneously 'translates' the exterior, 'physical' aspect, and the interior, psychological one, or we could say, both 'hint' at the motive and result of the entire matter: cause and effect. The first compound, *qínshòu* (禽兽) indicates both a violent, brutal behavior, typical of beasts, but it can also mean a person who does not respect the etiquette, rite, *lǐyì* 礼仪, and his behavior is despicable, as was Francesco's action, who was accused of committing incest. The second disyllabic compound, *xiǎojīng* (梟獍) means a 'disobedient son', or 'ungrateful person', but it is also the name of the mythological animal that devours, eats its own mother the moment it is born.

So the parricide perpetrated by Beatrice is, in some ways, condemned in this comment, Beatrice is a daughter, who did not have filial piety for her father, she is unfilial, *buxiao* 不孝. The linguistic metaphor of the animal which eats its own parent—mother—is used to criticize her behavior in a more veiled manner.

An all-women story, a story not altogether pertinent to the narrative of the pages at hand, but one the author consciously decided to tell, with her own comments. This is one of many examples of the personal and individual marks Shan Shili intentionally gives to her work, mirroring her subjective way of facing the

¹³ Indeed she was Francesco Cenci's second wife, Beatrice's stepmother, Lucrezia Petroni, Velli's widow.

relationship between identity and difference, a relationship running on the double tracks of genre and nationality.

As we have already mentioned above, for Shan, art is the tool by which she tried to describe the identity of the other, but we must keep in mind that at the same time artistic expression and works—given the unquestionable diversity between Western and Eastern aesthetic value—could also be a source of cultural shock or disorientation. In this light we could image the impact and shock for a Chinese woman traveller, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when seeing for the first time European sculpture in Rome, and specially the Hellenic and Roman nude statues, which crowded Rome's church, museums and square, a form of art which is completely absent in the Chinese culture and to which the Chinese gaze is not accustomed to. Far from shock, actually, Shan after an initial, justifiable and not hidden, embarrassment, gradually confessed her appreciation for this form of art, in particularly for the statue of Laocoon (see Fig. 2), kept in the courtyard of Statues in the Belvedere garden in the Vatican museum.

At the first glance she seems to be astonished, indeed she confesses:

予昔年初出境外，见裸体雕画，心窃怪之，既观劳贡之像，读辩论劳贡之书，于是知学者著作，非可妄非也。(Shan 1985, p. 825)

Fig. 2 The statue of Laocoon and his sons, excavated in 1506, is housed in the Museo Pio-Clementino—Vatican Museums



Since I began to travel abroad in the past years, I have seen nude statues and paintings, and in my heart I felt this is to be very strange.

This passage seems to describe an innocent reaction to an artistic newness that the Chinese traveller discovered in Rome, but actually Shan wanted to express a more hidden complex and torn feeling, expressed by the two words *guai* and *qie*. The Chinese character *guai* 怪 has a large semantic spectrum. According to the *Hanyu da cidian*, it can mean something uncommon, strange, or odd and mysterious, the subjects on which the Master, Confucius did not talk (*Lun yu* 论语, 7. 21子不语怪, 力, 乱, 神); but it can also indicate something astounding or surprising, which probably was Shan Shili's reaction when she saw for the first time this kind of artistic expression. A reaction that provoked in her soul, a sense of 'guilt', because she is in front of such a 'strange' statue, a mysterious object, and in doing so she feels as though she disobeying the role assigned to her by her own society. The sense of 'guilt' is expressed in a veiled way by the character *qie* 窃, which can be translated as "secretly" or "in private", but it can have a negative value, since one of its original meanings is to steal (*toudao*, 偷盗) or to rob (*daozei*, 盗贼), even to violate, to harm (*qinhai*, 侵害; *weihai*, 危害). And probably it was this strong emotion, this instinctive reaction which Shan felt when admiring objects deemed inappropriate not only for a Chinese woman, but for anyone from her own culture in general. A cultural shock that the discovery of the other culture provoked in the Chinese traveller.

However, after this initial disorientation, she is particularly careful to explain every single detail in order to permit her readers to image it. Also in this case, Shan walks along different paths—artistic, mythological, historical—first narrating the biographical tale of the Trojan priest (Laocoon) and then the mythological dispute for the golden apple among the three beautiful goddesses—Hera, Athena and Aphrodite—the war of Troy and the wooden horse, and then she returns to the artistic comment of the famous statue of Laocoon, explaining what a visitor could admire:

凡所雕刻, 筋肉脉络, 无纤毫不肖, 而主客之位, 运动之方, 配合调和, 允称杰作。[Shan 1985, p. 821]

Everything which is sculpted, muscles, bones, veins, arteries, each part no matter how tiny, is veridical, and the position of the main figure and its movement is created with utter harmony. Allow me to say it is a masterpiece.

Her judgment is incontrovertible, the word *jiezuo*, masterpiece is a evident proof of valuation change in her mind, from a initial aversion, disgust to a widespread appreciation. And this gradual transformation in her esthetic feeling toward Western sculpture was certainly the effect of accustoming her sight to a new form of art, but it was also the result of a slower process of discovery achieved through a bookish knowledge. In her pages dedicated to the description of this famous statue group, she seems to be well informed on Western art criticism about this sculpture, in particular the essay, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, in which G. E. Lessing (1729–1781), criticizing the classicism theory, expounded

intrinsic differences between visual art and written text, peculiarities of poetry and painting.

Here some lines from Shan's text:

[美术家]或又曰：诗中劳贡大呼而亡，今像无呼唤状，果孰是？曰：皆是也。夫诗与文，所以纵写时间，而为叙述之美术；雕与画，所以横描瞬秒，而为造形之美术。诗与文直而长，雕与画广而促，二者目的虽同，而方向各异，不必相符合也。[...] 又劳贡赴祭，必被长袍，今像且裸体，不合于事实，是又何说？曰：劳贡之强，诗中以语述之，不必有形。今雕像必借形以显，则舍筋骨莫著。果衣服踣跽，则不独不能示强，且转示弱，乌乎可！予昔年初出国境，见裸体雕画，心窃怪之，既观劳贡之像，读辨论劳贡之书，于是知学者著作，非可妄非也。顾移此像于中国，则不博赞美矣。[Shan 1985, p. 825]

Some [critics] affirmed that in the poetry Laocoon cries out and dies, whereas in this statue he has not a crying out appearance, so who is right? The answer is that all of them are right. Poetry and prose describe a period of time in succession, and this is the art of narrating; sculpture and painting depict a single moment (an instant), and this is the art of creating an image. Poetry and prose are extended in time, sculpture and painting in space, even though their purpose is similar, their orientation is different, they do not correspond to each other. [...]

Further, when Laocoon went to his sacrifice he most likely wore a long robe, but the statue nevertheless is naked, which does not seem appropriate to the circumstance, so what should one say? That the strength of Laocoon in the poem is expressed by the language, and it is therefore not necessary for it to have a visible shape, while sculpture borrows a form to show muscles and bones which would otherwise not be seen. In fact, had he worn a light robe, not only would he have been unable to show his strength, but might even have appeared weak! Since I began to travel abroad in the past years, I have seen nude statues and paintings, and in my heart I felt this to be very strange. But now that I have seen the statue of Laocoon, read books by critics on this work, and learnt what scholars have written, I can neither blame nor condemn him. Were we to bring this statue to China, however, I believe we would not find anyone to admire it (Shan 1985, p. 825).

She can not “neither blame nor condemn him”, because she is won over, however she is completely aware of cultural distance between this form of art and her own esthetic background, and so she tries to persuade her readers to appreciate it. And for doing this, she resorts to the most authoritative power: the book. She explains that after a long period of studying and reading, she was eventually able to appreciate this art. It seems to me that Shan wanted to deny the instinctive emotion that a work of art can stimulate in the viewer. The sight of an artistic work generates in everyone of us a reaction, a judgment, positive or negative, which springs from visual perception, not through books and studies. Her esthetic feeling, her reaction, produced by sight went through a long and elaborated process of reading and studying, not through instinctive emotion when standing in front of the work. It seems to me that Shan resorts to the influential power of *wen* 文, written text, to describe her *qing* 情, feeling and emotions.

She chose art and artistic production to explain her encounter with the other culture, strongly believing art to be the synthesis of the sense of history and of culture of a people, and a tool with which to compare and reflect on ‘otherness’ and her own identity.

Her choice is even more original for her being a woman, a woman venturing into a subject and genre much removed from the Chinese female universe. She is the “other” of Chinese culture, that is to say a representative of a woman trying her hand at “another” world, one outside her own, and chooses a precise niche, on one hand a narrow choice though on the other a vast scenario—the artistic production kept in Rome—to describe an all together other culture to her compatriots.

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