

## 150 Years of Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari

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### Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari

#### Lionello Lanciotti, Mario Sabattini and Their Legacy

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**Abstract** The successful development of Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari was mainly due to the contribution of two eminent sinologists, Professor Lionello Lanciotti (1925-2015) and Professor Mario Sabattini (1944-2017). This paper offers a brief overview of their intellectual and academic experience in Venice and of their legacy.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Lionello Lanciotti at Ca' Foscari. – 3 Mario Sabattini and His Contribution to Venetian Sinology. – 4 Lionello Lanciotti and Mario Sabattini's Legacy in the '80s and '90s.

**Keywords** Chinese Studies. Lionello Lanciotti. Mario Sabattini. Italian sinology. Ca' Foscari University.

## 1 Introduction

The teaching of the Chinese language and culture at Ca' Foscari University started in 1966, almost one century after the foundation of the University in 1868 and later with respect to other educational institutions in Italy, such as the universities of Naples and Rome. Nevertheless, just in few years, Ca' Foscari became one of the main teaching and research institutions in this field, widely re-known in Italy and abroad. This rapid and successful development was mainly due to the contribution of two eminent sinologists, Professor Lionello Lanciotti (1925-2015) and Professor Mario Sabattini (1944-2017), who from the mid-'60s to the end of the last century played a pivotal role in establishing and driving the academic study of China in Venice and in educating a group of young specialists eager to develop their intellectual legacy. Both can be considered as the founding fathers of Venice sinology.

## 2 Lionello Lanciotti at Ca' Foscari

Lionello Lanciotti arrived at Ca' Foscari University as Professor of Chinese Language and Literature in 1965, starting his teaching of Chinese language and literature in the academic year 1966-67. At that time, Ca' Foscari was the only university in Italy where there was a Chair in Chinese Studies, as in the other institutions where Chinese language was taught – namely the universities of Naples and Rome – no similar position existed. Before coming to Ca' Foscari, Lanciotti worked at the Institute for the Middle and Extreme Orient (IsMEO) in Rome and from 1960 he was in charge of teaching Chinese language at La Sapienza University. It was there, in 1942, that Lanciotti, attending the classes of the eminent sinologist Pasquale D'Elia, developed the deep intellectual interest for Chinese culture that nurtured his scientific and academic work all along his life. There, Lanciotti also met Giuseppe Tucci, the famous Italian orientalist, who was in charge of the IsMEO and strongly supported Lanciotti in the early state of his academic career (D'Arelli 2005). In 1946, Lanciotti enrolled in Chinese language classes at IsMEO and two years later began to work there as a librarian. In 1949 he moved to Stockholm, to spend a period of study abroad in order to specialise under the supervision of Professor Bernhard Karlgren. After coming back to Italy, he left again to Leiden, where in 1951 he studied with Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak. It does go without saying that Karlgren and Duyvendak were among the most eminent European scholars in Chinese Studies. This academic international training was pivotal in making him known as the most representative personality of a new generation of sinologists in post-war Italy. In 1957 he had the chance to visit China for the first time, as a member of a small cultural delegation of the IsMEO; his reports were later published as a book (Lanciotti 2007a). Later in 1960 he began to teach Chinese language at La Sapienza University and in 1965 he was called by Ca' Foscari as Professor. He held the Chair of Chinese language in Venice until 1979, when he moved to the Istituto Orientale of Naples (Sabattini 1984b; Rossi 1996).

A well-known scholar all over Europe, Professor Lanciotti was a member of the Board of the European Association of Chinese Studies for many years. It has to be also said that his wide popularity was due not only to his remarkable academic skills, but also to his warm attitude toward colleagues and students. As it is well known, his academic and scientific profile was mainly marked by his deep interest not only in Chinese philosophy and philology, but also in Chinese traditional literature and archaeology. He has been the author of the first original history of Chinese literature in Italian language (Lanciotti [1969], 2007b), and of several studies on Confucius and on Chinese philosophy (Lanciotti 1968). Moreover he translated and commented Chinese classical texts into Italian, ranging from traditional fiction to Chinese classics (Lanciotti 1955, 1981). Lanciotti's impact on Chinese Studies



Figure 1. Lionello Lanciotti and Mario Sabattini in the library of the Seminary of Chinese Literature, 1972

in Italy has been seminal and widely recognised, covering a great variety of scientific interests.<sup>1</sup> But it is worth spending some words about his contribution in establishing Venetian sinology. This is important because, besides having a foundational role in the study of Classical Chinese from an innovative academic perspective, Lanciotti's intellectual and academic enterprise was also marked by his belief about the importance to overcome the traditional approach to sinology focused almost exclusively on classical texts. Not by chance was he also active in exploring topics quite ignored before, such as the history of Chinese law, the history of Chinese women and the relations between Venice and China (Lanciotti 1978, 1980, 1987). But he was also supportive of the need to develop a more specialised expertise in the different fields of Chinese humanities. Ca' Foscari was the academic environment where this development became soon quite evident. Here, between the late '60s and the '70s, the success of Chinese Studies could be measured not only by the increasing numbers of students – around fifty in the early 1972 – but also by the training of a young generation of scholars who, sharing an approach to China based on the most rigorous knowledge of the language and on an acute awareness of the relevance of culture for understanding contemporary Chinese issues, were also interested in opening new fields of enquiry, from modern and contemporary history to modern Chinese language, literature and art. Lanciotti also envisioned the necessity to promote the study of Chinese language at high school, following the experimentation

1 For a bibliography of Lionello Lanciotti's works see Carletti, Sacchetti, Santangelo 1996.

adopted in other European countries such as France. The leading figure in this transition towards a specialised approach to China founded on solid linguistic and cultural knowledge was Mario Sabattini, who, in 1971, began his career at Ca' Foscari under the aegis of Professor Lanciotti.

### 3 Mario Sabattini and His Contribution to Venetian Sinology

Mario Sabattini was the favourite student of Prof. Lionello Lanciotti's at La Sapienza University in Rome, where he graduated in 1969 and started his career, just to move in 1971 to Venice, as lecturer of Chinese history, and soon in charge of the teaching of Chinese language and literature. At Ca' Foscari, Sabattini, who eventually took the Chair of Chinese Studies in early '80s, soon became the pivotal figure in guiding the shaping of a distinctive school destined to gain a central position in the national and international context.

Mario Sabattini held the position of Head of the Chinese Literature Seminary from 1979 to 1991 and from 1991 to 1994, of the Department of Indological and Far Eastern Studies (later renamed Department of East Asian Studies). Moreover, he was Supervisor of Courses of Asian Languages and Literatures (1987-90), Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures (1996-99) and Pro-Rector (1988-92 and 2003-04). From 1979 to 1989 prof. Sabattini also served as Director of Courses of Eastern Languages and Cultures at the IsMEO in Rome. Like Lanciotti, as an internationally renowned scholar, he too was a member of the Board of the European Association of Chinese Studies for many years and moreover he gave a fundamental impulse to the birth of the Italian Association of Chinese Studies, of which he was Secretary General from 1988 to 1999. From 1999 to 2003 he moved to Beijing as Director of the Italian Cultural Institute at the Embassy of Italy and, in 2003, he was awarded for his merits as foreign expert of China by the Chinese Ministry of Education. After his retirement, he became Professor Emeritus at Ca' Foscari University. His intellectual role was also fundamental as a member of the Veneto Institute of Sciences, Letters and Arts.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, Mario Sabattini's role in developing Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari University deserves a full appreciation from several perspectives. First, he gave an invaluable contribution as an intellectual with a wide range of interests. He was the first one among the scholars of his generation to recognise the importance that Chinese society, culture and economy were going to take on the world stage and, in light of this awareness, to open the path towards a new research and study approach to China in

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete assessment of Mario Sabattini's academic experience and scientific contribution see Abbiati, Greselin 2014, 11-22.

Italy. One of his fields of expertise was history, and not by chance was his first book dedicated to the history of political movements in modern and contemporary China, a topic that he studied with a full understanding of the legacy of China's past and the challenges of modernity (Sabattini 1972). Nevertheless, his greatest scientific contribution concerned the development of aesthetic thought in China. In the latter field, in particular, Sabattini's work has achieved great resonance even in China. He has been unanimously recognised as one of the world's leading experts on the work of Zhu Guangqian, the important Chinese philosopher inspired by the ideas of Benedetto Croce (Sabattini 1984a, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2005, 2008, 2010). The relevance of the historical dimension remained at the core of Sabattini's intellectual project even when he turned his main academic attention towards literary criticism, the translation of classical and modern poetry and prose, the evolution of Chinese fiction. Among his several works it is worth remembering his two books – written with another eminent Italian sinologist, Paolo Santangelo – on Chinese history (Sabattini, Santangelo [1986], 2005) and on Chinese fiction (Sabattini, Santangelo 1997), his contribution as translator of Yu Dafu (Sabattini 1999) and of Chinese contemporary poetry, as in the specialised journal *Caratteri*. In the last years he co-edited one volume of the most important work dedicated to Chinese civilisation in Italy (Sabattini, Scarpari 2010). Finally, one cannot fail to mention his pioneering work in the study of Thai language and literature, and in the comparative analysis between Thai and the Chinese language (Sabattini 1996; Bungjarat, Sabattini 2017).

Secondly, Mario Sabattini's academic work was also addressed to the promotion of the knowledge of Chinese culture and civilisation in Italy. He organised the first major exhibitions on ancient Chinese civilization in Italy, namely *7000 Years of China. Neolithic and Han Art and Archaeology* (Venice, 1983-84) and *China in Venice, from the Han Dynasty to Marco Polo* (Venice, 1986-87) (Sabattini, Abbiati 1986). These two initiatives greatly contributed to project Venice as a main centre for the diffusion of the knowledge of China in Italy.

#### **4 Lionello Lanciotti and Mario Sabbattini's Legacy in the '80s and '90s**

Thanks to their personal charisma, their human and intellectual depth and their vast and multidisciplinary knowledge, Lionello Lanciotti and Mario Sabbattini managed to gather around them a group of young scholars who found high inspiration in their example for developing their own specialisation in Chinese Studies. In a period in which in Italy the teaching of the Chinese language and culture was still in a pioneering phase in terms of methodology, they were able to educate a generation of sinologists who, since the late '80s, made Ca' Foscari the greatest centre for Chinese Studies in Italy.

Among them, we must at least mention Maurizio Scarpari, who not only developed research and study of classical Chinese but also played a pivotal role in enhancing Venetian sinology and making the Department of East Asian Studies an important institution in the field; Magda Abbiati, whose academic research was fundamental in the development of a new approach to the teaching and learning of Chinese modern language, thus making Ca' Foscari a leading centre; Guido Samarani, a nationally and internationally re-known historian of contemporary China; Federico Greselin, who was the first to specialise in modern Chinese culture and media; Alfredo Cadonna, whose research interests were focused on Chinese religion and Taoism. Scarpari, Abbiati and Samarani acted also as Heads of Department in the '90s and in 2000s; Scarpari has also been Pro-Rector in the early 2000s. This is an evidence of the capacity of Venetian sinologists to personally engage themselves in order to place Chinese Studies at the core of the development of Ca' Foscari as a nationally and internationally important institution in high-education and research.

This small group all belongs to the first generation of Lanciotti and Sabbattini's students at Ca' Foscari in the '70s. In the following two decades all of them were able to build on these masters' inspiration not only to support the growth of Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari but also to promote an approach to ancient and contemporary China, based on a solid knowledge of the language. This remains the main trait of sinological studies at Ca' Foscari, and has nourished and still nourishes the current generation of China scholars in Venice.

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