

Chinese Students in Italy During and After Covid-19: Projects and Future Trends

XU HAO

In comparison to other European countries, Italy has a relatively short history of welcoming Chinese students and has only recently gained attention. As a result of the pandemic, the figures for 2020 and 2021 have continued to fall, and Chinese students who are studying abroad have decreased; at the same time Chinese students who are already living and studying in Italy have faced several challenges. This article focuses on Chinese students in Italy, including the pathways, study types, Marco Polo and Turandot Projects for Chinese students, challenges faced by Chinese students during the epidemic, cultural responses to society, and outlook and trends in the post-epidemic era.

Keywords: Chinese students, Italy, overseas education, studying abroad, Covid-19, post-epidemic era.

Xu Hao, *Chinese students in Italy during and after Covid-19: projects and future trends*, in “Educazione Aperta” (www.educazioneaperta.it), 12/2022.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7573879

Introduction

With the advent of globalization, international educational exchanges have become a fact of life. Due to this reason, the overseas education is expanding rapidly. It is known that the number of Chinese students studying abroad has reached 500 thousand per year, and its growth rate is far higher than the global average annual growth rate of about 7% (Bislev, 2017). Compared with other European countries, Italy has a very short history of welcoming Chinese students. Until 2005, as the new target country of overseas study, Italy had gradually drawn the eyes of Chinese students. Within a few years, the number of enrolled and graduated Chinese students in Italy has increased rapidly. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of both Italian and Chinese governments (Mottura, 2010).

The aim of this research is to analyze the phenomenon of *liuxuesheng*¹ in Italy: the Marco Polo and Turandot projects, which have greatly facilitated the mobility of Chinese students to Italy (Ambroso, 2010); the issues Chinese students faced in Italy during the pandemic, their attitude to the post-epidemic era; and the cultural responses they provided to Italian society (Pedone, 2020).

The article begins with an examination of the evolution of Chinese study abroad policies from 1949 to the present. The central part of the article will then focus on Chinese students in Italy: their backgrounds, types of studies, Marco Polo and Turandot projects, based on data research and the author's experience as a professor at

¹ In Chinese, the term *liuxuesheng* 留学生 is used to indicate Chinese students studying abroad, foreign students, or exchange students. In this article, *liuxuesheng* refers to Chinese students abroad, particularly in Italy.

the University of Florence and Campus CIELS in Padua. In 2021, a questionnaire distributed to 100 Chinese students at the Campus CIELS in Padua and the University of Florence revealed the difficulties faced by Chinese students in Italy during the pandemic, as well as their attitudes toward the post-epidemic period. Completed questionnaires were submitted anonymously and included a total of 20 questions in Chinese. They were divided into four parts: basic personal information (name, age, etc.), experiences during the pandemic, details about student life and confrontations with discrimination. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions, the latter so that the respondents could more actively participate and make nuanced reflections on the phenomena under exploration².

1. Chinese liuxuesheng in the world from 1949 to the 21st century

In terms of the trajectory of the evolution of study abroad policies, China's study abroad activities have entered a period of booming development since the 21st century (Dixon, 2013). China's study abroad policy can be divided into five important stages: the preliminary establishment stage (1949-1956); the implementation stage (1956-1966); the stagnation stage (1966-1977); the adjustment stage (1978-1992); and the specification development stage (1993-present) (Liu, 2016).

1.1. The preliminary establishment stage (1949-1956)

The CPC Central Committee decided in January 1951 to send many engineering students to the Soviet Union. Under this policy,

² A model of the questionnaire is given in the "Appendix" section.

the Chinese government sent 375 engineering students (including 136 postgraduates) to the Soviet Union for the first time in August 1951. Since then, China has sent many students to the Soviet Union. In addition, the Chinese government has proposed sending students to North Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia, Egypt, and India. 13 to North Korea to study Korean, 5 to Vietnam to study Vietnamese, and 7 to Egypt to study history. In June 1956, the Chinese government issued the Report on the Request for Dispatching Postgraduate Students to Capitalist Countries. The aim of this project was to break the Western countries' isolation and blockade policy against China. The Report specifies the dispatch requirements and categories, the dispatch specialties and channels, and the departments and institutions responsible for implementation. According to statistics, the total number of international students sent during this period was ten, with three students in England, four in Sweden, and three in Finland.

1.2 The implementation stage (1956-1966)

From 1957 onwards, China's policy on studying abroad entered a phase of active policy exploration. After 1957, along with the basic completion of the socialist transformation and the end of the national economic recovery period, the Chinese Communist Party became more and more experienced in managing the country and carrying out social construction. Chinese leaders began to reflect on and take the initiative to review their subjectivist and dogmatic approach to the issue of education abroad over the past period. At the same time, the withdrawal of Soviet experts led to a sharp deterioration in relations between the two parties and the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the "Leaning to One Side"³ diplomatic system towards

³ The expression in Chinese is 一边倒, which literally means "leaning to one side". It was a diplomatic relationship policy of the People's Republic of China in its early years. The policy was more than just founding an alliance with the Soviet Union; it meant reso-

the Soviet Union. In line with this, China's policy of sending foreign students to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe changed. The "Great Leap Forward" movement⁴, which began in 1958, led to some new developments in China's study abroad policy.

As educational exchanges between China and the few capitalist countries outside the United States improved, the Chinese government formulated a policy of "appropriately increasing the dispatch of international students to capitalist countries" in 1957 and sent over 200 students to capitalist countries between 1957 and 1965. In June 1957, the Chinese Ministry of Higher Education pointed out that there was no longer any significant difference between the academic levels of students studying in the Soviet Union and those of domestic students, and therefore proposed the policy of sending additional high school students to study in the Soviet Union in a targeted manner.

In 1959, the Chinese government stated that all higher research institutes and universities were eligible to send more students. In April 1958, the National Science Council, commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education, set up the famous "Thousand Talents Plan", a program to send 1,000 outstanding postgraduate students to study abroad every year from 1958 onwards. The program was eventually not implemented after 1960 due to the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. To make up for the shortcomings of the above policy, the Chinese government changed the "leapfrog model" of study abroad policy and began to pursue a "mass model" of study abroad, and in February 1959, proposed a policy of "sending a larger number of advanced students and interns". Between 1959 and 1963, 692 teacher trainees and research interns were sent abroad. In 1963, the Chinese government further proposed the policy of "sending more students in languages", pointing out that since there

lutely supporting the Communist bloc and opposing the imperialist and capitalist camp led by the United States of America.

⁴ Great Leap Forward, in Chinese history, is the campaign undertaken by the Chinese communists between 1958 and early 1960 to organize its vast population, especially in large-scale rural communes, to meet China's industrial and agricultural problems.

was a relative surplus of Russian language talents and a serious shortage of talents in other languages, it was necessary to speed up the training of talents in other languages.

From 1964 to the beginning of 1966, 1,221 students were sent abroad to study 34 foreign languages, only a few of whom were studying science and technology. Due to the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the third group of foreign students could not be sent.

1.3 The stagnation stage (1966-1977)

On June 30, 1966, the Ministry of Higher Education issued a notice on the postponement of the selection and dispatching of international students for half a year. In fact, from the date of the circular until 1972, China stopped all actions related to the policy of sending students abroad. The suspension of the selection and dispatch policy, which was supposed to last only six months, was delayed indefinitely for six years. The state decided to suspend classes at any time and send international students and their families who were studying abroad back home as soon as possible.

The stagnation of China's study abroad policy during the Cultural Revolution was mainly manifested in the following aspects: (1) The "suspension of classes and revolution" led to great disorder in teaching. The selection of students was seen as an act of "pandering to foreigners". (2) Some university professors and experts who returned from studying abroad were criticized, so that the discourse of study abroad gradually faded into the rolling tide of political struggle. (3) Many international students were assigned to remote areas to support the revolutionary construction, deepening the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside movement"⁵, which eventually led to a massive waste of

⁵ The Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement, often known simply as the Down to the Countryside Movement, was a policy instituted in the People's Republic of China in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result of what he perceived to be pro-bourgeois thinking prevalent during the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao

resources for studying abroad. (4) The background of study abroad was used as an excuse to investigate the possibility of “fornication abroad”, which led to many high-tech experts’ disappointment in cowsheds and farms⁶. (5) The importance of class origin in universities has led to a precarious employment situation and prospects for returnees.

1.4 The adjustment stage (1978-1992)

The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee thoroughly corrected the historical mistakes of the Cultural Revolution, thus bringing about a complete rectification of the situation in all areas of society. The Plenum decided that in the coming period, the focus of work should be shifted to socialist modernization. In line with this, China’s diplomatic activities also returned to a normal course. China established diplomatic relations with the United States, signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China, and established diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level with 125 countries around the world. These diplomatic activities not only established a new pattern in China’s foreign relations but also created favorable international conditions for socialist modernization and effectively promoted the resumption and rapid adjustment of the policy of leaving China to study abroad.

In general terms, the changes in study abroad policies during this period can be subdivided into four phases. (1) 1978-1982: The Chinese government, under the active impetus of the country’s main leaders, re-established and actively implemented the policy of “sending

Zedong declared certain privileged urban youth would be sent to mountainous areas or farming villages to learn from the workers and farmers there. In total, approximately 17 million youth were sent to rural areas as a result of the movement.

⁶ Chinese labor camps established during the Cultural Revolution that combined hard agricultural work with the study of Mao Zedong’s writings in order to “re-educate” cadres and intellectuals in proper socialist thought

a large number of publicly funded students abroad”, and defined the basic policy of publicly funded study abroad, the scale of selection, the method of selection, the conditions of selection, the country’s requirements, the professional requirements, and the management methods. (2) 1983-1986: the state accelerated the dispatch of publicly funded students to study abroad, with the decentralization of administrative approval, and each unit could approve “students dispatched abroad” based on the actual needs of its own department. (3) 1987-1989: In response to the many problems that had arisen in the previous period, the Chinese government began to adjust the main spirit of the policy on studying abroad, stating that the main points of the new policy should focus on ensuring both the quality of those sent abroad and the return of those who had completed their studies. The new policy also introduced the “Study Abroad Agreement Policy” for the first time, i.e., the state or the unit must sign the “Study Abroad Agreement” before going abroad, otherwise it will not be approved. (4) 1990-1992: The main points of China’s study abroad policy in this period were: the policy of “restraining self-financed study abroad by charging higher education training fees” (1990); the policy of “taking advantage of the strengths of different countries, selecting and sending the best students to ensure quality and return” (1991); and the policy of “supporting study abroad, encouraging return to China, and freedom to come and go” (1992). It is noteworthy that, along with the boom in study abroad, many organizations and departments specializing in study abroad services have emerged, some of which are subordinate to government departments, some of which are non-governmental organizations specializing in study abroad consultancy services. These organizations are generally referred to as “study abroad intermediaries”.

1.5 The specification development stage (1993-present)

With the further improvement of China’s international environ-

ment since 1993, China has shown great confidence and independence in both diplomacy and international relations. Judging from the overall trajectory of China's historical development of study abroad activities and the evolution of study abroad policies, the current stage of China's study abroad activities has entered a period of relatively "normative development". Firstly, the number of national policy documents issued is stable in the sense that they are fewer and more precise; the frequency of issuing documents is gradually decreasing; and the number of restrictive policies on studying abroad is gradually decreasing. Secondly, since 1993, the number of Chinese students studying abroad and those returning to China has shown a new trend of steady growth, with the number of state-sponsored and government-organized students studying abroad showing an overall steady change. Thirdly, the public is generally more rational and sensible about studying abroad and no longer has the urge to study abroad or study at any cost. Students no longer consider employment or living abroad as the best choice for studying abroad but rather adjust their future destination according to the characteristics and knowledge structure of their studies, the demand for talents, occupations, interests, living habits, religious beliefs, family background, and other factors (*ibidem*).

2. Being liuxuesheng in Italy: Marco Polo and Turandot Projects

According to the 2019 UNESCO survey "Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students", the number of Chinese students worldwide has decreased. The number of international students in Italy in 2019 is 14,531, the 11th in the world and the 4th in Europe. This is a quantum leap from fewer than 500 in 2005. In 2006, to attract more Chinese students to study at Italian universities, the Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane was established. In 2009, the Italian

government launched the Turandot Plan to attract Chinese students to study in Italy. “In 2009, the Italian government launched the Turandot Project, which aims to attract Chinese students to study in Italian higher art institutions in the fields of art, music, dance, and design (Alta Formazione Artistica e Musicale). The most important feature of these two projects is that the Italian government offers measures to facilitate the visa process for Chinese students and to solve the language problem: without any basic knowledge of Italian language and with a set score on the *Gaokao*⁷ (400/750 points for the Marco Polo project and 300/750 for the Turandot project), students who have completed the course and passed the exams and met the language requirements can enter the pre-registered university directly. In addition, Italian universities reserve a certain number of places each academic year for Chinese students participating in both schemes. It is worth noting that the Marco Polo Project has increased the requirement for students to score 400 points in *Gaokao* from 380 points, and the duration of language courses in Italy has increased from 6 months initially to 10 months now, reflecting the increased attention paid by the Italian government to the quality of students and thus the quality of study. According to the Italian Ministry of Education, in 2006, only 32 Italian comprehensive universities joined the Marco Polo Project. This reflects, to some extent, the importance that Italian higher education institutions attach to Chinese students. If we compare the number of students coming to Italy under the Marco Polo and Turandot Projects in recent years, we can see that the second project is preferred by Chinese students. In 2012, for the first time, the number of students enrolled in art schools exceeded the number of students enrolled in the Marco Polo Project; since

⁷ The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), commonly known as the *gaokao* (Higher Education Exam), is a standardized college entrance exam held annually in mainland China. It is required for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level.

2016, the number of students enrolled in the Turandot Project has remained stable at the same level as that of the Marco Polo Project. Since 2016, the number of students enrolled in the Turandot Project has remained at 2–2.4 times that of the Marco Polo Projects (Lan, 2020). This is probably because Italy has a long-established system of higher art schools and China is placing greater emphasis on the cultural and creative fields. In addition, according to a survey conducted by the relevant authorities, in recent years, Chinese students prefer universities located in north-western Italy, especially in the Lombardia and Piemonte, where the most popular universities are the University of Bologna, Politecnico di Milano, and for general studies, the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, the Conservatory in Bologna, the Conservatory in Milan, and the Conservatory in Rome (Politi, 2020).

3. Chinese liuxuesheng in Italy during Covid-19: fears, hopes and artistic expression

3.1 Questionnaire and analysis

When Covid-19 broke out in Italy, the panic caused by the information spread among the Chinese students in Italy (Depoux et al., 2020). From the discrimination against Chinese to the differential treatment of Italians by people from other countries, from the relatively optimistic attitude towards the virus at the beginning to the national lockdown, this group of young people far away from their homeland have witnessed historic moments and experienced a series of unprecedented difficulties. The reason why we choose to focus on this group is that, although they have experienced various severe complications in this epidemic, they also give a rational cultural answer to this. In the epidemic, Chinese students are in a foreign coun-

try, and spatial isolation is more likely to make them feel anxious and helpless. In addition to worries about the epidemic, anxiety about life and studies, and great difficulties in returning to China, Chinese students have also experienced a series of problems of being discriminated in Italy and marginalized on Chinese We-Media⁸ (Liu, 2020). When the epidemic first broke out in China, some Chinese students in Italy suffered discrimination and exclusion. When the epidemic in China improved and the epidemic in Europe was serious, a multitude of foreign students chose to return to China. This practice, along with the improper words and deeds of some foreign students after entering China, once again made the group of overseas Chinese students criticized and marginalized in Chinese We-Media. In this environment, Chinese students must face double pressure (Chen, Ju 2020).

To have a clear understanding of the practical difficulties and specific needs faced by Chinese students in Italy during the epidemic, the author decided to launch this questionnaire survey among Chinese students at two universities: the University of Florence and Campus CIELS in Padua.

The survey results show that during the epidemic period, the common concerns of overseas students are as the following:

1. Fear to be infected with the virus
2. Fear that pandemic could affect their study
3. Fear to be unable to return to China
4. Fear to be subject to discrimination.

⁸ We-media (also called self-media) is a platform on the Internet. It gives a user the facility to write articles and publish videos, each possessing a unique identity. On the basis of content format, we-media platforms can be split into three types, namely text-, video-, and audio-based. Besides the conventional we-media like blogs, other we-media platforms that are gaining prominence are live streaming platforms and self-made funny video platforms.

In terms of “infection with the virus”, which ranked first, many Chinese students showed tension and anxiety, and expressed obvious concerns about the prevention and control measures taken by the Italian government. In terms of “academic impact”, ranking second, 75% of the Chinese students were worried that their studies would be affected. In the third place is “unable to return to China”. From the outbreak of the epidemic in Italy in early 2020 to the survey conducted in 2021, the epidemic had reached several peaks, and the state of emergency had been prolonged again and again. Therefore, most overseas students hoped to return to China as soon as possible and accompany their families. However, the rising cost of airline tickets and the cancellation of many flights during the epidemic period caused significant hardship for Chinese students returning home. Among the students who participated in the survey, 64% had a strong desire to return home; 23% of the students were worried about the change in Italian immigration policy, which would lead to their inability to return to Italy to continue their studies as scheduled after returning to China, so they didn't choose to return to China for the time being; the remaining 13% of the students believed that choosing to return to China during the epidemic would cost a lot in terms of economy (sky-high airfares) and time (the time of compulsory isolation after entering China), so they had no intention to return to China in the near future. The fourth point is that Chinese students studying abroad will be discriminated against during the epidemic. This was not just a worry. In fact, more than 60% of the Chinese students said that they had been discriminated against to varying degrees during their lives in Italy. This phenomenon became more obvious and widespread after the outbreak of the epidemic. In response to this phenomenon, foreign students actively built their self-image with diaries, videos, documentaries, and other cultural works, so that their voices could be heard in the society they live in and pay more correct attention to foreign students and Chinese groups. It was also during the epidemic that young Chinese students living in Italy made some very meaningful cultural creations.

This article will introduce and analyze these cultural works in detail in the second part.

Finally, the questionnaire included a survey of the most pressing needs of Chinese students. The current problems that must be solved are listed below in various proportions.

Hope to increase flights to help overseas Chinese students return to China.

It is hoped that the university can provide more academic and administrative guidance and assistance to Chinese students.

Hope to provide corresponding psychological counselling and support to Chinese students.

The following are the specific contents of the questionnaire:

- Gender
- Age
- How long have you lived in Italy?
- Why did you choose to study in Italy?
- University majors
- Do you have any plans to return to China soon?
- What are your biggest concerns now?
- In what ways do you think you have been affected by the epidemic?
- What do you think of the measures Italy has taken to combat the epidemic?
- What personal protective measures have you taken?
- Do you know the medical treatment process in Italy?
- Do you think you need psychological counselling?
- Do you have any worries about your studies?
- What are your views or difficulties with distance learning?
- Do you think your university has enough care and encouragement for foreign students?
- What kind of help do you think you need most at present?
- Would your life in Italy be easier if there was no epidemic?
- During the epidemic, restaurants, bars, and other usual places

for parties were closed. Would you feel unhappy because you couldn't often go to these places to chat with people and improve your language level?

- Have you ever encountered discrimination against Chinese people?
- When you encounter discrimination, what kind of attitude do you usually adopt?

3.2 Cultural responses of Chinese liuxuesheng to the society

In response to the topic of discrimination, Chinese students also gave unique cultural answers in the form of art documentary, which is the VULCA project, completed in 2021.

VULCA 2021 is a project that aims to produce a documentary about Vulnerability and Care during Covid-19-induced Anti-Asian Racism and Violence in Italy and Canada⁹.

This project aims at producing a documentary on Covid-19-related Sinophobia in Italy and Canada with the goal of combating misinformation and racial stigma. Additionally, the documentary aims to give a voice to victims of Sinophobia, providing them with a space to share how they are coming to terms with trauma and find ways to heal and show resilience.

The project was jointly completed by the University of Florence in Italy and the University of British Columbia in Canada. The authors of the project are Chinese students living in Italy and studying at the University of Florence and Chinese students living in Canada and studying at UBC. Some of them are overseas Chinese students. Some are Chinese children born and raised in Italy; others are Chinese children adopted by Canadian families; and still others are children who have lived in Canada with their parents since they were

⁹ Valentina Pedone from the University of Florence, along with Gaoheng Zhang from the University of British Columbia as the Canadian partner, is honoured to have received the Canada-Italy Innovation Award 2021.

children. Their mother tongue can be Chinese, Italian, or English; their majors, educational backgrounds, and growth environments are different, but what they have in common is their Asian faces and the prejudice and discrimination they have faced in life.

At the beginning, the students who participated in the project understood the topics everyone cared about through mutual communication and planned the direction for everyone to collect materials. The content collected by students can be divided into two types: interviews and creations. The students interviewed their friends or classmates. But unlike traditional interviews, the characters they shot did not specifically face the camera when talking, nor were they deliberately answering a question, but were naturally telling their stories and expressing their ideas, as if the camera didn't exist, and the photographers carefully recorded the characters' small movements, the surrounding environment, and all the scenes they thought worth recording, such as a rainy day, somewhere in the city, etc. Some students also integrate into their own creations and become the story's protagonists. Starting from their own experience and emotions, they use the first-person view to tell their own experience, the stories of their family or friends around them. By describing the discrimination and resistance in their environment, they also try to give their own answers about how to act in the future.

The students who shot the material were not professional video makers and had no professional training. Although it is difficult to compete with professionals in terms of knowledge and skills, after months of effort and cooperation, their production was screened in October 2021 and received great recognition. This small documentary has no director and no single author, but the final work fully shows the simplicity and pristine of this art documentary. Each creator has precisely identified his or her own focus, narrative rhythm, and heart. On the other hand, this art documentary has also aroused a lot of resonance. The reason is not only the topic selection but also that the documentary has no fixed system requirements when sho-

oting, so the creators can freely edit and narrate based on shooting materials, which gives them the opportunity to show the significance of the theme to the greatest extent. The students who created this documentary were in different countries and cities, but the audience did not feel this distance when watching the documentary. The filmmakers and the subjects seem to be in the same context, the same time and space, and a strong sense of integration and empathy naturally appear.

According to Chinese students' accounts, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination are long-standing phenomena, but the epidemic has made them more visible and serious. This is where intercultural communication and understanding come into play. Chinese students in Italy have been very active in raising their voices during the epidemic, spreading their own approaches to the public crisis and the phenomenon of discrimination through cultural and artistic expression.

4. Chinese liuxuesheng in Italy after Covid-19: trends in study abroad from 2022

If there is one word to describe the study abroad sector, it would be “downturn” in 2020 and “recovery” in 2021. After the initial panic and chaos of Covid -19, with mass vaccination, universities have opened their campuses and offline examinations for overseas students have largely resumed. A world disrupted by the epidemic is back in motion. Recently, the Italian Education Centre released its first big data for studies in Italy in 2021. Although the data for 2021 is still on a downward trend compared to the period up to 2020 due to the ongoing impact of the epidemic, there are some bright spots. Meanwhile, the Common Document of the 10th Joint Meeting of

the Italian and Chinese Governmental Committees of December 30, 2020, clearly states that “both sides agree on the need to deepen cooperation in the field of higher education and are willing to continue to expand the scale of exchange of international students, teachers, and researchers and to strengthen cooperation in scientific research projects [...]”.

The study in Italy also endured the ongoing test of the epidemic in 2021, with the total number of pre-registrants falling by around 12% to 3,043 compared to 2020 (3,496 total pre-registrants). Of these, the number of international students¹⁰ is 1,932 and the total number of planned students¹¹ is 1,111, with the number of international students already significantly exceeding the number of planned students.

In terms of international students, the main sources of international students are Shandong, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Anhui, Hebei, Henan, Chongqing, and Hunan.

The places of origin of planned students are, in order, Shandong, Zhejiang, Henan, Sichuan, Jiangsu, Anhui, Chongqing, and Hebei.

The number of master’s degree applicants has increased significantly, both in the international and planned student pathways, with master’s students exceeding a 10% or more increase compared to 2020. As a representative country for tuition-free study in Europe, Italy is also tuition-free for public higher art institutions, with good faculty and good overall cost performance for postgraduate study. It has been close to that of art institutions in China, so more and more undergraduate art students graduating from China are choosing Italy as their destination country for postgraduate study.

Thanks to the publicity and promotion and the objective percep-

¹⁰ International students are Chinese students who choose to enroll at Italian universities without being part of specific projects such as Marco Polo and Turandot.

¹¹ Planned students are Chinese students who are part of the Marco Polo and Turandot projects, for whom the admissions requirements are different.

tion of the international status of Italian higher education and influenced by the employment situation. Students who choose to study in Italy pay more attention to the international ranking of Italian universities and art schools. (Mok et al., 2021).

In terms of professional choices, it is more focused on applying for Italian advantageous majors such as design, music, fine arts, and architecture, all of which are traditionally popular majors with high competition. In fact, Italian universities and art schools can offer much more than these specialized courses, such as artificial intelligence, big data, environmental sustainability, and biomedicine, which are currently popular, and Italy has its own industry characteristics and advantages in all these professional fields (Yang et al., 2022).

Studying in Italy remains one of the most popular choices among the “minor language countries”¹², mainly because of the advantages of the Italian higher education system and the high cost-performance ratio. In addition, the employment situation of students who have returned from their studies in Italy in recent years has led to a more objective perception of “studying in Italy”.

It can be predicted that by the end of 2022, if the epidemic is substantially controlled, the activities of Italian universities will return to normal. The number of students studying abroad in Italy will be able to recover slowly. It is likely that the number of international and Marco Polo and Turandot students studying undergraduate and master's programs in Italy will approach 3,800-4,000, with a quantitative recovery for Marco Polo and Turandot students. The increase in the number of applicants will also lead to more intense competition for specialties; DAMS, communication, design, fine arts, and vocal music are still the most popular majors chosen by Chinese students.

¹² Most Chinese people usually think of English as the common language and all other languages as non-common, so the minor language is a language other than English.

Conclusions

Although the epidemic has had a definite impact on study abroad, the demand from the study abroad community is undiminished. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education's 2021 statistics, more than half of students have postponed their plans to study abroad, but less than 10% have cancelled their plans altogether. This indicates that the majority of those interested in studying abroad are more determined to do so.

In the post-epidemic era, the challenges and missions of Chinese overseas students will be greater than before. The value of studying abroad is not only the acquisition of a degree, but more importantly, the ability to interact with students from all over the world in a different cultural context, to improve one's abilities and expand one's horizons, and to improve one's knowledge of the world.

In terms of culture, the responses given by Chinese students during the epidemic also demonstrate the important role of international students in intercultural communication. Their long stay in both their home and foreign cultural environment makes their perception of the cultural differences between the two countries more visible and clearer. Due to their dual identity, international students' transmission of what they see, hear, and feel is a transmission of first-hand information, and the content of their communication is more realistic and graphic. Chinese students in Italy are dispersed throughout society, and in their daily lives, they are on relatively equal footing with the people around them, and their communication as "friends" is clearly consistent with the characteristics of "equality". Finally, unlike the government, students' individual roles make them less likely to be labeled as "propaganda" at the outset of the communication process and more likely to accept and approve of their message, making it easier to achieve a supportive and positive effect in the communication process.

Appendix

调查问卷 Questionnaire

个人信息 Personal information

第一部分收集的个人信息仅用于对填写调查问卷的人进行分类, 问卷将是匿名的. The personal information collected in the first section will only be used to classify participants who complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire will be anonymous.

性别 Gender

年龄 Age

你在意大利生活了多长时间? How long have you lived in Italy?

你在大学所学的专业是什么? What's your major?

关于疫情 About Covid-19

你为什么选择到意大利留学? Why did you choose to study in Italy?

你近期有回中国的打算吗? Do you have any plans to return to China soon?

你目前最担心的问题是什么? What are your biggest concerns now?

你认为在哪些方面会收到疫情的影响? In what ways do you think you have been affected by the epidemic?

你认为意大利采取的防疫措施如何? What do you think of the measures Italy has taken to combat the epidemic?

你自己采取了哪些个人保护措施? What personal protective measures have you taken?

你了解意大利的就医程序吗? Do you know the medical treatment process in Italy?

你认为自己需要心理疏导的服务吗? Do you think you need psychological counselling?

对于学业, 你有哪些担心吗? Do you have any worries about your studies?

对于疫情期间的远程教学, 你有什么看法或者担忧? What

are your views or difficulties with distance learning?

你认为你所在的大学对于外国学生表示出了足够的关注和鼓励吗？Do you think your university has enough care and encouragement for foreign students?

你认为在现阶段你最需要什么样的帮助？What kind of help do you think you need most at present?

如果没有疫情，你认为留学生活会更容易吗？Would your life in Italy be easier if there was no epidemic?

疫情期间酒吧和餐馆都关了，你会因为不能经常去这些地方和人聊天提高语言水平而感到不开心吗？During the epidemic, restaurants, bars, and other usual places for parties were closed. Would you feel unhappy because you couldn't often go to these places to chat with people and improve your language level?

关于歧视 About discrimination

留学期间你遇到过歧视中国人的现象吗？Have you ever encountered discrimination against Chinese people?

当遇到歧视的言行时，你通常会采取什么态度？When you encounter discrimination, what kind of attitude do you usually adopt?

References

Ambroso, S., *Il Progetto Marco Polo. Requisiti e competenze per studiare nelle università italiane*, in “La didattica dell’italiano a studenti cinesi e il progetto Marco Polo”, 19, 2020, p.19.

Bislev, A., *Student-to-student diplomacy: Chinese international students as a soft-power tool*, in “Journal of Current Chinese Affairs”, 46(2), 2019, pp. 81-109.

Chen Xiaoru 陈小茹, & Ju Hui 鞠辉. (2020) 全球疫情下的中国留学生: 无问去留祖国都在身后 in “China Youth Daily”, 4, 2020.

Depoux, A., Martin, S., Karafillakis, E., Preet, R., Wilder-Smith,

A., & Larson, H., *The pandemic of social media panic travels faster than the COVID-19 outbreaks*, in “Journal of travel medicine”, 27(3), 2020, p. 31.

Dixon, B., *Education abroad in China: Literature review of study abroad program types, outcomes, and benefits*, in “Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad”, 23(1), 2013, pp.105-122.

Lan, S., *Youth, mobility, and the emotional burdens of youxue (travel and study): A case study of Chinese students in Italy*, in “International Migration”, 58(3), 2020, pp.163-176.

Liu Wenhui 刘文晖, *疫情下的留学生经历了什么*, in “Fangyuan”, 7, 2020, pp.62-65.

Liu, Y., *Researching on Oversea Study Policy Change of the People's Republic of China*. Ph.D diss., Northeast Normal University, 2016.

Mok, K. H., Xiong, W., Ke, G., & Cheung, J. O. W., *Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility: Student perspectives from mainland China and Hong Kong*, in “International Journal of Educational Research”, 105, 2021, pp. 101-118.

Mottura, B., *Studenti cinesi nelle università milanesi: un rapporto preliminare*, in “Studenti cinesi nelle università milanesi: un rapporto preliminare”, 2010, pp.301-309.

Pedone, V., *(Non) Fai rumore. Il silenzio intorno all'espressione culturale sinoitaliana durante la stagione Covid-19*, in “Sinofere”, 2020, url: <http://sinofere.com/2020/07/30/valentina-pedone-non-fai-rumore-il-silenzio-intorno-allespressione-culturale-sinoitaliana-durante-la-stagione-Covid-19/>

Politi, A., *Italy: A Case Study of the Silk Road Project in Europe*, in “Lau China Institute Policy Paper Series: China in the World”, 2020.

Yang, Q., Shen, J., & Xu, Y. (2022). *Changes in International Student Mobility amid the COVID-19 Pandemic and Response in the China Context*, in “Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences”, 15(1), 2022, pp.23-40.

The author

XU HAO is adjunct Professor in Languages and Cultures of Ancient and Modern East, 2020, University of Florence. The academic interests include both Chinese teaching and translation of classical period literary works, with a focus on the Yuan (1279-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) periods.