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The teaching of Chinese culture in Italian secondary school. Challenges and opportunities.

Panel: Establishment of Chinese language education as a subject of study in Europe

Keywords:

Chinese language and culture teaching, knowledge models, discipline building stakeholders

Abstract:

As an academic subject, Chinese language teaching already had quite a long tradition in Italy. It was 1732 when the catholic Collegio de' Cinesi officially opened a course of Chinese language, whereas the first academic chair of Far Eastern Languages was established in 1864 at the Institute of Higher Studies of Florence. Since then, the subject has gradually developed, until recent years, when it has entered a rapid development, thanks to an exponential increase in the number of learners and the introduction of the subject of Chinese language and culture as a school discipline at the secondary-education level, starting from 2003.

Following this development, the scientific world has consequently undertaken a process of rethinking the discipline, which is being carried out in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. A crucial contribution to this process comes from the production of reference materials, like language textbooks, and of documents aimed at institutional and scientific mediation, like the Syllabus for the Chinese language, edited in September 2016.

Based on the communicative approach, the Syllabus is targeted to Italian learners at the secondary education level. It presents competence descriptors, teaching themes, and lexicon inspired both by the European and the Chinese-relevant reference documents. The document also includes a section presenting culture content, scanned according to school years.

The culture section closely follows the national guidelines (“Indicazioni nazionali”), which also recommend analysis and confrontation activities that students can constantly carry out on texts and content. This last aspect is consistent in general with the most common approach to Chinese culture teaching in Italy that we noted both at the level of reference materials used in teachers’ lesson planning and at the level of classroom practice: an approach based on a model of knowledge transmission known as “knowledge collection” and implemented through the traditional teacher-centered lesson where there is little space for active learning and mobilization of cultural representation.

This shows that we are still far from developing that intercultural competence which is nevertheless considered a fundamental objective in official references documents for foreign language and culture teaching, both at the national and European level. Far from being an obstacle, this shortcoming in the development of the intercultural aspect in Chinese culture teaching is an opportunity to contribute not only to the ongoing renewal and improvement of the discipline of Chinese language and culture teaching in Italy, but also to foreign culture teaching which is overlooked and underestimated in foreign language and culture teaching in a general way.

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