



*Tin Wei-yi*

# Into the Amazing Puzzles

**A Chinese Journalist's Travels in Europe**



**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS**

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*Jin Weiye*



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# Preface

It has almost become a routine for old-timer travelers to fight a “how-many-have-you-been-to” war whenever they meet, by counting the number of countries they have visited. I seldom lose the game: stretching one hand and saying “50” usually nails it. Well, half of the 50 countries I’ve been to are in Europe, and touring around Europe is pretty much like travelling around China, in terms of the distance covered. But the highly integrated management of European countries impresses me a lot. One day, I set out from Bregenz of Austria in the morning, driving all the way to Lake Constance in southern Germany to have lunch; then I headed to the Stein and Rhine falls in Switzerland without any trouble, not even a toll gate on road.

I had spent a quiet night with a group of tough-looking Polish passengers in a train heading north to Warsaw; I had talked about football like a real fan with the chatty Italians over a glass of wine, while bathing in the sunlight of the Mediterranean; I had watched the pious Orthodox believers praying by the Volga River; I had seen the Irish recounting the history of Northern Ireland in Dublin. I have been to Brussel, the center of Europe, and saw the EU’s headquarters under construction – like traveling back in time to Shanghai when it was in the construction boom ten years ago – the guardrails of the building recorded the history of Europe. I think there must be an inherent logic and a shared value among these European countries, despite their differences and conflicts, to allow them the level of harmony like it is today. These logic and values have

undergone quite a journey. They may have emerged in ancient Greece and Rome before they were instilled into the European gene after the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. They may have been rectified time after time under the impact of the Arabian world and the lessons were only learned after two tragic world wars. Only freedom and equality can bring us Europe as it is today. Power politics and wars will never create long lasting peace.

We are lucky to witness a Europe where we can travel freely, even for someone as remotely-located as I am.

When Foreign Languages Press showed interest in my travel notes, I was thinking whether it was better to arrange the essays in time sequence or doing it country by country to show logic and relevance. However, I felt either was difficult to manage in a single book, because I went to those countries at different times, some revisited while others left for future exploration. All I can present for readers are fragments. It reminds me of how I felt when I stood in front of the Forum ruins in Rome. One rock cannot tell the greatness of the Roman Empire, but as you pick up more, the picture becomes complete, and you see Rome at its prime. It is my hope that the fragmental recounting of my journey in Europe, threaded together, will entertain my readers and fellow travelers just as it does me.

**Jin Weiyi**

November, 2015, in Shanghai

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# VENICE

## Nessun Dorma

Many cities of water in the world are labeled as the “Venice” of a certain country. For example, Zhouzhuang Village was once known as the “Venice of China.” But I am sure that the name giver didn’t really visit Venice, otherwise, he or she should not have made such an analogy!

Is it possible to have a “second Venice” on the planet?

Try to imagine a historic city where no streets or alleys are straight and all the buildings are arranged in sentimental arc lines rather than straight ones; buildings of medieval and Renaissance styles stand side by side, emanating an atmosphere of grandness and elegance along with worldliness and joy. Isn’t it very special? Not





Venice – The pearl of the Adriatic Sea

only that, what really makes Venice unique is that the streets are not paved with shiny and smooth marble slabs, or simple firm cement, or poetic and nostalgic bluestone slates, but tons of water. Don't you love a city like that? Venice has appeared in movies and television programs so many times that it has been no stranger to us at all. When I visited Venice by walking along the canals, across the bridges, and through the alleys, I felt I knew so little about the history of the city.

I had no idea of why and how this "city of water" was built up, except that all of the buildings in Venice were constructed on the

shoals, and the foundation was wood piles pretreated with tung oil to avoid erosion from sea water, on top of which stone plates were placed. I was wondering why a city was built on shoals rather than a free land of the continent. Did the builders plan to create a mirage? Or were they simply crazy? In any case, thanks to those "crazy guys," we now have such a treasure of world civilization.

Venetian architecture encompasses both Gothic and Renaissance styles. However, compared with those in Rome and Florence from the same period, both office and residence buildings in Venice sent off a sort of cozy atmosphere of family living. I would expect a Venetian to show up, at any moment, in any of these Gothic arches or delicate balconies to give a stretch, or a smile with an early morning greeting. Sunshine on the water sparkled on his or her face so that I could see them better. The silhouettes and designs of the buildings

do not seem to match at first glance. But with those meandering waterways underneath, everything in the city becomes perfectly coordinated with one another. It is like that a woman may not have to have each individual facial feature pretty, but with a nice body, personal charm and a good coordination, she is a beauty.

The Grand Canal is wide, in which gondolas paddled by sailors were drifting one after another. In contrast, groups of visitors on the banks who were moving slowly look like ants from a distance. And along the banks, gondolas parked by the wooden poles were bumping up and down in the waves. All these reminded me of Canaletto's paintings on Venice completed three hundred years ago. The Venice depicted in his paintings seems to be almost identical to the Venice in front of me.

Today, Venice belongs to romance and love. But thousands of years ago, it presented power, wealth and wisdom. Relying upon good timing, geographic convenience and harmonic relationship within the nation, Venetians had managed to form a formidable power in Europe as early as the 10th century, and maintained such power until the 16th century. In 1423, the Venetians owned a fleet of 3,000 small ships with 17,000 crew members, 300 large ships with 8,000 crew members, and 45 large yachts with 11,000 crew members, 25 of which were ships for commercial use, 15 warships, and 5 civilian ships. Besides, another 50 large yachts were stored for emergency use. It is amazing that Venice with such a tiny piece of land owned such a powerful naval force that could make the entire Europe pay respect. It is interesting to note that Venice owns a population of only 60,000 residents today, which barely doubles the total number of the crew of the Venetian fleet centuries ago.

Back in 400 AD, Venice was simply a group of desolate shoals. It was surrounded by cities that had been well developed, and had not been worth mentioning in terms of history and culture compared with the neighboring cities. However, with the passage of time, its



geographic convenience began to show. So, Venice encountered tremendous developmental opportunities, which in turn attracted talents from all over the world and from all walks of life. All those contributed to the fast rise of Venice that surprised the rest of the world and became a milestone in the world history.

Let's try to imagine what Venice looked like during the Renaissance. The coastal country of only eight square kilometers showed prosperity and power. In the exquisitely decorated Prime Minister's Office, the head of the state was just elected after a serious debate of the parliament. The republic polity could ensure the balance of powers while maintaining iron fisted ruling of the country. The polity was far more efficient than many European monarchies at the time. Behind the Prime Minister's Office, there is a short and finely built bridge, which links to a prison across the water. Criminals who were escorted to this place after being convicted in the court sighed in front of the bridge for they had to say goodbye to freedom.

The clear water under the bridge is the blood of Venice, which has circulated every corner of the city. Gondolas, shuttling like arrows, did not carry tourists but merchants, sailors, and the earliest





Taking the boat to the other side of the river

bankers in Europe who were trying to meet their schedules. Perhaps Shylock from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was in one of those gondolas. He was good at loan sharking. As a first-generation Jewish immigrant, he might have been discriminated by the earlier ones. But in the society of "money the priority," he could not have lived better.

Not far away, there was a gondola passing those giant merchant ships laden with oriental fortune delivered via the Silk Road or from the Arab world, which included Chinese silk, Indian jewels, Southeast Asian spices, and African ivories. Almost all the ships that carried goods to Europe had to be pulled over to the Venetian shores and the merchants were obliged to pay tax there. In fact, taxation enabled Venice to collect a big fortune.

Nearby, there was another big ship getting ready for a voyage heading for Constantinople. It was a long trip and extremely profitable business for the Venetians. In fact, such business opportunity was created during the period of the endless crusades. In the Fourth Crusade, the European army departed from Venice. The Venetians followed the army and provided military supply. But somehow, they

turned around and conquered Constantinople whose people were also Christians. Well, belief is belief, and business is business! Big money can be made out of wars. Since then, whenever the European Christians planned to visit Jerusalem via Constantinople, they came to Venice for the best deal. And for Venice, it was a big business!

A breeze from the Adriatic Sea caressed my face, and induced the sounding of the bell of St. Mark's Church. There emerged a scene in which many people were busy working in the front square of the church. The commander-in-chief in a project on the corridor of the church, Jacopo Sansovino, could not move his eyes away from a drawing sheet. The envoy that the Pope sent from Vatican approached him politely, and carefully described the decent offer with which he wished to bring Sansovino back. But the Roman architect did not even turn his head. He replied firmly: "How can I leave a republic to serve a monarch?" Not far from Sansovino, Titian Vecelli and Tintoretto Iac, who were taking a coffee break, made smiles of understanding. They might have just completed the coloring of a mural, and were waiting for the paints to dry in the Mediterranean sunshine.

Venice has surprised me in many aspects. It was such a hegemonic sea power, with a strict political regime, a mighty army and a huge commercial fleet, with businessmen who sought nothing but profits and who would haunt you and take a pound of your flesh if you dared to defer the payment, and with shrewd and cunning lawyers who ensured that no drop of blood could be seen when the flesh was taken. In contrast to the coldness and cruelty, the very same Venice owns Piazza San Marco, the Rialto Bridge, Ca' d'Oro, San Giorgio Maggiore Church, and many other architectural miracles, as well as a legion of great artists represented by Titian, and a massive number of immortal masterpieces, and a city that was built on the shoals and stood in the water as one could only imagine in a fairy tale. Today, we often bemoan the fact we are in the era of excessive

commercialization and the fact that we have no control of losing humanistic spirit. But look at what the Venetians did hundreds of years ago. They were either divided into two groups, one focused on business, the other on arts, or they divided their time fairly: business at daytime and arts at night, or business in the autumn and arts in the spring. Either way, Venetians were born to be able to handle commercialization and humanism nicely.

In Venice, you've got to take a ride in one of these gondolas. Getting yourself involved in bargaining will make you feel satisfied because you will have the real experience of fighting against Venetian merchants. In the sunset, boats rippling the water slid quietly into the narrow river course. The sunshine on the water was refracted on the outside of the walls of old-fashioned residences on both sides of the river. Moss, along with the flow of the river, has eroded the banks for hundreds of years, leaving mottled traces. Almost each building is exquisitely nice-looking, as the Russian painter Repin once said that even the chimney of the most inferior residence in Venice seemed to be crafted by an amazing architect. We know that each oldie may have its own story, but we, as tourists, have no luxury of learning it anyway.

Many residences were locked with emptiness inside. However, it has nothing to do with the hustling noise over the Grand Canal. They left their homes to avoid the troubles created by water such as flooding. In fact, our handsome boatman lives in the town of Mestre, and it takes him five minutes by train to come to work.

The boat moved gently as the boatman tried to tell us which renowned family owns the residence building that we were passing by. I closed my eyes immersing myself in the smooth ride and the *in situ* commentary from the boatman. But as he pointed at one residence and said: "You, Chinese, should know this guy!" I could not help opening my eyes and gave a reflex response: Marco Polo!

Of course, Marco Polo must be a Venetian, just as Shylock

must be a Jewish and Genghis Khan a Mongolian. As to whether or not Marco Polo has ever been to China, there are different points of view from different scholars. *The Travels of Marco Polo* has depicted China, Japan, and other Southeast Asia in a roughly accurate way. So at the very least, Marco Polo was the spokesman of the European explorers who really set their feet on the oriental land, even if he did not make the trip to China himself. On the other hand, the influence of Marco Polo is way beyond the discovery of a new country or two. It was his adventurous spirit or the Venetian spirit that opened a door for Europe to view the rest of the world.

Unfortunately and inevitably, by doing so his hometown was almost doomed to decline. His portrayal of the East made the oriental land the dream place in the mind of Europeans. Shortly afterwards, emerged Vasco da Gama and then Columbus, followed by the Great Era of Navigation. It was the novel Maritime Silk Road centered around the Cape of Good Hope that broke the monopoly the Venetians who took control of the one-and-only route to the East via the Adriatic Sea. Since then, the Venetians have sunk into oblivion.

Fortunately, Venice has preserved the other half of her talent that has left us those marvelous fine arts as well as the unique architecture of the city.

Finally, the gondola was paddled out of the narrow alleys and over the Rialto Bridge. We were not far from Piazza San Marco, the place where the climax of Venice was to be found. I had seen many passionate scenes of the plaza in movies and had also tried to picture the real scenes in my mind while I stayed in the Venetian Hotel of Las Vegas. But as I got off the boat, I somewhat felt a little disappointed by what I saw. It was not as majestic as I imagined. But as I walked closer, I realized that I made a mistake. Piazza San Marco takes an L-shape. The place where we landed actually faces the small square on the side of the Prime Minister's Office. If you walk to the center of Piazza San Marco, you will immediately understand why it



is called “the most beautiful living room in Europe.” San Mark’s Church has already been majestic enough, but its style seems a little weird. The front façade is Gothic, while the back side looks Byzantine and even Islamic. Such a combo style is the manifestation of geographic characters of Venice as well as its tolerance of cultural diversity. It looks a little disorganized when viewed by each individual part, but somehow it gives an overall impression of majesty. The gold powder in the murals signals materialism but in the meantime nobleness. Very often I had to struggle through those conflicting elements, but each time I ended up with a gasp in admiration.

I walked further into the major square of the L-shaped plaza. The library and government buildings, uniformly two-storied porticos, stand still on both sides like two rows of soldiers guarding the splendid church. The pigeons on the plaza flied up in the sky with dazzling white color in the sunshine. There were so many tourists that even taking a picture was impossible. Many were yelling to express their excitement as if they had taken some sort of stimulant. Quickly I found myself to be one of them. I almost reached a state of being insane at which I wanted to describe the beauty and the holistic experience but couldn’t find the right words. In fact, I found that any attempt to express with words



The Romantic Watery Lane

was useless. It reminded me of the statement of a domestic architectural theorist Mr. Chen Zhihua when he paid his first visit here with his east European friends: We were all very excited. But Martin said repeatedly: "It's like a dream. It's like a dream." I was calmer than him, but all the same excited, my blood running wildly through my veins.

At sunset, several groups of musicians appeared on the terraces of cafes on both sides of the plaza. They started to play their music as if they were in a contest. They took turns and were very well organized. *O Sole Mio*, then *Funiculì, Funiculà*, here on this side, *Il ritorno a Sorrento*, then *Nessun Dorma* on the other.

The more audiences gathered, the more intense the applause became. In Piazza San Marco, there has never been short of gasps, cheers, and applauses.



Gondola