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Feature: Italian sculptor once follows legend to China, expects to ride China-Europe high-speed train now



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A photo taken in 2010 shows Italian sculptor Dionisio Cimarelli is working on a sculpture of Italian missionary Matteo Ricci, who came to China in 17th early Century. (Archive photo/provided by Dionisio Cimarelli)

by Xinhua writers Yang Shilong, Zhang Zhihuan

NEW YORK, June 18 (Xinhua) -- In 1601, an Italian missionary named Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) entered the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Chinese imperial palace, opening a path for East-West cultural exchange that many people set foot on.

Inspired by Matteo Ricci's legend, in 1986, Dionisio Cimarelli, aged 21 then, boarded a Trans-Siberian train to Beijing for the first time.

FASCINATED WITH CHINA

"China is one of my very old passion. Since I was a student, I was very interested in Chinese culture, Chinese art, Chinese people....so in 1986 I stopped my study in the academy and I decided to move to China for a big trip," said Cimarelli, who now teaches sculpture at the New York Academy of Arts.

"Matteo Ricci probably went to China to teach, but I went there primarily to understand, which was also my way to try to understand and exchange, and explain to the Chinese my culture, my education, and Chinese can teach me their own culture," he told Xinhua.

China at that time was not yet fully open to tourism and streets of its cities were full of bikes, no busy traffic at all, he recalled.

"...in 1986, I found China a poor country, it was coming out from a very difficult time in terms of economy and culture. But in 1986 I was also able to see the beginning of the change after the opening-up," he said, referring to China's adoption of the policy of reform and opening to the outside world in 1978.

Cimarelli returned to find a very different China in 2004 and he stayed nine years since in the booming country.

"I feel very lucky and I'm very very proud that I was able to see this change which would not only be part of China, but also part of the world change," he said.

"I saw huge change. From 1986 to 2004, China already changed a lot," he said.

"But during my nine years in China from 2004 to 2013, there was huge, enormous, amazing change. I was able to see every week the difference in Shanghai and Beijing, which I was going to very often. Continuously I saw the change," he said.

"I would say that in 2007 and 2008, there were the biggest changes in Beijing before the Olympic Games, I would say the change was 180 degree completely," he said.

"I could also see the change of people, the change of the attitude of the Chinese. They became more wealthy, they started to travel, they started to know. For the young people, they were able to do their Ph.D. in Europe and the U.S.A. So there are the enormous changes, you almost can't recognize the country, I would say," he said.



Dionisio Cimarelli is speaking to Xinhua reporters in an exclusive interview, May 11, 2017. (Xinhua/Zhang Zhihuan)

CHOOSING PORCELAIN AS STEP CLOSER TO CHINESE CULTURE

"China for me was an amazing experience, incredible. That's why I was able to stay for such a long time. It is because I've always been interested and curious and have always been learning the history and the mentality of the Chinese people, to understand them," said Cimarelli.

In Beijing, Cimarelli met Situ Jie, a renowned sculptor at the Central Academy of Arts. He was then introduced to other professors and students at the academy. In 2006, he moved to Shanghai to work for a cultural institute.

Soon his expertise and experience in China caught the attention of the Italian government which commissioned him to do a sculpture of Matteo Ricci for the Italy Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010.

"Matteo Ricci was coming very close to my hometown. What he did was a bridge between the Western culture and the Chinese culture," Cimarelli said.

"So when they offered me this opportunity, I was really excited, I said, of course I would do it. I tried to make it something unique, something different which could represent Italy and represent China, Chinese culture as a bridge," he said.

Cimarelli finally created a 1.5-meter-tall bronze sculpture of Matteo Ricci adorned with gilded calligraphy. The calligraphy in fact is Cimarelli's name written in Chinese characters. It took him six weeks to model and another twelve weeks to finish the sculpture which was collected by the Shanghai Italian Center in 2013 following the expo.

Life in China also transformed Cimarelli's pursuit of art, making figurative sculptures in Chinese porcelain instead of Italian ceramics.

"When I made my series of porcelain, that was probably the most important learning, because I never did any porcelain before. I was coming from a culture of ceramic, Italian ceramics, which looks similar but is completely different," he said.

"So porcelain for me is an understanding of the culture of China, an understanding of a way of living, an understanding of a way of working. So for me to choose porcelain is a step forward closer to the Chinese culture," he said.



A photo taken in 2010 shows Italian sculptor Dionisio Cimarelli standing beside his work, a sculpture of Italian missionary Matteo Ricci, who came to China in early 17th Century. (Archive photo/provided by Dionisio Cimarelli)

EXPECTATION OF EUROPE-ASIA HIGH-SPEED RAILWAY

Italy is a nation in the West with cultural ties closest to China, Cimarelli said, it is no surprise that in China the two most famous historical figures from the West are Italian -- Marco Polo (1254-1324) and Matteo Ricci.

He is confident that Italy, once an important terminal of the ancient Silk Road, would play a major role in the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China in 2013.

The initiative consists of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, with an aim to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along and beyond the ancient Silk Road trade routes.

Apart from the economics, Cimarelli said, the Belt and Road Initiative, just as the ancient Silk Road, serves for a deeper cause too, which is the exchange and understanding of cultures.

"I think primarily it's business. That was the same in the Middle Age when Marco Polo was travelling, that's the main purpose. But behind that, for me the culture is very important," he said.

"It would be like a way, a road along which you can do business with countries, but there is also cultural exchange which we need today," he noted.

"I think today we need more bridges than walls, we need more understanding than trying to avoid each other," he said.

Cimarelli also expressed his hope that Europe and Asia would be soon connected by the high-speed rail that is commonly seen all over China.

"They did in China several huge projects with the train, like the one from Beijing to Lhasa (in west China's Tibet region). I really hope they can do that (between Europe and China) because that would be an amazing and incredible trip, and I would really enjoy it. I hope I will not be too old to wait for that," he said.