Over one hundred years ago, from September 25 to 27, 1910, a Conference of “Orientalist-Geographers” was held to commemorate the “apostle and geographer of China,” Jesuit Father Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). This event took place three hundred years after his death, in his native town, Macerata. On that occasion, two of the invited speakers, Mr. E. A. Perogio and Mr. L. Sborlino, chose as the focus of their speeches “Italians and Governance in China” and “The Italian Concession in Tientsin,” respectively. At this juncture, nearly 50 years had passed since the complex and problematic creation of the newly unified Italian state, while, significantly, only nine years had elapsed since the official acquisition from the Qing government of the territory destined to become the Yizujie (Italian Concession), known today as Yishi fengqingqu (Italian-style scenic neighborhood). The cession of this small plot of land was the outcome of the Italian military participation in the Eight-Power Allied Expeditionary Force’s repression of the Boxers’ uprising, which had led to the forced signature, by the Qing government, of the “Final Protocol for the Settlement of the Disturbances of 1900” (Xinchou Treaty, dated September 7, 1901).

Italy received an allotment of 5.91 percent of the Boxers’ indemnity (26,617,005 haiguan taels, equal to 99,713,769 gold lire). The country also received extraterritoriality privileges in the Legation Quarter in Beijing. But the most important practical achievement was
the cession, in perpetuity, of a small area of 447,647 square meters on the northern bank of the Haihe (Hai River) in Tianjin, situated at 38° 56’ latitude north and 117° 58’ longitude east, on which to develop an Italian Concession. The Italian area was set between the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian Concessions, the left bank of the Haihe, the Beijing-Mukden (today’s Shenyang) railway track, and the Chinese territory.

The area ceded to the Italian government consisted of four parts:

1. the higher rising area (100,000 square meters) of the salt mines;
2. the so-called Chinese village (200,000 square meters), in the center of the concession area: approximately 1,000 dwellings, mainly huts built by salt workers, with 13,704 inhabitants, according to the 1902 census;
3. north of the village, the least appealing area: wetland, where water could be as deep as 3–4 meters, frozen in winter; and
4. on the emerging parts of this wetland a “vast abandoned and flooded cemetery,” where local dwellers used to bury their dead4 (Figure 1.1).

This essay will examine the various representations of the former Italian Concession and the construction of a success story for the newly unified Italian nation in Tianjin.

Figure 1.1 Cemetery and marshes in the territory of the Italian Concession.