

# LUISS



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## **Fifty years of Sino-Italian bilateral relations**

### **Understanding the shared history to look at the future**

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## **Abstract**

This work looks at the Sino-Italian relations starting from the 1950s, namely the years in which Italy started to consider the PRC recognition and its implementation. The main argument lies on the fact that Sino-Italian bilateral relations and Italian approach towards China can be considered peculiar and unique compared the other main European countries. The distinctiveness of the Italian approach does not refer to the amount of economic exchanges, nor in the primacy of the diplomatic recognition of the PRC; but in the coherence demonstrated over the years in the promotion of constant dialogue since the beginning of official diplomatic relations, 50 years ago. Moreover, I explore role of history and culture in shaping the bilateral relations as factors of closeness and political affinity. Furthermore, thanks to the characteristics above mentioned, as long as the key factors of the Italian approach can be maintained, I hypothesize that Italy can play the role of the “bridge” between China and the EU, as it has been affirmed also by Italian and Chinese leading figures.

In particular, I focus on the role played by Pietro Nenni, one of most important and influential Italian political actors of the 1900s and the first person who promoted the Italian recognition of the PRC and the end of the Chinese isolation within the international context. The role of the values and actions represented by Pietro Nenni constitute a case study and a common thread in establishing my major argument of this thesis. In doing so I shed light on the importance of Pietro Nenni’s values and actions in shaping the Sino-Italian relations, starting from the 1950s to today, considering the relevance of his legacy.

Moreover, this research points out how, throughout the years, Italy and China have built solid bilateral relations. Thanks also to the precious testimony of a number of interviews, it shows that Italy in the past already played the role of the bridge between Europe and China, thus creating a solid relation grounded on trust and friendship that explains why China still recognize a central role to Italy. Moreover, deep cultural links between the two countries clearly constitute the basis for further

relations. Despite the uncertainties and hesitations of the Italian politics, I argue that Italy maintain a privileged link with China and has all the prerequisites to play a more incisive and effective role in the future.

Keywords: Sino-Italian relations, Sino-Italian rapprochement, culture, Pietro Nenni.

## List of abbreviations

<b>AGI</b>	Agenzia Giornalistica Italiana – Italian News agency
<b>AIIB</b>	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CoCom</b>	Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls
<b>ENI</b>	Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi – National Hydrocarbon Corporation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICE</b>	Istituto nazionale per il Commercio Estero – Italian Institute for Foreign Commerce
<b>MAECI</b>	Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale – Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
<b>MISE</b>	Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico – Italian Ministry of Economic Development
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>PCI</b>	Partito Comunista Italiano – Italian Communist Party
<b>PSI</b>	Partito Socialista Italiano – Italian Socialist Party
<b>PSIUP</b>	Partito Socialista Italiano di Unità Proletaria – Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity
<b>PRC</b>	People’s Republic of China
<b>ROC</b>	Republic of China
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



# Introduction

## Background and Context

In 2020, Italy and China celebrated the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, an occasion to reaffirm the importance of their proximity despite the geographic distance and the great differences. Indeed, since Italy officially recognized the PRC in 1970, the two countries built solid relations characterized by a coherent path of increasing dialogue. Long before that, the two countries shared important historical moments. For example, Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci played a key role in shaping the Sino-Italian relations and the memory of the Ancient Silk Road, which used to connect the Roman and the Chinese Empires millennia ago, today is still inspiring the project of the new Belt and Road Initiative and is a source of honor always recalled to state Sino-Italian friendship. The climate of solidarity between China and Italy has also been confirmed during the dramatic events determined by the spread of the novel Coronavirus. In this situation, politicians from both sides stressed the significance of friendship and support, demonstrating high levels of solidarity and cooperation by helping each other through concrete efforts.<sup>1</sup>

This work explores the Sino-Italian bilateral relations since the 1950s to today. In the first part of this work a great emphasis has been placed on the role of the Pietro Nenni, who has the merit, among others, of having promoted and strongly worked for the Sino-Italian rapprochement. Indeed, the case study of and the common thread of the work will be the exploration of his figure. Pietro Nenni has

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the significant interrelations between the two countries Italy was one of the first counties that mobilized in sending aid to China on the outbreak of the Covid-19. On the other side, China was the first country to send aid to Italy, according to someone replacing the role that the European Union should have taken in that occasion.

[https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/13/news/coronavirus\\_italia\\_aggiornamento\\_13\\_marzo-251129542/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/13/news/coronavirus_italia_aggiornamento_13_marzo-251129542/)

[https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/notiziario\\_xinhua/2020/03/02/cooperazione-e-costanti-contatti-italia-cina\\_b9fe9dbb-c018-4479-8aa5-731d625b8e45.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/notiziario_xinhua/2020/03/02/cooperazione-e-costanti-contatti-italia-cina_b9fe9dbb-c018-4479-8aa5-731d625b8e45.html)

<https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/03/15/news/il-virus-non-ha-confini-pronti-ad-aiutare-l-italia-vinciamo-insieme-questa-guerra-1.38593853>

[https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/esteri/2020/03/11/coronavirus-jinping-scrive-mattarella-sostegno-sforzi-italia\\_PDXbqRtHqsJgsiklZHzcAO.html?refresh\\_ce](https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/esteri/2020/03/11/coronavirus-jinping-scrive-mattarella-sostegno-sforzi-italia_PDXbqRtHqsJgsiklZHzcAO.html?refresh_ce)

<https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2020-03-14/coronavirus-telefonata-xi-mattarella-7519224/>

<https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/cina-italia-mascherine-coronavirus-huawei>

been one of the most important and influential Italian politicians of the 1900s, who covered important roles such as that of Foreign Minister and Party leader. The relevance of the Nenni's role in promoting and determining the Sino-Italian rapprochement within the Italian political panorama is undisputed among scholars, historians and experts of Sino-Italian relations. Indeed, in 2018 the Italian Embassy in Beijing has contributed to an important research project promoted by the Pietro Nenni Foundation aimed at deepening on the relevance of Nenni as a prominent actor in shaping the Sino-Italian rapprochement and the path of the bilateral relations after the Italian recognition of the PRC. The most interesting finding that the researchers pointed out, is that the memory of Pietro Nenni, despite his passing in 1980, is still vivid among the Chinese institutions.

The exploration of Pietro Nenni as a case study in this work will be helpful to deep on Sino-Italian relations, in the terms that his figure highly contributed to determining the history of bilateral relations in the last 70 years. Moreover, I argue that the set of values implied by him in setting the ground for the rapprochement created a solid basis on which Italy has shaped its approach towards China.

The last part of this work shifts the focus on better understanding and deepening on the other factors that have contributed to build the Sino-Italian relations and that can shape their shared future. Namely, I explore the role of culture, history, actors and relations, which according to the Chinese point of view are of great importance in shaping the foreign policy.

## **Key questions and hypothesis**

This work is aimed at answering a main research question: how does the history of diplomatic relations between Italy and China influence the current relations, differentiating the Italian case from the other main European countries? To do so, I provide a deep study of the Sino-Italian relations, within an historical approach, aimed at stressing the importance of history, values and culture in shaping the decision of the main actors. Moreover, a parallel research question will be considered: Can Italy be a bridge between China and the EU?

The main hypothesis regards the fact that the peculiarity of the Italian approach towards China, compared to the other main European countries, lays both in its coherence and in the cultural links. Namely, since its recognition of the PRC, 50 years ago, Italy has always been fostering the enhancement of dialogue and cooperation between the two countries. Concurrently, the cultural links constitute a firm foundation that facilitated the interactions.

Therefore, the distinctiveness of the Italian approach does not refer to the amount of economic exchanges, nor in the primacy of the diplomatic recognition of the PRC; but to the coherence demonstrated over the years in the promotion of constant dialogue.

## **Literature review**

The current literature available on the Sino-Italian relations since the 1950s onwards is mostly historical. A great historic reconstruction has been made by Mario Pini in 2011 with his famous book *“Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro”* (Italy and China, 60 years between past and present). This book for the first time describes in detail the history of the two countries from the 1950s up to 2000, revealing details that were unknown until that moment. Of great interest for this work, is what emerged in relation to the difficult relationship between the Italian Communist Party and the Chinese one, which explains why since the 1950s the favorite point of contact with China has been the Italian Socialist Party led by Pietro Nenni, instead of the Italian Communist Party.

In the book *“La Cina di Mao, l’Italia e l’Europa negli anni della Guerra fredda”* (Mao’s China, Italy and Europe in the Cold War years) published in 2014, the added value lies in the comparisons between the single countries, making it possible to identify the main differences in their approaches towards the recognition of China. For example, the main aim of the French recognition of China was to resume the influence that France had had over China in the past centuries. From the British and the German side, instead, the interest towards China was highly motivated by the willingness of increasing

commerce. Indeed, for many years the economic exchanges between the Federal Republic of Germany and the PRC were not paired with a recognition of the country. Great Britain recognition was linked to the Hong Kong colony, which also led to a continuous economic exchange between the two countries. The Italian interest towards China was aimed not only by an economic desire, but also by a cultural one, as well as by a political-ideological interest especially from the left parties.

Another interesting volume on the Sino-Italian relations is the one realized by Stefano Beltrame *“Breve Storia degli Italiani in Cina”* (Brief history of the Italians in China) edited by LUP Luiss University Press and published in 2019. This book shed light on the main events of the Chinese history by presenting them alongside with parallel Italian events. This comparative approach is very helping when trying to retrace the history of Sino-Italian relations because it allows to contextualize the foreign policy moves with both the Italian and the Chinese historic times.

For what concerns the figure of Pietro Nenni as main actor and promoter of the enhancement of the Sino-Italian relations since the 1950s, the greatest literature support comes from the Pietro Nenni Foundation. Through the publication of the book *“La politica internazionale secondo Nenni. La Cina come partner, mezzo secolo dopo”* (The international politics in Nenni’s view. China as a partner half a century later) by Luigi Troiani in 2018, they have managed to trace scrupulously Nenni’s thoughts on China and, in general, his view on foreign policy. From this book the reasons and the values behind Nenni’s approach clearly emerge. Specifically, his willingness to put an end to the bipolarity created by the Cold War and his thought importance of including such a big and populous country in the international system.

## **Research aim and contributions**

This thesis is carried on with the aim of answering the research question and to contribute in shedding light on the peculiarities of the Sino-Italian relations, with a special attention on the Pietro Nenni's contribute and legacy in the Italian politics towards China.

In the first part of this paper, the approach is mostly historical, with a special attention posed at events that more than others are explicative for the aim of this work. In other words, certain precise periods / actions / facts are more in depth analyzed in order to understand whether their impact is still vivid today.

For example, great importance is given to the Sino-Italian rapprochement in 1970, within the great work implemented by Pietro Nenni. The period of the rapprochement relies both the Italian commitment in the recognition of the PRC, but also for the admission of the PRC to the UN.

A second relevant period which has been highlighted corresponds to the 1980s since the first years of the 1990s, namely the Chinese period of the Deng Xiaoping great reforms and the Italian primacy in supporting and promoting the Chinese growth. The 1980s are, indeed, addressed as the “golden age” of the Sino-Italian relations and characterized by the three triennial agreements signed within the context of the Development Cooperation Italian policy.

Another period that strongly marked the Sino-Italian relations is the one that followed the Tiananmen crisis in 1989. In fact, once again, Italy was the only country who promoted the end of the Chinese isolation and its re-introduction within the international system, demonstrating great solidarity.

Finally, I identified the fourth important event in the Italian signature of the MoU for the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019. The relevance of this signature lays in the fact that Italy continues on the same path of foreign policy's approach towards China, by distinguishing itself from the others. This event highlights and confirms my hypothesis that Italy values China as a great partner (despite the general mood within the other main European countries is different) and the Italian willingness is to keep dialoguing in order to create more opportunities for the future.

Retracing the history of the Sino-Italian relations since the 1950s, with the aim of defining which kind of relations the two countries entertained, I found that the coherence in the path followed by Italy in its approach towards China is clear. Moreover, the history of the bilateral relations, specifically characterized by this coherence, contributes to justifying and explaining actions in the present such as the Italian signature of the MoU, a choice that distinguishes itself from the trend of the main European countries. So, the Italian actions towards China are inserted in a major path that keeps going following a clear willingness of enhancing dialogue since Nenni's intuition to recognize the country. Furthermore, following this trend, as I pointed out before, Italy has played the role of the bridge between the EU and China, and I argue that the country in line with the shared history still preserves this potential today.

Additionally, another element characterizes the Sino-Italian kind of relationship: culture. This aspect has mostly emerged within the interview's sessions and explains the deep Chinese interest and great consideration on Italy. The cultural links between the two countries contribute in making this bilateral relation unique and different from the other European countries.

In conclusion, this coherence in the values and the constant willingness to always consider China as an opportunity and a friendly country to develop good bilateral relations in terms of diplomacy and economy, not only is the characteristic that more than others distinguish the Italian foreign policy towards China, but also is a clear legacy to that process foreseen and strongly desired by Pietro Nenni since the 1950s.

## **Research structure**

To understand the factors that contributed to the development of Italy's peculiar approach towards China, I analyze the history of diplomatic relations between the two countries, starting from the events that lead to the Sino-Italian rapprochement in 1970.

The first chapter describes the political, historical, and cultural situation characterizing the beginning of the 1950s. At that time, diplomatic relations were deeply influenced by the Cold War and the system of alliances among states. Italy was linked to the Western Block and its external actions were influenced and limited by the United States. Nonetheless, Pietro Nenni, leader of Italian Socialist Party, was starting to set grounds for the recognition of the PRC. Investigating the reasons that led Nenni to push for the Sino-Italian rapprochement, I find that, firstly, he saw it as an opportunity to put an end to the bipolarism that was characterizing the international panorama during the Cold War. Secondly, he was profoundly against the Chinese isolation: morally speaking he thought that not taking into consideration such a big country in terms of population was an error. Thirdly, Nenni foresaw the great potential of China, and understood the importance of entertaining good relations with the Country.

In the second chapter, I start by shedding light on the specific years of the Sino-Italian rapprochement and the PRC admission to the UN. Namely in the resolution of the China question in Italy. The event is studied by taking into consideration the limitations and the difficulties that Italy faced because of its membership to the Atlantic Alliance. With the purpose of achieving the two important goals, Pietro Nenni's actions have been central as, by taking advantage of his nomination as Foreign Minister, he decided to unilaterally (without consulting the Chinese counterpart) declare to the parliament the Italian willingness to recognize the PRC, forcing the procedures. Subsequently, Italy and China started their official diplomatic relations. Generally speaking, during the last years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution that match with Italian years of uncertainty, the exchanges quietly grew. However, the highest moment of bilateral relations, namely "the golden years", arrived with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the Deng Xiaoping reforms from the Chinese side, and with specular innovation in the Italian foreign policy characterized by an implementation of its commitment in Development Cooperation. Indeed, three triennial plans were approved for the cooperation between Italy and China.

In the last chapter, I describe the bilateral relations in recent years and in the present context. Within the beginning of the 1990s, despite the “golden age” was came to term, the Italian Socialist Party within the figure of De Michelis the then Foreign Minister continued to implement the same kind of politics based on the values proposed by Nenni. Of great importance was Italian policy aimed at helping China after the Tiananmen crisis in 1989 to end its international isolation. Moreover, his action was meant at supporting and encouraging China in its modernization process. Furthermore, considering the more recent bilateral relations, we can identify two years that marked a turning point in the bilateral relations. The first one is 2004, a year in which the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” agreement was signed. This agreement contributed in enhancing the quality of the Sino-Italian dialogue to another level, which since then involves the discussion of global issues, the China-EU relations, and multilateral issues. More recently, 2019 has to be considered another important step because of the Italian signature of the Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. This made Italy the first G7 member and the first country among the EU founding members to sign such an agreement. In addition, this chapter contains the great majority of the considerations emerged within the interviews. It explores the fundamental importance of culture in characterizing the Sino-Italian relations and the future possibilities. The theme of Italy being a bridge between China and the EU is deeply explored, but also a brief reflection on the pandemic implications is present.

Finally, in order to draw conclusions and answer the first research question, I argue that the history of bilateral relations studied and exposed in this work points out how Italy, in pursuing its foreign policy towards China, has followed those values and principles firstly identified by Nenni 70 years earlier. Namely, the Italian approach towards China has been marked by the willingness to always enhance the level of dialogue and cooperation and by the determination to never exclude China and its population from the international decision-making processes. The value of understanding,



tolerance and openness. Alongside with the long cultural tradition that links Italy to China, these factors make determine the uniqueness of this bilateral relation.

Furthermore, throughout the thesis I pointed out and stressed the key moments such as: the rapprochement; the “golden age” of bilateral relations; the Italian solidarity after the 1989 crisis and the signature of the MoU, in which Italy has played a pioneering role in getting closer to the PRC. Therefore, in answering the second research question, namely whether Italy has the potential to be the bridge between the EU and China, I argue that Italy has already played this role throughout history, and still has this potential today.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework that will be implemented throughout this work is the Constructivist Theory applied to foreign policy analysis. This theory is particularly useful for this specific work because it considers the human actions as determined by factors such as history, identity, society's values, and institutions. As this work will start from an historical basis, constructivism is suitable to explain how certain actors and historical moments influenced the today's outlook of the Sino-Italian relations.

The main objective of Constructivism is to study the world and its actors as "socially constructed". The emphasis is posed on social relations: the events and the human actions must be studied by framing the social context in which they take place. The origins of Constructivism in the study of International Relations (IR) come from the end of the Cold War and the incapacity of the traditional IR theories to fully address and explain that historical moment. Specifically, the failure of traditional theories such as Liberalism and Realism lies in the fact that they were too focused on the states as the unique actors, without taking into consideration other factors. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union it was clear that the traditional theories were no longer enough to explain the complexity of the world, especially within the passage from a bipolar to a multipolar international system. Indeed, the rationality, the inflexibility and the monist approach of Realism and Liberalism, always aiming at creating fixed models, were no longer suitable for the new reality characterized by multipolarity, globalization and instability.

The two main innovations advanced by Constructivism in the study of IR, and the reasons why this theoretical framework is the most suitable for the aim of this work are: firstly, the fact that Constructivism does not consider States as the unique and main actors; secondly the overcoming of the rationalist paradigm. If the mainstream theories consider the states as rational and self-interested actors, Constructivism starts to consider the relevance of individual actors in shaping international

relations. Moreover, it considers actors as moved by ideas, culture and historical backgrounds. In short, Constructivism understands the world as socially constructed.

Checkel (2008), by shedding light on the meaning of “constructed”, explains that the world is understood as «a process of interaction between agents (individuals, states, and non-state actors) and the structure of their broader environment». In practice, the scholars who apply constructivism to a certain research have to study the context, the shared culture and the specific social norms that define a context.

The most famous example of how to apply the Constructivist Theory to a study is the one made by Wendt in 1995. The example regards the different perception of the danger from the US point of view dealing with the British detention of nuclear weapons and the North Korean detention of the same kind of weapons. In fact, the British ones were perceived by the US as less threatening, while the potential of the weapons was exactly the same. It means that the weapons per se does not have any significance without the understanding of the social context.

This work is aimed at providing an explanation of the Sino-Italian bilateral relations of the last fifty years with a focus on the theme of culture and shared history as drivers of explanation. The importance of culture as cognitive factor clearly emerged even from the interviews that I made to deepen this work. Especially Francesco Sici, a famous Italian sinologist – the only journalist who had the chance to interview the Pope on China in 2016 – stressed on the importance of culture in understanding the Sino-Italian relations. Sisci (2020) said that «the cultural heritage for the Chinese population is a touchstone or a lens by which to understand the occident».

This is the reason why in defining the theoretical framework for this work I explored also a non-Western Constructivist Theory. Indeed, I will take into consideration the implications of the theory developed by the Chinese scholar Yanqing Cin on his book “A Relational Theory of World Politics”

edited by Cambridge University Press in 2018. This theory derives from the idea that a monist social theory cannot be applied to the world, but a pluralist social theory will be needed to study different cultures. Pluralism is considered as crucial because it takes into consideration «time, geography and history, and culture and practice when the formation and development of a social theory are under discussion» (Cin, 2018).

The author offers a social theory grounded on the concept of relationality which has the aim of being an alternative theory to the mainstream ones in the study of International Relations, namely a non-Western based social theory with a different metaphysical hard-core component. Moreover, this theory is set up on the basis of Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture. The Relational Theory will be a more appropriate tool to study and understand IR and the bilateral relations between Italy and China even from a Chinese perspective.

Cin (2018) argues that any social theory's hard core is composed by two components: the substantive one and the metaphysical one, which are complementary. While the former one refers to objective facts – such as poverty or a war – which can be empirically verified, the latter is related to the perception, understanding and interpretation of the world and events. It is a matter of fact that the construction of a worldview is a process influenced by culture, history and experiences. This explains the need to use a pluralist social theory, even because humans are social and cultural beings. So, according to Cin (2018) culture is central and «shapes the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core and nurtures the nucleus of a social theory when it begins its life».

Deepening on the construction of the metaphysical component of a social theory's hard core, the author focuses on three components and concepts which are: background knowledge, communities of practice and cultural communities which are all linked one another.

Within the term “**background knowledge**» he refers to the interpreting schemes of both linguistic interpretation and perceptual interpretation. It explains why people from different parts of the world

interpret and understand things in a different way. Namely, when two people do not share the tacit knowledge that constitute the frame of reference, they understand the world differently. As a consequence, the three characteristics of background knowledge are: local, inarticulate and unconscious, plural and inclusive.

On the other hand, the concept of “**communities of practice**” is linked to the previous one. In fact, as Cin (2018) explains: «Communities of practice are the social collectivity that develops, shares, stores, and maintains such knowledge, and in turns it is constituted and shaped by such knowledge». Hence, it is possible to interpret this concept as a worldview, namely it is applicable by looking at the world as a network of transnational communities of practical areas. In this way it would be possible to rethink the world not as defined by states and borders but to look at IR by giving more importance to global and regional governance and to the international life. Therefore, three kinds of communities of practice have been explored. The first one is the “macro-level community of practices” which refer to civilizational communities. The second one is the “intermediate-level”, namely subcultural communities based on, for example, gender, religion or socioeconomic classes. These communities exist within one civilizational community of practice but have different experiences. The last one is the “micro-level community of practice” which is more functionally oriented. In other words, this category is issue-related to the everyday life, such as the category of diplomats, or the category of environmental workers, etc... The three categories have in common their setting on background knowledge, hence «they are defined by culture, culture as the most conspicuous background, as ways of life, as shared knowledge for perception and disposition, and as schemes of understanding, interpreting and giving meaning to social events» Cin (2018).

Lastly, the notion of “**cultural community**” implies a community of practice where “culture” means shared background knowledge. Cin (2018) argues that a community without culture cannot exist, because culture is what shapes the community, its world view and its identity. A community is an entity which shares a cultural heritage and orientation. In general, the most common and natural way to represent a community of practice is a cultural community.

The notion of the centrality of culture, defined in terms of background knowledge in the social theory, is one of the pillars. The author wants to underline that every and each social theory is embedded by culture because a scholar cannot theorize on something which is completely out of his/her background knowledge. Moreover, he argues that when someone does not recognize the importance of culture, then is tempted to assume that a social theory is universally applicable even if is locally constructed. On the other hand, having countless community of cultures all around the world and by establishing pluralism we would have a great prosperity of social theory development and innovation, especially non-Western theories would have more space to grow. The scarcity of non-Western social theories in the IR, is also explained by the custom of non-Western scholars who apply Western theories instead of creating new ones. The mainstream IR theories developed in the West, despite their differences, have in common the background knowledge that characterize their metaphysical hard core component, which, according to the author, is the “ontological individualism”. Ontological individualism is a worldview that sees the world as composed by rational individuals. In short, they have been developed within the context and the resources of Western culture, strongly influenced by the enlightenment and they have in common the rationalistic point of view.

The Cin’s study does not say that the mainstream theories are wrong – on the contrary we should learn from them – but he states that those theories are embedded within their context and so they are representative of that context and that cultural practices.

Starting from the assumptions explored until here, Cin (2018) poses to himself the question of which would be the metaphysical hard core of a social theory developed in a different background: a non-Western one. He argues that relationality can be the metaphysical component of a theory developed in Confucian communities – the counterpart of the individualistic rationality in the Western mainstream theories. This explains why his theory is a «a relational theory of world politics centered on the concept of relationality by defining the key concept “relation”, discussing actors as relators

and delineating some underlying assumptions sustaining the relational theory» that has its roots on the assumption that «the world is a universe of relatedness».

The world described from a relational point of view is different from the one described by the mainstream IR theories developed in the West. According to the Relational Theory, natural and social world are related and in the social world everyone is related to everyone: there would be no-world without relations, and there is nothing which is not related, and nothing can be above this interrelated whole. According to the Chinese way of thinking there is nothing that transcends the relational complexity. Hence, the metaphysical component of the hard core of this theory is the concept of “relation”. The relational worldview is more focused on the relations among members instead of individuals, on the interdependence and on the dynamic processes. According to Cin (2018) «the identity of a social actor is shaped and reshaped by her relations with others and her relationship in the social context».

The tool employed to interpret and understand the world, according to the Relational Theory, is dialectics. Dialectics is used in the Relational Theory to figure out the nature of the relations in the IR. The author stresses also how the meaning of the word and concept “dialectics”, in turn, is different and linked to the local culture. Indeed, while the Western meaning is linked to the Hegelian tradition, the Chinese one is linked to the Confucian and Daoist traditions and is appointed with the word *zhongyong*.

The *zhongyong* dialectics assumes that harmony is the foundation of any human relation and its natural state. *Zhongyong* is the opposite of the Hegelian tradition, which is more about conflict and contradictions. If conflict happens, according to *zhongyong*, this is just a consequence that can be adjusted in order to return to harmony. The harmony condition is given by the balance between *ying* and *yang* which are two polarities that have a relation characterized by inclusivity and

complementary. These two properties are the fundamentals of harmony, but harmony needs to be preserved by human agency. The preservation of harmony derives from education, self-reflection and self-cultivation that have to be applied in the relation with others. If the Hegelian dialectics is applied to the Western social theories, *zhongyong* is the most appropriate methodological device for the Relational Theory developed by Cin.

Another innovation developed within the Cin's Relational Theory is the "logic of relationality". This kind of logic is presented as an alternative explanation when elaborating on the reasons that move human actions. Indeed, if the Western theories use the "logic of rationality" or the "logic of practicality", in the case of Relational Theory, what explains the human action is relationality. Starting from the assumption, discussed above, that human actions are moved by relations, the relational logic is deeply linked to the background knowledge which, in this case, is the Confucian culture and way of life, but it goes even beyond geo-cultural boundaries.

I decided to consider, introduce and study of the Relational Theory in this work because it gives a different point of view and a non-Western perspective to explore and interpret the IR. Practically speaking, this thesis analyzes the behaviors of two different countries, that have different background knowledge and different cultures. It would have been reductive to study the foreign policy of China under the light of a purely Western social theory. Thereby, the aim is to give a more comprehensive and accurate interpretation of the events. For sure, considering a Chinese theory to interpret Chinese actions will be more appropriate to deeply understand them.

A practical example of the benefit of considering the Relational Theory refers to one fact that will be discussed along the thesis, namely the importance of some specific actors in defining the bilateral relations, in particular the figure of Pietro Nenni. Without considering the relational theory the fact that Nenni is still a well-known figure in China and that had so much importance in establish the Sino-Italian rapprochement would have less significance.



The main research question of this work is aimed at investigating how the history of the Sino-Italian relations influences the current relations between the two countries. While the main hypothesis claims that the Sino-Italian bilateral relations can be considered somehow “special” in terms of culture, namely the relation between the two countries goes far beyond the simply economic or diplomatic exchanges, but their link is grounded on the importance of relations, culture and shared history. Moreover, I argue that the Italian trend of keeping to a high level the bilateral relations, distinguishing its approach by being always coherent to the principles of the multipolarity, inclusiveness and dialogue through China contributed in shaping this relationship. Furthermore, in the investigation over the Pietro Nenni’s case study, I assume that one of the main reasons that led to the Sino-Italian rapprochement lies on the Nenni’s forcing the procedures in order to reach a goal motivated by cultural factors, personal ideas and values.

The characteristics of this research led me to exclude the mainstream IR theories, finding in the Constructivist Theory and in the Relational Theory the relevant tools to implement this kind of work. Clearly, it would not be complete without a double theoretical framework both Western and non.

The Constructivists Theory have been far more developed and studied compared to the Relational one developed by Yanqing Cin, as its theorization evolved within the contributions of several scholars. As a result, the Constructivist Theory is complete with a number of practical and theoretical tools that will be applied specifically along this research. Specifically, Constructivism will be applied to the study of the foreign policy implemented by Italy towards China since the 1950s, a brief theoretical introduction of the concept of foreign policy is needed.

According to Hill (2011), foreign policy can be defined as “the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually, but not exclusively, a state) in international relations”. It would be reductive to only consider the foreign ministers and the diplomatic personnel as the only foreign policy makers, in fact, today the foreign policy decisions are no longer monopolized by those

actors. Thus, applying Constructivism to the study of the foreign policy means to always take into consideration culture and ideas and the individuals in representing these cultures and ideas.

This thesis will show how the foreign policy decisions have been influenced not only by the international context. Indeed, in the specific case of the Italian recognition of the PRC, this goal has been achieved by the commitment of one specific actor, Pietro Nenni, who initially was just a Party leader who foresaw the Chinese potential before others. Moreover, his view, his values, and the pattern he pursued have influenced a whole state's approach for half a century even after his death and have established a friendly and trusty relation. According to Hill (2011), indeed, foreign policy consists in “actions, statements and values relating to how the actor wishes to advance its main objectives and to shape the external world”.

In this context, and in this study, the notion of cognition is particularly relevant when deepening on the role of Pietro Nenni. It is important because, as human beings, “leaders analyze information through their cognitive filters” (Morin and Paquin, 2018), this means that they understand information on the basis of their personal experiences, culture, values: namely, their constructed world. In short, the term “cognition” refers to the process through which a person, in this case a leader, understands and interprets the environment. This notion of cognition, sheds light on the importance of values in the foreign policy analysis. It is not a coincidence that the Italian leader who had the intuition of the importance of integrating the Chinese population within the international context was the leader of the Socialist Party. Indeed, as a socialist, Nenni was fascinated by the Chinese socialism, and he especially admired the figure of Chairman Mao. This affinity in the values and this shared cognitive factor explains the primary role of Nenni in emphasizing the rapprochement with China as fundamental for the Italian foreign policy. Indeed, Morin and Paquin in their book “Foreign Policy Analysis. A Toolbox”, published in 2018 explain how the emotional and psychological sphere of a leader/or key actor, which is usually considered non relevant for the analysis of foreign policy, has to

be taken into consideration as “an essential component of all forms of decision-making” and policy implementation (Morin, Paquin, 2018).

Furthermore, in this work, the political actions and decisions made by the actors in determining the development of the Sino-Italian relations will be framed within the specific social context in which they are happening. For example, the process of rapprochement and the normalization of relations between China and Italy, concluded in 1970, will be studied and interpreted within the context determined by the Cold War and its consequences on the international system, on single societies and on single actors. In this case, the task will be to understand how Pietro Nenni understood the Cold War, and how, based on his own experience and cultural heritage - defined also by his political party - he interiorized what was happening. In this way, the intuition of creating pressure within the Italian foreign policy for recognizing China acquires a deeper significance. In fact, as a Socialist he always expressed his adversity to the Atlantic alliance making the multipolarity of the international system one of the main points of his party program. In addition, looking at his personal values, it clearly emerges from the study of his personal diaries that the Chinese recognition in his view was also a humanitarian matter: indeed, he used to think that it was deeply unfair to exclude such a populous country as China from the international system.

Therefore, to answer the research question we will have to study the impact of historical facts on the present. In doing it will be necessary to understand in which way the countries internalized historical events leaving a mark capable of determining the future bilateral relations.

In the following paragraphs, I will present the theoretical aspects and the practical tools linked to the Constructivist Theory that will be applied to this work.

Theoretically speaking, Checkel (2008) explains that constructivism can be applied to the study of foreign policy in three main ways that he identifies with: bureaucracies, decision-making, and international society.

Bureaucracies are relevant because the states as we know them today are based on strong bureaucracies. In this thesis, the role of Ministries, Parliaments, and Embassies will be central in understanding how the Sino-Italian relations developed over the years. Applying constructivism to the study of the role of the bureaucracies will mean to analyze the self-interest of the people working in those offices. The purpose of doing this is to avoid taking bureaucracies as close, impenetrable boxes, but consider them as entities composed of people that, again, have to be framed within the context in which they operate in order to understand the way their interests are constructed through a process of social interaction.

For what concerns the decision-making processes, constructivism, as already pointed out abandons the notion of rationality of the actors. In fact, the theory considers the individuals as deeply social. The decisions, therefore, are not taken on the basis of rational counts but are influenced by the society in which they take place. This is clear especially when the study of the foreign policy is complemented with the in-depth analysis of memoirs, personal diaries of the actors, and interviews. Hill (2011) agrees on saying that decision-makers cannot be considered as perfectly rational, because they are undoubtedly influenced by the environment, they live in. But, at the same time, the concept of rationality cannot be excluded at all, because political actors are convinced to act rationally, plus they need to transmit the message to the citizens that they are working rationally in order to be trusted.

The last point is the correlation between the international society and the actions of single states. This point cannot be avoided when studying international relations in a world that is determined by globalization and an increasing interconnectivity between states. The international system and the

single states are continuously interacting and, therefore, conditioning one another. The constructivist theory can be used to shed light on the ties between the two levels of society: national and international. In simpler words, a cross-level analysis will be required.

Another fundamental concept to be taken into consideration in the application of constructivism is culture, which is also a cognitive factor as pointed out before. Morin and Paquin (2018) in their work analyze most relevant cultural factors in the study of foreign policy. First of all, norms are to be taken into consideration. According to Constructivism, norms are what is considered fair and legitimate by a community, they are internalized and taken for granted as normality. Moreover, what is relevant in the study of foreign policy is the notion of national identity, which is a socially constructed image of a political community. According to constructivism the national identity is the basis on which to build the foreign policy. Furthermore, the notion of national role has to be considered as that cultural aspect that define the position of a certain state in the international context. This was particularly true during the Cold War, when states had fixed positions and roles.

Finally, the relevance of studying and deepening in the role of single actors in foreign policy comes from the fact that the process of decision making is the result of interaction between actors and structures (Hill, 2003). In fact, in a single foreign policy decision there is a great number of actors, who, on their side, are influenced by the social structures in which they operate.

Talking specifically about foreign policy, according to Carlsnaes (2008) the main actors to take into consideration when studying the process of decision-making are those that occupied relevant negotiating roles. For example, Foreign Ministers, head of states or governments, leaders of the parties, exponents of political forces, and so on. However, at the same time there is also a whole set of actors that are still involved in the foreign policy process of decision making, although not directly. These are, for example, lobbying firms, think tanks, research institutes, the media, governmental and

non-governmental institutions, etc. These actors, even if they are not directly involved in the decision-making process, are constantly in contact with those who are. This is to say that, when studying foreign policy, it is not sufficient to consider the context and the international and national systems, it is also necessary to focus on the actors in order to complete the work.

The necessity to study the impact of one actor in a foreign policy decision making process fits with the constructivist theory. According to constructivism, what mostly influences the decisions and the outputs of the foreign policy, as pointed out above, is the context, the ideas, the society, the history, etc. These are to be considered structural factors.

According to Carlsnaes (2008) there is the need, in the study of foreign policy, to see the actors and the structures not as mutually exclusive but as interactive entities. The purpose is to consider a more dynamic model that links together both the social structures and the individual decision makers. Indeed, as pointed out by Wight (2007), “In the social world both agents and structure are necessary for any social act to be possible”.

In this work, I will follow this approach, especially when dealing with the exploration of the Pietro Nenni’s case study. I will consider the notion of international relations and foreign policy proposed by the constructivist theory, namely as an interrelation between norms and practices implemented by human behaviors. In doing so, I will also take into consideration the central role of individuals and their intentions in the process of decision making, as suggested by Carlsnaes (2008). In other words, a foreign policy action will be studied as composed by an individual intention which is determined by a disposition (namely, the values or social norms that drove the actor to pursue that intention) and by the structure (that can be the domestic one, the international one, the cultural context, and so on. It depends on which one the actor decides to take into consideration the most). Through this specific approach, I will be able to combine constructivism, which is extremely useful when dealing with history, and the need to analyze the relevance of a specific actor in pursuing certain foreign policy goals.

## **Methodology**

This thesis analyzes the available literature on the Sino-Italian relations since the 1950s by studying it within the Constructivist theoretical framework both Western and non-Western, and through an historical approach. Namely, by considering and giving great importance to the cultural aspects, the values and to the historical background.

The approach of this thesis is descriptive, analytical and qualitative, in conformity with the Constructivist Theoretical framework which aims to interpret social facts, rather than simply describing them.

Official documents and declarations obtained by official websites of the institutions such as the Italian Ministry of Economic Development (MISE), the Italian Foreign Ministry (MAECI) and the Italian Embassy in Beijing, are used and analyzed using qualitative methods. The supporting material and data to quantify the analysis is obtained from books and papers published and integrated using information from the main Italian and Chinese newspapers online archives.

Moreover, archival research has been implemented especially in the study of the monographic part on Pietro Nenni, mostly on official and unofficial correspondence furnished by the Pietro Nenni foundation.

Finally, the research is enriched with a number of semi-structured interviews that allowed me to collect open-ended data particularly useful in the process of enhancing the qualitative analysis. Specifically, through the semi-structured interviews, I explored the participant's thoughts about my main hypothesis and research questions, obtaining also personal comments and beliefs about the topics. The deep knowledge of the subject of the respondents enriched this research with great testimonies and unexplored topics regarding Sino-Italian relations.

## **Research Limitations**

The subject of this analysis are the Sino-Italian bilateral relations. The topic has been analyzed mainly from an Italian point of view considering the Italian system of Alliances and its European collocation. Given the focus posed on the Italian case the history of the bilateral relations between the others European countries and the US within China has not been deeply explored. The other countries' cases have been taken into consideration only in so far as they have directly influenced the Italian behavior towards China.

Moreover, concerning the second research question, namely whether Italy can play the role of the bridge between China and the EU, the answer can be explored only partially. In fact, the international system and balances are quickly changing as a consequence of the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic in an unpredictable way.

Lastly, another limit to this research has been the access to the Chinese written materials, articles and studies due to the language barrier. Indeed, the Chinese sources considered are few.



# Chapter 1

## **Historical Context: 1952-1963, From the total closure of diplomatic relation to the preparation for the rapprochement**

In order to understand the normalization of relations between China and Italy reached on November 6, 1970 it is important to have a good understanding of the context that made it possible and specially to have an idea of the kind of relations that were going on at that time. If, as I pointed out in the introduction, the Sino-Italian relations can be simplistically summed up as “a long-lasting friendship”, I cannot deny that has been characterized also by challenging times. In this chapter I will shed light on how the diplomatic relations between the two countries evolved during the 1950s by going through the lowest moment in which the connections between China and Italy disappeared almost completely. I will follow by explaining how, slowly and gradually, they resumed them and, in doing so, I will present the figure that will constitute the case study and the underlying theme of the whole work, namely, Pietro Nenni. The international context characterized by the Cold World and its division in two blocs inevitably will be the frame that highly influenced the two countries diplomacy and decisions.

The main aim of this first chapter will be to analyze the background situation in which the two countries set the ground for the normalization of relations. I selected the figure of Pietro Nenni as a case study and in this chapter, I will dedicate a special attention to his figure. Nenni, who has been the leader of the Italian Socialist Party almost uninterruptedly from 1930 to 1963, has played a determinant role in posing the question of normalization with China in the center of the Italian diplomatic agenda. His figure, despite his role not always having been given the importance that it

deserves in the Italian historiography, represents one of the first Italian politicians who had foreseen and understood the Chinese potential. The peculiarity of his intuition lies in the fact that Italy in that historical moment was deeply connected to the Atlantic Alliance and had no autonomy from the foreign policy point of view. Luigi Troiani (2018) a member of the Scientific Council of the Pietro Nenni foundation and expert in International Relations, has stated that Nenni, jointly with De Gasperi, has been the only political figure that has managed to give an international look to the post World War II Italian foreign policy which was characterized by provincialism.

Finally, thanks to Pietro Nenni diplomatic action, in 1970 Italy recognized the People's Republic of China (PCR) even sooner than the United States of America.

## **1.1 1950s: an overview of the years in which China and Italy moved away and then got closer**

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China on the first of October 1949, in Italy was opened the so called "Chinese question", namely, how to deal with the newborn Country in terms of recognition. From the beginning, Italy has demonstrated its interest in getting closer with the country. Indeed, according to Rostagni (2014) the 1970's recognition is the result of a process started soon after the 1949 that continued to be present in the Italian politics for two decades, even if with different grades of intensity. This willingness and initial enthusiasm are evident in some documents that have emerged from the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry.

In his book "Italy and China" Mario Pini, published in 2001, reports some of those examples such as a draft telegram ready to be sent to Zhou Enlai from the Italian Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza expressing the Italian willingness to recognize the PRC, written in the first week of February 1950. Another proof of this was the message sent to Washington and to other NATO's capitals informing them about the desire to recognize the new-born China. Despite the Italian willingness and the intentions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some external factors prevented Italy from recognizing the PRC soon after its proclamation in 1949. In this paragraph, I will point out the main factors that slowed the process, which was completed only twenty years later. Moreover, I will shed light on how both the internal and the external context inevitably affected the Italian foreign policy of those years. Despite the absence of formal diplomatic representations, the relations between the two countries reached their minimum in the first half of 1950s and started a rapprochement soon after.

First, what slowed down the process of the Italian recognition of the PRC – that was almost taken for granted as demonstrated by the draft telegram mentioned above – was the request advanced by the new Chinese leadership; in fact, the PCR asked the countries willing to develop diplomatic ties, as a

precondition, to completely interrupt the relations with the KMT government escaped to the Taiwan island. Of course, the decision to stop the connections with Taiwan needed to be discussed in the Parliament and to obtain its approval, which caused a delay in taking action (Beltrame, 2019). This delay is not the only reason for the Italian non-recognition of the PCR: a series of external factors influenced the Italian foreign policy decisions.

To better understand the situation and to explain why Italy ended up not fulfilling its willingness to recognize the PCR soon after its proclamation it is important to consider the national and international situation going on at the time. The Cold War was at its beginning and, of course, conditioning the countries and the government to the two blocs: Italy was bound to the United States by the Atlantic Alliance and, as a consequence, its foreign actions needed to be agreed on, or at least to receive the consensus from the US's counterparts. Actually, Italy by signing its membership to the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949, accepted its alignment to the US foreign policy decisions. As reported by Pini (2001), if in the very first months after the PRC foundation, the US did not oppose the Italian will to build diplomatic relations, the situation soon changed in the second half of February 1950 when the United States Department of State replied to the Italian request of agreement on the China's recognition by saying that it was not a good idea to move forward in that direction. Therefore, as a reaction, the Foreign Minister called back in Italy the Ambassador in Nanjing, as the other European countries did, but part of diplomatic representation in the Nanjing's Embassy and in other cities' consulates remained in the country. Since then, the international situation framed within the Cold War worsened and a rapid decline took place with the outbreak of the Korean War.

## **The impact of the Korean War on the Sino-Italian relations**

The Korean War determined an escalation of tensions in the context of the Cold War, and undoubtedly aggravated the situation putting an end to the expectation of countries such as Italy – pertaining to the West bloc – to build diplomatic relations with the PCR, especially after the direct confrontation between the US and China.

The relation between the US and China in that moment had an importance for all the US's allies that were completely dependent on the US for their foreign actions. The Korean War constituted a crucial event for the Sino-US already difficult relations. According to Kissinger (2011), the two countries afforded the War in Korea by misunderstanding each other's strategic design. The Chinese name attributed to their intervention was “War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea”, which shows that the main purpose of Chinese involvement was to defeat the US in order to prevent them from expanding their interventions in other Asian countries (such as Vietnam), while helping a country considered to be a “brother” was a secondary objective (Sun and Xu, 2014).

The US, which constituted 90% of the UN's mission in the Korean War, did not anticipate the size of China's involvement in the War. In fact, the PCR was not even a year old and the country was still in the middle of its recovery after four years of Civil War. Therefore, when China sent into Korea 2.3 million troops, field army, artillery, air force, and all its tanks, the US and the whole world were literally surprised (Fairbank, 2006), and much more so when the US was defeated by China in a terrible war that generated significant losses on every side.

In July 1953, an armistice was reached, but as pointed out by Matray (2011), the US's aim within the armistice was to create a diplomatic isolation and an economic punishment for China. In the following years, indeed, the US tried to oppose Beijing's major objectives in foreign policy such as the reunification of China by acquiring Taiwan. Meneguzzi Rostagni (2014) pointed out that within the

end of the Korean War, China was isolated both politically and economically. Politically speaking a veto was posed on the PRC admission to the UN. Economically, the US posed an embargo in the Chinese products, on par with the ones imposed to the USSR. Indeed, in 1952 was created the subcommittee Chincom to the CoCom (Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls) with the aim of applying strict barriers to the foreign trade with China.

Therefore, the impact of the Korean War on the Sino-US relations went far behind the confrontation itself: it influenced and characterized their enmity for fifteen more years, as underlined by Matray (2011), «the war had built unremitting hostility into the Sino-American confrontation, which would fuel its continuation until the early 1970s».

Moreover, in the same period another phenomenon contributed to make it difficult the rapprochement through China: the so-called McCarthyism, from the name of UN's Republican Senator McCarthy who set up a real anti-communist campaign in the US that lasted through the 1950s. McCarthyism had its influence also in the Italian territory where the left-wing parties had a consistent consensus. In particular, the Italian Communist Party had strong links with the URSS: in the US's opinion Italy was the "weakest link in the North Atlantic Alliance" (Ortona, 1986). For this reason, the US's administration in 1953 sent Clare Boothe Luce as US Ambassador in Rome, who had the task to control the Italian politics (Meneguzzi Rostagni, 2017).

The Sino-Italian relations, in this exact historical moment determined by these factors, were at all-time low, but Italy, differently from the majority of other countries, never sent its representatives to Taiwan and continued to cultivate the willingness to recognize the PCR. In 1952, the Italian government recalled all the diplomatic representatives which had remained in China: in the former embassy in Nanjing and in the consulates in Shanghai, Canton, Tianjin and Chongqing. In the same

period even the Italians living in China had to go back to their home country: in all respects the relations were nullified (Pini, 2001).

After the total closure of 1952, we have to wait a few years before seeing some positive signals to restore the relations between the two countries. In the first part of the decade, the relations are almost nil, and the following approaches will take time to build something solid.

Even if, from a mere diplomatic point of view, in those years Italy seems to put aside its interest towards China, if we look at the economic and commercial relations, we discover that Italy never underestimated the importance of trading with China and this is demonstrated by the analysis of the speeches during the Parliamentary sessions (Rostagni, 2017). Indeed, between 1953 and 1956 during parliamentary session, deputies and senators pertaining to the PCI and PSI promoted and asked an opening towards China. In fact, in their mind to recognize China was in the interest of the Country, whether the alignment to the US was against the Italy's welfare. But still, all the political choices in those years considered in the first place the will of the American administration. Italy was still economically dependent on Washington.

In 1953 two important international events contributed to a first change of perspective: the conclusion of the Korean War and the death of Stalin. The second will cause a progressive weakening between the PRC and the USSR. For what concerns the Sino-Italian ties during the 1950s, they will proceed by leading to a reinforce of relation between the Chinese administration and the Italian Socialist Party instead of the Italian Communist Party.

As I mentioned before, in 1953 the armistice relative to the Korean War took place and a Peace Conference was scheduled in Geneva for 1954. According to Pini (2001) the Geneva Conference was the first occasion in which Italy and China could establish some contacts. The national representatives

to the Conference had the chance to talk about commerce. No agreement was reached because from the Chinese side everything was posed on the condition of an official recognition of the PRC.

Between the weak signs of interest towards China during the 1950s, the joint collaboration between certain political and commercial actors led to an increase of exchanges that in 1950 amounted to 574 million Lira and in 1958 grew to 29 billion Lira. One of the most relevant commercial figures that since the beginning bet on the importance of China was the Italian president of ENI (the Italian energy company), Enrico Mattei who traveled to China in 1958 in order to start important exchanges between the countries (Pini, 2001).



## **1.2 Case study: The role of Pietro Nenni in setting the ground for the normalization**

This section will be aimed at deepening on the figure of Pietro Nenni. The importance of his role as principal promoter of the Sino-Italian normalization has been globally recognized; for example, among others, Rostagni (2017) wrote: “The support given by this eminent Socialist politician to the initiation of trade between Italy and China [...] was fundamental”. The question of China, its recognition, and its international role was always a priority in Nenni’s agenda. This is true to the point that the Chinese still remember him today (Intini, 2018). Additionally, the totality of the respondents to the interview have agreed on the relevance of Pietro Nenni in establishing the Sino-Italian relations but also in affecting a number of Italian politicians that came in the Italian political panorama after him.

Moreover, during the interview session within the Chinese Professor Yang Lin from the Nankai University, who has studied the Nenni’s profile and even published about him on the Italian magazine “Il Ponte”, she confirmed that Nenni has been so important in determining the Sino-Italian relations that still today he is recalled and mentioned in China. Therewith, on the 5<sup>th</sup> December 2020 during a conference for the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Sino-Italian diplomatic relations organized by the University for Foreigners of Siena and the Confucius Institute of Pisa, the Chinese Consul General in Florence Wang Wengang mentioned Pietro Nenni while reminding the shared history.

Likewise, Stefano Beltrame, Italian diplomat and former Consul General in Shanghai, during the interview pointed out that the fact that Italy, through the action of Pietro Nenni, has demonstrated closeness and interest towards China while the Country was going through a moment of difficulties – even marked by aftermath of the Korean War - will be always remembered in China. Namely, as I mentioned before, soon after the Korean War, China was completely isolated. According to him,

having a political exponent that was aiming to go beyond the ideological differences in an effort to build a relationship has been very appreciated in China. So, Italy looked for China and not the other way around. Plus, Beltrame underlined how China, being a very organized and systematic country would never forget about that Italian intent to get closer in that specific moment. A signal that didn't come from other countries.

Before starting to explain the relevance of Pietro Nenni in determining the Sino-Italian normalization, it is important to start from his political thought and from the role that he played in the Italian political scene.

Pietro Nenni was one of the most important and influential political actors of the 1900s. During his political career he has been one of the anti-fascism leaders that in 1926 moved to Paris together with the socialist directorate in order to survive the fascism. In Paris he became the secretary general of the Italian Anti-fascist Concentration. Back in Italy after years in 1943 he was elected secretary of the new Socialist Party (PSIUP). Throughout his political career, instead of being one of the prominent leaders of the left and of the Socialist Party, he played primary roles in the Italian government, such as Foreign Minister (1946-1947 and 1968-1969) and Deputy Prime Minister (1945-1946 and 1963-1968).

Despite his official roles, I will follow by introducing Nenni's political thought within the context of the Cold War and how and why he started to look with interest at China.

An initial event that it is helpful to frame the political figure of Nenni is a speech that he delivered in Canzo on the 13th of October 1946 (right before being appointed for the first time as Foreign Minister). This public speech can be considered as an official explanation of his political thought, where he pointed out his guiding principles of foreign policy (Meroni, 2018). I will reassume them

through two major concepts. First, the international solidarity based on the multipolarity of the international system. Second, the importance of renouncing the military power myth.

Despite the international situation went in the exact opposite direction compared to Nenni's ideal international setting, due to the outbreak of the Cold War and the creation of a bipolar system; during his first ministry (1946-1947) Nenni pursued his goals by forging commercial relations with countries beyond the two blocs-imposed logic. Italy in that period started negotiations with countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Argentina. This strategy was aimed at granting Italy a minimal autonomy on its foreign policy from the US. It was in this context and pursuing this kind of foreign policy that Italy could move closer to China as well. The peculiarity of Nenni's political thought was determined by his understanding of the importance of creating commercial and economic ties pursuing an independent way from the major forces. Furthermore, he adopted a policy of equidistance between Washington and Moscow and tried to oppose the Italian signature to the North Atlantic Treaty which was completely against his view of how international relations should be settled. Nenni himself explained his opinion about NATO in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1962 by saying: «Throughout its history it [the Socialist Party] has opposed military pacts and alliances. [...] It was and is true in regard to NATO, which was subscribed to by the Italian Parliament for reasons of domestic rather than international policy».<sup>2</sup>

Nenni was a pacifist and a neutralist as pointed out by Meneguzzi Rostagni (2014). While “multipolarity” is the word that better resumes the Nenni's view of the foreign policy as he made a “Socialist commitment to the growing of international efforts to promote détente, neutrality and peace” (Meneguzzi Rostagni, 2017). It is clear that the foreign policy had a central role in his political view, and he used to stress this concept every time he could. An example is given by Nenni's speech

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/1962-01-01/where-italian-socialists-stand>

during the XXVI congress of the Socialist Party in 1948 when he was very clear in voicing his concern about the possibility of the Italian foreign policy being shaped by the conservative and clerical influences that were trying to oppose the so called “Soviet menace”.

One of the main characteristics of his politics was to never think about the internal politics of a country separately from the foreign one. According to him the external actions were strictly linked to the success or failure of any internal plan (Meroni, 2018). The international situation that was emerging along with the outbreak of the Cold War seemed to prove that he was right. The bipolarity of the international system and the Italian linkage to the west bloc would strongly affect the Italian internal and external actions for the rest of the Cold War. Moreover, the two blocs' division put an end to the socialist desire, impersonated by the figure of Nenni, of having an equidistant Italian foreign policy from Washington and Moscow, and a multipolar international order.

The main reason that makes Nenni important for this research is not only his contribution to the normalization of relations with China. Aside from his practical political actions towards China that make him the major Italian promoter of the rapprochement, what is interesting about him is the international role that he imagined for China. In fact, Nenni ascribed to the PRC the capacity of breaking the bipolar system and the creation of a multipolar one, typical of his understanding of the international system. The reality was that China attracted the interest of Nenni at a time when the country was underestimated and mostly neglected by the majority of Italian and foreigners' politicians and public opinion.

Within the outbreak of the Korean War, China gained importance on the global stage and for Nenni and the Italian Socialists, China started to represent an alternative model of revolution and power organization, and, most importantly, Nenni foresaw the key role that China could have in redefining international political balance in a multipolar way (Meroni 2018).

According to what Beltrame pointed out during the interview session, both China and the Italian Social Party – more in general, the Italian left wing – had in common a “third world advocacy”. Despite the Chinese links to the Soviet Block and the Italian ones to the Western Block, both countries were also implementing policies to avoid the block line and the bipolarism. In Italy this purpose was followed by Nenni and in China by Zhou Enlai.

To sum up the Nenni’s view on China there is the fact that according to him, a détente between east and west was possible on by recognizing the PRC. He clearly expressed this opinion in his personal diaries.

Furthermore, there is one more reason that can explain the Nenni’s strong interest towards China in that precise moment: the need to find a new source of financing for his party. This motivation has not been explored yet in any study, book or paper, but has clearly emerged during my interview session with Antonio Tedesco, the Scientific Director of the Pietro Nenni Foundation. He himself has started this investigation based on oral testimonials and few written data. For now, this theory is only an assumption of the scholars which needs to be confirmed in further studies and researches.

The theoretical basis of this assumption lies in the fact that the PSI led by Nenni in 1956 broke up within the USSR after the Hungarian invasion. Within this moment the PSI definitively stopped to be linked to the PCI and to the USSR. This decision had as a consequence the end of the financing to the party from the USSR, that since the 1948 had contributed to the financials of the PSI. According to Tedesco (2020), in that period, the PSI found itself in a serious economic crisis which was aggravated by the breakage with the USSR. Moreover, during the 1950s the PSI was gradually disappearing from the south of Italy, and a strong initiative of propaganda was needed in order to grow the party. These are the reasons why there is the possibility that Nenni hoped to receive some kind of contributes, even in the long run, from the Chinese side.

## **Pietro Nenni's trip to China in 1955**

During the 1950s, as I pointed out before, the ties between Italy and China became pretty tenuous. The Pietro Nenni's trip to China in 1955, under the invitation of Zhou Enlai, constituted an interesting page of history between the two countries for more than one reason. This trip represented the first time that an important Italian politician was invited to China. Yang (2020) describes that trip as a «prelude to a series of friendly exchanges and visits between the two countries», moreover she added that for Nenni, the trip was an occasion to discover the “new China” and to learn more about the country thanks to the meetings and exchanges with the Chinese leaders that he met. Furthermore, Yang (2020) portrays Nenni as the first Italian politician of a certain level going to China and being received by the highest Chinese representatives. Namely, this visit will be an “unforgettable event” in the history of bilateral relations between Italy and China.

First of all, the 1955 trip (the first out of two of the Nenni's trips to the PRC) represents the first important connection between Italy and China, which had a great impact in both of the countries by arousing political reaction in the domestic and international scenarios (for example the US's disappointment, but also the concern of the Chinese nationalists). Secondly, what made the trip unique was the fact that the Chinese leadership decided that the first Italian political personality to visit China had to be the leader of the Italian Socialist Party instead of the leader of the Italian Communist Party.

Many scholars and historians have wondered why Nenni and not Togliatti (who was the leader of the Italian Communist Party) has been officially invited to China (note that Nenni in that period was not even playing an official role in the Italian Government). The more shared thesis is the one proposed by Pini (2011) which suggested that the Chinese leaders chose Nenni because of his capability of playing an important role internationally. Moreover, it is important to take into consideration that in the Nenni's political agenda the Sino-Italian normalization has always been one of the main and

undisputable points. Between the main reasons that increased Nenni's interest towards China there were the perception of Chinese communism as an alternative to the soviet one; the great opportunity that China would constitute for Italy in terms of commerce; the role that China could play in challenging the Cold War division of the world in two blocs that Nenni always tried to oppose.

In support to this thesis, during the above-mentioned interview with Antonio Tedesco, emerged clearly that Nenni looked at the Chinese communism as an alternative to the Soviet socialism. In his mind the Maoism represented a unique and a valuable experience and he wanted to get there before the others.

Of course, the Chinese invitation from Zhou Enlai to Nenni didn't come out of nothing. Behind the trip there had been the Nenni's effort to draw the Chinese attention to him. In fact, despite his public declarations about the need to include the PRC and the Chinese population in the international system, Nenni acted through his friend Dino Gentili.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the commitment of Dino Gentili, Nenni could deliver a message straight to Zhou Enlai where he expressed his desire to visit China.

Gentili, who aside from being a Socialist since the 1918, was a friend and a close Nenni's co-worker, has been of fundamental importance in the whole process of rapprochement. In fact, he was one of the most influential Italian tradesmen, who firstly understood the Chinese potential and who opened up the Nenni's eyes. Moreover, Gentili had met Zhu Enlai during the Geneva conference in 1954 with which had talked about possibility to enhance the Sino-Italian trade, and the year before Gentili had already made his first trip to China.

Another personality that helped the Socialist leader in reaching the PRC was Kuo Mo-Jo, an important Chinese intellectual with whom Nenni was in touch. It was through Kuo Mo-Jo that Nenni received the invitation letter from Zhou Enlai. In the same invitation letter, Zhou expressed very nice words

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<sup>3</sup> Dino Gentili was the founder of Comet, a company focused on the international trade that he founded with the purpose to open the commerce with the PRC and the Far East. Comet in 1952 had started some exchanges with China. (Tedesco, 2018; Rostagni 2017)

towards Italy, such as his conviction that both Italians and Chinese would always be united in the process for ensuring global peace and security (Tedesco, 2018).

It is possible to state that the invitation was a Nenni's conquest, that he succeeded in obtaining thanks to his connections and expertise.

After receiving the Zhou Enlai's invitation, according to Rostagni (2017), Nenni tried to make the trip official by asking the Foreign Minister Martino for an official mandate. To succeed he stressed the fact that enhancing the connections with China in that moment would have been very important to improve the difficult economic situation that Italy was experiencing. By contrast, despite Martino agreeing on Nenni's concerns about the economic crisis, he denied any official role to Nenni because of the American counterpart's opinion. Martino, in fact, was a liberal and extremely Atlanticist, but he never opposed the increasing economic exchanges with China. On the contrary he was extremely interested in the Nenni's trip and he agreed in officially starting to prepare the ground for the recognition.

However, even if formally was just a private trip, of course it had its consequences and a very high echo in the media. During those days Nenni had the chance to learn and see a lot: he met Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and other important exponents of the government and participated in a major program of visits both in Beijing and in the countryside. In his diaries Nenni deeply describes how much he was positively impressed from what he saw and by the people that he met. Not only, being there on the date on the anniversary of the foundation of the PCR he had the chance to participate at the celebrations of the 6th birthday of the Country. He would comment that was one of the biggest and the most suggestive performances of his entire life (Tedesco 2018).



Moreover, Nenni really enjoyed his meeting with Mao Zedong that he described as a simple person with a peasant modesty in which he recognized himself (Pini, 2011). Antonio Tedesco (2020) during our interview session confirmed that Nenni was deeply fascinated by Mao's charm.

From the Nenni's memoirs, books and feedback on those days is clear that despite the non-official role of Nenni in that occasion, that trip didn't end onto itself. First of all, it was the most important event of the 1950s for the Sino-Italian relations, secondly constituted a great start for the rapprochement process.

At the end of the trip no commercial agreements were signed between the two countries because China still posed the condition of the official recognition of the country and the breaking of relations with the nationalist confined in Taiwan. On the Italian side, despite the willingness of improving the bilateral trades with the PRC, Italy was still too much linked and tied to the US. It is important to remember that Italy was trying to be admitted to the United Nations, and on this not only Italy needed the US support, but also had to avoid the Chinese nationalists veto - as they were still representing China with a seat in the UN Security Council.

If this trip can be considered as a first signal of a rapprochement, in the following years, gradually the connections started to be increased: and Nenni continued to be one of the main actors in promoting the normalization.



*Pietro Nenni and Chairman Mao in 1955*  
*Source: Pietro Nenni Foundation Photographic Archive*

### **1.3 The impact of Nenni's view and the path towards normalization**

After Nenni's trip, in the second part of the 1950s, the Sino-Italian relations started to be more intense, both from the commercial point of view and from the political one, even if the route through the rapprochement would still be long and difficult. However, after that first move, in the following years other signs of openness became evident. For example, as reported by Beltrame (2019), in the same year of the Nenni's trip the Mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira, invited to his city the Beijing's Mayor; and, in 1957, a group of Italian communist students went to Beijing.

From the commercial point of view, the first important connections were realized by Enrico Mattei, the President of ENI (the National Hydrocarbon Corporation), who, after many contacts between his company and the PRC, secretly flew to China in 1958 – after having obtained the approval by the Italian President of the Republic, Gronchi, and the Premier, Fanfani. Mattei participated to a series of meetings discussing the economic collaboration between the two countries and, according to Rostagni (2017) “Mattei's strategies had been seconded by official policy during the transition phase from center to center-left governments, which had oriented the government towards the developing world and towards the creation of an international role of Italy”.

Furthermore, Dino Gentili, Nenni's close friend mentioned in the above paragraph, in the years managed to build an actual “Chinese lobby” – as Brundu (2004) said – that the Socialists could have benefited from, if they would have succeeded in normalizing the relations with Beijing.

If the last years of the 1950s were characterized by an increase of commercial connections; from the political point of view the situation is more complex to be addressed because of some international events that contributed to alter the global situation.

Indeed, 1956 was a determining year because the communists all over the world had to start dealing with the process of de-Stalinization. The reaction to the process initiated by Krusciov, such as the Hungarian Revolution or the Suez Crisis deeply affected the international system.

Mao Zedong found himself at odds about the new USSR policy of de-Stalinization and started a process of distancing and autonomy from the USSR that would clearly emerge only later in the years. In 1960, the Chinese, for the first time, publicly criticized the USSR on the news, a decision that led to the official rupture of their relations until 1985 (Beltrame, 2019).

In the same year, in Italy, the Hungarian Revolution had the effect of splitting the left-wing parties that until that moment had worked in a united front: from this moment on the Socialist Party led by Nenni will strongly criticize the USSR move of repression while the Communist Party will remain loyal to Moscow's political line. From now on the two left-wing parties will continue to be separated (the Italian Socialists and Communists had decided to work together in order to be stronger in response to the Fascist menace). Consequently, even the relations between the Italian Communist Party and the Chinese one became more difficult. As reported by Pini (2011), Togliatti (the leader of the Italian Communist Party) and Mao on few occasions had the chance to meet in Moscow but in both cases the differences and the disagreements were evident. The discrepancies reached the point of no-return in 1962 when the differences in terms of ideology and political thought became completely incompatible, as confirmed by an article published in the Chinese press titled "The differences between the comrade Togliatti and us". This also explains why the task of promoting the Sino-Italian relations was played by Nenni and the Italian Socialist Party: the relation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Italian one has never been good.

In Nenni's political action, the Hungarian Crisis was an occasion to re-formulate his political agenda. The most important points would be: the Italian neutralism; the role of the UN in determining peace

by conferring more importance to the non-aligned countries such as India and by admitting China; the independent role of Europe (Meroni, 2018).

Nonetheless, the Socialists and Nenni as their leader were not the only Italian politicians in favor of the Sino-Italian normalization. Certainly, Nenni was the one that had the intuition and that more than others forced the procedures for the rapprochement happening. Indeed, many exponents of the Christian Democracy throughout the years reached the same conclusion and understood the importance of having good relations, in terms of diplomacy and commerce, with the PRC. The main difference between the Christian Democrats and the Socialist was that being the ruling party since the beginning of the First Republic, the former was too concerned about the US reaction. Thereby, while sharing the idea of the necessity to strengthen the relations with the PRC, they never made any important move in that direction until the 1960s.

In the first years of the 1960s, some events accelerated the process of rapprochement that Nenni inaugurated with his trip. The years between 1960 and 1970 have been called by the Italian historians “The years of the center-left” because, for the first time, the Italian Socialist Party would enter the government and gain a greater influence in the decision-making process. This opening to the left would lead to the achievement of Nenni’s goal of normalization with the PCR. According to Colarizzi (2007), the possibility for the Socialists to enter the government was given by two major international factors. The first one was the arrival of a new Pope, namely Giovanni XXIII, which for Italy meant a lesser involvement of the Church in the internal affairs. Giovanni XXIII determined a great change in the Vatican politics that contributed to overtake the previous anti-communist commitment. Secondly, another important change came from the US, where John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been elected as President: the inauguration of the entrance of the socialists in the Italian government was accepted from the US in the hope it would mean an additional isolation of the Italian Communists. It

is important to remember that the Communists were still the second greatest political party in Italy in the 1963 elections when they obtained 25.3% of the votes.

A more general consideration on the Italian interest towards China and, in general, towards the Communist world is explained by the large pool of electorate of the left-wing parties. Looking at the results of the elections in Italy since the 1948 to the 1987 the Communist party was always the second most voted party in Italy after the Cristian Democracy, and the Socialist Party was always the third one. Generally speaking, the left-wing parties in Italy had always had great support by the population despite the low political potential due to the Atlantic Pact and the US's influence.

To conclude this first chapter, I want to underline how, within the beginning of the new decade, the internal and external situation became more favorable for achieving the goal of the Sino-Italian normalization. As I will point out in the second chapter, soon after, in 1964, the first concrete signals of a rapprochement would get a foothold.

## Chapter conclusion

What has emerged from this chapter is a clear picture of the Italian limitation in its autonomy in the foreign policy decision due to membership to the Atlantic Pact. Italy was strictly linked to the US and definitely not autonomous in its decisions. Despite this situation, from the 1949 and the constitution of the PRC in the Italian political panorama emerged the so called “China Question” that remained vivid for over 20 years until the Sino-Italian rapprochement in 1970.

The bipolar world in which Italy was stuck in its decision was particularly opposed by the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) led by Pietro Nenni, who was a neutralist a pacifist and always opposed the Italian affiliation to the Atlantic alliance. Despite being the leader of the PSI, Pietro Nenni has been the political figure that has hardly worked for the Italian recognition of the PRC.

In fact, the figure of Pietro Nenni in this chapter has been deeply studied as the case study of this work. In short, the reasons that led Nenni to see the Chinese recognition as a great opportunity for Italy were: the possibility to put an end to the bipolarism of the international system; the need to include and consider Chinese population within the global decisions; the need to find an alternative to the Soviet interpretation of socialism; great economic opportunities for Italy that was facing a critical moment in this sense; the possibility, in the long run, to get financing for his party.

The first Nenni’s trip China in 1955 under the invitation of Zhu Enlai has been the first important step of the process of rapprochement.

In 1956 the entire world had to deal with the effects of the de-Stalinization. China slowly started to get some distance from the USSR. While in Italy the reactions to the Hungarian revolution split the left-wing parties by definitely dividing the Italian Communist Party from the Italian Socialist one. Therefore, these events contributed to distancing and spoiling even more the already difficult relations between the Chinese Communist party and the Italian one.

In the first years of 1960s the process of Sino-Italian rapprochement was facilitated by the Italian internal political situations. Indeed, for the first time the PSI entered the government. It is thanks to

this “opening to the left” in the government that Italy succeeded in reaching the goal of the recognition.



## **Chapter 2**

# **The Sino-Italian rapprochement and the new era of diplomatic relations**

The second chapter is aimed at deeply understanding how and why the Sino-Italian rapprochement occurred. The normalization finally happened in 1970; twenty years after the PRC foundation. Throughout the years, many political leaders in Italy, first and foremost Pietro Nenni, proposed to recognize the country. However, despite the political willingness, many difficulties - both internal and external - occurred, which slowed down the process. Finally, in 1970 Italy was ready to proceed with the normalization.

As already pointed out in the previous chapter the role of Pietro Nenni and his political action in this phase of the Sino-Italian history was determinant. I will continue to highlight how his work and his commitment towards China determined and promoted what today we can call “friendship”. Indeed, Nenni’s second mandate as Foreign Minister was the turning point for the Sino-Italian rapprochement, which led to the achievement of the main goals of his entire political career.

Furthermore, I will point out how China and Italy started a whole new era of diplomatic relations. Italy was one of the first countries, in the European panorama, to recognize the PRC and, in some cases, paved the way to other countries. If the connections between the two countries were limited and difficult in the first years, by the 1980s, under favorable conditions both in China and in Italy, the situation completely changed. Therefore, in the last part of the chapter, I will explore why the Sino-Italian relations in the 1980s have been addressed as the “golden age”.

## **2.1 The “China question” in Italy: the first practical steps in the rapprochement and the limits imposed by Washington**

In the first years of the 1960s trade diplomacy and bilateral relations increased thanks to the Italian political openness to the left-wing parties. In Italy, in 1963, for the first time, a center-left government was formed with Aldo Moro (Christian Democracy) as the Prime Minister; Pietro Nenni as his Vice-premier, and Giuseppe Saragat (Democratic Socialist Party) as Foreign Minister. The possibility of an opening to the left-wing parties in the formation of the Italian government had been previously agreed with the Americans. The result was that, for the first time, the Socialists were part of the leadership, thereby their commitment towards China became a concrete possibility in the Italian politics. This commitment would be addressed as the “China question”.

In 1964, another factor contributed to the acceleration of the Italian action towards China: France's recognition of the PRC, which happened very quickly and surprised the other countries. It was an initiative of De Gaulle, which can be framed within his *realpolitik* and his attempt to boost the importance of the Country. Moreover, according to Beltrame (2019), the recognition did not really promote a real increase in bilateral relations between the two countries. Despite the fact that the French recognition could have been a factor of speed up in the Italian action, the Italian government believed that it was still too early to proceed with an official recognition of the PRC (Rostagni, 2017).

Nonetheless, the French recognition was followed by some political actions in Italy. Indeed, in order not to fall behind the French move, the reaction of Nenni was to send to China the Socialist Senator Paolo Vittorelli, with the purpose of, at least, boosting the commercial relations. During his trip, Vittorelli had the chance to be received by Mao Zedong and to address the issue of Sino-Italian commercial ties. It was not an unsuccessful attempt; the result was that, for the first time, in 1965 Italy and China agreed on establishing official commercial relations with the opening of an Italian

ICE office (National Institute for foreign commerce) in Beijing. The Chinese, on the other side, opened a Chinese office for commerce in Rome. The role of these offices was to be a “quasi-diplomatic” bureau to discuss economic issues. The Italian office in Beijing, according to Fardella (2016), “functioned as a *de facto* embassy” even if it did not directly open the road to normalization. Washington was still strongly opposing any Italian attempt to recognize the PRC. In fact, at that time, China was involved in Vietnam against the US. The main concern of Italy in those years was not to disappoint the Allies, while managing to increment the ties with China in order to prepare the ground for normalization. When, during his trip to Washington in 1964, the Italian President Segni exposed the Italian intentions to the US leaders, their reaction was to ask to postpone any decision and official announcement after the incoming US presidential elections in order to not to interfere (Rostagni, 2017).

One month after the US elections, in December 1964, the Foreign Minister Saragat publicly exposed the new bilateral trade agreements with China, which led to the establishment of commerce offices in the two countries, and officially explained the position of Italy on the China question. Saragat, in that occasion, pointed out that Italy was not questioning whether to recognize the PRC or not, the intention was to identify the best moment to deal with it. Basically, he stated the Italian intention to undertake a process of normalization. By doing so, Italy sent a message both to China and to the US trying not to concern anyone. Moreover, Saragat in the same speech, stressed again the Italian interest in increasing trade relations and the willingness to proceed with the official diplomatic recognition and the admission of the PRC to the United Nations. At the moment of the speech only the first point had been addressed, the others were more difficult to carry on due to the Atlantic Alliance. Indeed, soon the US declared its disappointment about the increasing Sino-Italian trade relations (Rostagni, 2017).

The American disappointment towards the Italian increased trade involvement with China can easily be explained by looking at how the Sino-US relations were developing in those years. At that time, the US stand on China was very negative. Indeed, on more than one occasion China was portrayed as a threat by official spokesmen of the government. McGeorge Bundy, the Johnson's National Security Advisor, in 1965, referred to China as "a major problem for all peaceful people" (Lui Y., 1998). Furthermore, according to Kissinger (2011), President Johnson even justified the American intervention in Vietnam by saying that it was a way to resist a combined action by Hanoi and Beijing.

For these reasons, the Italian leadership decided to take time in before going ahead with the China question, and to reassure the American counterpart by saying that "we have not up to now decided to recognize China, nor will we without timely and friendly contact with the United States" (Saragat to Dean Rusk, 14 December 1964. Rostagni, 2017).

In any case, the conclusion of the trade negotiation and the opening of an Italian office in Beijing definitely laid the groundwork for the political and diplomatic step. From the mere economic point of view in 1966, only one year after the opening of the offices, the bilateral trades reached 75 billion of Liras (Pini, 2011).

## **2.2 Pietro Nenni as Foreign Minister and the forcing of procedures for the rapprochement**

On the 12th of December 1968, Pietro Nenni was appointed as Foreign Minister for the second time in his career. It is within this ministry that the China question would finally start its route towards being solved. Indeed, the two main issues that characterized his short ministry (will last less than one year later, until August 1969) are: the Chinese recognition and the PRC admission to the United Nations. The absolute priority of his office was the China question.

In the European context, already two countries had started to have bilateral relations with the PRC before Italy. France and the UK had recognized the PRC although for reasons and contexts different from the Italian one. Indeed, both of them were already members of the UN Security Council and had a greater independence from the foreign policy point of view. Furthermore, the UK basically recognized the PCR because of the situation of Hong Kong and France because of De Gaulles's attempt to demonstrate the importance of his country.

Less than a month after he took office, in January 1969, Nenni decided to officially announce to the Parliament that Italy was willing to recognize the PCR. The peculiarity of this disclosure was that he did not have any consultation with the Chinese counterpart before giving the speech. Moreover, as emerged by the reserved documents of the Italian Foreign Ministry, Nenni had previously been advised to keep the negotiations with China a secret, at least for the first period. The main aim of keeping the secrecy about the negotiations was to minimize the possible risks, including the possibility that China would raise too much their requests. However, Nenni replied to this note by saying that he would have communicated openly his intentions through an announcement to the Parliament: he refused to keep it secret. He justified this decision by saying that the China question had been ridiculously put off for over twenty years (Nenni, 1983). This is the event through which

Nenni “forced the procedures” and, in doing so, he assumed on his person the responsibility of the act.

The result was that, in February, China and Italy started the negotiations for the rapprochement. The process lasted almost two years and a common agreement was reached only in November 1970. The negotiation started with Nenni as Foreign Minister but, from August 1969, the Ministry passed to Aldo Moro (Christian Democracy) who concluded the process of negotiations.

Surprisingly, the US reaction to the Nenni’s declaration was not so negative. Obviously, the Americans were not happy but at the same time they did not prevent Italy from going ahead. That period was characterized by the election of the new US President, Richard Nixon. However, the State Department asked to be continuously informed about the Sino-Italian negotiations thus creating restricting conditions to the Italian moves (Brundu, 2004).

According to Troiani (2018), the true innovation in Nenni’s approach was to declare that Italy was ready to recognize the PCR even if the PCR still did not have its seat in the UN. As I already pointed out, Nenni was not the only politician who realized that the normalization of the Sino-Italian relations was an important step for the country. However, the approach that Italy had carried on until that moment had been characterized by waiting for the PRC to be admitted to the UN in order not to have to deal with the problems related to the Taiwan issue. Moreover, the US would have opposed the initiative. In fact, the Taiwan matter continued to be the main issue in the twenty-one months of negotiations that followed, and with all probability the reason why the two parts took so much time to find an agreement.

## **The rapprochement in Nenni's view**

To keep exploring the figure of Pietro Nenni and his contribution to the Sino-Italian rapprochement, before dealing with the mere content of the negotiations I will spend a few words to deepen on his political view about the China question.

The Sino-Italian normalization had always been one of his priorities since the foundation of the PRC. In his view, not only was a good opportunity for Italy in terms of trade and economic growth: the issue was far beyond that, it had political value.

Troiani (2018) summarized the Nenni's will to recognize the PCR in four main necessities. First, the need to include the Chinese as a population in the international community; second, the PRC recognition constituted a chance for the international pacification; third, it was a way to promote multilateralism, eroding the two blocs set-up that he always opposed; and, finally, it would enhance the political pluralism.

The China question for Nenni was mostly a matter of principle: for him it was not possible, and even wrong, to not consider the most densely populated country of the world and its citizens. Moreover, China, being part of the Bandung Conference in 1955, had already demonstrated to be a landmark for the non-aligned countries. Therefore, letting China enter the international system would definitely contribute to the creation of a multipolar international system.

Regarding the Taiwan issue, Nenni's answer had always been clear: only one China exists. The Chinese request to pick only one of the two in Nenni's view was a correct demand. He deeply respected the decisions taken by the elites in the single states according to the national sovereignty principle.

Finally, the issue of the PRC admission to the UN - as a replacement of the ROC - to Nenni would constitute the beginning of a new era for the history of the UN, as he wrote on his diary during his 2nd trip to China in 1971<sup>4</sup>. From his words he expressed his hope for Italy to be part of the new role that China would cover once admitted to the UN.

### **The long negotiations - Pietro Nenni as Foreign Minister**

The famous speech to the Parliament in which Nenni announced that the moment to recognize the PRC had come, was also Nenni's first official speech as Foreign Minister. The following week Nenni identified the Italian Embassy in Paris as the means through which the negotiation had to start. France had recognized the PRC in 1964 and the Italian Embassy in France could easily get in touch with the Chinese one. Nenni appointed the Italian Ambassador Francesco Malafatti to inform the Chinese Ambassador in Paris Huang Cheng about his speech and about the Italian intentions.

Shortly after, on 7th February 1969, the Chinese authorities replied that the PRC welcomed the Italian proposal to establish diplomatic relations. The negotiations officially started, but, despite the expectations, the whole process would take a very long time. The Foreign Minister Nenni appointed as official negotiator the Minister Plenipotentiary to the Italian Embassy in Paris, Walter Giardini. On the other side, the Chinese authorities appointed as negotiator Yi Su Chih, who was a chargé d'affaires in the Chinese Embassy in France.

Jointly with the Chinese confirmation of their willingness to proceed with the negotiations, from the Chinese authorities arrived also the list of unquestionable principles on which the two countries had to agree before proceeding with the official agreement. There were four main points/requests, which Chinese would call "principles".

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<sup>4</sup> Nenni's private diary, 8 November 1971, Shanghai - Beijing. <https://fondazionenenni.blog/2016/09/09/quarantanni-fa-moriva-mao-nei-diari-di-nenni-quella-cina/>



1. The PRC government had to be accepted as the only representative of the Chinese people;
2. The Taiwan province was integral part of the PRC;
3. Italy had to break up any diplomatic relations with the Taiwan Nationalist government;
4. Support the PRC admission to the United Nations and interrupt its support to the Nationalists.

On the basis of these requirements the Italian expectation was that Taiwan, after hearing about the Italian willingness to proceed with the PRC recognition, would have broken the diplomatic relations independently (Troiani, 2018). Indeed, the Taiwan point was one of the most problematic requests to agree on, also because Italy was afraid of the US possible reaction. In fact, as soon as the Sino-Italian negotiation started in Paris the first argument to be addressed was the Taiwan issue. Nenni's answer to the Chinese request was that Italy did not have the capacity to determine whether Taiwan was or was not part of the PRC. In his opinion, this question did not have to be mentioned in the bilateral agreement. Of course, the Chinese remained unsatisfied with the Italian reply.

The Taiwan issue has been the first and the main reason that explains the delay in reaching a bilateral decision: the Chinese were worried that Italy would not respect the principles posed once an agreement would be signed. The main goal the Chinese negotiators were trying to reach was to make the Italians more than clear in their declarations, in order to eliminate any change of reinterpretation.

Italy tried to propose a solution to the issue: in the agreement the Chinese authorities should have specified which was the PRC territory according to them, and Italy would have had only relations with the PRC government by interrupting any relation with the nationalists. In this way Italy would have overcome the problem of clearly declaring that Taiwan was part of the PRC. This Italian proposal, which did not satisfy the Chinese counterpart, had the unique result of interrupting negotiations for two months.

Two months later, in April 1969, the situation had not changed. Once resumed, the debates between the Italian and the Chinese negotiators shed light on the fact that the Chinese were not completely trusting the Italians. Moreover, they were scared that an administration without the presence of Nenni could change the Italian position towards the points that they considered fundamental, especially the Taiwan issue. These concerns were justified. Indeed, the Italian politics was going through a period of great instability. Moreover, among the reasons why the Chinese could not completely trust the Italians was the fact that for years Italy had proposed the realization, within the UN Assembly, of a commission aimed at studying the delicate question of the China issue.

After two more meetings of the delegations, it became clear that it was impossible to reach an agreement that could be similar to the one signed between China and France in 1964, as Nenni would have expected. According to Troiani (2018), who deeply studied Nenni's private diaries, to come to this conclusion was very upsetting for the Socialist leader whose desire was to conclude the negotiations in a short time. Indeed, in the following months, Nenni no longer wrote about China in his personal diaries until his second trip to the Country in 1971, probably the length of the negotiations became very frustrating for him.

Cheng Yi, the Chinese Plenipotentiary, made it clear that in order to proceed with the negotiations, Italy had to be more than clear on the Taiwan issue, because the US and other countries were plotting a conspiracy to create two Chinas or one China and one Taiwan. The Italian counterpart reaffirmed the Italian intentions of accepting what Beijing would state about the issue.

For the following months the question did not make any progress on the Taiwan issue. In July 1969 a political crisis broke up within the Italian Socialist Party which provoked a parallel fall of the government. Nenni decided to resign from his office as Foreign Minister. His successor would be Aldo Moro who came from the left wing of the Christian Democracy.

The last action that Nenni made as Foreign Minister facing the China question was to send a telegram to the Italian Ambassador to the UN, Enrico Vinci. The letter was aimed at expressing his opinion and suggestions on how Italy should have behaved during the September General Assembly session on the China question. His objective was not that of imposing one line of action, - he specified that it would be a responsibility of the future Foreign Minister - but to suggest what, in his mind, was correct and coherent with the process that Italy had undertaken towards the PRC.

Nenni's instructions can be summed up in the following main points: to vote in favor of the PRC admission to the UN. The direct consequence would have been the revocation of the ROC seat as representative of the Chinese people; Italy should have voted to the promotion of this issue as an important issue; it would have been desirable for Italy to make an agreement on those issues with Canada and Belgium who were also interested in recognizing the PRC.

This telegram represents the last attempt to overcome two decades of diplomatic errors towards the PRC. However, he left in the hands of Aldo Moro - his successor - the liberty to take those decisions (Troiani, 2018).

### **The long negotiations - Aldo Moro as Foreign Minister**

Aldo Moro was an exponent of the left-wing of the Christian Democracy. His position towards China was not as strong and determined as Nenni's one: he was more cautious but still a promoter of the normalization with the PRC. According to Fardella (2016) "Moro was much more concerned than the Socialist Nenni about Washington's sensitivity, making him more cautious about the form of the compromise to be reached with Beijing." Indeed, in September the Italian delegation to the UN, under Moro's instructions, abstained from the voting to admit the PRC to the UN, in contrast with Nenni's suggestions.

Moreover, in the same months the US declared to put an end to its involvement with the Vietnam War and the Nixon administration demonstrated to be more open towards China.

Within this context, at the beginning of October 1970, the Chinese requirement became more open by letting go of some of the requests that until that moment had stopped the whole process of rapprochement. The event that most of all boosted the Sino-Italian normalization was the agreement that on the 13th of October 1970 the Canadian authorities signed jointly with the Chinese ones to declare mutual recognition. The Sino-Canadian agreement was in line with the initial Italian proposal: the Chinese declared in the document that Taiwan was part of the PRC and the Canadians would have only “taken note” of that assertion. This was the key that unlocked the Italian negotiations, as well as for the countries that in the wake of the Canadian and Italian normalization of relations with China decided to do the same.

On the 6th of November 1970, Italy officially recognized the People's Republic of China. According to Fardella (2016), the opening and the increased Chinese flexibility was also made to send a message to Washington. This thesis would also be confirmed by Huang Zheng, the Chinese Ambassador in Paris.

To sum up, in November 1970, the Sino-Italian negotiations team reached an agreement thanks to a new and more flexible approach from the Chinese side. It is true, as I pointed out, that the international situation influenced the course of things, especially the worsening of the Sino-Soviet relations impacted as well on China's decisions.

## **The deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relations**

To explain why the Chinese decided to change their approach becoming more flexible, once again, the answers can be found by giving a look to the international contexts. In fact, the period coincided with a worsening in the Sino-Soviet, already difficult, situation.

As a matter of fact, both China and the Soviet Union had displaced troops along their border areas and their relations were continuously deteriorating and eventually exploded in clash at the Xinjiang border in 1969.

This battle took place in an Island called “Damansky” in Russian and “Zhenbao Dao” in Chinese, which defined the border between the two countries, addressed by the New York Times as “The Island that Changed History” (Radchenko, 2019). The Sino-Soviet confrontation was so serious that it has been reported also as the clash that “Almost Started World War III” (Farley, 2016).

Moreover, in the same period, China had other reasons to be concerned about its international situation. Indeed, China was worried about Japan and South Korea’s hostile attitudes towards the country and the Nationalists and Communists unsolved situation of Taiwan. This explains why China was also looking forward to getting over its isolation and implementing a new foreign policy.

Therefore, the Sino-Soviet clash represented an opportunity for China to start “preparing” its public opinion for a further opening to the US. They did so by implementing a major shift in the political propaganda in which the focus as “main threat to the country’s security” stopped being the “US imperialism” and became the “Soviet Social-Imperialism” (Cheng Jian, 2001). Indeed, after the Sino-Soviet clash at the Xinjiang border, Beijing started concentrating its propaganda on the fact that imperialism had been restored within the USSR. In this way what changed was not the object of

imperialism itself but the subject of who was promoting such imperialism. Thanks to this dialectical trick, now the “US imperialism” became a threat less urgent than the “Soviet Social-Imperialism”.

## **2.3 The beginning of a new era of diplomatic relations. The Italian political class embracement of Nenni's intuition on the importance of China**

Within the Sino-Italian rapprochement and the global situations at the beginning of the 1970s a new era of diplomatic relations started between Italy and China. Although, great innovations contributed to creating transformations within China itself; especially the beginning of negotiations with the US.

In other words, the world was slowly exiting the Cold War logic, and going through a multipolar system in which China was about to become one of the main protagonists until today. Although, one more step was needed to officially welcome China in the global order: its admission to the UN. Basically, what Nenni had foreseen twenty years before now was coming together.

Finally, the People's Republic of China was admitted as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with the famous UN General Assembly Resolution No. 2758, also addressed as "Albanian motion", because it was proposed consecutively for many years by Albania. As a result, Taiwan, as politically perceived by the PRC should be a Chinese provincial level administration district, was expelled from both the General Assembly and the Security Council. 76 countries voted in favor of the Albanian motion (for the substitution of the ROC with the PRC in the UN), 35 votes against and 17 abstained.

### **The second Nenni's Trip to China in 1971 and his interest towards China**

In November 1971, four days after the Albanian motion was voted, Nenni flew to China for the second time under Zhou Enlai's invitation. In the invitation, the Chinese Prime Minister stressed that Nenni was considered a friend, and that now that the goals of the Chinese representation in the UN and the

Sino-Italian rapprochement had been reached none should forget who paved the way for its realization.

Zhou Enlai referred to Nenni as the “well digger”, the metaphor refers at Nenni’s commitment towards China in the years (Vian, 2016). Nenni was invited because in China he was considered *lao pengyou*, an old friend of China. This second trip, during which Nenni was an old man with 80 years of age, was more a way to thank him for his actions (Pini, 2011), also because he was not playing any official role anymore.

During the second trip Nenni visited Shanghai and Beijing and had the chance to meet Zhou Enlai again and talk with him for four hours. Nenni wrote in his diaries that Zhou welcomed him heartily, and, in general, the Chinese team that accompanied him during the whole trip always treated him with care (Tedesco, 2018). With Zhou they talked about international relations, the entrance of the PRC to the UN and about the European integration process that, according to Zhou, had to be carried out independently from the US and the USSR. The whole trip has been deeply reported by the Italian journalist that traveled with Nenni, Francesco Gozzano, that published in the “Avanti!” the Socialist newspaper every detail of the trip, so the Italians were able to follow the trip.

It is possible to claim that over the years and through his political career, Nenni managed to establish a good relation based on friendship and reciprocal respect with his Chinese counterparts. During his second trip to China, Nenni was already 80 but his interest towards the PRC was still high and continued to be so for the rest of his life.

Indeed, as described by (Troiani, 2018), Nenni, despite his age, continued to have great relations with the Chinese institutions in Italy. For example, on the 12th September 1976, the day after Mao Zedong's death, Nenni was invited to the Chinese Embassy in Rome to commemorate Mao's passing.



In that occasion, Nenni, once again, expressed his admiration towards the Chinese leader by saying that Mao has been one of the greatest men of the century, who has been able to interpret his people and to leave his mark on history. The year later, when the Chinese Ambassador in Rome Wong Kuo-Chuan visited Nenni in his private house, told him that in Beijing he was considered as the Chinese best friend in Italy.

The last sign of closeness of Nenni to the PRC happened a few months before his passing, when he was invited to the Chinese Embassy to be thanked for his commitment for the Chinese admission to the UN.

### **The beginning of the official Sino-Italian diplomatic relations**

Soon after the mutual Sino-Italian recognition the Embassies were established in the two capitals. The Italian Socialist Party, that since the beginning had promoted the rapprochement, now wanted to demonstrate to the other political forces how right it was by insisting in this direction. For this reason, the first political actions toward China were promoted by the Socialists. Their aim was to make it clear that the Chinese recognition had been a good decision from the political, ideological, and economical point of view. So, in order to achieve this goal, the PSI started to ask the government to send to China the Italian Minister for Foreign Commerce, the Socialist Mario Zagari.

The Zagari action in China had been addressed as “Zagari Mission” for its importance. Since the PRC had started to open to the West it was one of the first times a Western Minister arrived in the country with a huge delegation of 76 people. Before Zagari only two French ministers had reached China (Pini, 2011).

During the trip, Zagari met Zhou Enlai and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce Bai Xiangguo that Zagari invited to Italy soon later. During the “Mission Zagari” and the following visit in Italy of his

Chinese counterpart, Italy and China signed a first commercial agreement. In reality, according to Pini (2011), the big Italian delegation that arrived in China with the “Zagari Mission” was more a matter of appearance. In fact, the economic consequences of the agreement did not increase that much.

However, the bilateral relations continued to grow in the following months and years. For example, in 1972, in Rome was inaugurated the first Chinese exhibition of typical products in Europe. The month later, Italy brought to Beijing an exhibition of Italian industries. In the same year, China and Italy signed an agreement on the Maritime transports: even in this case Italy was the first country to sign this kind of agreement with the PRC.

In 1972, Italy could see, for the first time, concrete results of the bilateral action: a great growth of Italian exports to China was registered; it amounted to 44,8 billion Liras (a considerable growth compared to the 35 of the previous years) (Carbonetti, 1973).

It is interesting to see how, at that time, the Italian exports towards China constituted just a small part of the whole Italian exports (0,4%); while the Italian market for China was very important: China exported to Italy 2,5% of the total Chinese exportations (Pini, 2011). These figures did not last a lot and soon the exchanges with Italy became a lower percentage of the Chinese exchanges worldwide. This was the result of the increasing number of countries that following the Italian and Canadian example started to recognize the PRC. Between those countries there was also the US and many other European countries.

In 1973, the Italian Foreign Minister, Giuseppe Medici, pointed out that China was really becoming a great power, that, jointly with the initial moves of the European integration, was putting an end to

the bipolar international system (Fardella, 2016). Again, exactly what Nenni had foreseen many years before.

Few years after the Sino-Italian rapprochement, Italy lost part of its importance in China. Italy had made a great start with the “Zigari Mission” I mentioned above, but in a little time, other countries overcame Italy. At the beginning, Italy was one of the first western countries to promote and achieve the Chinese normalization and had been the pioneer country in many aspects, but, in just two years, most of the European Countries did the same.

Inevitably, Italy lost its visibility in Beijing. Moreover, in those years Italy suffered from a great internal instability, changing the governmental composition many times in a very short time. The Italian political instability, of course, conditioned also the Sino-Italian relations, as every time the Chinese authorities had to deal with different personalities from different political backgrounds.

In the same years, Italy also worked on its diplomatic relations with the US and the USSR, with the aim to promote the detente. Of course, the Chinese did not appreciate this Italian approach of dialogue with everyone.

Literally, in those years Italy fell behind because it stopped to focus on the Sino-Italian relations. For example, after 1973, no more Italian Ministers flew to China until 1975 letting the bilateral relations decay. In the meantime, other European countries took care of their relationship with the PRC by setting great bilateral agreements.

Italy, despite its difficulties and its behavior towards China, which compared to the other European countries was less assertive, still manifested its willingness to strengthen the bilateral relations. A great example is the 1975 Giuliano Orlando’s trip, who was the Minister of Post and

Telecommunications, joint with a great delegation of the representatives of the major Italian Industries, between them there was Gianni Agnelli leader of Confindustria.

In 1976, the relations became even more complicated, in fact, for the PRC it was a year of major changes. First of all, Zhou Enlai passed away in January, followed in September by the Chairman Mao Zedong. Before his death, Mao had appointed as Prime Minister Hua Guofeng under the suggestion of the so called “Gang of Four”<sup>5</sup>. In a few months, in October, the new Prime Minister, Hua Guofeng, succeeded in getting the Gang of Four arrested and Deng Xiaoping was reinstated. With this event, it was clear that an era was ended for China and the Cultural Revolution was finally over.

However, in order to give an overview of the relations over the 70s, after the normalization of relations, it is possible to say that there were great upgrades both from the political and economic points of view. However, the situation characterized by the Italian uncertainties and the Chinese situation determined by the Cultural revolution, lowered the potentials in the bilateral relations. In fact, economically speaking, between 1973 and 1976, the Sino-Italian import and exports had great improvements growing to 96%, but the total value was lower compared to the other European countries. According to Fardella (2016), the main reason of the Italian lower growth with China is due to two main reasons. First, the Chinese and Italian market were not very complementary. Second, the fact that in Italy the majority of enterprises were medium size determined a difficulty in promoting them on the Chinese market.

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<sup>5</sup> The Gang of Four was composed by Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, Wang Hongweng.

## **2.4 1980s: The Deng Xiaoping reforms and the golden age of bilateral relations**

As pointed out in the above paragraphs, the elimination of the Gang of Four led to the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping in 1977, who soon became the new protagonist of the post-Mao history of China.

According to Beltrame (2019), the Deng Xiaoping arrival on the scene constituted a real watershed. Indeed, Deng started a whole new period of great reforms and diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. He proceeded with the operation of opening to the West that was already started, plus he connected his internal strategy with a commitment of cooperation with the international market (Fardella, 2016). Italy since the beginning tried to get into the game, taking advantage of the situation determined by this new Chinese attitude.

Indeed, in 1977 the Italian Foreign Minister Arnaldo Forlani visited China, the trip can be considered a success, as it constituted a revival of relations. Forlani was one of the first European Foreign Ministers to visit the country in post-Mao China. Again, Italy tried to not lose time and to arrive earlier than the others. Moreover, the main Italian interest at that time was to investigate whether there was the possibility to import oil from China, as Italy was looking for new opportunities in the energy field. In the same year, five other Italian Ministers flew to China improving the bilateral relations and opportunities for both countries. This is a great number compared to the Italian Ministries visits from the 1970 to 1976 that were only five in total (Pini, 2011).

In 1978, Deng officially presented his program of reforms that included: industry; agriculture; science and technology and defense. The message of the reforms and of Deng's new approach was beneficial for the bilateral relations between China and Italy. One of the first signs of a renewed Sino-Italian bilateral relations was carried out during the Prime Minister Hua Guofeng trip to Europe in 1979.

This was the first trip of a Chinese Prime Minister in Europe: constituted a clear message of a renovated foreign policy and Hua never hesitated to stress the new Chinese intentions of collaboration with the West in all the countries he visited. Shortly before (January 1979) Deng Xiaoping had visited the US, showing a friendly and positive attitude.

During the European tour, Hua Guofeng visited France, Germany, England, and Italy. In Rome, he met the Italian President of the Republic Sandro Pertini and the Prime Minister Francesco Cossiga. In that occasion, among other things, they agreed on the creation of consular offices both in Italy (Milan) and China (Shanghai) and they signed three agreements: economic cooperation; scientific cooperation; technical and cultural cooperation.

Moreover, the Chinese Premier also visited the city of Venice where, for the first time, was established a twinning initiative between Venice and the Chinese city of Suzhou in the Jiangsu Province. Suzhou, for its characteristics, is known as the “Venice of the East”. The two cities still today keep great relations including important cultural initiatives but also cooperation actions and aid ventures. An example is the recent dispatch of twenty thousand face masks in support of the Coronavirus emergency that Suzhou sent to Venice and the consequent messages of support shared between the two cities’ majors, as reported in the Official website of the City of Venice.

The situation described above represents the positive conditions through which the two countries entered in the new century, that had been addressed by the historians as the “golden age” for the Sino-Italian bilateral relations.

### **Official visits and the three economic agreements**

The 1980s were inaugurated with the first official visit of one Italian President of the Republic to China since official relations were established. According to Pini (2011) the President Sandro Pertini

was the best President that could visit China in that precise moment to inaugurate a new phase of relations. Pertini was appreciated by the Chinese because he was a Socialist, a man of the left-wing and a partisan. At the same time, he was not linked to the USSR and had been a great friend and comrade of Pietro Nenni.

Moreover, 1980 is the year in which Deng Xiaoping strengthened his power and some changes happened in the CCP. Deng remained the President of the Central Committee and of the Military Commission, while as Secretary of party he appointed Hu Yaobang and as Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang.

The golden ages of the bilateral relations were made possible thanks to the internal situation of both Italy and China in those years. Italy, during the 1980s, had a great economic growth; actually in 1986 the Italian GDP surpassed the English one. Politically speaking from 1983 to 1987 Italy was led by Bettino Craxi as Prime Minister who was the leader of the Socialist Party: his political view of Foreign Policy was similar to Nenni's one. Multipolarism and the willingness to have a more independent country were the pillar of his external action.

As Fardella (2017) pointed out "For the first time since the normalization, Beijing started appreciating Italy's foreign policy, embodied by the courageous and incisive activism of Bettino Craxi. [...] Craxi independent stances vis-a-vis Washington [...] Italy's activism in the Middle East peace process and Craxi's belief in a strong and unified Europe were all elements that met with Chinese appreciation." On the other side, China had started to implement Deng's reforms.

Italy in those years highly implemented its commitment in Development Cooperation, within these three triennial plans were approved for the cooperation with China: 1982-84; 1985-87 and 1987-89.

Within those important plans Italy decisively contributed to the creation in China of Italian Industries that were crucial for the Chinese growth (Pini, 2011).

Every triennial plan was more consistent than the previous one, growing to very high amounts of money: for example, with the third triennial plan Italy invested 576 million US dollar in the country, plus 95 million of US dollars were donated (Pavolini, 1987). In Europe, Italy was the main aid supplier for China, and this was a means of pride for the Italian authorities. In 1985, Italy was the country that made the greatest growth in exchanges with China (Pini, 2011).

Moreover, in 1986, China and Italy signed an important consular convention, this was the first agreement of this kind that China signed with a European country.

If the 1980s started with the first trip to China of an Italian President of the Republic Pertini, the decade characterized by good relations continued with the first trip to China of an Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi in 1986. This visit was a moment to celebrate the great goals of cooperation and good bilateral achievements during the “golden age” in Sino-Italian relations. Unfortunately, the Italian economic boom would not last, and the other European countries would soon overcome the Italian GDP. Within the coming years, the relations with China would be completely reversed, and nowadays Italy has a continuous commercial deficit towards China.



## Chapter conclusion

The chapter has pointed out how the Sino-Italian rapprochement occurred. At the beginning of the 1960s the formation of a center-left government in Italy for the first time has been the drive of the recognition. Italy was still under the US control, in fact that openness to the left had been possible because previously agreed within the US. In this case the US strategy was to isolate even more the Italian communists by letting the Socialists taking part in the government.

The French recognition of China in 1964 boosted the Italian willingness to do the same but the international ties were still too limiting. Indeed, in 1964 the Italian President Segni was asked to wait the end the US elections before doing or declaring any intention towards China.

The real turning point for the rapprochement was the Nenni's appointment as Foreign Minister for the second time in 1968. This ministry has been characterized by one priority: solving the China question. In less than a month Nenni unilaterally announced to the Parliament the Italian willingness to recognize the PRC, by forcing the procedures for the normalization. In one month, Italy and China officially started the negotiations that ended only two years later in 1970. The length of the negotiations is explained by the difficulty in dealing within the Taiwan issue. Despite the fact that in 1969 Nenni resigned from his seat as Foreign Minister, the appointment of the new Foreign Minister Aldo Moro did not compromise the outcome of the rapprochement. In fact, in 1970 the Chinese approach became more flexible due to the worsening of the Sino-Soviet bilateral relations linked to clash at the Xinjiang border in 1969.

After the PRC reached also the goal of its admission to the UN, Nenni was invited again in China. At this time his invitation was just a matter of thanking him and recognizing his efforts towards China. Indeed, he was considered by the Chinese as a *lao pengyou*, and his memory would be always remembered within the Chinese institutions until today.

In short, the Sino-Italian rapprochement is still considered as Nenni's conquest from both Italians and Chinese authorities. The influence and the consequences of Pietro Nenni's ideals and values

undoubtedly paved the way for the implementation of friendly relations between the two countries in the most delicate phase of their shared history. Indeed, after the rapprochement it is clear how the relations continued following the same approach promoted by Nenni. Moreover, it became evident to the whole Italian political class how Nenni was right in considering China the key to overcome the bipolar international system.

In the 1980s within the Deng Xiaoping reforms and its opening up to rest of the world impacted positively in the Sino-Italian relations, so much that the 1980s are referred as “the golden age of bilateral relations”.

Despite the death of Pietro Nenni, Mao Zedong and Zhu Enlai, namely the political class that led to the Sino-Italian rapprochement, after that the bilateral relations built on a solid basis of faith and respect continued and incremented positively.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Today's bilateral relations: the impact of political choices half a century later**

This chapter will be aimed at analyzing to what extent Nenni's contribution and, more in general, the history of Sino-Italian relation of the last 50-60 years are still relevant today in influencing the reciprocal foreign policy choices of the two countries. Moreover, it will be analyzed the importance of culture in bilateral relation, and to what extent this factor features the Sino-Italian relations.

I started this work giving an historical point of view in order to demonstrate that an important shared history, culture, and experiences strongly determine the ongoing relations (under certain circumstances and with certain conditions were/are satisfied). In fact, this is particularly true when taking into consideration a country such as China, as explained by the Relational Theory.

Today, Italy and China are good commercial partners but also friendly countries. I argue that this friendship and the overall positive attitude that characterize today's Sino-Italian relations come from the past (again, the current situation is not destined to be so, but we can identify the necessary conditions and factors that function positively in bring the bilateral relationship closer cross-time; we cannot ignore the other factors and trends that may lead the relationship to an uncertain direction).

As I will point out in the chapter, since the end of the last century, Italy had more than one occasion in which differentiated its action towards China from the other main European countries: the reaction to the Tiananmen crisis, the creation of the three triennial plans and the Italian commitment in the enhancing of the Development Cooperation with China; the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2004 and the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative in March 2019.

Despite the fact that, commercially and economically speaking Italy today cannot compete with the amount of exchanges of other European countries such as Germany, but, from the political point of view, Italy - with its ups and downs - maintains an overall positive attitude towards China that in the last years is growing and strengthening.

### **3.1. Towards the end of the century: the Tiananmen crisis and the beginning of Italy's Second Republic**

Unfortunately, the golden age of the Sino-Italian relations was temporarily interrupted in 1989 within the Tiananmen crisis and the consequent sanctions ordered by the European Council of Madrid. Italy had to adopt those sanctions towards China that included a suspension of the high-level bilateral relations and the delay in the realization of new cooperation agreements. As a consequence, all the Italian aids enlarged to China were suspended. However, Italy soon resumed the bilateral relations thanks to the commitment of the government of that time that was led by Giulio Andreotti, as Prime Minister, and Gianni De Michelis, as Foreign Minister. The latter was one of the main exponents of the Socialist Party.

De Michelis as Foreign Minister, following the line of the Italian Socialists since Nenni's presidency, declared that leaving the PRC behind would have been a great mistake. In an article published in the Italian geopolitics journal "Limes", De Michelis, in 1995 expressed his thoughts about China. This article is relevant to this work because express that continuity in the Italian approach towards China that I have supposed at the beginning of this work. In fact, De Michelis said that everything that happens in China was of high interest for the whole world and criticized the Italians for often forgetting about it. Furthermore, he openly declared that, in his opinion, the Western reaction of imposing an embargo towards China was wrong. Moreover, such action could have had as only consequence the fact that the Chinese leadership would have considered the Italians (and the CEE members in general) as someone who could not deeply understand what was going on in China and, therefore, as superficial.

De Michelis had a very upstream thought about China, especially about the Tiananmen facts, that he, differently from the great part of the Foreign Ministry personnel, considered within a more in-depth

view of the general situation of China. He was almost alone with his thought, but his role as Foreign Minister since 1989 favored his operating space, and, in general, the Italian operating space about the Chinese situation. Once again, the Socialist Party showed its capacity to foresee the Chinese potential, siding the PRC in its development.

In 1990, Italy took the presidency of the European Council and within this role showed solidarity with the Chinese people and worked for bettering the Chinese situation for a further resumption of dialogue. Italy actually called for the elimination of the sanctions, and, by July, it succeeded in this goal (Fardella, 2016). In doing so, Italy drew Chinese attention to the Italian role in the resumption of the Chinese situation.

Corrado Clini, during the interview session stressed the importance of Italian action following the Tiananmen crisis. He said that Italy has been the first and only country who helped China stopping its isolation. Moreover, Italy helped China also in presenting itself as a global player and not just a close country. Furthermore, Clini said «we helped them to succeed within international trade and global issues». In other words, Italy definitely played the role of the bridge in that historical moment, when China was facing international isolation and difficulties, and China do recognize to Italy that role and appreciate it. According to Clini, this explains why China perceives Italy as a player to communicate with and shows openness trough the country.

In fact, as reported by Coralluzzo (2008), the visit that De Michelis and later Andreotti made to China in 1991 determined the end of the Chinese isolation. Moreover, Minister De Michelis during his trip discussed with Chinese authorities about a very ambitious project that Italy wanted to contribute to financing in Shanghai. This project was called Pudong, it was about the construction of a new very modern city, with skyscrapers, hotels, banks, which would have been the symbol of the Chinese modernization, as pointed out by Coralluzzo (2008). De Michelis (1995) admitted being very proud

about the Italian involvement in the Project, also because Italy at that moment had been the first Western country to be involved. Indeed, Italy arrived even before the US. By aiding China in the realization of the Pudong project with a sum of 600 billion of Liras. If they had complied with this promise, Italy would have made a great signal of support to the Deng Xiaoping program of modernization, and, therefore, Italy would have obtained even a great position in the Chinese market.

Italy, once again, was the great promoter of the Chinese inclusion in the international system being also the first country visited by the Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng in 1992 after the 1989 facts.

Italy between the end of the 1980s and the wake of the 1990s played the role of the “bridge” between China and Western world, as Li Peng stressed during his visit to Rome. Italy was pretending to be the first and biggest driver of Chinese modernization. Despite the great diplomatic role that Italy played in that occasion, looking at the economic side, things worsened. Indeed, after 1989 Italy passed to be the second-largest European country for trading with China to be the fourth largest. From the global point of view, if before 1989 Italy was the sixth-largest trade country for China, after it became the tenth largest (Institute of International Affairs, 1993).

Another fact that contributed to worsening again the Sino-Italian relations and to distancing the two countries was the Italian tumultuous transition from the so called First Republic (1948 - 1994) to the Second one (1994 - today). What determined this traumatic shift in the political history of Italy was a great judicial investigation of political corruption that has been called “Mani pulite” (meaning, clean hands), started in 1992. In brief, the investigation involved the majority of the parties of the First Republic and their leaders turned to be involved with corruption issues. The result was the disappearance of the main Italian parties that until that moment had been the greatest protagonists of the Italian history, in particular the Italian Socialist Party and the Christian Democracy that had been

also the two parties that more than the others had favored and worked for the promotion of Sino-Italian relations. In 1994 Italy officially entered into the Second Republic.

For what concerns this study, the main consequence was the complete change in the foreign policy: Italy basically disappeared from the international scene. What will be particularly affected are the Sino-Italian relations. As pointed out by De Michelis (1995), one of the first actions in 1992 was to stop all the cooperation aids towards China, which were implemented during the De Michelis mandate. Among them, also the funds bound to the Pudong project. From this moment on, the history of Sino-Italian relations would never be as good as during the golden age. The Chinese never saw the money that Italy had promised to them and this led the Chinese lower their trust and opinion towards Italy as a foreign partner: Italy lost its credibility in China. According to Coralluzzo (2008), this was one of the greatest errors that Italy made towards China, and the Country is still paying its consequences today. The Pudong project would have really been the Italian steppingstone in China but everything was lost and in a short time and other countries replaced the role that Italy should have played in the project.

Despite the great slowdown in the bilateral relations consequent to the turbulent Italian transition from the First to the Second Republic, new attempts to renew the Sino-Italian relations were made in the first decade of the Second Republic. Multiple official visits of Italian Ministers to China took place over the years, but also the visit of the Chinese President Jiang Zemin in March 1999 and the Prime Minister Zhu Rongji in July 2000 and as a consequence the enhancement of the Italian exports towards China, which in the second part of 2000 become the Italian second trading market in Asia.



### **3.2. The Italian approach to China in the new millennium**

Within the new millennium, the Sino-Italian relations had ups and downs depending also on the turnover of the Italian governments. For example, during the years of the center-right government (2001-2006), headed by Silvio Berlusconi, diplomacy towards China was characterized by few initiatives but also an alarmist attitude that led the Italians to interpret China more as a risk than as an opportunity. The situation was even worsened with the anti-China campaign promoted by the Lega Nord Party and the gaffes of the Prime Minister Berlusconi (Coralluzzo 2008). In those years, the only very positive moment for the bilateral relations was made by the trip of the Italian President of the Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi to China in 2004. That visit was made and sponsored as the occasion to make a new start in the relations with the PRC. Moreover, Ciampi was appreciated in China since the 1980s, and considered as a friend of the country: he was the right person to try to enhance the situation. As Coralluzzo said, the main goal expected with that trip was to «shift the center of political gravity with respect to the Asian colossus away from the ‘alarm over China’ and towards an active participation in the “Chinese miracle” ».

According to Sun (2020) since 2000 the world patten has quickly changed, and as a consequence Italy and China have decided to improve the bilateral relations to a «strategic level» and to increase the cooperation. Indeed, 2004 has been appointed as a turning point for the bilateral relations after the establishment of the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” (Rizzi, 2018). In that occasion the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and the Italian one Silvio Berlusconi issued a joint communique calling for bilateral and multilateral joint efforts to safeguard world peace and security. That was the first time since the rapprochement in which the two countries issued this kind of communique and for the first time was set up an inter-ministerial committee in order to coordinate bilateral relations. The creation of such a high-level coordination body was a novelty for China. In practice, the value of establishing this Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, echoing the words of the official site of the

Italian Foreign Ministry, lies in the fact that since 2004 the collaborations between China and Italy have not only a bilateral value, but involves the discussion of global issues, the China-EU relations and multilateral issues. I would point out that, this 2004 enhancement of relations, is of particular importance because it demonstrates the overall Italian interest in keeping a high-level quality of dialogue despite the political view of the leader of that time. Sun (2020) said that within the 2004 agreement a whole new stage progress has started.

Within the 2006 elections and the appointment of Romano Prodi (center-left) as Prime Minister, a new scenario opened up. Prodi really wanted to enhance the Sino-Italian relations; indeed, his first foreign visit (outside Europe) was to the PRC. The trip was aimed at recovering what Italy had lost in the preceding years in the Sino-Italian relations: both politically and economically. Coralluzzo (2008) described the trip as a «desperate attempt to win back the ground that Italy had lost in years of delay, neglect, errors, omissions, overweening ambition, hasty and improvised visits, and missed opportunities».

If these aspects have determined the beginning of the new millennium, in the last decade the bilateral relations have increased and even improved by reaching also important goals among them distinguishing the famous Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019. The signature of the MoU is particularly important because it made Italy the first G7 member and the first EU Founding member to sign this kind of document with the PRC. A decision that, once again, made Italy a pioneer in foreign policy actions related to China. This of course, has been a move not really appreciated in the European context that has been even criticized. A decision that, for the sake of this work, demonstrates the uniqueness of Italy towards China. This does not mean that Italy is the first country in entertaining economic relations with the PRC, in fact according to the Eurostat data of 2019, is the third largest importer of Chinese goods in Europe, for a value of EUR 31,665 million, following Germany and The Netherlands. Similarly, Italy is the fourth largest exporter for a value of

EUR 12,993 million, following Germany, France and The Netherlands. In this context, Italy has the second largest commercial deficit with china.

### EU-27 imports of goods from China, 2019

	EUR million	% of China in extra EU-27 imports
Netherlands	88 414	26.1
Germany	76 772	18.8
Italy	31 665	17.3
France	31 426	15.1
Spain	24 821	16.4
Poland	20 536	25.9
Belgium	16 704	10.9
Czechia	14 806	35.6
Sweden	8 424	17.4
Hungary	7 470	24.9
Denmark	6 253	21.4
Austria	5 606	14.3
Romania	4 537	19.3
Greece	4 061	14.9
Ireland	3 146	5.8
Portugal	2 953	14.0
Slovakia	2 904	17.2
Finland	2 296	11.2
Slovenia	2 016	13.6
Luxembourg	1 509	42.7
Bulgaria	1 484	13.8
Lithuania	929	8.7
Croatia	726	13.6
Estonia	651	16.7
Latvia	511	12.1
Cyprus	410	12.2
Malta	255	8.6

Source: Eurostat (online data code: ext\_st\_eu27\_2019sitc and DS-018995)

## EU-27 exports of goods to China, 2019

	EUR million	% of China in extra EU-27 exports
Germany	96 283	15.2
France	20 959	8.5
Netherlands	13 906	6.3
Italy	12 993	5.5
Ireland	8 207	8.6
Belgium	7 108	5.1
Spain	6 799	5.6
Sweden	6 763	9.9
Denmark	4 837	10.2
Austria	4 611	9.0
Finland	3 548	12.0
Poland	2 651	4.3
Czechia	2 146	5.9
Slovakia	1 690	10.5
Hungary	1 456	6.1
Greece	892	5.5
Bulgaria	814	7.8
Romania	612	3.3
Portugal	604	3.4
Slovenia	435	3.9
Lithuania	277	2.1
Luxembourg	198	6.7
Estonia	173	3.8
Latvia	159	3.0
Croatia	108	2.1
Malta	36	2.9
Cyprus	34	1.9

Source: Eurostat (online data code: ext\_st\_eu27\_2019sitc and DS-018995)

eurostat 

## EU-27 trade balance of goods with China, 2019 (EUR million)

	EUR million
Germany	19 511
Ireland	5 061
Finland	1 252
Malta	-219
Latvia	-352
Cyprus	-376
Estonia	-478
Croatia	-618
Lithuania	-652
Bulgaria	-671
Austria	-995
Slovakia	-1 214
Luxembourg	-1 311
Denmark	-1 416
Slovenia	-1 580
Sweden	-1 662
Portugal	-2 349
Greece	-3 169
Romania	-3 925
Hungary	-6 014
Belgium	-9 596
France	-10 467
Czechia	-12 660
Poland	-17 885
Spain	-18 022
Italy	-18 673
Netherlands	-74 508

Source: Eurostat (online data code: ext\_st\_eu27\_2019sitc and DS-018995)

eurostat 

Sun (2020) explains the commercial deficit with three main reasons: custom borders, differences between the dimensions and the structure of the industry, lack of mutual openness of the market.

If the signature of the MoU is the tip of the iceberg, there is so much more under the curtain. In particular the bilateral relations have grown faster in the last five or six years, during which there has been an increased number of official visits. Great results reached in the last years have been facilitated by the important institutional instrument created in 2004: The China-Italy joint Government Committee. This bilateral instrument is chaired by the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs and has the role of promoting the interconnection between the public and private institutions to improve the bilateral relations. Through this instrument, especially in the last years, an increasing number of agreements have been signed for the enhancement of both diplomatic and economic goals. In particular, the Committee plays the important role of preparing the framework for the realization of important bilateral meetings as in the case of the 2018 Xi Jinping visit to Italy in March 2019 that led to the signing of the MoU.

Furthermore, the MoU's signature has opened to a number of cooperation agreements between Italian and Chinese companies for a value of up to 2,5 billion Euros. Sun (2020) said that the MoU was a signal of the willingness to deep the bilateral relations. From a Chinese side, she made it clear that China hoped to strengthen the friendly relations, to promote commercial exchanges, to import more high-level Italian products in China and to favor more Chinese investments in Italy. Not only, another Chinese goal was to create a signal within the EU, in order to promote an advancement towards Bruxelles.

Behind the BRI and the economic exchanges between Italy and China, as I said, there is more that characterize the bilateral relations, for example in the field of culture, tourism and technologies.

For example, 2020 besides being the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Rome and Beijing, has been also declared the “China-Italy year of culture and tourism”. As reported by Xinhua News, many cultural events were to be organized before the outbreaking of the Novel Coronavirus. In fact, Italy is the first destination of Chinese visitors to Europe that in 2018 have spent 353 million euros in cultural holidays in the Country<sup>6</sup>. Due to the unexpected virus, “China-Italy year of culture and tourism” has been postponed to 2022.

According to Amighini (2019) the turning point that really led to an increment in the Sino-Italian relations has to be found in the Italian entrance to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015. Through which Italy also demonstrated its willingness to participate to the Belt and Road Project. Moreover, an important step forward has been the creation, announced by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development (MISE), of the Task Force China (MISE, 2018). As pointed out by the Under Secretary of State for Trade and Foreign Investment Geraci this important instrument is aimed at creating a systemic approach towards all the aspects of the Sino-Italian bilateral relations. Indeed, soon after its realization the Task Force China led to the achievement of another fundamental agreement and the subsequent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in the field of Cooperation in Third Countries<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the numerous agreements reached in the last decade, and the countless official visits, important signs of friendship and respect between China and Italy have been shown by the words of the main political exponents. This is of particular interest, because the historic and cultural factor is always mentioned and stressed in the official occasions.

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<sup>6</sup> Xinhuanet.com (2020) China-Italy Year Of Culture And Tourism Kicks Off With Official Event In Rome - Xinhua | English.News.Cn. [online] Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/22/c\\_138726808.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/22/c_138726808.htm) [Accessed 10 April 2020].

<sup>7</sup> MISE (2020) Raggiunta Intesa Su Testo Del Memorandum Of Understanding Con La Cina Per La Cooperazione In Paesi Terzi. [online] Available at: <https://www.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/198-notizie-stampa/2038584-raggiunta-intesa-su-testo-del-memorandum-of-understanding-con-la-cina-per-la-cooperazione-in-paesi-terzi> [Accessed 10 April 2020].

A great example can be the letter written from the Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni to his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Sino-Italian diplomatic relations<sup>8</sup>. In that letter, in fact, Gentiloni stressed the fact that Italy and China, being two of the most ancient societies in the world, share a vivid history of exchanges and mutual benefits.

Even from the Chinese side this kind of statement are frequent: to remember the shared history and the long-lasting friendship between the Italian and Chinese people is always mentioned. This is the proof, that even if the two countries went through periods of distancing, as Pini (2011) frequently used to say, «the Chinese have a great memory» and did not forget about the Italian efforts towards China.

For example, in an article signed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping published in the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera” in 2019, and published in English on the China Daily, the President spent a long part of the article remembering the great moments of the Sino-Italian shared history and refers to Italy by saying «Now that I am about to set foot again on this beautiful country, it feels like I am to be among old friends and get immersed in their wonderful hospitality». Furthermore, Xi again stressed that «The traditional friendship between us, stronger than ever, has become a strong pillar supporting the rapid steady growth of our bilateral ties».

This way of addressing the relations between Beijing and Rome as starting from history and based on a strong friendship and mutual trust is typical of the today’s Sino-Italian bilateral relations. In fact, every new step achieved together is always presented as it has been made possible because of the shared past and mutual and friendly confidence. This perfectly fits with the thesis that I pointed out within this work, with the constructivist approach and with the aim of shedding light on the results of common shared past in order to explain the current relations. Of course, in drawing these conclusions it is necessary keep into consideration the boundaries constituted by the conditions that make it

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<sup>8</sup> Ambpechino.esteri.it. 2015. [online] Available at: [https://ambpechino.esteri.it/ambasciata\\_pecchino/resource/doc/2015/11/45mo\\_anniversario\\_relazioni\\_italia-cina\\_lettera\\_del\\_ministro\\_gentiloni\\_al\\_ministro\\_wang\\_yi.pdf](https://ambpechino.esteri.it/ambasciata_pecchino/resource/doc/2015/11/45mo_anniversario_relazioni_italia-cina_lettera_del_ministro_gentiloni_al_ministro_wang_yi.pdf) [Accessed 11 April 2020].

possible. The theme of the importance of culture will be deepened in the following paragraph, within the contribution of the interviews.



### **3.3. The Italian uniqueness among the other European Union founding states for its friendship with China and the importance of culture**

So far, this work has been aimed at giving an overview on the past 50 years of diplomatic relations between China and Italy. I pointed out the key moments of bilateral relations and the main reasons that have approximated and sometimes separated the two countries through the time. I also presented the main actors that promoted the Sino-Italian bilateral relations since the rapprochement until the present days, particularly underlining the role of exponents of the Socialist Party. Over the years, the two countries have manifested interest towards each other - even if for different reasons - and the events led to the establishment of good relations and friendship.

The Annual Development Report of Italy (2019-2020), namely the Chinese “Blue Book on Italy”, an important publication realized for those who work in the field of Sino-Italian bilateral relations in China, is a valid document that confirms my thesis and, from a Chinese perspective explores the Sino-Italian relations and opportunities for the future. Sun (2020) claims that «In the past 50 years, no matter how the international situation changed, the two countries have always upheld the principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win results, and gradually established a model of friendly relations between countries with different cultural background, different social systems, and different stages of economic development». Furthermore, the author explains and stress that fact that Italy and China, being two outstanding representatives of the Western and Eastern civilization, found in the cultural factor a major asset. Moreover, Sun (2020) shares my vision of bilateral relations according to which culture is one of the main drivers of improving the level of cooperation and exchanges in the future.

The cultural element, indeed, is one of the key concepts and common thread of this work, in line with the implementation of the Constructivist Theory and the Relational one. I argue that what makes the

Sino-Italian relation “special”, different and unique is the cultural link and the shared cultural heritage of the two countries, jointly with the important action implemented by some specific actors along the time. Beltrame, during the interview, remembered that in the “China Millennium Monument” in Beijing, erected in 2000 to commemorate the new Millennium, a great fresco represents the Chinese history from prehistoric to modern times and only two foreigners are represented: Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci. The two Italians are celebrated as individuals who significantly contributed to Chinese history.



Marco Polo, China Millennium Monument, 中华世纪坛.

Beijing World Art Museum



Matteo Ricci, China Millennium Monument, 中华世纪坛.

Beijing World Art Museum

This is only an example of the different kind of relation which links the two countries. The totality of the interviews agreed in defining the Sino Italian relation as “special”, confirming the main assumption of this work. What strongly contributes to outlining the uniqueness of the relation is culture. As theorized by constructivism, culture has everything to do with international relations and foreign policy, especially when considering a country such as China embedded within a Confucian context. It would be not possible, reductive and inaccurate to study the Sino Italian relations without considering contexts, actors, relations, culture and history and the China Millennium Monument is a clear demonstration.

Beltrame explained that Italy and China mutually recognize how deep is their cultural identity. Both Italy and China see each other as millennium civilizations, as two empires which had great world’s impacts. This aspect features the deep relation between the two and its distinctiveness, including the

importance of culture. Moreover, he argued that because of the great importance given by the Chinese to the Italian history, they also award Italy with a greater international role compared to the one that Italy actually has. Namely, politically speaking Italy is the Europe's fourth country behind Germany, France and England. Culturally speaking, Italy is a class of its own. Another reason, reported by Beltrame, that explains why culture makes the Sino-Italian relation special, is linked to the role that Italy had in raising awareness about China in the West. Specifically, through Marco Polo's book "The Million" – the very first book about China – Italy has been the first country in promoting knowledge about China in West world. Afterwards, Prospero Intorcetta, an Italian Jesuit missionary, has been the first Confucius's translator in West and together with the Jesuit's action contributed to illustrate and explain the Chinese Emperor to Italians. Similarly, Matteo Ricci studied the similarities between Italian and Chinese culture. Not only, the Italian Jesuit activity in China contributed to bringing to the country many innovations: astronomic, scientific and agricultural ones.

These are examples of how the cultural exchanges along the time still contribute to defining and characterizing today's kind of relationship between two countries.

Corrado Clini, as well, shared my hypothesis of the "special" relation between the two countries. He added that in terms of culture, science and politics Italy is considered by Chinese as a privileged counterpart. However, in the last years Italy is losing its privileged position because of its incapacity to take advantage of it. Clini also fully agreed on the relevance of culture; he argued that between the Italy and China exists a positive feeling. He stressed the importance of strong links between the universities as a fundamental asset for the improvement of relations. He also mentioned the positive role of the Chinese community in Italy as an important cultural factor. Therewith, he stressed how the "made in Italy" brand is highly appreciated both commercially and as world vision in China. According to him, thanks to the commonalities and to the shared history, Italy could play a more decisive role towards China and benefit from the existing "special" relation.

Francesco Sisci's consideration is similar to Clini's one. Namely, regarding the assumption on the special relation he said that it is true only in theory, because Italy never knew how to benefit from that and never implemented a serious and structured policy towards China. He compared Italy to an intelligent student who thinks he can avoid to study.

Yang Lin, who confirmed the existence of a special relation between Italy and China, differently from the other respondents to the interview, explained it looking at more recent events. For example, she said that what makes the relation special is the Italian signature of the MoU in 2019 – Italy was the first G7 Country to sign the document. Moreover, Italy was the first country which joined the Sino-Italian Intergovernmental Committee following the signature of the Sino-Italian Strategic Global Partnership in 2004. Finally, she noted that until 2020 the Sino-Italian Intergovernmental Committee already met ten times aiming to strength the ongoing bilateral relations. Regarding the question on the importance of culture as a factor of closeness between the two countries, she stressed the value of the long history which links the two countries and their cultural heritage. She also pointed out the importance of the cultural relations established soon after the PRC foundation in 1949, before the Sino-Italian rapprochement: those connections were fundamental to approximate Italy to China and vice versa. Yang finally added that from 1970 to today the cultural ties were numerous and important and contributed to the promotion of mutual understanding and consolidation of the bilateral relations.

Sun (2020) described the Sino-Italian cultural cooperation as the «highlight of the bilateral relations». She illustrated the cultural exchanges between the countries in the last fifty years as a «rich spiritual fulfilment». Italy and China, despite being the representants of the ancient Western and Eastern societies, are also on top of the raking for the number of UNESCO sites, 55 sites each. According to the author, this proximity in terms of culture can explain the reciprocal political attraction and the mutual respect. The cultural links constitute a solid basis for the enhancement of cooperation in all

sectors. Again, Sun (2020) considerations are in line with this thesis. Namely, what explains the “special” relation is culture and this creates great opportunities in term of politics and shared future. It is no coincidence that Italy was the first country that realized a cultural forum with China. Indeed, in 2014 Italy and China putted together a cultural forum aimed at strengthening cultural cooperation and organizing cultural exchanges. This initiative constitutes the first example and a new model of cultural cooperation between the EU and China.

Finally, it is worth underlining the growing Chinese interest towards Italy in terms of studies. As a product of the numerous agreements, specifically the 2004 Strategic Global Partnership, China counts on more and more numerous Italianists scholars. A clear example is given by the realization, for the first time, of the Chinese “Blue Book on Italy” – already mentioned in this work as a source of information. This is a testimony of the growing importance that Italy is acquiring in China, but also a clear sign of growing development opportunities for the country.

Despite the “special” relation, the fact that each time Italy was overtaken by other countries in terms of commerce and exchanges with China, can be explained by some structural factors within Italy. For example, the internal political instability that characterized the whole Italian First Republic, which led to a great discontinuity in the foreign policy and external action. Secondly, the fact that Italy has always been “a weak middle power and it had nothing special to offer to Beijing despite its technology” (Fardella, 2016).

When I refer to the Italian uniqueness in its relations with China, I refer to some specific players and to the cultural links as pointed out before. The capacity, demonstrated by some Italian politicians (such as Nenni, or De Michelis, but also exponents of the Christian Democracy such as Moro) but also businessmen, who had foreseen the Chinese potential before the others. Despite the fact that for some periods Italy was the first country in terms of trade and economic exchanges with China, this

condition did not last long. The uniqueness can be found mostly in the Italian diplomatic initiative towards China before the others, and its capacity to influence the other European countries in doing the same following the Italian paths towards China. The Chinese have also recognized this credit to Italy on official occasions such as the visit of the Chinese Premier Li Peng in 1992.

### **3.4. The possibility for Italy of being a “bridge” between the European Union and China and its limits**

Italy in more than one occasion played the role of the pioneer in approaching China and in promoting its inclusion within the international system. According to Fardella (2016), even if the Sino-Italian relations had always been perceived just as a peripheral aspect of the Cold War, Italy had an important role in favoring China's influence in the European region.

As I pointed out throughout this work, on more than one occasion Italy has already played the role of the “bridge” between China and Europe. According to Amighini et al. (2019), today Italy could play this role again by being a channel of promotion of a collective European action towards China.

This work until here has been aimed at describing which kind of relation consists between Italy and China, namely, to create a solid basis and knowledge to answer to this secondary research question: Has Italy the potential to be a bridge between the EU and China?

Given the kind of relation that exist between the two countries, I argue that Italy could have the potential to play the role of the bridge, but many obstacles exist and limits as well that will be explored. The content of this paragraph and the answer to this question will be mostly elaborated within the contributes and the answers to my semi-structured interviews, given the fact that the literature on this theme is almost absent.

The possibility of Italy being the bridge between the EU and the PRC today could be a direct consequence of the Italian signature of the MoU related to the realization of the BRI. In fact, a few days before President Xi Jinping visited Italy in 2019, the European Commission declared China as a “systemic rival” in the promotion of alternative models of governance. This situation made it clear



that the Italian decision of signing the MoU was an upstream choice within the EU panorama (Cuscito, 2019).

This hypothesis of Italy being the “bridge” has been repeated and underlined many times in the public speeches of the Italian politicians. But the views in relations to this theme are contradictory and unclear.

On one hand, looking at some official and unofficial declarations Italy is really putting its effort in assuming this role, both for fulfil and continuing to enhance its commitment towards China and for promoting its view within the EU institutions. For example, in a speech given by the Italian President of the Republic Mattarella in 2019 during a conference on the future of multilateralism, he criticized the EU for not having a clear and systemic course of action towards China, US and Russia. To face the problem, he suggested improving a common foreign policy and political economy within EU system. The conclusion of his speech was clear in claiming the role of Italy as a strong promoter of more cohesion and integration in order to let the UE to become a better and more credible international partner.

The same message was expressed by the words of Gentiloni reported by the China Daily in 2018. The Italian former Premier and Minister, referring to the BRI shed light on the need for a common European action toward the project, and in this context, Italy is the primary promoter of a common approach.

Finally, the concept of Italy being a bridge, according to AGI (Italian News Agency) (2019), has been expressed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping at the end of his visit to Italy in March 2019.

In general, most of the declarations and the optimism around this concept and possibility emerged soon after the Italian signature of the MoU.

However, in addition to all the declarations, Italy formally took this commitment during the 9th Meeting of the China-Italy Joint Government Committee held in Rome on 25 January 2019<sup>9</sup>. That occasion was mostly aimed at discussing the improvement of relations between China and the EU, and the Italian Foreign Minister, Enzo Moavero Milanesi, together with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi discussed the development of comprehensive China-EU relations and the implementation of the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.

Despite the encouraging words of political leaders both Italian and Chinese, the results of the semi-structured interviews are less encouraging. Specifically, the totality of interviews agreed on the fact that Italy could have the potential to play the role of the bridge between the EU and China but this does not mean that Italy can actually play that role.

The potential is given mostly because of the great and stable relation between the two countries. The relationship is grounded on mutual respect and trust which would be a good basis for Italy to take this role. On the other side, the great majority of the responses were uncertain about this. What emerged is mostly a difficulty of the Italian politicians to take action and to be more decisive within the EU.

For example, the Italian sinologist Francesco Sisci said that in theory Italy can play the role of the bridge but not in practice. Because Italy lost her capacity to be effective within the EU and does not even know how to be incisive with China.

Stefano Beltrame totally agreed on the fact that Italy has the potential to play this role, but he stated that in order to be successful a major investment would be needed. Corrado Clini is of the exact same opinion, in addition he said that the Chinese would be given to the Italians that role because of the trusting relation but, on the contrary, Italy has not been able to take it and put it in practice; paradoxically, Italy pulled back. According to him, Italy does not have the audacity needed to play

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<sup>9</sup> Esteri.it (2019) Joint Statement On The 9Th Meeting Of The China-Italy Joint Government Committee. [online] Available at: <https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2019/01/comunicato-congiunto.html> [Accessed 4 April 2020].

the role. In order to fix the situation, Italy should set up a specific policy towards China taking into account the differences in terms of politics and state organization but aimed at cooperating. Moreover, looking at the EU Italy should pose the question in terms of bilateral relations between two systems. According to Clini, in the present context, the country which more than the others is playing a decisive role towards China, the one that Italy could have played is Germany.

Differently from the other respondents, the Professor Yang Lin is more optimistic about the Italian potential. She explains her point of view by saying that in the past Italy has already played the role of the bridge. In particular when in the second half of the 1900, when Italy the EU Presidency, played a major role in the recovery of the China-EU relations and contributed to developing the cooperation between them. Moreover, she argued that today during the official high-level meetings between Italy and China, one of the main items on the agenda is exactly the discussion of the Italian role in promoting the development of the cooperation between the PRC and the EU. Furthermore, according to her, being Italy an important member state of the EU it can play the role of the bridge once again.

In brief, while the totality of the interviewed agreed on the Italian potentiality, they had different opinions on the actual possibilities to put in practice what potentially and theoretically is possible. Trying to address the reasons of the Italian limits in being more relevant and incisive in determining the Sino-European policies many assumptions were addressed during the interviews sessions.

First of all, according to Beltrame, one of the main reasons is related to the amount of the investments of the other countries. He argued that other countries invested in China much more than what Italy have done, as a consequence other European countries have a stronger role. This answer is very similar to the one given by Clini, who clearly said that Germany has taken this role from Italy trying to cooperate and mediate between the EU and China. In addition, Clini argued that while China gives to Italy an important role, Italy is not able to take advantage of it and clarified the concept with an example. In front of the Tsinghua University in Beijing, where he is Visiting Professor, has been built

the “Sino-Italian Ecological and Energy Efficient Building” by the Italian Architect Mario Cucinella thanks to a partnership between the Italian and the Chinese governments. That is the first eco-smart building, the product of an Italian eco-cooperation design which has been inaugurated in 2006. Not only the Obama’s Energy Minister in 2008 during the G8 meetings presented that project as the best example of sustainable architecture. In China that kind of architecture soon became a standard while Italy has never been able to promote and highlight that product both in China and in the world. Finally, another reason and explanation given by Clini is a “deficit in the ruling class”.

The Sisci explanation is somehow linked to this last statement, namely he argued that the major Italian limit is the chaos of the Italian state and the improvised approach towards China.

Another point raised to shed light on the Italian reluctance in playing a more relevant role in the present context is whether the limits can be linked to the dimensions of democracy, rule of law, human rights. Even on this question the answers were varied. According to Beltrame and Sisci these dimensions do not constitute a limit in the Italian foreign policy towards China. But it could be a limit if we consider Italy as being part of the EU. On the contrary, Clini said that they have an influence on the Italian action, but according to his vision Italy, instead of backing out should have played a mediation role for example in the case of Hong Kong.

Another aspect which is present and considered along the thesis is the influence of the international context. For example, I have pointed out how more than once Italy has been held back in its foreign policy towards China because of the international system of alliances, starting from the limits to the Italian recognition of the PRC. Starting from this assumption, I discussed within those surveyed whether the Italian limits could be explained again within the external influence of the EU or the US. On this point too feedbacks were different, namely all agreed on the fact that Italy is limited by external influence of the international system, but they disagree on who’s the major responsible.

In fact, according to Sisci, Italy is highly influenced and limited both by the EU and the US because it is part of the NATO and the EU. Instead, according to Beltrame what mostly influences the Italian

foreign policy towards China is the EU. On the contrary, according to Clini this relation has been mostly limited by the US influence over Italy.

In conclusion, the interview session confirmed and deepened on my intuition. Namely, Italy has the potential to play the role of the bridge between China and the EU. The potential is mostly given because of the strong bilateral relations and thanks to the “special” relation between the two countries. Moreover, because China would give this role to Italy and has already stressed the concept more than one time. On the other hand, looking at the practice, what emerged is that Italy did not took advantage of this possibility. Italy failed in creating a solid and clear foreign policy towards China, and as a consequence failed in presenting itself as the “bridge” within the EU. This reluctance has created more space for other EU member states to take action.

## **Considerations and horizons in the pandemic context**

This work has been realized during the period characterizes by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, the virus has produced deep changes within the International context and made the future far more unpredictable than it was.

China and Italy have been the first two countries to face the virus and since the beginning both have demonstrated cooperation one to another. Despite the losses in terms of economic exchanges, the friendly approach has not changed, both in terms of material aid, assistance and donations and in terms of political support. The arrival in Italy of the Chinese support teams of doctors has been an impressive example of aid and closeness.

According to Sun (2020) the solidarity demonstrated during the pandemic paved the way for increasing the cooperation and for more collaboration in the future. Even because for the post-Covid global asset, cooperation will be a must for the re-growth.

The uncertainties of the present prevent to make any assumption. But the aim of this work is not to make any prediction but to study the history in order to understand the present and the possible opportunities. What mainly emerged is a solid basis grounded on the importance of shared culture and friendly relations, with many limits given mostly by the Italian reticence in outlining a clear program towards China caused by the instable political class. Clearly from this thesis emerged the Italian potential – at least in theory – to do more, to play the role of the bridge once again, and to take advantage of the “special” relationship with China.

## Chapter conclusion

This chapter considers the Sino-Italian bilateral relations in the more recent period, namely since the 1990s. If the 1980s has been considered as the “golden age” of Sino-Italian relations, the same cannot be said for the 1990s. This is mostly due to the Italian passage shift from its First Republic to the Second one and its turbulent overturning of the whole political system. In short, the political figures and parties that until that moment had dealt with China, such as the PSI, disappeared. This shock within the Italian political panorama had its negative consequences in the Sino-Italian bilateral relations. In fact, the great projects of investments planned at the beginning of the 1990s vanished and so part of the Chinese trust over Italy.

Despite the great difficulties, soon Italy returned to prove its constant interest towards China. Indeed 2004 can be considered as a real turning point thanks to the signature of the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”. Since then, the bilateral actions are included in a more global view. Moreover, another fundamental step has been the Italian signature of the MoU in 2019: the unique decision of Italy to sign this document has been criticized within the European context but is a proof of the good will demonstrated by Italy in the history and that has been widely addressed in this work.

Additionally, this chapter makes a great investigation over the importance of culture in the Sino-Italian relations thanks to contribution of a number of interviews. What emerged is that culture is what makes the relationship between the two countries so deep and important and it paved the way for political and economic cooperation. Moreover, culture and shared history is what distinguishes the Sino-Italian bilateral relations from the other European countries and makes it special.

Moreover, I explored the second research question, namely whether Italy has the potential to be a bridge between China and the EU. In order to answer, even if only partially, to this question and to demonstrate the effective possibility for Italy to play this role, have been highlighted the moments in

which Italy has already played this role, but also a number of official declarations in which Italy express its aims to perceive this goal have been considered.

Finally, a brief consideration on the present context characterized by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has the aim to reflect on the future opportunities.



# Conclusion

The thesis is aimed to answer the following research question: how the history of the diplomatic relations between China and Italy influences the current relations by distinguishing the Italian case from the other main European countries? The approach followed is both historical and qualitative, and it includes a number of interviews that helped me to explore and to answer the research question. This work starts from the hypothesis that the peculiarity of the Italian case lies on the coherence expressed in its foreign policy towards China and in the important cultural link that exists between the two.

The time period considered starts from the 1950s, namely the years in which the PRC recognition started to be considered within the Italian political panorama, and the “China question” grew within the Country. Especially, the first promoter of this idea has been Pietro Nenni, one of the most influential Italian politicians of the 1900s and the case study and common thread of this work. The analysis arrives to the present aiming to answer, even if not completely, to the second research question: whether Italy has the potential to assume the role of the bridge in promoting the enhancement of the Sino-EU relations.

The historical analysis shed light on the most important moments of the Sino-Italian shared history. In particular, I identified four main moments that are especially explanatory of the research question. The first one is the Italian recognition of the PRC and the rapprochement. Italy was not the first European country to recognize China looking at the timing, but the reason and actors who led to the achievement of this goal are singular compared to the case of France and UK who recognized the PRC earlier. In fact, Pietro Nenni, who has been the main promoter of the rapprochement from the Italian side, was moved by both personal values such as the necessity to include into the international system the Chinese population, and by the intuition of the great potential of great country as China. Moreover, he was particularly aimed at finding an alternative to the bipolar international system and

space of independence from the US. It is a matter of fact that the Italian example was followed by a number of other countries in Europe.

The second important moment is the so called “golden age of bilateral relations” when Italy during the 1980s has been in the front line in the creation of three bilateral agreements embedded in a program of Development Cooperation for supporting China in its growth.

Thirdly, Italy played a decisive role helping China exiting the international isolation which followed the Tiananmen crisis in 1989. At that time, Italy having the Presidency of the European Council, demonstrated its solidarity through the Chinese population by promoting the end of the embargo and favoring the Chinese inclusion in the international system. Between the 1980s and the first years of the 1990s Italy have been the first country involved in the process of Chinese modernization with some great projects and investments. Soon the Italian example has been followed and imitated by other countries, who even took this role from Italy because of its internal political instabilities.

Additionally, in recent years more than one Italian action towards China marked a distinction from the other main EU countries. For example, the institution of the Comprehensive Global Strategy in 2004 with the creation of a joint committee of the Foreign Ministry to benefit the bilateral relations. This has been the first example of this kind of agreement. Even the creation in 2014 of the Sino-Italian cultural forum has been an innovation and a new model of cooperation in the field of culture. Moreover, Italy really differentiates itself within the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019 inaugurating a whole new period of cooperation. In this case Italy not only has been the first among the EU founding member to sign the MoU but also the first G7 Country.

These are only the four most egregious examples of the Sino-Italian bilateral relations of the last 70 years. In general, what emerges by the research is a constant interest in enhancing the dialogue and the cooperation. The coherence in the approach is the main characteristic that emerges from the study.

On the other hand, the events exposed represents also the Italian potential in distinguishing its action from the other countries in order to keep its position of continuous dialogue with China. In addition, to distinguishing its action from the others Italy, in the same events recalled above, demonstrated to have already played the role of the bridge by being a pioneer State in at least four occasions. I argue that this potential can be utilized again in the near future especially in the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative which is a great opportunity of interconnectivity shaped on the necessities of a sustainable development based on the model of win-win cooperation between states.

The interview's contributions enriched this work with great testimony aimed at investigating the main reasons behind the friendly and unique relation between Italy and China. The investigation's results matched with my hypothesis and helped in reaching an articulated answer to the research questions. Namely, the uniqueness of the Italian relation with China has been confirmed, and the reasons lies not only on the coherence of the Italian action over the time, which of course is important, but also on the cultural links. China looks at Italy as a friendly country which has demonstrated solidarity but also as a very similar country in terms of history: the fact that Italy and China are both millenary societies which have marked the history of the Western and Eastern cultures is of great importance. Essentially, the real peculiarity and what gives to Italy the possibility to both play the, above discussed, role of the bridge but also being a special partner for China lies in cultural factors and on kind of friendly relation built over the time.

# Interviews

Antonio Tedesco, Scientific Director of Pietro Nenni Foundation – 21/05/2020, Rome, Italy

Corrado Clini, Former Italian Minister of the Environment, Professor at Tsinghua University –  
24/11/2020, Rome, Italy

Antonio Sisci, journalist and sinologist – 02/01/2021, Rome, Italy

Stefano Beltrame, Italian Diplomat, former General Consul of Italy in Shanghai and currently  
Diplomatic advisor of the Italian Foreign Ministry 13/01/2021, Rome, Italy

Yang Lin, Professor of Italian Studies at Nankai University – 25/01/2021, Rome Italy – Beijing,  
China

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## **Summary of the Achievements**

This thesis constitutes the final product of the two years Double Degree Program in International Relations between LUISS University in Rome and China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing.

Given the possibility to study both in Italy and China, this work is aimed at considering and deepening the bilateral relations between the two countries. Beginning with an historical overview, the paper is intended to delineate and shed light on the kind of bilateral relations established from the 1950s until today. The investigation of the main stages of the Sino-Italian relations has been helpful to explain the current situation and future perspectives.

Specifically, this work looks at the Sino-Italian relations starting from the 1950s, namely the years in which Italy started to consider the PRC recognition and its implementation. A specific focus is posed on the role played by Pietro Nenni, one of the most important and influential Italian political actors of the 1900s and the first person who promoted the Italian recognition of the PRC and the end of the Chinese isolation within the international context. The role of the values and actions represented by Pietro Nenni constitute a case study and a common thread in establishing my major argument of this thesis.

The theoretical framework implemented through this work is the Constructivist Theory applied to foreign policy analysis. Moreover, despite considering only western-developed constructivism, I applied also the Relational Theory developed by the Chinese scholar Yanqing Cin in his book “A Relational Theory of World Politics” edited by Cambridge University Press in 2018.

Choosing Constructivism as the theoretical framework is particularly useful for this specific work because it considers human actions as determined by factors such as history, identity, society’s values, institutions, and relations. As this work starts from a historical basis, constructivism is suitable to explain how certain actors and historical moments influenced today’s outlook of the Sino-Italian relations.

The two main innovations advanced by Constructivism in the study of IR, and the reasons why this theoretical framework is the most suitable for this analysis are: firstly, the fact that Constructivism does not consider States as unique and main actors; secondly it overcomes the rationalist paradigm. If the mainstream theories consider states as rational and self-interested actors, Constructivism starts to consider the relevance of individual actors in shaping international relations. Moreover, it considers ideas, culture, and historical backgrounds as the main drivers of human action. In short, Constructivism understands the world as socially constructed.

The further consideration of non-western constructivism, the above-mentioned Relational Theory, makes this work completer and more accurate in the analysis of two countries deeply embedded within two distant contexts and way of thinking. The constructivist social theory developed by Yanqing Cin is grounded on the concept of relationality and has the aim of being an alternative theory to the mainstream ones in the study of International Relations, namely a non-Western based social theory with a different metaphysical hard-core component. Moreover, this theory is set up based on Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture. The Relational Theory is a more appropriate tool to study and understand IR and the bilateral relations between Italy and China even from a Chinese perspective.

Regarding the methodology applied, it is descriptive, analytical and qualitative, in conformity with the Constructivist Theoretical framework which aims to interpret social facts, rather than simply describing them. Archival research, secondary sources and primary sources have been used along with the thesis. In fact, the contribution of several semi-structured interviews promoted a deeper interpretation of facts and events considering thoughts, personal views and ideas of significant scholars, diplomats and politicians. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to collect open-ended data particularly useful in the process of enhancing the qualitative analysis. The extensive knowledge of



the subject from the respondents enriched this research with valuable testimonies and unexplored topics regarding Sino-Italian relations.

Throughout the thesis, special attention is posed at events that more than others are explicative for the aim of this work. In other words, certain precise periods/actions/facts are more in-depth analyzed to understand whether their impact is still vivid today.

Besides, archive research has been applied mostly in the monographic part related to Pietro Nenni.

The unexpected outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic while this paper has been written, constitutes one of the main research limitations, given the quick changes and the narrow possibilities to foresee the near future.

This work is aimed at answering a main research question: how does the history of diplomatic relations between Italy and China influence the current relations, differentiating the Italian case from the other main European countries?

The main argument of the thesis lies in the fact that Sino-Italian bilateral relations and Italian approach towards China can be considered peculiar and unique compared to the other main European countries. The distinctiveness of the Italian approach does not refer to the number of economic exchanges, nor in the primacy of the diplomatic recognition of the PRC; but in the coherence demonstrated over the years in promoting a constant dialogue since the beginning of the official diplomatic relations, 50 years ago.

In detail, I considered that the uniqueness of Italy for its approach towards China lied both in the coherence expressed in its foreign policy towards China and in the important cultural links that exist between the two.

Moreover, I explored the role of history and culture in shaping bilateral relations as factors of closeness and political affinity.

Furthermore, a parallel research question has been considered and explored, namely whether, as long as the key factors of the Italian approach can be maintained, Italy can play the role of the “bridge” between China and the EU.

To answer the research question and investigate whether the main hypothesis can be verified, this work has been divided into three parts or chapters.

The first chapter describes the political, historical, and cultural situation characterizing the beginning of the 1950s. At that time, diplomatic relations were deeply influenced by the Cold War and the system of alliances among states. Italy was linked to the Western Block and its external actions were influenced and limited by the United States. Nonetheless, Pietro Nenni, leader of the Italian Socialist Party, was starting to set grounds for the recognition of the PRC. Investigating the reasons that led Nenni to push for the Sino-Italian rapprochement, I find that, firstly, he saw it as an opportunity to put an end to the bipolarism that was characterizing the international panorama during the Cold War. Secondly, he was profoundly against the Chinese isolation: morally speaking he thought that not taking into consideration such a big country in terms of population was an error. Thirdly, Nenni foresaw the great potential of China and understood the importance of entertaining good relations with the Country.

Moreover, 1955 can be considered a turning point in the process of rapprochement between Italy and China. In fact, Pietro Nenni under the invitation of Zhu Enlai flew to Beijing where he met, among others, the Chairman Mao. This trip represented the first time that an important Italian politician was invited to China.

In the second chapter, I start by shedding light on the specific years of the Sino-Italian rapprochement and the PRC admission to the UN. Namely in the resolution of the China question in Italy. The event is studied by taking into consideration the limitations and the difficulties that Italy faced because of

its membership to the Atlantic Alliance. With the purpose of achieving the two important goals, Pietro Nenni's actions have been central as, by taking advantage of his nomination as Foreign Minister, he decided to unilaterally (without consulting the Chinese counterpart) declare to the parliament the Italian willingness to recognize the PRC, forcing the procedures. Subsequently, Italy and China started their official diplomatic relations. Generally speaking, during the last years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution that match with Italian years of uncertainty, the exchanges quietly grew. However, the highest moment of bilateral relations, namely "the golden years", arrived with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the Deng Xiaoping reforms from the Chinese side, and with specular innovation in the Italian foreign policy characterized by the implementation of its commitment in Development Cooperation. Indeed, three triennial plans were approved for the cooperation between Italy and China.

In the last chapter, I describe the bilateral relations in recent years and the present context. Within the beginning of the 1990s, despite the "golden age" was came to term, the Italian Socialist Party within the figure of De Michelis the then Foreign Minister continued to implement the same kind of politics based on the values proposed by Nenni. Of great importance was Italian policy aimed at helping China after the Tiananmen crisis in 1989 to end its international isolation. Moreover, his action was meant at supporting and encouraging China in its modernization process. Furthermore, considering the more recent bilateral relations, we can identify two years that marked a turning point in bilateral relations. The first one is 2004, a year in which the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement was signed. This agreement contributed to enhancing the quality of the Sino-Italian dialogue to another level, which since then involves the discussion of global issues, the China-EU relations, and multilateral issues. More recently, 2019 has to be considered another important step because of the Italian signature of the Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. This made Italy the first G7 member and the first country among the EU founding members to sign such an agreement. In addition, this chapter contains the great majority of

the considerations that emerged within the interviews. It explores the fundamental importance of culture in characterizing the Sino-Italian relations and future possibilities. The theme of Italy being a bridge between China and the EU is deeply explored, but also a brief reflection on the pandemic implications is present.

The results of the qualitative analysis, achieved through the study of secondary and primary sources, confirmed the initial research hypothesis. In other words, it emerged that Italy has a singular relation with China due to a number of reasons. Firstly, what makes this relationship unique are their shared cultural and historical links. Even today, Italian remarkable actors such as Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci, between many others, are still commemorated for their determinant role in explaining the Chinese culture in the West. Moreover, the memory of the ancient Silk Road today inspires the new BRI project. In short, the great number of links to the past are relevant in defining the Chinese foreign policy towards Italy and the good consideration that China has upon Italy today.

Secondly, of great importance for the current Sino-Italian bilateral relations is the coherence demonstrated by Italy through history. In fact, Italy has always supported Chinese growth and inclusion within the international system by following the values and principles firstly identified by Nenni 70 years earlier. Moreover, the actions implemented by the Italian Socialist Party, both with Pietro Nenni and Gianni De Michelis are still rewarded and remembered by the Chinese authorities. In other words, what became apparent during this analysis is that “China has a good memory” and so it remembers the commitment shown by Italy in the past: this to underline the relevance of relationality in characterizing this relationship.

Lastly, cultural relations, as well, are a key element which enhances the quality of bilateral relations. The fact that China and Italy are two of the most ancient civilizations in the world, and the massive quantity of artistic and cultural sites in the two countries are common points and matters of closeness and affinity. The mutual cultural attraction provides a great opportunity for strengthening relations. A proof is the realization of the “Sino-Italian cultural forum” in 2014, and the appointment of the

year 2020 as the “Sino-Italian year of Culture and Tourism” (which has been postponed to 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

In the process of answering the second research question “Has Italy the potential to play the role of bridge between China and the EU?”, the linked hypothesis has been confirmed as well. In this case, given the limited available literature on the issue, the primary sources have been the most explicative ones.

The historical analysis has shown that Italy has already played the above mentioned “bridge” role in the past more than once. Namely, differentiating itself in its action towards China and by taking individual decisions in its foreign policy, diverging from both the EU and the US influences and preferences. Notably, the Sino-Italian rapprochement is itself a prime example, together with the Italian effort to reintegrate China within the international community after the Tiananmen crisis. In the recent years, again, Italy distinguished itself by taking action in 2004 with the institution of the Comprehensive Global Strategy and in 2019 when Italy has been the first country amongst the G7, and the EU member states to sign the MoU on the BRI.

All these events testify that Italy has the potential to play the role of the “bridge”, given that it has already played it, but also because China would agree, thanks to the great political relation and the cultural affinity. On the other hand, especially from the interviews several challenges emerged, precluding Italy from having a more significant and decisive role in this direction. The main problems and limits can be conducted to the Italian political instability and its failure in creating and addressing a clear and rigorous foreign policy towards China. More obstacles come from the Italian membership to the EU and to the NATO, which obviously limits its political sphere of action in foreign policy.

Hence, even if the main hypothesis of the thesis are confirmed and Italy could have the potential to play the role of the “bridge”, this is not currently verified due to the Italian inability to take advantage of its unique relationship with China.

Despite the consequences brought by the Coronavirus pandemic, that make the future of international relations unpredictable, the achievements and the findings of this work remain valid. Indeed, the cultural links, the affinity between the two countries, the memory of the solidarity demonstrated in the past, represent a solid basis for strong bilateral relations grounded on cooperation. Undoubtedly, from the Italian side a more decisive, clear and linear approach towards China will be needed in order to enhance the ongoing exchanges and to take advantage of its mediating role between the East and the West.