

MA in International Relations

Chair of International Current Affairs: Understanding Our World

Beyond ‘*Telling China’s Story Well*’:
An Analysis of Chinese Public Diplomacy
Strategies in Italy

Silvia Menegazzi

SUPERVISOR

Giuseppe Scognamiglio

CO-SUPERVISOR

Sara Alesi

CANDIDATE

To Mum, Dad, Chiara, and Beatrice.

To their love and sacrifices.

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Acronyms and Initialisms

Acronym/Initialism	Definition
1G	First generation
2G	Second generation
AGCOM	Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni
AGI	Agenzia Giornalistica Italia
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ANSA	Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata
BREIP	Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCCC	China Communications Construction Company
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CDP	Cassa Depositi e Prestiti
CeSIF	Centro Studi per l'Impresa
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CI	Confucius Institute
CMG	China Media Group
CONATEL	Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones
CONSOB	Commissione Nazionale per le Società e la Borsa
COPASIR	Comitato parlamentare per la sicurezza della Repubblica
COSCO	China Ocean Shipping Company
CPD	Central Propaganda Department
CRI	China Radio International
CSFM	Common Shared Future for Mankind
DSR	Digital Silk Road
EC	European Community
EEAS	European External Action Service
ENI	Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
Fiat	Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino
FIFA	International Federation of Association Football
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
i4t	Infrastructure for tomorrow
ICCF	Italy China Council Foundation
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
M5S	Movimento 5 Stelle
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OBOR	One Belt One Road
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano
PM	Prime Minister

PRC	People's Republic of China
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano
RAI	Radiotelevisione italiana
ROC	Republic of China
RT	Russia Today
S&T	Science & Technology
SCIO	State Council Information Office
TIM	Telecom Italia
UGIC	Unione Giovani Italo-Cinesi
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNIIC	Unione Imprenditori Italia-Cina
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Relevance of the topic

Over the past decades, China has been enhancing its confidence on the world stage. While in 2004, Joseph Nye Jr. predicted that, despite its high annual growth rates “China has a long way to go” in the challenge to become a global power (Nye, 2004), China’s development has been far more rapid than expected. Notwithstanding its authoritarian party-state system, China has become the world’s second-largest economy and a strategic competitor to liberal democracies all over the world (Wu, 2019). However, playing a growing leading role in regions where the United States is withdrawing, “China needs to reduce fears of its rise”, persuading foreign audiences “that it is willing and able to take responsibility in global affairs” and addressing “deteriorating views” worldwide (d’Hooghe, 2021).

Especially after Xi Jinping became the Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2013, China’s media strategies have widely been at the centre of heated academic debates all over the world (Negro, 2022). In a speech pronounced by President Xi at the Conference on National Propaganda and Ideological Work on August 19th, 2013, the CCP Secretary General said that “we must strive to move international communications capacity construction forward, innovate foreign propaganda methods, strengthen discourse system construction, strive to forge new concepts, new categories and new expressions that circulate between China and the outside world, tell China’s story well, disseminate China’s voice well, and strengthen our discourse power internationally” (Creemers, 2014). As a result, Chinese media outlets were strongly encouraged to extend their broadcasting out of national borders by accurate selecting and filtering the contents and to make those contents appealing to the new local audiences. In Xi’s speech, great emphasis was put on the slogan “to tell Chinese stories well” (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*). Indeed, since that moment, it has been reported an evolution in China’s public diplomacy efforts which have been ever more oriented towards “telling” rather than “listening”, as well as being more confident, positive, and active (Zhao K., 2019). When this speech was drafted, the lexicon was not casually chosen. The word “story” does not refer to any generic historiographic product, but it describes fiction and real narrative productions, capable to both attract and influence audiences (Miranda, 2020). Moreover, the adverb *hao* was intended as to mean “correct”, and hence, the whole phrase would indicate the need of conveying Chinese stories so as it correctly mirrors the vision of the party. This means, therefore, that stories do not necessarily have to adhere to reality: their job is to comply with the creation of an image of the country which has to be internationally positive and

that conveys explicit messages about future objectives and action plans even if that is done by altering incongruous, awkward, or unpleasing facts.

One of the crucial components of a country's public diplomacy plan is its soft power, especially one that emphasises cultural heritage and economic successes, which are typically conveyed through complex and effective media strategies by both governmental and non-governmental organisations. However, since the publication of the report by Ludwig and Walker, *The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence*, in 2017, more scholars have pointed to how Chinese public diplomacy efforts tend rather to be of a "sharp" and aggressive nature and would thus be better conceptualised and described by the notion of "sharp power". According to the definition provided by Ludwig and Walker, this phrase indicates the efforts of authoritarian regimes to pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and informational environments in the targeted countries, by means of public diplomacy strategies that centre on distraction and manipulation (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Hence, by exploiting a "glaring asymmetry" these repressive regimes are taking advantage of the openness of democratic systems abroad to shape public opinions and perceptions around the world. However, especially in an era of hyperglobalisation, these "sharp" tactics are ever harder to detect, and would thus pose an alarming threat to the health and safety of our democracies.

Considering that the People's Republic of China (PRC) today is both a key global actor and an authoritarian regime where freedom of expression and human rights are limited, developing a comprehensive and deep understanding of its public diplomacy strategies becomes ever more paramount. Indeed, the ideological background of China is functional to mould national and international communication through a sophisticated system of online manipulation that includes a manifold and broad censoring apparatus to monitor and control both public and private departments (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Due to its significant rising economic power, it is natural for China to look for a stronger presence in the international arena. However, the search for a growing and more impactful influence on the international scene could become problematic when Beijing strives to shape the international system to make it more "with Chinese Characteristics".

This notwithstanding, it is still deemed unlikely that Western countries will soon consider China's authoritarian regime as the world next hegemon. At the moment, the Red Dragon still worries Western audiences, more than it attracts them, since "its autocratic political system, its civil society suffocated by censorship, surveillance and repression are drying up the creativity of Chinese culture and hardly instigating the admiration of foreign populations" (Boisseau du Rocher and Dubois de Risque, 2019). Therefore, it is believed that it will be hard for China to replace the

United States as an international leader unless it convinces global elites and masses that authoritarian systems are the winning formula against the inefficiencies and defaults of liberal democracies (The Economist, 2018). However, this way of understanding China's attractiveness and soft power as ineffective is failing to grasp how the PRC is indeed generating attraction precisely by offering a viable alternative to the West and its values and by using sharp power. Hence, studying China's public diplomacy strategies as having soft power characteristics seems not to be the good reading key for evaluating China's international influence. Rather, by adopting a sharp-power perspective, it could be easier to understand the way China has adapted its outward facing policies to wield influence and challenge liberal democracies worldwide.

1.2 Research question, Methodology, and Limitations

The goal of this work is to evaluate the strategies of Chinese public diplomacy in Italy, by analysing them in terms of soft and sharp power and answer to the following questions: *To what extent can Chinese public diplomacy strategies in Italy be classified as sharp power efforts? Which are the main fields and actors which contribute to the development of Chinese public diplomacy, and how can Italy counter-react a potential sharp power threat?* I will argue that even though Sino-Italian relationships are well developed, this does not imply that Italy should not consider Beijing's messages in an uncritical way.

Overall, this thesis adopts a qualitative case study approach supported by process tracing to investigate the strategies and instruments of Chinese public diplomacy in Italy. The study combines analysis of primary and secondary sources, like scholarly articles. Primary sources include official communications from both Chinese and Italian leaderships and political institutions; speeches and press conferences by Chinese and Italian officials; memoranda, agreements, and bilateral declarations, particularly those related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In parallel, a media content analysis has been conducted across major Italian outlets, focusing on the coverage of Chinese initiatives and messaging; shifts in framing over time; presence of recurring narratives. In addition, semi-structured interviews have been carried out with selected experts and stakeholders including Italian diplomats, scholars of international relations, Sino-Italian affairs, and media studies, representatives of Chinese cultural or educational institutions in Italy as well as those of diaspora associations. On a broader plane, interview questions explore:

- a) perceptions of the nature China's communication strategies;
- b) impact of key diplomatic episodes;
- c) interpretation of China's long-term strategies in Italy.

Therefore, the case study method enables an in-depth, context-specific investigation, while process tracing allows for a systematic reconstruction of the causal mechanisms through which public diplomacy efforts are formulated, implemented, and potentially influence Italian perceptions and/or policy decisions. In this context, therefore, process tracing helps gather together events, institutional decisions, and narrative shifts that define China's public diplomacy trajectory in Italy. It thus facilitates the analysis of both observable actions – such as official statements and public campaigns by both Chinese and Italian leadership – and more implicit dynamics – such as influence through cultural institutions, elite co-optation, and stealth economic practices.

Italy serves as a particular salient case in the research on the controversy between Chinese soft and sharp power. Indeed, in 2019 Italy was the first G7 country to join the BRI, China's colossal infrastructure investments which aims to enhance connectivity, trade, and communication across Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America (Jie, 2021). Italy's decision to join the BRI sparked several criticisms and calls for attention to potential Chinese malign influence, and this is why Italy is a unique site for observing Chinese public diplomacy in a Western democratic context.

All interviews have been conducted in accordance with ethical research standards, with informed consent and full anonymity where explicitly declined consent to be identified. Public documents and media sources are cited appropriately. The research maintains an objective stance, acknowledging the political sensitivity of the topic while striving for balanced analysis. However, it must be recognised that the study is subject to certain limitations. In particular:

- a) access to decision-making processes within Chinese or Italian institutions may be limited, especially considering the high degree of sensitivity of the topic and the controversy surrounding the issue of sharp power;
- b) the interpretation of media and narrative shifts carries a degree of subjectivity – this is true especially in the interviews;
- c) the effectiveness of public diplomacy is difficult to measure definitively, and causal inferences through process tracing rely on the availability and credibility of sources;
- d) the linguistic competences of the author do not include Chinese and so the analysis of PRC's official statements and Chinese news articles have necessitated automatic translation by online translation services which may result in a potential lack of accuracy;

Despite these limitations, the combination of process tracing, document analysis, and expert interviews provides a solid methodological foundation for triangulating and understanding the dynamics of Chinese public diplomacy in Italy.

1.3 Structure of the study

In order to answer to the research question, this study will be divided into several parts.

In the second chapter, the concepts of soft and sharp power will be presented, from the initial formulation provided by Joseph Nye Jr. to the latest evolution in the current scenario. More specifically, the role and importance of soft power in public diplomacy strategies will be analysed, together with its transition into sharp power. This notion will thus be problematised so as to understand why sharp power efforts do pose a threat to democratic systems. Moreover, the authoritarian sharp power toolkit will be further reviewed with a focus on propaganda, disinformation, and censorship as they are deemed to provide the building blocks of a sharp power strategy.

The third chapter will include more in-depth research on the existing literature regarding the hidden attractiveness of the PRC and its unique application of soft power “with Chinese Characteristics”. The specific elements of China’s public diplomacy will be thus explored, as well as the various fields in which Chinese diplomacy has been applied. The chapter is five-fold: while the first section introduces to the integration of soft power in China, the three following sections delve into the specific aspects of Chinese public diplomacy, analysing cultural and educational diplomacy, media and digital diplomacy, and economic and political diplomacy. The chapter will be concluded by showing the critical perspective around Chinese soft power, presenting the so-called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy so popular in Western scholarship focused on China’s public diplomacy. Indeed, the last section of the chapter poses more critically the question of sharp power with Chinese Characteristics.

Chapter four will consist of a brief account of the bilateral relations between the PRC and Italy. The Sino-Italian relations are deeply rooted in history, since the two countries have started significant trade exchanges, already during the Roman Empire (Conti, Negro, Omodeo, 2021). These have however evolved so as to encompass today a wide array of areas, spanning from culture to economy to technology. As briefly mentioned above, the most recent and most newsworthy advancement of Sino-Italian relations was seen in the evolution of the Belt and Road Initiative. As Italy rushed its withdrawal from the initiative in 2023, despite its former enthusiastic commitment to the project through the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding, a brief digression on the rise and fall of the BRI in Italy could shed light on an important component of China’s diplomatic efforts as well as its perception in the European country.

Lastly, a study of the current Italian situation is provided. The actions, the impacts, and the interconnections of various actors will be explored, and China's media footprint in Italy will be scrutinised. To do so, the elements analysed are Confucius Institutes (CIs) and their controversial nature of potentially both soft power and sharp power tools; the Chinese diaspora in Italy which interacts with local realities through civil society and university associations; the relation between Italian and Chinese news and media agencies, since media outlets do have a key strategic role in building a bridge between Italy and China. The analysis of these actors will be carried out through a combination of both field and desk research, which will prioritise a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. More specifically, this context-specific analysis will be carried out after having carried out interviews to both Italian and Chinese people working in the key institutions and associations where public diplomatic strategies are more developed. The experts being interviewed will be selected so as to provide an extensive and variegated critical view of the Chinese presence in Italy. Therefore, the resulting interviews are supposed to give even contrasting opinions, which would highlight the complexity of the task of classifying an effort of public diplomacy as inherently soft or sharp in its essence.

Finally, after investigating whether specific Chinese public diplomatic strategies in Italy are of a soft or sharp power nature, final considerations and recommended actions to tackle the authoritarian threat will be provided.

In an era of rising authoritarianism across the globe, liberal democracies are asked to demonstrate their efficiency and the solidity of their foundational values in providing successful and effective answers to the most pressing global challenges, from global warming, to poverty, to social inequalities. World democracies, Italy included, must rethink about their role and be reminded of their major comparative advantage over autocracies, that is, their capability to guarantee education and innovation, demonstrating that an open and equal socio-political system can truly offer better opportunities for everybody (Ansalone, 2021).

Chapter 2 - *Soft power* and *sharp power*: The role and impact of public diplomacy in an era of rising authoritarianism

In the “world of post-modern transnational relations” (d’Hooghe, 2007, p.5), the struggle for global influence is no longer confined to military or economic might. Rather, the battling ground has moved to the arena of ideas, evolving into a contest for ‘winning hearts and minds’ of not only domestic, but also foreign audiences. In this context, public diplomacy, intended as the strategic effort to communicate and engage with foreign audiences, has long been a critical tool in the exercise of international influence. Rooted in “soft power”, public diplomacy does therefore play a crucial role in advancing national interests through initiatives that allow states to cultivate cultural, ideological, and political appeal on the world stage. The concept of “soft power” was first coined by Joseph Nye Jr. (Nye, 1990; 2004) to indicate the form of power which “arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye, 2004, p.X).

Nevertheless, as authoritarian regimes grow more assertive, public diplomacy is being increasingly challenged by the rise of what the scholars Walker and Ludwig in 2017 have termed “sharp power” (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). This concept describes the efforts of authoritarian states to manipulate, coerce, and distort information and democratic processes in democratic countries. Hence, this manipulative approach to public engagement would constitute a direct challenge to the democratic ideals traditionally associated with soft power. Unlike the latter, sharp power is not about attraction but subversion; it aims at penetrating and manipulating foreign societies to serve authoritarian interests.

This chapter will explore the evolving role of public diplomacy in the context of rising authoritarianism. To do so, the fundamental differences between soft and sharp power will be examined, as well as the ways in which public diplomacy can be used as both a constructive and disruptive force. Salience will be given to how authoritarian states, in particular Russia and China, have weaponised information in the digital age. Focusing on disinformation, propaganda, and censorship, it will be explored how sharp power tactics threaten the integrity of democratic governance and the future of international relations. Indeed, as public diplomacy becomes an increasingly contested space for narratives, understanding its dual use as both an instrument of attraction and manipulation is essential to navigate the complex dynamics of international current affairs.

2.1 What is soft power and how it fits public diplomacy strategies

Soft power has become a cornerstone of public discourse, ever since its first coinage in 1990 by the Harvard professor Joseph Nye Jr. Already in his early publications on the topic, he argued that power comes in many guises and always depends on the context in which the relationship between at least two actors exist (Nye, 2004). Even though power can be generally defined as “the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants” (Nye, 2004, p.2), and it generally assumed to coincide with the ownership of resources like extensive territory, large populations, natural resources, military force, this might not be enough: indeed, “those best endowed with power do not always get the outcomes they want” (Nye, 2004, p.3). This paradox is thus explained by the “second face of power”, for which in world politics a country might obtain the results it aims at because other countries “admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it” (Nye, 2004, p.5). Hence, the expression “soft power” illustrates the ability of moulding and shaping the preferences of others.

Soft power is the ability of states to fulfil their interests and desired outcomes not through violence or threats, but through seduction and attraction. In the world of international relations, soft power points to the capacity of a country to persuade other states to adhere to a system of norms and institutions aligned to its own strategic interests (Messa, 2018). In so doing, efficient soft power strategies would increase the legitimacy of a state in the eyes of the broader international community. This is due to the fact that what the recipient thinks is crucial in deploying soft power, since social interactions determine the success of power strategies based on attraction and persuasion.

In the international arena, outcomes can be obtained in a variety of ways. Indeed:

“You can command me to change my preferences and do what you want by threatening me with force or economic sanctions. You can induce me to do what you want by using your economic power to pay me. You can restrict my preferences by setting the agenda in such a way that my more extravagant wishes seem too unrealistic to pursue. Or you can appeal to a sense of attraction, love, or duty in our relationship and appeal to our shared values about the justness of contributing to those shared values and purposes” (Nye, 2004, pp.6-7).

This is what distinguishes hard power from soft power, which are two sides of the same coin as they both refer to the achievement of one’s purpose by affecting the behaviour of others. As Table 1 illustrates, the two lie on a continuum from coercion to economic inducement – typically associated with coercive power – to agenda setting to pure attraction – related to co-optive power

(Nye, 2004). Interestingly enough, economic and commercial resources can be considered as both hard and soft power tools, being exploited as a means either to attract or threaten.

	Hard		Soft	
Spectrum of Behaviors	Command		Co-opt	
	coercion	inducement	agenda setting	attraction
Most Likely Resources	force sanctions	payments bribes	institutions	values culture policies

Table 1. Hard power vs. Soft Power

Source: Nye, 2004, p.8.

In global affairs, soft power is understood as the fulcrum of modern public diplomacy, defined as the process and strategies by which direct relations with people in a country are established to serve the interests and promote the values of those being represented (Sharp, 2005). Public diplomacy is indeed one of soft power’s key instruments, entailing image cultivation and projection, propaganda, nation-branding, and (positive) country’s reputation (Melissen, 2005). While soft power represents a state’s attractive values, public diplomacy more broadly represents those activities which are carried out to demonstrate the soft power of a country to the international community. In other words, “soft power is what the country *has*; public diplomacy is what the country does to showcase *what it is*” (Saliu, 2023). In particular, Nye describes the resources constitutive of soft power as arising from the values a country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by internal practices, and in its foreign policies (Nye, 2004).

Culture is one of the pillars in building an effective soft power, but it is not enough on its own. People-to-people exchanges have been extensively mentioned as a winning tactic to improve a country’s influence abroad, as historically demonstrated by the explosion of these cultural and educational exchanges from developing countries to the USSR during the Cold War (Messa, 2018). Not by chance, China is today one of the countries which have people-to-people exchanges at the heart of their public diplomacy strategies. In particular, it has been remarked that these exchanges have partially helped improve the Red Dragon’s perception abroad (Messa, 2018). Beyond these resources, also art and literary products together with sports have demonstrated their strategic importance to promote national soft power and brand a country as innovative, modern, and culturally rich. For the first case, it is possible to mention the Guggenheim and Louvre museums in Abu Dhabi as a means to expand international tourism in the Gulf, satisfy powerful elites in the

EAU and export their 'brand' worldwide. In the case of sport, both the 2008 Beijing's Olympic Games and the 2022 FIFA football world cup in Qatar illustrate the desire of national governments to include sports in their public diplomacy strategies.

Differently from traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy "targets the general public in foreign societies and more specific non-official groups, organizations and individuals" and is thus "a collaborative model of diplomacy" (Melissen, 2005, p.5). Crucially, being power over opinions, soft power in public diplomacy can be used to support the most vital interest of nations and increase their legitimacy on the world stage. As observed by Nye, "when countries make their power legitimate in the eyes of the others, they encounter less resistance to their wishes", especially when they are able to shape international rules that are consistent with their interests and values (Nye, 2004, p.10). If, on the contrary, a country or a political group is perceived as manipulative and aggressive, its global credibility is undermined, potentially rousing negative reactions from international actors.

Reputation, therefore, matters in international affairs. If "politics has become a contest of competitive credibility", in a fuzzy information age, where most actors are not always in control as they would like to be, politics is about "whose story wins" (Nye, 2004, p.106). The attractiveness of a country can precisely be attained by demonstrating the values of its soft power to foreign audience, thus exposing its narrative power through communication-related activities (Saliu, 2023). Indeed, conveying information and selling a positive image constitute a fundamental dimension of public diplomacy, assisting in the creation of an attractive projection of a country so that it can improve its prospects for achieving its national aims. However, to be truly effective, public diplomacy projects must involve both 'listening' and 'talking'. Since soft power entails getting others to want the same results you want, it "requires understanding how they are hearing your messages, and fine-tuning it accordingly" (Nye, 2004, p.111). As a matter of fact, great powers strive to raise their soft power by leveraging on their assumed common socio-cultural values, which must be coherent with their national realities to be truly successful. Indeed, conceiving soft power as a capacity to exert *on* others rather than *together with* others could be highly detrimental: soft power is more of a win-win game which favours cooperative interactions beneficial to each participant (Nye, 2012).

As previously suggested, in a global information age 'winning hearts and minds' matters. This explains why states cannot underestimate the importance of information and the cybersphere, if they want to wield effective soft power. Indeed, information is power, and today a broader section of the world population has an easier access to that form of power (Nye, 2012). Public diplomacy

is an area where the effects of the cyber revolution are most visible, especially in what concerns nation-branding and the projection of a country's national image abroad. Already during the Cold War, broadcasting agencies, like Voice of America, have had a crucial role in spreading American culture and ideas to the other side of the iron curtain (Messa, 2018). However, when it comes to the public information component of soft power, the division line between elevating a country's image and exercising propaganda is ever more blurred. As stated above, the success of a soft power strategy depends on its recipient rather than on its producer, and here perceptions and feelings of the targeted audiences are vital.

It is certainly true that power depends on who has the biggest and best-equipped army, but in this new information age, stories, news, and images are more precious resources. Indeed, not only are narratives central to human relations as “they shape our world and constrain behaviour”, but also “political actors attempt to use narrative strategically” because “our communication environment fundamentally affects how narratives are communicated and flow, and with what effects” (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, 2013, p.1). Scholars have long investigated the impact of narratives in foreign communications and foreign policy, as well as the role of political elites, media, and culture in the construction of national narratives. Today, communication through the media is the principal manifestation of a country's public diplomacy, so much so that it has also been coined the expression “media or mediated public diplomacy” (Entman, 2008). Accordingly, a digitalised public diplomacy strategy does usually entail the following aspects:

- 1) Information management, which refers to the government's control of information through the media, preferably on a daily basis;
- 2) Strategic communication, which consists of the various campaigns and programmes developed by the government through time;
- 3) Cultural diplomacy, which involves the different exchanges to engage with the foreign public, maintaining beneficial relations with them, through the promotion of cultural traditions (Saliu, 2023).

Therefore, public diplomacy activities revolve around the development of highly structured communication strategies that include educational, informative, and entertaining programmes, to manage the international environment. However, in this infosphere heavily bombarded by *hyperstories*, it is extremely daunting “to manage the continuous and irregular information and images that are projected abroad, especially in an ecosystem where the multitude of media, the Internet, real-time journalism and mobile phones have broken the barrier between the local and international spheres” (Saliu, 2023, pp.215-216). Stories can more generally help to promote a

certain worldview and acquire knowledge of a certain country, its peoples and culture, and in the digital age, online information has become highly democratised. Nevertheless, false narratives, disinformation, and post-truth are the side effects of this expanded circulation of online messages (Saliu, 2023).

Even though fake news is a phenomenon as early as communication itself, social media have speeded up their spread and extended their reach and impact. Moreover, given the multitude of mediatic content and the subsequent decline in online trustworthiness and credibility, the nature of communication, and hence, digital public diplomacy has begun to change. It has been noted that “the preponderance of new social media technologies, hyper-transparency and adaptations to these conditions through new public diplomacy programmes” might thus “compel a revision of soft power thinking” (Hayden, 2017, p.21). This is because competition over storytelling and soft power has increased, to the point that also terrorists and informal ad-hoc groups can easily spread *their* narratives online (Saliu, 2023).

Other two important features of the controversial relationship between digital storytelling and public diplomacy must be highlighted. First of all, when audiences are flooded with news, they tend to select those narratives that promote their countries or those with which they feel more aligned in terms of values and culture (Saliu, 2023). This implies that communication might be partial, non-neutral, and incomplete. The second aspect attains to the very notion of storytelling: if storytelling is about how an individual tells a story, it is inevitably an artificial process that involves a certain degree of construction and, therefore, manipulation. Indeed, when building a narrative, the words chosen to advance one’s argument do always emphasise certain aspects, while obscuring others. Storytelling is about creating *one* possible narrative frame for the same story, to the point that, eventually determining who is telling the ‘truth’ becomes a rather futile task.

The notion of soft power would thus prove misleading when stories are ‘packed’ in a deceitful and fraudulent way. This can become even dangerous when those narratives are part of a country’s structured public diplomacy activity. Despite culture and values constituting the basis of a soft power strategy, when the recipient audience is not welcoming the message or cannot voluntarily choose to welcome it, traditional soft power instruments move from attraction to coercion. If the freedom of choosing how to think and which values believe in is manipulated and limited through typical soft power instruments, soft power cannot fully explain the influence that is being exercised. Rather than soft, the power has become “sharp”.

2.2 Sharp power and its threat to democracy

The concept of soft power has acquired a greater popularity among IR scholarships worldwide, so much so that it has been often used as a catch-all label to broadly refer to all those tactics that do not employ explicit coercion. However, some scholars and analysts have underestimated the evolution of power strategies fostered by the ongoing processes of globalisation and informatisation. In particular, “today more than at any time in recent memory, there are no bright lines between domestic affairs and international influence” (Walker and Ludwig, 2021, p.III). Beyond this, “there are serious vulnerabilities in a cluster of institutions related to information and ideas, commerce, media, and technology” as “during this period of democratic downturn, dictatorships have intensified and modernized their repression” and authoritarianism is on the rise worldwide (Walker and Ludwig, 2021, p.III). Indeed, this new digital era, coupled with the globalisation of Western media and business, have amplified the ability of authoritarian regimes to extend their reach (Foxall and Hemmings, 2019).

In this direction, the publication of the report of the American think tank National Endowment for Democracy (NED), in December 2017, has represented a turning point. The document *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* has indeed introduced the concept of “sharp power”, which is neither explicitly hard nor entirely soft. As the very adjective indicates, sharp power “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries” (Walker and Ludwig, 2017, p.6). Sharp power is examined as a distinct sub-genre of what was historically called ‘influence operations’ (Foxall and Hemmings, 2019). This kind of authoritarian influence differs from traditional soft power in that it is not centred on attraction or persuasion but makes distraction and manipulation the backbone of its deployment. Indeed, despite the fact that also soft power relies on information, “it differs from the *coercive manipulation* of information because it rests on the voluntary agency of the subject” (Nye, 2019; my emphasis). Moreover, while soft power can potentially be used for offensive purposes, it still depends on voluntary choice, unlike coercive acts where manipulation is so deceptive that it hampers this freedom. Even though there is no consensus around what constitutes sharp power, these efforts should be understood in a three-fold manner. It has indeed been reported that sharp power usually manifests as a means to compromise the legitimacy of foreign institutions, to manipulate public perceptions in favour of the host country, and to put pressure on political and economic actors in a target state (Richter, 2022).

What is understood as “authoritarian ‘soft power’” reflects the ambitions of authoritarian regimes, which systematically and routinely suppress political pluralism and intellectual independence within their own borders, to increasingly extend these practices globally in order to secure their

interests (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). By exercising this power, autocrats seek “to impair free expression, to compromise and neutralize independent institutions, and to distort the political environment” (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020, p.127). The leading success of these authoritarian approaches can be attributed to the exploitation of a “glaring asymmetry” between the openness of democratic systems abroad and the internal barriers to external political and cultural influence raised by assertive illiberal regimes (Walker and Ludwig, 2017, p.6). Indeed, the democratic institutions whose integrity has been most heavily under threat – from media and entertainment companies to universities – are vulnerable to deceiving and manipulating efforts precisely because, in free societies, they are open to the outside world (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020). Especially in the media domain, autocratic regimes have been investing billions of dollars to reach a leading global position, and in the process, they are transforming how people perceive facts and engage with technology.

When first outlining the concept, the two scholars referenced Russia and China, whose approach to international relations is rooted in an ideological model that prioritises state power over individual freedom¹. Both regimes are inherently hostile to social and civil liberties, open and independent debate, and human rights, and this favours their exploitation of the open nature of democracies to their advantage (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). In recent decades, both China and Russia have challenged democracies on multiple fronts, employing a toolkit typical of soft power diplomacy². However, these initiatives of apparent soft power do not aim at creating an open and transparent international dialogue or at promoting the genuine exportation of their own cultural values. On the contrary, their goal is attempting to constrain and limit the regular workings of democracies abroad. For example, when formal public diplomacy organisations like Russia Today (RT) broadcast openly in other countries, they are deploying soft power. If instead, they produce false information or their messages are too blatantly propagandistic, that deception crosses the line into sharp power. Therefore, “transparency and proper disclosure is necessary to preserve the principle of voluntarism that is essential to soft power” (Nye, 2019).

This new ‘political warfare’ does not only include a wide range of domestic and international instruments historically deployed to persuade, intimidate, and weaken opponents; they are also making use of economic, cyber, and other forms of unconventional military warfare (Foxall and

¹ In more recent articles they also mention the Gulf States (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020) and Turkey (Walker and Ludwig, 2021), while Messa referred to Iran (Messa, 2018). Nye has spoken about the support that this sharp power model has attracted Hungarian leadership (Nye, 2019).

² Walker and Ludwig mention “thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, educational programs, and the development of media enterprises and information activities with global reach” (Walker and Ludwig, 2017, p.6).

Hemmings, 2019). Hence, this sharp facet of power does not appeal to ‘hearts and minds’ in a gentle, voluntary, attractive way, but it profits from distracting and manipulating foreign audiences. Indeed, such initiatives are the result of the authoritarian determination of those regimes to monopolise ideas, curb alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). Nevertheless, the predominant aspect of these sharper efforts is the psychological dimension: by targeting vulnerable democracies, China and Russia are “actively working to undermine the core interests of the West, seeking to subvert its cohesion, and attempting to erode the resilience of liberal democratic societies” (Foxall and Hemmings, 2019, p.8).

The use of (dis)information and story manipulation in international politics has a long history and has been used by both democratic and undemocratic countries. What has changed today is the speed at which distorted information circulates. Indeed, “in the digital realm, sharp power is keenly felt yet often not perceived as such” (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020, p.128). This is because the ICT revolution has not only spread awareness of democratic lifestyles but has also helped expose the faults of the liberal democratic project in communist and developing countries. By blurring perceptions and hypocrisy that pervade their home countries, authoritarian states manage to pollute public discourse in democracies thus undermining the health and credibility of those states. It is precisely the mask of apparent soft power that creates a camouflaged space for these threats inside democracies.

Although some sharp power activities may appear to advance admirable projects, the ultimate goal of these efforts seems not to be so much the improvement of the reputation of these repressive regimes. As one scholar pointed out, the real objective behind sharp power strategies is to delegitimise democratic states from the ground, digging out all their limits, contradictions, and faults (Messa, 2018). By promoting political narratives that create favourable conditions, authoritarian regimes camouflage state-directed projects for foreign propaganda and manipulation (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Crucially, the difficulty in unmasking authoritarian influence is due to the chameleonic way in which those initiatives are displayed. Indeed, sharp power actions are directed at building relationships with the political elites, the intellectual and civil society, and this is achieved through the work of commercial media, grassroots associations, or even local actors. In so doing, any kind of criticism of the repressiveness or illiberalism of authoritarian systems is neutralised.

There are four main dimensions in which sharp power is displayed (Messa, 2018). Firstly, it is possible to distinguish a cultural dimension in the broader sense. This aspect consists in the need to conquer public opinions and institutions which can spread and promote foreign messages. This

includes schools, universities, think tanks, media, social networks. The second dimension is the political ground which also includes multilateral forums where authoritarian states are attempting to reforge international norms, especially those that stigmatise authoritarian governance (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). In this field, they are aiming to undermine the involvement of independent groups in the human rights and democracy mechanisms of international forums like the United Nations, while also reshaping the agenda to minimise discussions on topics deemed undesirable. Beyond international organisations, this dimension also embraces individual political parties and policymakers, foundations, NGOs, and lobbies. Thirdly, the economic arena is believed to be the most decisive one. Even though it must be admitted that investments and trade agreements do not always have hidden finalities, in some cases economic projects can be turned into key resources of misleading soft power. As will be illustrated in the later chapters of this study, the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been widely analysed as one of the cornerstones of the sharp power toolkit of China. Finally, the cyber dimension has grown in its importance and pervasiveness as it has increased the threat posed by sharp power.

Indeed, the digitalisation of communications and services has not only speeded up but also lowered the costs of accessing the internet and thus the pervasiveness of disinformation. Democracies have failed to grasp that together with progress, interconnection, and openness, the technological revolution would also bring gloomier results. In many significant ways, new technologies did foster free information flows and improved governance worldwide³. Nevertheless, the digital transformation also enabled modernising autocrats to reach across borders, to censor, silence, and manipulate public discourse, to sharpen polarisation, and, eventually, undermine already-vulnerable democracies (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020).

Authoritarian regimes have made massive investments in saturating the international media landscape with highly coordinated, state-sponsored and state-directed content designed to shape narratives in their favour (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). These efforts extend far beyond traditional propaganda, leveraging a combination of digital platforms, social media, and international news aggregators to amplify the reach of their messages. Online, authoritarian state media outlets gain additional outreach by appearing on global news platforms, where their content is harmoniously integrated with independent journalism. Indeed, most news consumers in these environments are

³ In this context, the role of media, and especially social media, in the Arab Spring has been extensively debated. The most popular opinion is that social media enabled or at least facilitated the protests by giving voice to people in societies with mostly government-controlled media, by helping people connect, mobilise, and organise demonstrations, and by broadcasting protests to the world thus gaining global support for their cause [see Smidi, A., Shatin, S. (2017), "Social Media and Social Mobilisation in the Middle East: A Survey of Research on the Arab Spring, *India Quarterly*, 73(2), pp.196-209, doi: 10.1177/0974928417700798].

unable to recognise the presence of state-controlled media agencies, like Xinhua or RT, in bylines or social media products. Even when they do, they might be unaware of these agencies' deep subservience to the ruling regime, mistaking their reports for objective journalism rather than unneutral government-driven narratives. Hence, by embedding their content into mainstream information channels, authoritarian states manage to blur the line between genuine reporting and strategic disinformation, making it increasingly difficult for audiences to discern between unbiased news and manipulated storytelling (Walker and Ludwig, 2021).

Over time, these sharp power tactics have eroded the structural integrity of the international media ecosystem, distorting the very perception of what constitutes credible and reliable news. Indeed, by flooding the information space with content tailored to their geopolitical interests, authoritarian actors not only shift global discourse but also weaken the foundations of free and independent journalism, making it more challenging for democratic societies to maintain a well-informed and critical public (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing, for instance, have extensively defended their state-controlled media outlets by claiming that they provide *alternative* perspectives and are just as entitled as any other news organisation to broadcast in foreign media markets. In so doing, they frame their global media presence as a necessary counterbalance to Western narratives, portraying their outlets as legitimate sources of diverse viewpoints in the international information space. However, these same regimes systematically curb independent journalism at home and in their overseas communities, denying their own citizen access to pluralistic media that could challenge state-controlled narratives. For example, critics of the Saudi regimes based in the United Kingdom or Canada have been targeted with spyware programmes in state-linked attacks by their home governments. Similarly, the Chinese party-state utilises highly sophisticated technology to surveil and threaten Uyghurs, Tibetans, and discourse centred around these topics both within and outside China's borders (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020).

While demanding access to foreign audiences, authoritarian regimes impose strict restrictions on international media and information platforms operating within their borders, using censorship, legal barriers, and intimidation to curtail reporting that contradicts official state positions. In recent years, they have intensified efforts to expel, silence, or even co-opt foreign news organisations, further tightening control over the domestic and international flow of information (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). This glaring double standard underscores their broader strategy: exploiting the openness of democratic media environments while reinforcing an information monopoly within their own societies.

If authoritarian states continue to expand their influence over the systems that facilitate the sharing of information on a global scale, it is likely to witness an even more pervasive form of “authoritarian curation” (Walker and Ludwig, 2021, p.11). This phenomenon extends beyond merely shaping narratives, controlling media content, or curating discourse and information. Rather, it involves the systematic and scientific manipulation of information ecosystems to reinforce autocratic power structures on a much broader scale. The danger, therefore, lies not only in the selective filtering and suppression of speech but also in the normalisation and exportation of technological standards and governance models that serve the strategic interests of authoritarian regimes. They are increasingly setting precedents for digital surveillance, content regulation, online censorship, and computational propaganda, which, if widely adopted, could seriously erode free expression on a global level (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). The authoritarian-driven norm of “cybersovereignty” is too often dangerously dismissed by some tech titans and opinion leaders, even if it aims at halting free flow of information and access to the internet (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020, p.130). Crucially, Russia’s recent enactment of a “sovereign internet law” aimed at facilitating site-blocking and shutdowns is just the latest manifestation of the considerable effort that authoritarian regimes have made to shape the technological environment.

Today, information is acquiring an unprecedented commanding bargaining power. Its presence or absence plays an ever-crucial role in determining whether a narrative aligns with soft power or sharp power dynamics. The lack of transparency regarding the bureaucratic workings of political systems, foreign policy strategies, and the internal conditions of authoritarian regimes, creates a significant obstacle to fully understanding the extent of their influence. Indeed, without (free) access to reliable information, it becomes far more difficult to assess the real impact of authoritarian actions on the global scale. Importantly, the way technologies are used around the world depends on their users that interact with them, as well as “the democratic and right-based safeguards put in place by individual societies, and the democracies’ success at defining and defending their values within international institutions” (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020, p.131). What is essential here is the establishment of strong democratic safeguards protecting the rights of the vulnerable and human rights. Chinese and Russian sharp power disguises itself within existing political, economic, and media structures, infiltrating democratic societies in ways that are often subtle yet profoundly transformative. Even if authoritarian regimes do not explicitly seek to reshape the world in their own image, the threat to civil liberties is intensifying as the models of social control that they embody become deeply embedded in the global technological infrastructure (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020). Countering these manipulative efforts, therefore,

requires exposing them to public scrutiny, making them undeniably visible so that more precise assessments and countermeasures can be developed.

2.3 Exploring the sharp power toolkit: propaganda, censorship, disinformation

As illustrated in the previous paragraph, authoritarian regimes are striving to mould international standards and rules by relying on a sophisticated arsenal of tools to manipulate information, control narratives, and undermine democratic institutions. Their tactics range from traditional forms of public diplomacy and other kinds of soft power to more covert and coercive activities, with sharp power efforts in the grey zone between those poles. The ‘shaper’ nature of these strategies frequently undercuts democratic norms, erodes national sovereignty, threatens the financial sustainability of independent media, and breaches local laws (Cook, 2021). Authoritarian leaderships across the globe have continuously refined their tactics, expanding their influence into new countries and stressing the urgency of a more coordinated and comprehensive response. At the heart of this counterreaction must be a clear recognition and deep understanding of the challenges that these regimes pose to media freedom on a global scale.

From an analytic point of view, it becomes necessary to examine the various tactics employed by autocracies to manipulate foreign information environments through sharp power efforts. At the core of these sharp power strategies, three key mechanisms can be individuated: propaganda, disinformation, and censorship (Cook, 2021). Collectively, these tactics have expanded to the point that hundreds of millions of news and media consumers worldwide are routinely watching, reading, or listening to content created or influenced by illiberal powers, often unaware of its origins.

Generally speaking, propaganda amplifies state-approved and controlled messaging. Propaganda efforts blend filtered and highly selected ‘truths’ with ideological framing to shape public opinions, conform them to the *official* version of facts and assert “information sovereignty” both within and outside their own borders (Walker, 2018). In particular, in autocratic states, “efforts to disseminate state media content frequently lack transparency, and coproductions or coopted private media further obscure the political and economic motivations driving certain reporting” (Cook, 2021). This strategic manipulation of information that attempts to reinforce their legitimacy also allows regimes to dictate the political discourse while suppressing alternative voices that might challenge their authority. This dominance extends beyond traditional state-run media to include social media platforms, foreign language news outlets and networks of sympathetic influencers. For example, the state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) operates a host of international networks that include PressTV in English and HispanTV in Spanish (Walker, 2018). There are also

IRIB radio stations and tv programmes that broadcast in approximately 25 languages. Even though the information engagement of the Islamic Republic of Iran is not as wide as that of other authoritarian giants, it too is actively projecting influence in the information space.

As outlined above, every story, especially those employed in public diplomacy projects, entails a certain degree of choice in the selection of the elements to tell. Yet, if public diplomacy arguments are framed and crafted so to answer to a ‘logic of appropriateness’ dictated from above, they are driven by influence-seeking goals typical of propaganda (Mor, 2007). When it comes to propaganda, indeed, individuals are not concerned with moral issues. Rather those who utilise propaganda have the amoral scope of engineering a convincing impression that they are the embodiment of a positive and alternative model to the West, either for their economic and cultural prowess or for their ‘exemplary’ control (and repression) of dissenting opinions at home. In the case of Russia, for instance, the Kremlin has often strived to propagate the notion that the regime is a “normal” member of the international community, and that its actions and claims are as legitimate as those of Western democracies (Walker, 2018). Unleashed by state media outlets such as RT and Sputnik, the Russian leadership is able to generate a false sense of normality by casting doubt and disorder among their rivals, and it can therefore push its projects of authoritarian global dominance outside. Indeed, these state-backed outlets operate in multiple languages and target Western audiences with content that challenges democratic institutions, promotes conspiratorial narratives, and amplifies polarisation (Walker and Ludwig, 2017).

Another example of the use of propaganda in sharp power strategies is Venezuela’s ‘new public diplomacy’. Under the rule of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has attempted to monopolise media narratives exerting a “communicational hegemony”. Initially introduced by Chávez in 2007, it sought to control information flows and establish a counter-hegemonic media structure that could rival Western and private news networks. At the beginning, it encompassed the nationalisations of the telecom company CANTV and the closure of the tv channel RCTV in 2007, and the shutting-down of 39 radio stations in 2009. In 2014, the *Globovisión* news channel was packed by Chávez-friendly businesspeople, and the government started funding its own channel for international news diffusion, Telesur. Propaganda is what keeps Telesur alive. Indeed, its main functions are acknowledged to be “bolstering the international leadership and achievements of the Venezuelan regime and its allies, attacking the values of liberal democracy, and exaggerating social problems in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin American centre or centre-right countries” (Puyosa, 2019, p.4).

Beyond propaganda, another backbone of sharp power is censorship. Preventing certain types of information from circulating in the public sphere has become the growing issue of the era of free flows of information (Ermoshina, Loveluck, Musiani, 2021). A critical feature of 21st-century authoritarians is that they have been able to devise specific techniques that exert political control on the Internet without shutting it down completely (Puyosa, 2019). Their paramount aim is to control key information spheres and the instruments for disseminating narratives, images, and ideas (Walker, 2018). This is achieved through a well-structured centralised and unitary management model which enables the regime to systematically select information. Taking again the case of Venezuela, since 2014, the National Commission of Telecommunications (CONATEL) established the practice of routinely blocking websites that publish exchange rates, and in 2019, the government almost entirely blocked Wikipedia (Puyosa, 2019). This is due to the fact that the Venezuelan government perceives a free and open internet as a threat to domestic sovereignty, as it is also demonstrated by the temporary blocking of social media platforms at the times of crucial political events.

In recent years, in Russia the internet has developed along the lines of pervasive centralising and controlling tendencies, as far as concerns both legal instruments and technical infrastructure (Ermoshina, Loveluck, Musiani, 2021). In so doing, the Kremlin has pushed to develop Russian-made technical solutions for censorship and interception, both at home and abroad. This has allowed the opening of a promising market for Russian software sellers as well as hardware solutions for traffic surveillance and filtering. In the Russian case, where state power and control are strongly asserted, “black boxes” imposed on private actors at the level of internet infrastructure are embedded in a body of social, economic, and political relations which aim at de-constructing the overly simplified image of state-driven control through technology and regulatory mechanisms (Ermoshina, Loveluck, Musiani, 2021).

In the area of censorship, the leading case is that of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which will be further developed in the following chapters of the present study. For example, it has been reported that in 2021 the Lithuanian government accused a Chinese-based company, Xiaomi, of selling phones that were pre-programmed to censor approximately 500 words related to themes critically sensitive to the Chinese authorities, such as Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang (Sytas, 2021). Moreover, Confucius Institutes (CIs) around the world have been obliged to self-censor themselves and deliberately avoid any debate on those sensitive matters. Hence, China is said to be seeking “to legitimise its position in the international sphere through direct and indirect manipulation and external censorship of the criticism of the regime” (Martínez Cristóbal, 2021).

Finally, the corrosion of democracy through sharp power techniques is also attempted by authoritarians through disinformation campaigns. Indeed, in addition to deterring and censoring information circulating within and outside the regime's borders, sharp power initiatives fill the vacuums left out in democratic systems by amplifying the sponsoring states' preferred narratives (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). Beyond spreading fake news, modern digital innovation could even be used as a force multiplier as they have the potential to enable authoritarian regimes to manipulate digitalised historical repositories at the source. Indeed, news outlets are facing massive transformations in their business models due to technological advancements, and features of the mediasphere that were once seen as strengths – i.e. openness, competitiveness, fair-mindedness – have been turned into systemic defaults (Lucas, 2020). Information is a powerful weapon and in the “marketplace of ideas” distortion of stories by malign actors has damaging consequences to the stability of democratic systems and public trust in the media. Disinformation is thus crucially deployed to confuse and mislead public opinions, creating uncertainty about what is true.

Russia has been one of the most prominent promoters of disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping global discourse and threatening democratic institutions. Russian disinformation initiatives have constituted a relentless, multidimensional attack on the prestige of democracies and on the core values and ideas underlying the democratic system as a whole (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). In particular, Russian attempts to meddle with elections have demonstrated the Kremlin's boldest efforts of sharp power. The Internet Research Agency is widely known for its corrosive activities in the United States and other foreign election campaigns, aiming at trolling Putin regime's opponents (Walker, Kalathil, Ludwig, 2020). The interferences in the 2016 US and the 2017 French presidential elections have seen Russian-backed hackers leak online materials stolen from the candidates' archives, by using troll farms and bots to spread divisive narratives on social media (Janda and Víchová, 2019). In the context of the 2016 US election campaigns, a National Security Agency document reported that Russian intelligence engaged in cyber operations to push forward election-related software and hardware solutions and create a voter-registration spear phishing campaign targeting US local government organisations (Janda and Víchová, 2019).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is also a prime example to illustrate how Russia leveraged its public diplomacy to fuel disinformation, through a powerful combination of hard and sharp power (Janda and Víchová, 2019). In particular, the Kremlin's accusations of Ukraine's alleged use of chemical and biological weapons had the goal of undermining the support of Ukraine by people in western countries to indirectly support Russia's war claims and efforts (Chappell and Yousef, 2022). Moreover, the misinformation placed by Russia operationalises information

warfare in accordance with the 4D Concept, meaning Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay (Mandić and Klarić, 2023).

The Covid-19 health crisis has also offered an important opportunity to autocrats to use sharp power tools and break into public opinion to increase confusion and weaken public confidence in the management of the pandemic (Martínez Cristóbal, 2021). Russia's disinformation machinery was particularly keen in publishing a significant amount of fake news to foment pandemic negationist and complot groups across the globe. More specifically, a report of the European External Action Service (EEAS) affirmed that the goal of Russian disinformation campaigns was to trigger distrust in national and EU authorities and healthcare systems, as well as scepticism towards scientific experts in the targeted countries (Martínez Cristóbal, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) also cried at the "infodemic" that has been flooded with an excess of both true and false information, making it difficult for consumers to discern and rely on credible and trustworthy news.

As this chapter has shown, today, authoritarian states have transformed previously benign activities into strategic tools of influence and coercion (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). What once served as mechanisms for international cooperation, economic progress, and public diplomacy, has been repurposed to expand authoritarian reach and influence on democratic institutions, putting pressure on global forums to remould international norms so as to serve their strategic interests. Civil societies and academic institutions have become critical battlegrounds where autocracies strive to control intellectual freedom, suppress critical discourse, and promote (self-)censorship. All this is part of a broader effort to reshape the intellectual and ideological environment in democratic societies. What could be genuinely mistaken for soft-power initiatives operates alongside more overtly aggressive tactics, like cyber warfare and propaganda, and it is not as appealing as it is presumed to be. Through sharp power methods, authoritarian regimes not only gain a competitive edge but also weaken democratic resilience by manipulating public discourse and exploiting democratic vulnerabilities (Walker and Ludwig, 2021).

When the concept was first coined for Russia and China, their initiatives were broadly dismissed in democratic societies as ineffective, outdated, or irrelevant "autocratic vanity projects", lacking the appeal necessary to compete with democratic public diplomacy campaigns (Walker and Ludwig, 2017, p.9). At the time indeed, these governments struggled to "tell their story" in a way that would resonate with global audiences, given the stark contradictions with their systems, in particular "entrenched kleptocracy, massive environmental problems, institutionalized censorship, deepening economic inequality, and harsh political repression" (Walker and Ludwig, 2017, p.9).

Nonetheless, authoritarian regimes have learnt from their early missteps and adapted their toolkit. As the later chapters of this study will show in the case of China, authoritarian states have developed more insidious ways to manipulate the global information space and promote their own messaging, or, as the Chinese leaders would say, to ‘tell their story well’. Indeed, what was previously dismissed as simplistic state propaganda has evolved into a more aggressive and sharper effort to infiltrate and erode democratic institutions worldwide.

The following chapters will focus on China’s expanding authoritarian playbook. The approach of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has indeed been reported as one of the boldest and best-developed embodiments of sharp power strategies. By leveraging state-controlled media to expand its discourse power, the CCP has been able to portray China as a rising global leader. Narratives about China have been constructed to be so ambivalent that they skilfully blur the line between soft and sharp power, casting doubts on how scholars should interpret Chinese public diplomacy initiatives and, eventually, respond to safeguard democratic integrity and freedom.

Chapter 3 – Soft (and sharp) power with Chinese Characteristics

“China’s rising power is reshaping the global economic and political landscape” (Edney, Rosen, Zhu, 2020, p.1). It is not a coincidence that in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP, stated that China had grown so much that it had become an “heavy player” on the international scene. The same article pointed to the year 2009 as a new beginning for a new conceptualisation of multipolarity according to which the global order would be reshuffled and remoulded, especially in the shadow of the US as a declining superpower (Li, 2009). Moreover, globalisation prompted in less than a few decades, social and economic transformations, destined to radically alter the current global balance of power (Varsori, 2020). China is indeed among those actors who lived the global transition not as a bystander but as a key protagonist. This is true to the point that China does not *enter* globalisation, but for its contribution, China *changes* the whole sense of globalisation (Rampini, 2005).

As China’s global influence continues to grow, so does the debate over the nature of its international engagement. Indeed, the rapid growth in power and status has provided China with the opportunity to become more actively involved in various forms of international cooperation (Edney, Rosen, Zhu, 2020). China’s policymakers have immediately recognised the critical importance of shaping global perceptions to ensure that the country’s ascent was viewed positively rather than met with suspicion or resistance. Chinese leaders have been acutely aware of the need to mitigate concerns about the country’s strategic ambitions while fostering an image of a responsible, peaceful, and cooperative global actor. To achieve this, Chinese officials have increasingly prioritised soft power as a key instrument in their public diplomacy toolkit, viewing it as essential for winning hearts and minds.

This notwithstanding, it has been argued that the Western conceptualisation of soft power does not fully capture the distinct characteristics of China’s state-led approach to global influence. Unlike traditional soft power, China’s model is heavily centralised and strategic, integrating elements of economic statecraft, media control, and political influence operations (Zhao S., 2020). This has therefore led scholars to refer to China’s approach as “soft power with Chinese Characteristics”, highlighting both its state-driven nature and its strategic blending of persuasion and pressure. However, some of the tactics deployed by the PRC in its public diplomacy campaigns contain coercive and restrictive elements, particularly in the areas of media influence and censorship beyond its borders. These tactics have thus tended to blur the distinction between classic soft power as attraction and sharp power as manipulation, leading to ongoing debates over China’s influence strategy.

This chapter examines the dual nature of China's power projection and public diplomacy, analysing how soft power and sharp power strategies manifest and 'go global'. First, the notion of "soft power with Chinese Characteristics" will be analysed, explaining the building blocks of China's soft power. The specific areas of Chinese public diplomacy will therefore be investigated. Specific sections will be dedicated to the areas of less confrontational engagement which aim to align with the broader narrative of "peaceful development": cultural and educational diplomacy, media and digital diplomacy, and economic-political diplomacy. However, the effectiveness of these strategies has been limited by concerns over political manipulation and economic dependency, warning about the risk of a more confrontational approach, known as "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" (Zhao S., 2020). Hence, the criticism of soft power engagement has been a recurrent element of Xi Jinping's leadership, leading some scholars to refer to China's public diplomacy as a manifestation of "sharp power". By analysing these strategies and the debates over the successes and challenges of China's public diplomacy efforts, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive review of the PRC's evolving influence strategy, highlighting the broader consequences of Chinese public diplomacy for global governance and international relations.

3.1 China's model of public diplomacy

Shortly after its introduction, the idea of soft power became so popular that it began to be used to indicate different aspects of public diplomacy and nation branding. The term "soft power" (*wenhua ruanshili*) was introduced in China already in 1992 with the Chinese translation of Nye's seminal work *Bound to Lead*. Although the first Chinese academic article on soft power appeared in 1993, the phrase only started to be deployed with critical awareness after 2001, the year when China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Chinese media initiated the 'going global' campaign, driven both by the need to counter the growing presence of Western media within China and to mitigate concerns about the perceived "threat" posed by China's rise (Edney, Rosen, Zhu, 2020). Since then, PRC officials began incorporating soft power into China's "smiling diplomacy", built around the idea for which without advocating for peace and prosperity around China's borders, there will be no peace and prosperity at home (Blanchard and Lu, 2012). This can be attained by means of the country's charm, cultural engagement, and economic incentives, which are all functional to positive international relations.

Other from academia, also the Chinese leadership started exhibiting relentless curiosity and obsession with soft power: during 2004-2007, Chinese top leaders emphasised in several high-profile summits China's need to strive for its soft power (Lai, 2012). At the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2007, President Hu Jintao declared:

“We must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress” (Hu, 2007).

However, it was with Xi Jinping that soft power became a crucial element of Chinese public diplomacy projects at both the national and international level (Repnikova, 2022). When talking to domestic audiences, Xi refers to cultural soft power as embodying the “cohesion and vitality of a country based on culture, as well as the attraction and influence generated by it” (CPC News, 2019)⁴. The domestic dimension is therefore an important aspect of Chinese public diplomacy: not only is it necessary to boost China’s internal mobilisation ability, but it also aims at improving the position of China’s leadership (d’Hooghe, 2021). Importantly, the PRC’s efforts to develop soft power are driven by regime security concerns and a desire to counteract potential alternative sources of influence or appeal external to the CCP and its ideology (Edney, 2015). Indeed, while Western soft power is mainly oriented at foreign audiences, “Chinese objectives behind soft power intermingle between external and domestic frontiers, with domestic publics being as much a target of soft power initiatives as international audiences” (Repnikova, 2022, p.3). As for external motivations, soft power and public diplomacy are presented as essential to project international status and assert China’s position as a great power (Repnikova, 2022).

What is crucial in the debates around soft power, however, is that the Chinese understanding of the concept questions the need for boundaries between hard (*ying shili*) and soft (*ruan shili*) power, as well as the key sources of Chinese soft power (Repnikova, 2022). Indeed, Chinese scholars implicitly reject the existence of pure attraction as distinct from hard power. According to this view, Chinese co-optive power is rooted in hard power in the same way as Western soft power historically evolved from a long legacy of coercive dominance accumulation by the West. There is thus a degree of ambiguity in the formulation of soft power in Chinese narratives. “On the surface, it appears that culture is at the heart of the Chinese soft power conception, but culture itself is understood as a very open-ended concept that has political and ideological connotations” (Repnikova, 2022, p.4). Indeed, together with its continuous economic growth, China’s political

⁴ Xi Jinping’s speech at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work (August 19th, 2013).

capability and the so-called “Beijing Consensus” have been indicated as the pillars of Chinese soft power⁵.

This notwithstanding, traditional culture and the moral values associated with it play a crucial role in China’s soft power, on the premise that they enhance a millennial history, and a broad array of traditions and arts (Mingjiang, 2008). By stressing “giving priority to human beings” (*yi ren wei ben*) and “harmony between nature and humankind” (*tian ren he yi*), traditional Chinese culture is understood both as a viable alternative approach to current issues and as opposed to Western to “the morally vacuous” US civilisation (Repnikova, 2022, p.5). In doing so, this therefore puts Chinese culture in a more advantageous position in a post-industrialised global era (Mingjiang, 2008). Indeed, it has been suggested that the success of China’s soft power reach was due to its rejection of Western liberal values and democratic culture and that China could become a model for a Chinese version of soft power which is opposed to the Western approach (Edney, Rosen, Zhu, 2020). So, by definition, Chinese soft power needs a different understanding because the concept itself would be US-centric (Lynch, 2020). Especially after the official promulgation of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” at the 19th CCP Congress in 2017, Xi explained that attempting to compete with the US for soft power is would be purposeless and would damage the “Four matters of confidence”, namely, confidence in the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Chinese theory, system, and Chinese culture (Lynch, 2020; Jin, 2020).

In particular, by claiming that soft power “does not need to involve competition, and diverse cultures, ideologies and institutions can coexist, China does advocate a different set of rules rooted in the concept of *hexie shehui* (harmonious society) seen as a new model of sovereignty” where also individuals are understood in relational, rather than autonomous, terms (Edney, Rosen, Zhu, 2020, p.18). The idea of *tianxia* (all under heaven) has emerged to justify Chinese normative understanding of international relations in contrast with the principles of Westphalian sovereignty which form the core of the contemporary (West-centred) international system, regarded as conducive to discord and war (Zhao S., 2020). On the contrary, the core of the notion of *tianxia* is

⁵ Although there is no consensus around this concept, the Beijing Consensus, sometimes referred to as “China Model”, is an expression coined by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004 to describe China’s own way to realise fast development. The Chinese development model is praised for its originality and its effectiveness in promoting economic growth. Since the diffusion of this concept, some scholars have been arguing that the Beijing Consensus could replace or at least become a competitor for the Washington Consensus – the system through which the West has flourished and which is based on the international and West-led financial and economic institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – and it is considered an integral part of Chinese soft power (Zheng, Y., and Zhang, C., (2020) “‘Soft power’ and Chinese soft power”, in *China’s Soft Power and International Relations*, eds. Lai, H., and Lu, Y., Routledge, London and New York).

embodied in the Chinese ideal of perpetual peace and “inclusion of all”, in a system whose structure is hierarchical and where all parts are interdependent, coexist and prosper together (Zhao S., 2020).

Public diplomacy would thus be instrumental to the creation of a “soft landing” in the international system by alleviating global anxieties about the country’s rise driven by Western narratives (Lynch, 2020). Crucially, the goal of international acceptance is interconnected with China’s domestic development: one of the fundamental objectives of China’s diplomacy should be to foster a favourable external environment that supports the “Great Rejuvenation of China” and carry an important signal to the domestic audience, affirming the achievement of China’s rise and the “China Dream” (*Zhongguo meng*) (Repnikova, 2022)⁶. Indeed “China’s global attractiveness can boost domestic public appreciation for the uniqueness of Chinese culture, and implicitly for China’s political system (...) indirectly discrediting external criticisms of China as not adhering to Western values and practices” (Repnikova, 2022, p.8). China’s cultural promotion is therefore a component of its broader effort at public diplomacy (Kurlantzick, 2008).

It has been argued that in the post-Cold War era, China’s public diplomacy has evolved, shifting from pure propaganda to more nuanced public relations, as witnessed by the change in the name of the CCP’s Propaganda Department to Publicity Department (Kurlantzick, 2008). This notwithstanding, China’s public diplomacy is led by the CCP and, more precisely, it is highly centralised in the CCP Central Committee so much so that it can be summarised as a peculiar system of “party-led diplomacy” and “centralized management” (*guikou guanli*) (Zhao K., 2019, p.172). The CCP’s Central Foreign Affairs Small Leading Group is the decision-making organ which overlooks public diplomacy plans and guidelines, monitors foreign media while guiding and censoring the domestic ones (d’Hooghe, 2007). Operationally speaking, Chinese public diplomacy policies are informed also by the principle of “No Trivial Things in Foreign Affairs”, which means that when it comes to international affairs, these must adhere to the party leadership (Zhao S., 2020). Moreover, in terms of institutionalisation of its public diplomacy, the Chinese system is peculiar in that it engages a wide body of actors, including official agents such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the International

⁶ Xi Jinping has used the slogan “China Dream” during a tour of an exhibit at the National Museum of China in November 2012, where an exhibition called “Road to National Rejuvenation” was being shown. The China Dream is best understood not according to a singular correct definition, but as a series of debates centred not on the proper “meaning” of the China Dream, but to see what this formulation does in the Chinese politics: “which people does it bring together, and which does it shut out; which policies does it justify, and which does it exclude from consideration” (Callahan, W. A., (2014), “China Dream – 1”, *The Asan Forum*, December 8, 2014. Available at: <https://theasanforum.org/what-can-the-china-dream-do-in-the-prc/>. (Accessed: 31/03/2025)).

Department of the CCP's Central Committee, as well as public groups like trade unions, the Communist Youth League, the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese. All these actors are active in the promotion of public diplomacy, even though none have sufficient legal basis to function as the specialised agency of public diplomacy. Nonetheless, the CCP leadership of public diplomacy is a "political and ideological directing" (Zhao S., 2020, p.173)

The CCP officials, with a glance to China's long-standing traditional culture and profound civilisation, have endowed China's public diplomacy with "Chinese Characteristics" and objectives, to the point that some have talked of a "China Model of public diplomacy" (Zhao K., 2019). More specifically, Chinese public diplomacy attains the following goals:

- a) Promoting China's assertion to the external world;
- b) Shaping a desirable image of the state;
- c) Addressing and issuing rebuttals to overseas distorted misconceptions about China;
- d) Enhancing and improving the international environment around China;
- e) Influencing policy decisions of foreign countries;
- f) Selling the idea that China will not be a threat to other nations (Kurlantzick, 2008).

Overall, China's public diplomacy campaigns aim at reinforcing the idea of "peaceful development" (*heping fazhan*) and "win-win" diplomacy, thus serving multiple strategic purposes functions for Beijing (Kurlantzick, 2008)⁷. Promoting peace would ensure the continuous growth of China's economy: indeed, stability and prosperity would then benefit Chinese companies by fostering overseas market expansion, securing access to strategic resources like oil, and supporting the development of China's domestic scientific and technological capabilities which largely depend on imports of foreign research and resources. Furthermore, by raising the banner of peace, China can cultivate an image of itself as a benevolent, peaceful, and responsible global actor. Hence, the ultimate purpose of Chinese soft power is to counter the "China threat" thesis, favouring a better understanding of China's domestic socio-economic reality and persuading foreign audiences to accept and support China's project for the global order (Mingjiang, 2008).

The Chinese leadership is aware of the multiple challenges affecting the geopolitical plane. In the fragmented context of multilateral fragility, to "tell China's story well" (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi*) becomes a key strategy to shape China's global narratives. This concept emerged in a 2013 speech

⁷ It should be pointed out that the expression "peaceful development" replaced the previous notion of "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*). The idea of "China's rise" was encapsulated in the 2004 speech of the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in trying to reassure Western publics that China would not threaten any nation, even as it becomes a global power. However, the term "rise" still sounded menacing to Western ears, hence urging a lexical change to mitigate foreign anxieties and serve China's international goals (Kurlantzick, 2008).

at the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference where Xi Jinping spelled out his approach to propaganda and international messaging (China Media Project, 2021):

“We must focus on advancing the construction of international communication capabilities, innovate external propaganda methods, strengthen the construction of discourse systems, and strive to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate China and foreign countries, tell China’s stories well, spread China’s voice well, and enhance our voice in the international arena” (CPC News, 2019).

As “the multi-polarization of the world and the in-depth development of economic globalization, cultural diversification and social informatization continue to advance”, Chinese storytelling becomes an essential element in Beijing’s foreign policy (SCIO, 2015). In its quest for global influence, Chinese leaders have upheld China’s “right to speak” or “discourse power” (*huayuquan*) as a strategy to expand “China’s global audience while mobilizing specific normative arguments, world views, and communication policies counting as counter-narratives to explain China’s rise in world affairs” (Menegazzi, 2023, p.100). Discourse power has a double purpose: it becomes a tool to challenge the prevailing narrative for which “the West is strong, China is weak”, and it is an essential element of Xi Jinping’s Thought, a set of policies and ideas for China’s New Era (Menegazzi, 2023). Crucially, in spreading a positive image of the China political model, the Chinese leadership is resolute in framing the outside world as an enemy, challenging the global public discourse around China and its role in international relations more broadly. Hence the need to enhance “China’s voice” and “tell China’s story well”, by shaping “a narrative style with Chinese characteristics that gives China a distinct voice that can be heard and understood in international discourse” (Ying, 2020).

Therefore, as a major part of manifesting China’s international claims, public diplomacy is required to highlight cultural self-confidence, boasting the country’s capacity in international communication, and empowering Beijing with a greater say in the global arena (Zhao K., 2019). The PRC’s efforts to “explain China to the world” demonstrate a significant evolution in China’s public diplomacy from *listening* to *telling*, crucial to fulfil the China Dream. It has been argued that even *what is told* by China has evolved: “in the past few years, the narratives which China is promoting have shifted from prioritising the promotion of Chinese culture as the major source of soft power, to highlight the contribution which China’s political system (...) has provided to global governance” (d’Hooghe, 2021, p.300). It thus becomes necessary to analyse both the content and

the means through which this content is retained in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of China's public diplomacy campaigns.

Through the combination of "Bring in" and "Go Global" strategies, in conjunction with the "Let China Know the World" and "Let the World Know China" approaches, a multi-level (central, local, grassroots), multi-channel (government, enterprises, media and society), all-around (public communication, friendly exchange and people's livelihood cooperation), China's public diplomacy mechanism has been gradually established (Zhao S., 2020). To wield "soft power with Chinese Characteristics", China's public diplomacy mainly combines cultural and educational operations, global media outreach, and strategic political and economic initiatives, striving to project a positive image while also controlling narratives, aligning international perceptions with its rise, and securing its strategic interests.

3.2 Cultural and educational diplomacy

Chinese instruments of public diplomacy do not differ much from those employed by Western countries (d'Hooghe, 2007). One of the peculiarities in Chinese approach to public diplomacy and soft power lies in the emphasis on cultural self-confidence (*wen hua zi xin*), together with Chinese institutions of higher education as vehicles for the country's soft power promotion (Metzgar, 2016). Crucially, PRC leadership has tended to avoid the Western concept of "public diplomacy" in official discourses, turning to more "local" concepts such as "cultural diplomacy" (*wen hua wai jiao*), signalling that China is now highlighting cultural self-confidence (Zhao S., 2020). This notwithstanding, China's party-state officials tend to view culture much like Nye's original formulation, that is, as encompassing social values and traditions, cultural products, international exchanges and educational programmes (Edney, 2015). Indeed, in a 2013 Speech at the 12th Collective Study Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee Political Bureau, Xi Jinping declared that "Chinese culture is the deepest source for us to improve our country's cultural soft power and an important way for us to improve our country's cultural soft power", hence "we must systematically sort out traditional cultural resources and make the cultural relics stored in the Forbidden City, the heritage displayed on the vast land, and the words written in ancient books come alive" (CPC News, 2019).

Chinese assessments of the country's cultural soft power resources have mainly focused on traditional culture rather than contemporary or popular culture (Edney, 2015). Indeed, "China's vast historical and cultural tradition is seen as a rich resource to be used to attract foreigners to learn more about the country and to improve China's status in the eyes of the world" (Edney, 2015, p.909). Importantly, since for the CCP officials, enhancing cultural power is also a matter of

strengthening domestic soft power resources, as China's soft power and public diplomacy should be considered alongside the PRC's cultural reform programme. Therefore, the goal of cultural construction strives for fostering both cultural expansion and creativity while at the same time generating cohesion and improving the party-state's ability to manage and control the production in the cultural sector. In the speech mentioned above, President Xi also suggested some strategies to pursue to boost cultural diplomacy:

“We must improve the mechanism of cultural exchanges, innovate the methods of cultural exchanges, give full play to the role of all regions and departments, and comprehensively use mass communication, group communication, interpersonal communication and other methods to show the charm of Chinese culture (...) We should focus on shaping our country's national image, focusing on showing the image of a civilized country with a profound historical heritage, diverse ethnic groups, and diverse and harmonious cultures” (CPC News, 2019).

China's cultural diplomatic efforts fall in three main categories. First, official programmes aiming to enhance China's international perception and its cultural influence, through the export of cultural products and the expansion of the Chinese media. Second, international cultural forums and dialogues which promote the export of and international interest in Chinese cultural elements. Third, educational initiatives for the promotion of Chinese language and culture and studies of China (Lai, 2012). The latter is the focus of this section which centres on the role of Confucius Institutes and educational exchanges.

As China asserts itself as a major international player, global interest in China and the Chinese language are also surging, and speaking Chinese has increasingly been seen as an indispensable skill for understanding China, carrying out trade and business transactions, and securing a successful career for people around the world (Lai, 2012). To answer to this growing interest in Chinese language learning, the PRC set up the Confucius Institutes, which, according to the official website, are “non-profit educational institutions jointly established by Chinese and overseas partner institutions based on principles of mutual respect, friendly consultation, equality and mutual benefit” (Confucius Institute, 2025). The first CI was inaugurated in Seoul in 2004, but this initiative has expanded so rapidly that in 2023 there were a total of 496 CIs and 757 Confucius Classrooms in 160 countries worldwide (Chinese International Education Foundation, 2024). Their programmes consist mainly of language courses, cultural events such as exhibitions, book presentations, film screenings, and conferences (Hartig, 2020). Compared to China's other soft power tools, CIs have been viewed with particular scrutiny partly due to their unique operational

and management structure: they are indeed integrated into and co-sponsored by host universities, a feature that makes them deeply embedded within local institutions (Repnikova, 2022). It has also been noted that the Sino-foreign joint partnership, rather than mere governmental sponsorship, endows CIs of a firmer financial basis as the Chinese partner provides teaching staff and materials, while the host university houses the institutes (Lai, 2012). In addition, until recently, their operations were directly run by Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language Council International, which was a direct affiliation with the CCP. In 2020, the management of CIs was handed over to Chinese International Education Foundation, a newly established NGO set up by a group of universities, companies, and cultural organisations (Repnikova, 2022).

In the words of Xi, CIs play “an important role in promoting mutual learning between and among various civilizations in the world and strengthening mutual understanding and friendship between Chinese people and peoples of other countries” (Xi, 2014). In this direction would also go the choice of the name “Confucius”, which serves the purpose of helping promote Chinese culture and traditions well, as the philosopher is widely perceived in popular imagery as a positive and respectable symbol of China. If they had been called “Mao Institutes” instead, they probably would not have been nearly as well received (Messa, 2018). This notwithstanding, there is ambiguity around the conceptualisation of CIs, which could be understood in different ways: as instruments of China’s soft power and/or cultural diplomacy and as a “propaganda project” of the Chinese leadership (Hartig, 2020). Even though the literature tends to link CIs as the prime example of Beijing’s soft power strategy through cultural means, it would appear that CIs’ staff are uncomfortable with the very term “soft power”. It has indeed been reported that the Hanban itself officially denied its intention of soft power projection, emphasising that CIs neither project soft power nor attempt to impose Chinese values or culture on other countries (Hartig, 2020). This observation is related to the issue of how China is viewed and how it wants to be seen in the world: some within China are afraid that “a China that appears too boastful and self-confident may only fuel negative animosity toward China” and so advocate “for keeping a low profile in rhetorical terms” and distancing “CIs not only from the notion of soft power but also from broader strategic and foreign-policy related intentions” (Hartig, 2020, p.136). This is thus rather curious considering the attention that the CCP leadership has raised around the role of CIs as key drivers of Chinese soft power.

The rapid and extensive expansion of CIs has yielded mixed results when it comes to enhancing China’s soft power. The official CIs channels tend to distance their mission from that of outright soft power, stating their goal as that of “adapting to the global need of Chinese-language learning,

enhancing understanding of Chinese culture, encouraging cultural exchange, and developing friendly relations with foreign nations” (Repnikova, 2022, p.12; Confucius Institute, 2025). However, several external analysts and experts tend to view CIs’ objectives as political propaganda branches of the CCP (Repnikova, 2022). An increasingly popular view is that CIs are nothing but propaganda tools aimed at indoctrination and censorship rather than at fostering open cultural dialogue. However, it must be acknowledged that CIs are certainly amidst the most high-profile example of Chinese cultural diplomacy projection: indeed, in spite of the criticism, there is still strong global demand from foreign universities to host CIs as these cultural institutes are deemed an attractive proposition for universities seeking to internationalise and gain access to Beijing’s higher education market (Hartig, 2020).

In spite of the challenges in Western settings, CIs continue to offer domestic advantages for the Chinese party-state and can still generate soft power gains especially in non-Western countries (Repnikova, 2022). Domestically, CIs provide both cultural and economic benefits. From a cultural perspective, the growing popularity and interest in the Chinese language can foster a sense of national pride, as it mirrors international recognition of Chinese culture. However, CIs seem to face operational setbacks in the effort of keeping up with the increasing global demand for Chinese language education, which often comes at the expense of the teaching quality. On the economic side, instead, the CI initiative can contribute to the internationalisation of China’s higher education system by allowing Chinese universities to strengthen their global branding efforts, attract foreign students, and increase profits (Repnikova, 2022). It is significant that Chinese-language teaching and Confucius Institutes more broadly continue to be in high demand in the Global South. Indeed, it has been observed that in these contexts where Beijing has expanded its economic and political presence, “the pragmatic gravitation may fuse with admiration and even enchantment with Chinese culture”, eventually contributing to project a positive image of China (Repnikova, 2022, p.21).

Beyond Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges constitute another pillar of Chinese cultural diplomacy. Since the early 2000s, China’s education has undergone a process of internationalisation aimed at establishing China as a major hub of knowledge production and as an appealing international destination for education and training (Repnikova, 2022). President Xi Jinping in the first place believes in the need for China to strengthen cultural and educational exchanges by means of public diplomacy (Zhao K., 2019). The PRC has indeed promoted a variety of short-term training, scientific exchanges and cooperation projects, and other professional/academic degree programmes that allow international students and other professionals to dive into a cultural immersion of China (Repnikova, 2022). Significantly, these

projects have been particularly successful in Africa and other non-Western contexts, where thousands of officials and businesspeople have completed their training in China, thus raising alarms in the West about Beijing's growing ideological influence.

In blending political and economic motivations in internationalising higher education and professional training, Chinese cultural diplomacy clearly demonstrates how soft and hard power are integrated in Beijing's public diplomacy efforts (Repnikova, 2022). As for the political rationale, Chinese leaders have often framed educational exchanges to China's soft power and the China Dream. In 2016, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued the *Opinion on the Work of the Opening-Up of Education in the New Era*. The document encourages "gathering patriotic power of the vast population who study overseas, taking the initiative to promote China's developments and accomplishments, actively bringing into play the promotional abilities of foreign students and teachers in China, and actively communicating Chinese ideas" (CCP Central Committee and State Council, 2016). Moreover, in 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education has stated that higher education institutions should "promote positive and beneficial interactions between international students and the society", and students are encouraged to "tell China's story" and spread "China's voice" (China's Ministry of Education, 2018). Chinese officials are convinced that by studying in China, international students are expected to become attuned to Chinese perspectives and interests through an in-depth exposure to the country's language, culture, history, society, and politics (Repnikova, 2022). The goal is that, upon returning to their home countries and potentially becoming opinion leaders, they will more likely shape their countries' China policies in a pro-Beijing direction.

As for the economic motivations, given the PRC's government cuts to education subsidies, revenues from international students constitute an attractive and convenient opportunity for Chinese higher-education institutions (Repnikova, 2022). Nonetheless, beyond direct monetary profits from foreign students, there are indirect commercial benefits in attracting individuals with expertise especially in the ICT sector. Indeed, China's recruitment of foreign students and professionals aims at aligning with Beijing's efforts to develop strategic domestic sectors by introducing advanced technologies and high-end talent into the country. Hence, the political motives "are bolstered and reinforced by commercial and economic ones, which makes for a fast expansion of China's internationalization of higher education and training" (Repnikova, 2022, p.34).

As for the successes and challenges of Chinese educational diplomacy, the results are rather divergent. While some analysts have noted a positive impact of Chinese scholarship programmes

for international students, suggesting that education exchanges do strengthen China's soft power, others have pointed to pedagogical concerns and racial frictions which would diminish the potential soft power gains from China's educational offerings (Repnikova, 2022). Positive impressions have emerged mainly in relation to China's hospitality and networking. This has been observed especially with students and trainees from the Global South, who have often returned to their home countries admiring and even adopting China's worldview and foreign policy vision as a result of their experience in the PRC (Repnikova, 2022). However, concerns with the quality of Chinese educational exchanges have been raised by both foreign students and hosts, who have criticised the pedagogical approach that tended to discourage critical thinking. Beyond this criticism, the issue of racial discrimination toward African students have raised important difficulties to Chinese education officials, leading, in some cases, to explicit racial clashes between Chinese and African students on Chinese university campuses.

Nonetheless, educational exchanges and higher education internationalisation efforts constitute an important element in the discourse of education as a tool of soft power accumulation (Xu, 2024). In the coming years, the PRC's efforts at attracting students and dignitaries to-be for education opportunities are only likely to grow, especially in the developing world. The fusion of cultural and market logics, as well as the combination of hard and soft power resources and motives in China's educational diplomacy strategies, informs the mixed reception of China's initiatives in this field (Repnikova, 2022). Moreover, the global impacts of Chinese international education programmes have tended to be seen as a threat rather than a form of academic cooperation and enrichment by Western countries. These concerns have been informed especially by the issue of hidden curriculums through which international students are deemed to be inculcated into a culture that is more likely to spread positive views and gratitude toward China, thus realising the PRC's broader geopolitical aims (Xu, 2024).

3.3 Media and digital diplomacy

Another crucial aspect of Chinese public diplomacy is its global communication strategy through state media, hence, its media and digital diplomacy. This sector of China's public diplomacy has officially been referred to in academia as external propaganda or publicity (*duiwai xuanchuan*) and more recently as international communication (*guoji chuanbo*), thus highlighting one more time the dual target, domestic and international, of Chinese soft power (Repnikova, 2022). Importantly, the Chinese word for "propaganda" is made up by two ideograms: *xuan*, which means "disseminate, propagate", and *chuan*, which means "transmit, broadcast" (Negro, 2022). The word *xuanchuan* would also have multiple connotations and prominently one associated with education

and social integration which would see propaganda as the transmission of a set of moral values as well as a nation- and identity-building constituent.

It has been argued that China must increase its voice on the global Internet governance discussion (Negro, 2023). Through the convergence of top-down and grassroots communication merged with external and internal messaging, China's soft power initiative and the goal of "telling China's story well" aim not only to increase China's media presence all over the world, but also to "reduce or even eradicate the "bias" and "prejudices" against China that are seen in Western media" (Sun, 2020, p.82). Indeed, according to the official Chinese narratives, Beijing would have been deprived of its rightful discursive sovereignty (*huayu quan*) and its rightful voice in a world dominated by the imperialistic media power of the West (Sun, 2020). Hence, external propaganda is needed to address this discursive imbalance and reassert "China's voice", solve its status of "absence" (*quexi*) and "aphasia" (*shiyu*) and fight the Western unilateral monopoly on Internet governance (Negro, 2023). President Xi has thus argued for a reform of China's state-led external propaganda to:

- a) push back anti-China discourses by referring to authoritative and scientific (Chinese) sources when telling sensitive events;
- b) use personal storytelling to build empathy and enhance authenticity of Chinese civilisation and values;
- c) proactively express China's voices on mainstream media overseas;
- d) collaborate with and utilise media in countries with good diplomatic relations with China, especially in the Global South, to disrupt the monopoly of Western media over global public opinion through outflanking tactics for communication (Xu and Gong, 2024).

Chinese leaders became more concerned with the China's global media footprint after China's accession to the WTO in December 2001, but it was only with the launch of the 2009 "going-out" media policy that Chinese global media companies started competing with Western media outlets, devoting \$6 billion to this goal (Repnikova, 2022). Under this specific goal of competing with Western media organisations, the so-called "Big Four" – as China's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi has referred to Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI) and *China Daily* – have all used these funds to expand their international bureaus and increasing their informational offer with multiple languages (Zhang, 2020). Significantly, under Xi's presidency, cyberspace has played a prominent role, as has been witnessed by the establishment of the Cyberspace Administration of China (*Guojia hulianwang xinxi bangognshi*) in 2014, and headed by Xi himself (Negro, 2023).

Since Xi took office in 2013, the CCP has strengthened its grip over public diplomacy even further so that it has become extensively state centric. Aiming at depicting a positive image of China's political model, Beijing's media campaign carefully develops a narrative fine-tuned to the CCP's political needs, to the point that it does not "shy away from strongly denouncing the 'foreign' others and from silencing Chinese actors who do not toe the official CCP policy lines" (d'Hooghe, 2021, p.315). China's expansion onto Western social media platforms reflects its broader effort to wage a war for influence – both domestically and internationally – across the Internet (Kinetz, 2021). Indeed, President Xi has described the Internet as "the primary battleground" for shaping public opinion, and his desire to see China as a "strong Internet country" is motivated by his belief that cybersecurity and dominance of the Internet are fundamental for each other's development and China's overall modernisation (Xinhuanet, 2014).

It is important to say that two new trends have been recently noticed: on the one hand, there has been a progressive centralisation of external propaganda management; on the other hand, multiple partnerships with local media have become more prominent, with local media outlets working side-by-side with Chinese news entities (Repnikova, 2022). The explanation behind this evolution in Chinese media strategies has been motivated by Xi Jinping's constructive storytelling agenda. In recent years, China's extensive, systematic, and increasingly pervasive use of narratives and digital technologies has witnessed a remarkable acceleration, significantly impacting and transforming the styles and communication methods of political leadership on a global scale (Ansalone, 2021). It is precisely during this period marked by greater openness and a unique – yet controlled – form of pluralism that the CCP demonstrated its ability to adapt its communication strategies while simultaneously reaffirming the central role of its ideological apparatus (Negro, 2022). The CCP has therefore equipped with every means of persuasion, from culture to art and media, to promote, on the national territory as abroad the frontiers, the China Dream (Lincot, 2019). Hence, the constructive tone and localised content production constitute innovative features of China's global communication approach (Repnikova, 2022).

Constructive reporting has been presented as an approach which merges the techniques of critical journalism with narratives that empower readers, in alternative to Western media's focus on crises and failures (Repnikova, 2022). The combination of this *modus operandi* with the localisation (*bentuhua*) of media production and distribution involve local media professionals for reporting roles under Beijing's editorial and managerial control. Content localisation is operated through content-sharing agreements with foreign news agencies as well as the PRC's purchase of local outlets, usually incorporated into larger frameworks of media cooperation. This notwithstanding,

it is important to bear in mind that the authorisation to spread and produce information it is still constrained by specific journalistic licenses (Negro, 2022). Today, therefore, the release of these licenses is not only a confirmation of the professional link between journalists and news outlets, but it is a way for party officials to control the social media accounts of these journalists, ensuring that they do not share any information on issues sensitive to the Chinese leadership.

Nonetheless, alongside these rhetorical and operational innovations, Chinese media enterprises face a series of challenges. The issue of credibility constitutes a prominent difficulty: Chinese state media is deeply affiliated with the CCP, and it often results in censored content (Repnikova, 2022). Indeed, official media channels tasked with external propaganda are not only controlled by major party and state bureaucracies like the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and the State Council Information Office (SCIO), but they are also internally governed by officials directly appointed by the CPD. Media officials are provided with briefings (*tongqihui*) and guidelines on how to appropriately relay content across different platforms (Repnikova, 2022). Hence, the nature of the Chinese news system as based on constructive reporting appears to compromise its credibility. Importantly, a growing scholarship argues that China's communication on social media is primarily a *monologue* rather than a *dialogue*, stressing that it reflects "a one-way information transmission from Chinese authorities to the audiences" rather than a more collaborative, inclusive, and people-centric interaction (Chen, 2023, p.140). China's digital diplomacy would thus showcase the strong politicisation of Beijing's public diplomacy messages (d'Hooghe, 2021).

Even though the Chinese media diplomacy has made significant stride towards digitalisation, it was deemed essential to place equal emphasis on supporting the development of both traditional and new media, while at the same time encouraging their convergence (Negro, 2022). Generally speaking, Chinese traditional media, like the abovementioned Big Four, are employed in complex and well-structured communication operations aimed at projecting China's image abroad through a series of strategic partnership. For instance, *China Daily* has established partnership agreements with over forty foreign media organisations among which the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian* (Negro, 2022). This approach is informed by the need to strengthen the perception and authority of the Chinese media system at the international level, without necessarily concentrating all efforts exclusively on new media. However, the health crisis brought by Covid-19 highlighted the complex blend of new and traditional media in China. Indeed, whereas traditional media outlets strived to tell a narrative centred on national unity and collective mobilisation as crucial in the fight against the virus, new media were keen in developing digital infrastructures aimed at monitoring the spread of the virus and sharing useful information about

medical and social conduct (Negro, 2022). The creation of QR codes by Tencent and Alibaba in order to collect data later shared with health departments went in this direction. Additionally, plenty of media and propaganda initiatives targeting an international audience were set out with the purpose of celebrating the Chinese government's successes in the management of the pandemic crisis. A crucial example is constituted by *Days and Nights in Wuhan*, the documentary produced by CCTV in 2021, which was the contribution of thirty filmmakers aiming at narrating the sacrifices and the efforts that people in Wuhan had made at the beginning of the pandemic (Negro, 2022).

Another aspect of China's media policy concerns the way its public diplomacy interacts with Western platforms. Importantly, the CCP has rejected Western social media, including Facebook and WhatsApp, for domestic use, replacing them with home-created platforms, like WeChat (Palit, 2024). This has been motivated by the conviction that the Western media have been unfair to China, playing up its weaknesses, underestimating its potentials and ignoring its achievements and its status as a respectable and responsible global player. However, China's embrace of X – formerly Twitter – for connecting with the global Internet community has demonstrated Beijing's willingness to counteract Western criticism and alter international perceptions of China. Even though X has been banned in China since 2009, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese diplomats have widely used the platform to present an alternate perspective and favourable stories on China to the outside world (Palit, 2024). Beijing's X-driven public diplomacy thrived in the fact that the pandemic was damaging its global reputation and thus hurting the China "brand". X was thus embraced as a "crisis messaging tool" for pushing away rebuttal, promoting and amplifying positive narratives about the CCP's handling of the pandemic (Alden and Chan, 2021).

In an analysis of Chinese digital diplomacy, it is interesting to investigate the role of Chinese media corporations in shaping the PRC's image abroad. China-based digital multinationals like Huawei are indeed involved in Beijing's efforts to promote a "new world media order", and Huawei has a crucial role for China's growing dominance in the market for 5G mobile network technologies (Guildburd-Kraviz, 2024). Crucially, many Western actors have called attention to the support Huawei would receive from the Chinese party-state, arguing that Beijing would furnish unusual backing, allowing Huawei to become one of the leading telecommunication companies in the world. Although both Huawei and the Chinese government have declared that the corporation acts as an independent and separate entity from the states, some Western observers are concerned about potential uses of Huawei products as a means of infiltrating Chinese surveillance systems around the world (Guildburd-Kraviz, 2024). This case only adds to the multiple concerns that have been

raised in the West in sectors supporting crucial information infrastructure, particularly about issues of transparency, propaganda, and online manipulation (Negro, 2023). In the case of Huawei this has also been linked to the economic public diplomacy strategy as the growing global 5G infrastructure project is considered a part of the Belt and Road Initiative. The initiative, which will be discussed in the following section, does not only improve China's economic power, but it supports China's ambitions to expand its political and cultural dominion (Guildburd-Kraviz, 2024). In light of the complex blending of political, economic, and security issues, Chinese media campaigns and digital infrastructure development tend now to be seen as the manifestation of a more assertive and aggressive public diplomacy which would be better conceived of as sharp power rather than soft power.

3.4 Economic-political diplomacy

As China rises on the global stage, its economic and political diplomacy serves not only as a tool for securing resources and markets, but also as a leverage of its growing capabilities to project its governance model and reshape global governance structures in line with its national interests. Seeing economic growth as an important foundation of its overall development, the Chinese leadership has enthusiastically pursued the overarching goal of economic modernisation (Zhao S., 2012). When the 2008 financial meltdown in the US became the GFC, the opportunity arrived for China to assert itself as a central player on the global stage in an attempt to build a network of strategic economic and political partnerships with virtually all the major powers and regional blocs. The CCP leadership has always been sensitive to balance of forces (*liliang duibi*) in the world and thus embraced a multipolarity (*duojihua*) in which China could carry out a soft balancing operation through economic leverage and assistance, diplomatic manoeuvrings, and international institutions and forums (Zhao S., 2012). Indeed, Beijing was keenly aware that it could not adopt a traditional hard balancing strategy centred on military alliances and arms build-up: on the one hand, the high costs of a military race could delay China's economic modernisation programmes; on the other hand, party-state leaders feared that very few countries would be willing to participate in a China-led alliance against the West (Zhao S., 2012).

To achieve this goal, China has pursued an exceptionally delicate balancing act by growing a form of connective leadership that reflects the fluid, positive and relational understanding of economic and political power compatible with the positioning that China seeks in the international order (Andornino, 2017). In this logic, CCP officials have tried to foster bilateral and multilateral cooperation in various sectors even without the assumption of ideological agreement, by fostering initiatives geared around the need to manage a shared global economy. With President Xi's

consolidation of power, Beijing's efforts to reshape the international order in a way that supports China's peaceful development have become increasingly structured and systematic, shifting away from the strategic prudence (*taoguangyanghui*) to active engagement (*fenfa youwei*). In Xi's own words:

“China follows the path of peaceful development, an independent foreign policy of peace and a win-win strategy of opening-up. One of our priorities is to take an active part in global governance, pursue mutually beneficial cooperation, assume international responsibilities and obligations, expand convergence of interests with other countries and forge a community of shared future for mankind (CSFM)” (Xi, 2016).

The most consequential output of Chinese grand strategy for peaceful development is the Belt and Road Initiative, an extensive project focused on transregional, multilayered connectivity designed to harness the development potential of Europe, Asia, and Africa (Andornino, 2017). Officially launched in 2013 as the New Silk Road and later renamed One Belt and One Road Initiative (OBOR), the BRI has emerged as “a bold idea” that reflects the “proactive language and nature of diplomacy and communication under Xi”, typifying China's growing discursive power (Brown, 2021, p.329). The BRI has essentially been approached from two main sets of perspectives. The first sees it as an economically driven strategy which aims to strengthen global connectivity by constructing infrastructure and facilitating trade (d'Hooghe, 2021). Under this strand, the BRI conveys the positive role that Beijing can play as a trade partner and potential investor, thus leveraging on the country's own experience in the infrastructural sector (Brown, 2021). The second approach understands the BRI as an overarching public diplomacy strategy aimed at China's national rejuvenation by means of economic operations to stake out its own rightful international space and reassert its “right to speak” (d'Hooghe, 2021). Therefore, Chinese official narratives promote the BRI as an open and inclusive platform of international cooperation with no outright political purpose behind, facilitating the creation of a zone of Chinese influence which cannot be easily contested by the West.

According to President Xi, the BRI is “the project of the century”, propounding “a new type of international relations featuring win-win competition” (Xi, 2017). Success in this strategic endeavour have led to profound implications on essentially three levels:

a) domestically, the BRI is deemed to strengthen the institutional role of the CCP as the legitimate political power in China, thus giving more ideological support to promote the benefits of building a CSFM and socialism with Chinese Characteristics;

- b) regionally, it aims at counter any form of tension which would inhibit closer relations in China's neighbourhood and potentially lead to fragmentation and conflict;
- c) internationally, it is scarcely plausible that China's prosperity due to the BRI would improve the PRC's relations with the US, both because of hard power competition and for the widening of the ideational cleavage especially under the two Trump's administrations (Andornino, 2017).

This notwithstanding, the BRI is the cornerstone of current China's economic and political diplomacy as the Chinese government is actively seeking to project a new image and to assert a new position (*dingwei*) for the PRC within the global system, by encapsulating the BRI policies for transregional connectivity into its own national development strategy (Andornino, 2017). This is reinforced by the promotion of CSFM as an endeavour to build a China-centred community that will cooperate based on common interests, mutual trust and equal sharing of responsibilities which will make global governance fairer and more inclusive (d'Hooghe, 2021).

In the narrative of the BRI as a crucial element of China's public diplomacy, the Chinese government is deploying all possible instruments to tell China's BRI story (d'Hooghe, 2021). Indeed, a significant role is played by Chinese leaders, diplomats, and party officials who use every opportunity to explain the positive consequences of the BRI and CSFM for the world at international meetings and official visits abroad. The government's outreach operation targets foreign leaders and policymakers at high-level international events centred on showcasing BRI achievements and innovations, such as the 2017 and 2019 Belt and Road Summits (d'Hooghe, 2021). In addition, the Chinese media system is crucial for disseminating the BRI narrative, for instance through BRI-themed websites in different languages and through international higher education and research cooperation channels. Targeting even younger children, Xinhua and *China Daily* published a promotional video on YouTube showing children of various nationalities chanting the slogan "The future is coming now, the Belt and Road is how, we will share the goodness now, the Belt and Road is how" (d'Hooghe, 2021). Moreover, Chinese government actors seek to engage both domestic and international audiences through a variety of cultural initiatives, including BRI-themed photo exhibitions, essay and speech competitions, concerts and ballets. An important role is also played by the millions of overseas Chinese whose contribution is needed to "spread China's voice", provide their support with fulfilling the great rejuvenation, and build a CSFM (d'Hooghe, 2021).

An aspect of the BRI which has been given little attention is the PRC's exercise of discursive power in the development of the so-called Digital Silk Road (DSR). Announced in 2015, the DSR is an integral part of the BRI focusing on enhancing digital connectivity, developing technological

infrastructure and conventional technology standards, and promoting China's digital discursive power abroad (Chang, 2023). The DSR is therefore crucial in the development and promotion of the BRI as its primary focus lies in expanding China's economic reach and political influence through technological investment and infrastructure. Beyond that, the DSR is essential for shifting the balance of geopolitical power in favour of China, facilitating the economic, social, and digital development of partner countries, while at the same time it seeks to generate new international competitive advantage (Ly, 2020). Therefore, the DSR's ability to use communication infrastructure to overtake markets, standards, and political elites within the BRI framework aims to provide the multi-regional base for Beijing to develop its norms, systems, and networks in order to reshape the international arena. It has been noted that in the long run, this initiative will give Chinese companies a competitive advantage, backing their expansion on international markets (Ly, 2020). Indeed, e-commerce growth, artificial intelligence (AI) and financial technologies are crucial components of the transition to the digitalisation of infrastructure.

The BRI thus illustrates how economic policies intermingle with the political, the cultural, and even the digital. Importantly, it has been noted that the BRI figures not as a narrative told by one actor but as a story to which multiple participants can contribute with different chapters (Brown, 2021). The Chinese government indeed actively tasks professionals and experts in areas such as culture, education, media, public relations and law, as well as lay people and the diaspora with the goal of enhancing the overall capabilities of those involved in China's people-to-people exchanges with foreign countries (d'Hooghe, 2021). By doing so, party-state actors can more effectively steer the promotion and communication of official narratives surrounding both the BRI and CSFM. State enterprises, private businesspeople, local governments, overseas communities all engage in telling China's story and contribute their own specific narratives (Brown, 2021). Over time, the more all these actors take part in this grand act of storytelling, "the more the story becomes human, and the more palatable it is likely to be outside of China's borders", even though the state is still the dominant voice (Brown, 2021, p.331).

In parallel with such a large-scale initiative like the BRI, China has also pursued institutional avenues to strengthen its economic and political diplomacy. In this context, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) not only complements the goals of the BRI, but it also became a platform for China to project its soft power, gain legitimacy on the global arena, and, more importantly, promote the China model of development cooperation worldwide as it challenges West-led financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The AIIB has immediately been considered as an effort by Beijing's political elites

to consolidate China's economic presence in global governance while simultaneously exerting a greater influence in multilateral institutions (Menegazzi, 2023). It has been argued that "through the creation of such a new institutional statecraft, China gained credibility thanks to membership recruitment while propagating new rules, principles, and norms reflecting Chinese principles and values" (Menegazzi, 2023, p.96). In so doing, China is attempting not only to gain great power status, but also to delegitimise, overthrow, and replace the US-led liberal economic order and challenge US supremacy.

The crucial aspect of the AIIB is that it managed to transform China from a participant in international rules into a norm-creator at the international level (Menegazzi, 2023). This has been possible thanks to the diffusion of the AIIB narrative which seeks to distinguish China's contribution to the global development sector as showing greater fairness to borrowing developing countries. In line with the indications of Xi Jinping, the story of the AIIB sees the institution as:

- a) a new type of multilateral bank;
- b) a new type of development platform, especially for the Global South;
- c) a new type of high-performance institution for international cooperation;
- d) a new paradigm of multilateral cooperation (Menegazzi, 2023).

All the multiple facets that characterise the AIIB make the multilateral development bank as a key tool for Beijing's foreign and development policy which has been built around the slogan of "infrastructure for tomorrow (i4t)" (Menegazzi, 2023). According to this narrative, the AIIB would seek to achieve:

- a) green infrastructure;
- b) connectivity and regional integration;
- c) technological innovation in infrastructure;
- d) private capital mobilisation and investment (Menegazzi, 2023).

However, it has been criticised that the development commitments of the AIIB would only be existent on paper and that it would just be a manifestation of a "debt-trap diplomacy" rather than an example of win-win cooperation strategy for the developing countries more involved in the Chinese projects. Indeed, the alternative normative dimension advanced by the Chinese leadership about South-South Development Cooperation is dangerously challenging – if not outrightly threatening – the global public discourse about international development (Menegazzi, 2023). Western critics have thus suggested that China would be using multilateral channels to diffuse its development and political model, protecting its economic interests and spreading a political

narrative style with Chinese Characteristics which “gives China a distinct voice that can be heard and understood in international discourse” (Ying, 2020).

Therefore, China’s approach to promoting its narratives within multilateral development institutions is a cornerstone of its public diplomacy as it sets to influence its growing role in global governance. Since he took power, President Xi has buttressed the CCP’s grip on all areas of policymaking, society, and culture, aiming at confidently promoting the China model by showcasing its economic successes abroad (d’Hooghe, 2021). This is why Chinese scholars have shifted from a narrow vision of public diplomacy and soft power as exclusively cultural to one in which China’s political system and political capability are major sources. Simultaneously, China’s stories have changed from defending the China model against foreign criticism, to highlighting the institutional benefits of this model, presenting its advantages and concepts like the CSFM as being superior to Western ideas. In this narrative, Chinese solutions are offered to the world as global public goods as China is no longer a rule follower but a rule shaper and rule maker (d’Hooghe, 2021). Hence, China’s public diplomacy has adopted a bolder and more assertive tone, both in its messaging and in its increasingly explicit use of the country’s economic and political power as a tool of influence and leverage on the global stage. While this may not directly affect and overturn neoliberal democratic principles or their underlying ideologies, it nonetheless presents a challenge that has been feared by the West as a form of “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy”. How will be illustrated in the following paragraph, this nationalistic and combative public diplomacy strategy has brought about growing tensions between image cultivation and ideological assertiveness. Hence, this new diplomatic posture has drawn concerns in the West, where it has been perceived as a manifestation of China’s sharp power rather than genuine soft power.

3.5 From soft power to Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

China’s rapid advancement in both hard and soft power resources over the past few decades has exceeded many initial expectations, especially considering that it firmly remains under an authoritarian party-state system, largely unaffected by Western democratic influences. At the same time, its soft power strategies have grown increasingly refined. Yet, many observers have been noticing the presence of coercive and manipulative elements which have led scholars to claim that this new diplomatic posture of China is a form of sharp power (Wu, 2019). For them, Beijing has learned to package its political messages in an attractive way, refining its diplomatic tools not just to attract wider global audiences and promote its own global image, but first and foremost to manipulate and pressure international actors into accepting its political agenda and pursuing its strategic interests.

Even though China's efforts align with standard public diplomacy practices common to many other countries, a significant portion of the PRC's activities goes beyond conventional soft power. Involving coercive or manipulative tactics aimed at pressuring individuals and organisations, Chinese public diplomacy activities often blur the line between soft influence and sharp interference and have thus been seen as attempts to compromise the integrity of Western civil society and democratic political processes (Diamond and Schell, 2019). It has therefore been claimed that China has used the open environments of liberal democracies to diffuse its malign influence on targeted societies, attempting to undermine democratic values and replace them with authoritarian ones (Wu, 2019). In particular, China has started deploying its carrot-and-stick hard power indirectly and covertly through its soft power tools, thus creating a camouflaged blending that ultimately results in sharp power. Beijing's rising authoritarianism, its increasingly "monomaniacal focus" on President Xi's campaign to restructure and rejuvenate China's economy while simultaneously cement his power have all contributed to the shift from the more modest *taoguangyanghui* to its current form of aggressive and belligerent diplomacy, which has become known as "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" (Kurlantzick, 2022).

The phrase "Wolf Warrior" (*zhanlang*) originated with the homonymous Chinese action film directed by and starring Wu Jing (Sullivan and Wang, 2023). When it was released, in 2015, it immediately brought about commercial successes at the box office. Indeed, the emphasis on national strength and the themes of love and loyalty to the country resonated with Chinese audiences at a time when China was aspiring to the China Dream. However, the term was adopted by Western journalists who popularised and used it mostly to refer to Chinese actors in official positions within the institutional foreign policy and diplomatic apparatus who are liable to engage on a range of highly sensitive issues like Xinjiang, Taiwan, the South China Sea and the origins of Covid-19 (Sullivan and Wang, 2023). While this type of communication has been described by Western media outlets as confrontational, belligerent, and rude, from the perspective of Chinese publics, the same tone is instead strong, frank, and bold. This is because the Chinese conviction that more robust and assertive communication is necessary to defend China's discourse power and tell China's story well against distorted Western narratives about the PRC, is criticised and pushed back by Western observers as propaganda and sharp power (Sullivan and Wang, 2023).

Wolf Warrior communication increasingly reflects the central role of digital technologies in advancing the state's objectives of propaganda, public opinion and social control. This digital turn underscores how public diplomacy tools especially in the digital realm are not merely instruments of modernisation but have become integral to the CCP's broader governance and messaging

apparatus (Sullivan and Wang, 2023). The Chinese party-state has deliberately distorted facts or falsified information to influence public perceptions, aiming to legitimise its authoritarian power and advance its strategic agenda (Wu, 2019). Under the direction of top CCP's leaders, the campaign has intensified seeking to portray China's authoritarian regime in a favourable light and foster greater receptiveness to Chinese investment and financial engagement abroad, positioning it as a model of governance and information control (Cook, 2021). Since Mao's era, the CCP's constant fabrication, falsification and flooding of stories, resulted in the situation where audiences cannot distinguish clearly between what is true and what is false. Both domestic and international publics, therefore, have progressively internalised the CCP propaganda, to the extent that they can no longer even dare to think independently and automatically censor themselves and others in complete obedience to party-state authorities (Wu, 2019).

Through a highly developed propaganda system and manipulative practices, some of China's current soft power efforts extend beyond genuine promotion of cultural appeal or attractiveness of its political model. Instead, these initiatives serve as instruments for penetrating and manipulating targeted audiences by covert, coercive, or corrupting means, ultimately aiming to disseminate and advance the CCP's political agenda under the guise of public diplomacy (Wu, 2019). By leveraging certain soft power platforms – from education, to culture, to media, to economic-political initiatives – China has actively sought to undermine Western democratic values. Domestically, it restricts foreign political and cultural influence to maintain ideological control; internationally, it exploits the openness of democratic societies to advance its strategic interests, influence public discourse, suppress critical voices, and tell China's story well according to the CCP, all under the veneer of positive public diplomacy. “Chinese leaders thus appropriated the term ‘soft power’ for their own use, while launching operations not just to improve foreign perceptions of the PRC but also to silence criticism and exert authoritarian influence” (Wu, 2019, p.136). Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, therefore, is justified by the fight for discourse power and the need for proactively setting the international agenda to counter the dominant negative framing of China's threat emanating from the West (Sullivan and Wang, 2023).

As it has been explained in the previous sections, China deploys varied public diplomacy tools to elicit friendly treatment or neutralise criticism in foreign independent media outlets, encouraging international audiences, government actors and business companies to align with and support the CCP's agenda (Wu, 2019). In the field of cultural and educational diplomacy, CIs have been charged with the claim of spreading propaganda, monopolising international Chinese language and culture study, and restricting the host universities' academic freedom. This “academic

malware” would instead strive to conduct military espionage and surveillance, as the PRC government uses them as economic leverage to coerce or threaten the host universities into obeying its demands (Wu, 2019). Through Chinese sharp power initiatives in the educational sector, the freedom of intellectual inquiry would thus be tested as party-state leadership seeks to bend knowledge-generating institutions to their will (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). As authoritarian-sponsored initiatives in the educational and cultural sector often appeal to individuals’ and institutions’ desire to extend access to foreign elites and international forums through exchange opportunities, they work to amplify the ideas preferred by the CCP while sidelining those they deem undesirable. Many universities and think tanks in open societies rely on Chinese economic resources and collaboration to boost their own prestige and formative offer, underestimating the extent to which Beijing has identified that reliance as an open conduit for influence (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). As a matter of fact, as universities enter into written funding agreements with the Confucius Institute Headquarters, these deals constrained the signing institution to comply with China’s laws and submit to a China-based tribunal in the event of a dispute.

Hence, economic inducements affect China’s cultural diplomacy as they provide Chinese party-state officials with leverage to achieve censorship and claim control over the discursive and ideational space, undercutting the pretence of parity with their democratic counterparts (Rolland, 2020). A leading case was that of the University of North Carolina which in 2009 cancelled a meeting with Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, already winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and spiritual guide of Tibetan Buddhism, who the PRC’s authorities considered a traitor. In that occasion, the local CI director, Bailian Li, asked the head of the university, Warwick Arden, to withdraw from the commitment, arguing that the Dalai Lama’s speech would jeopardise the strong (financial more than) educational relationships that the university was developing with China (Messa, 2018).

In the context of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Beijing has also insinuated its political propaganda messaging into foreign media markets in many subtle ways, resulting in Chinese state media content dominating international news outlets and stifling independent coverage that is critical of the PRC (Cook, 2021). The pace and intensity of China’s covert media and digital diplomacy operations have accelerated, particularly as Beijing seeks to rehabilitate its international image after the initial cover-up of the Covid-19 outbreak, seeking to exploit economic vulnerabilities and political fractures that have emerged within and among democracies during the pandemic. These efforts lack transparency as state-sponsored media content disseminated through co-productions and partnerships with co-opted private outlets masks the CCP’s political and strategic interests behind China’s stories. Indeed, by embedding official perspectives into foreign mainstream media,

while downplaying or obscuring ties to the CCP, these strategies blur the origins of the content and the role of party-state funding. As a result, Chinese state media narratives can circulate on a broader scale among international audiences, amplifying the CCP's/China's voice while evading scrutiny (Cook, 2021).

Over the past few years, the Chinese government has used Facebook, X, YouTube and other Western media platforms to launch disinformation campaigns and content manipulation efforts. Large-scale takedowns of inauthentic China-linked accounts, and investigations by some journalists and think tanks have revealed repeated and persistent campaigns to disseminate false and demonising information on sensitive issues (Cook, 2021). China's digital disinformation operations increasingly rely on a complex ecosystem of coordinated tactics. These include content farms that disseminate large volumes of information across various platforms simultaneously; hijacked or covertly purchased Facebook groups, pages, and user accounts used to amplify pro-China narratives; text-messaging campaigns. Additionally, the use of coordinated trolling efforts seeks to distort online discussions and skew research outcomes, while automated bot networks are deployed to manipulate Twitter hashtags, artificially boosting the visibility of state-aligned messages and drowning out dissenting voices (Cook, 2021). At the same time, Beijing has sought to extend its domestic censorship practices beyond its own borders by having its embassies and diplomatic missions attempting to intimidate independent foreign media when reporting diverges from the CCP's preferred storyline (Wu, 2019). "Chinese diplomats frame their assertive communication as defensive tactics in response to the rhetorical provocation of the Western states or sub-state actors" but push back the Wolf-Warrior-Diplomacy label attached by Western observers (Chen, 2023, p.150). Hence, aided by digital technology, China is striving to become a "networked totalitarian state" (Wu, 2019, p.153). The PRC regime not only relies on surveillance and cyber censorship to maintain strict control over its domestic population, but it also actively exports its model of digital authoritarianism abroad, encouraging the replication of its information control strategies and posing significant challenges to democratic norms (Wu, 2019).

Media diplomacy and control are thus highly intertwined with President Xi's aggressive global expansion also in the economic and political sphere. China's projection of economic sharp power increasingly hinges on a strategic blend of economic coercion and information control, as it is for instance shown in the case of BRI. Under the guise of infrastructure development and mutual benefit, the BRI has become a key vehicle through which Beijing exports its model of authoritarian governance and censorship (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). Indeed, while it has been touted by Chinese state media and diplomatic missions as a purely positive venture that will benefit

participating countries, many Western observers suspect that the BRI could be “a Trojan horse” for China-led regional development, military expansion, and PCC-controlled institutions (McBride, Berman, Charzky, 2023). Large financial investments and opaque, strategically focused agreements with targeted sectors would be examples of “corrosive capitals” which is enabled by a lack of strong legal safeguards, accountability and transparency mechanisms (Walker and Ludwig, 2021). These deals in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and real estate aim to lock target countries into long-term, asymmetric relationships that bind them to China’s interests, leaving them vulnerable to political leverage.

Democratic countries, therefore, have assumed that China’s public diplomacy strategies would genuinely lead to political reform and democracy rather than further imperilling liberal standards. Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is just the culmination of an unfolding trajectory reflecting changes in Chinese foreign policy posture which is increasingly striving to assert itself as a major country and a great power in the international arena (Sullivan and Wang, 2023). Hence, the internal logic of this more belligerent and assertive public diplomacy strategy would be intended to serve the twin demands of manifesting a robust foreign policy and affirm popular nationalism. However, there is an imbalance of informational power and techniques due to the Chinese regime’s non-transparency and manipulation of data, for which liberal democracies have often been ignorant of its true manoeuvres and purposes (Wu, 2019). This is why analysing Chinese public diplomacy strategies today is paramount.

While China has made considerable efforts to position itself as an indispensable global player and to expand its soft power, its approach is increasingly characterised by strategies that blur the boundary between attraction and coercion. China’s public diplomacy reflects in fact a calculated and evolving synthesis of soft power and sharp power tools, strategically crafted to bolster the China Dream and reshape international perceptions in line with the CCP core objectives – most notably, the imperative of telling China’s story well. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, although initiatives in cultural diplomacy, global media outreach, and economic-political engagement are ostensibly designed to cultivate international appeal, they are frequently underpinned by regime security imperatives and ideological control mechanisms, thus pushing them beyond the realm of benign influence. This duality is further reflected in the emergence of a more assertive diplomatic stance under Xi Jinping, where traditional soft power instruments increasingly coexist with – and at times are eclipsed by – a more confrontational Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, which has increasingly garnered widespread criticism and undermined some of the credibility gains achieved earlier conventional soft power initiatives, especially in the West

(Repnikova, 2022). As China's public diplomacy under Xi Jinping's leadership becomes more centralised, systematically orchestrated, and assertively nationalistic, its growing reliance on sharp power tactics and confrontational messaging reveals deep tensions between the CCP's desire for global influence and its reluctance to accommodate alternative models of governance and discourse (d'Hooghe, 2021). These contradictions lie at the heart of China's evolving public diplomacy strategy and underscore its broader challenge to the norms and institutions of liberal international order.

Chapter 4 – Sino-Italian bilateral relations: foundations for a strategic engagement

China and Italy are both time-honoured ancient civilisations whose bilateral relations are rooted in a millennia-long history of encounters and confrontations from the opposite ends of the same Eurasian continent. On one side stood the Roman empire, which eventually gave rise to the Christian Church; on the other, the Chinese empire, which consistently strived to preserve or restore an imperial structure capable of governing the same vast territory for more than two millennia (Bertuccioli and Masini, 2014). The first direct clash between these two civilisations occurred in the nineteenth century, when the West, having already extended its commercial power across much of the known world, turned its gaze toward the Far East. And while today trade seems to be the prominent element of the exchanges between the two countries, that between Italy and China has been, above all, a story of cultural relations, driven more by Italian interest than by Chinese initiative, since the latter historically showed little desire to venture beyond their imperial frontiers and cultural sphere of influence in East Asia. Hence, from the Middle Ages throughout the Renaissance, Europeans – and Italians in particular – journeyed by land and sea to reach this distant land, motivated by the desire to spread Christianity and the cultural values that had developed alongside it in the West (Bertuccioli and Masini, 2014).

Italy and China's bilateral relationships have evolved into one of the most intriguing and complex partnerships. After centuries of self-imposed isolation, China came to understand that, in order to survive, it needed to engage with the West and acquire the technological tools that had made Europe powerful (Bertuccioli and Masini, 2014). However, the events that unfolded between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – most notably the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) – contributed to the construction of a Western perception of China as a violent and antagonistic power. This perception significantly weakened the relations that had been established up to that point, leading to a prolonged interruption in bilateral engagement that would persist, in large part, until the early 1960s and 1970s (Bertuccioli and Masini, 2014). Hence, when Italy officially recognised the People's Republic of China in 1970, that decision was not only a significant diplomatic success, but also a symbolic reactivation of historical ties within a dramatically altered geopolitical landscape (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). In the decades that followed, Italy positioned itself as a pragmatic interlocutor in China's gradual internationalisation, adopting a commercially-driven and non-confrontational approach that distinguished it from other Western powers. This attitude allowed Italy to expand its relationship with Beijing also towards education and cultural-

scientific exchange, thus reflecting a convergence of economic interests with Italy's ambition to play a more prominent role in East-West relations.

Italy's symbolic and strategic importance to China – as a G7 country, a founding EU member, NATO ally, and a global cultural hub – has made it a compelling partner in Beijing's vision for global engagement, particularly under the BRI. Indeed, in 2019, Italy became the first – and thus far only – G7 country to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China to join the BRI. However, this decision was met with considerable criticism from both European and transatlantic partners, who viewed it as a deviation from the EU's cautious stance on China's growing strategic influence and its ambitious vision of Eurasian connectivity. (Andornino, 2023a) Therefore, Sino-Italian bilateral relations are also marked by ambiguity and asymmetry, reflecting the broader tensions between economic pragmatism, normative concerns, and geopolitical shifts. Nevertheless, cultural, academic, and scientific cooperation remain active domains of interaction, sustained by institutional partnerships and longstanding people-to-people ties.

This chapter argues that the Italy–China relationship – characterised by a peculiar blend of cultural fascination, political oscillation, and economic interests – has created both the conditions and the constraints for the development of China's public diplomacy strategies in Italy. This engagement has often been beclouded by myths, projection biases, and stereotypes and yet the outcomes of this relationship are numerous, affecting production arrangements, consumer habits, individual perceptions and behaviours (Andornino, 2012). After a brief historical account of the evolutions of this bilateral engagement – with Italy's recognition of the PRC in 1970 as a watershed, the chapter will shed light on the structural complexity of the Sino-Italian relations by analysing areas of interactions ranging from trade to cultural diplomacy. However, Italy's fluctuating strategic orientation, combined with China's evolving global ambitions, has created both opportunities and frictions. Indeed, Italian responses have been more ambivalent—oscillating between enthusiasm for economic cooperation and growing concern over strategic dependencies and value-based divergences. By outlining these structural conditions, the chapter provides the necessary foundation for understanding the public diplomacy strategies that will be examined in the following case-study.

4.1 Sino-Italian normalisation and bilateral relations in the 20th century

The complexity of Italy's relationship with the RPC reflected not only the broader dynamics of the Cold War international system but also the specific domestic contexts shaping foreign policy choices in both countries (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). From a diplomatic perspective, during the Cold War years, Italy and China did not maintain any formal diplomatic ties until the late 1960s

as, on the Italian side, the government's room for manoeuvre was constrained by the political obligations stemming from its membership in the NATO. As a matter of fact, Italy's Atlantic commitment represented a major obstacle to the development of Sino-Italian political relations, as any diplomatic opening toward Communist China risked undermining American support for Italy's economic development and its broader international ambitions. Moreover, there was concern that such a move could provoke the ire of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government, as the nationalist Republic of China (ROC) had veto power in the United Nations Security Council and could thus jeopardise Italy's hopes of securing a seat in the organisation. Therefore, convinced that Rome's stance toward Beijing could be swayed by developments surrounding the issue of China's representation at the UN, the government in Taipei attempted every effort to prevent Italy from recognising the PRC. Taiwan hoped that the Vatican would exert its influence and sought to put pressure on the Christian Democratic and Social Democratic political elites, both directly and through international channels (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015)

It was only after a complex and delicate process that Italy recognised the authorities of the PRC in Beijing as the legitimate government of China, rather than the ROC. Indeed, Italy showed little inclination to deepen its relations with the ROC, a position underscored by its decision not to establish an embassy in Taiwan, opting instead to be represented in Taipei by a consular office. While Italy largely aligned its policy toward Beijing with decisions made in Washington, the continued exclusion of the PRC from the international community generated a degree of unease among both Italian political elites and public opinion (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Indeed, the establishment of official ties with Communist China was supported not only by left-wing parties, but also by members of the governing coalition and significant sectors of the business community. In the 1950s, the strong and influential presence of the Communist and Socialist parties, enabled Italy to maintain a degree of continuity in its relations with the PRC, both through participation in international leftist networks and through bilateral contacts. As for Italy's industrial sector, the willingness to establish a productive dialogue with China was driven by the perception of the country as a potentially significant market for the national industry (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

On China's side, the attitude of the CCP's leadership toward Italy mirrored the broader orientations of China's domestic and foreign policy (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). During the phases of heightened ideological radicalism, relations with capitalist and imperialist countries such as Italy were viewed as politically problematic, regardless of the potential economic benefits they could have offered (Samarani, 2008). In the early years of the PRC, foreign policy was almost

exclusively managed by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and their decisions were driven by the need to consolidate the new state both domestically and internationally, as well as by the desire to assert the PRC's political and ideological identity unequivocally (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Furthermore, China's international position was complicated by the Korean War (1950-1953) and the PRC's decision to provide military support to North Korea, which led to a 1951 UN resolution condemning China as an "aggressor". Hence, the country's isolation from the Western bloc was progressively reinforced by the imposition of a military and commercial embargo, that in turn pushed China toward a more radical and inward-looking posture. It was only after the end of the Korean War that the PRC entered a new phase in its international relations. This shift was marked by the gradual expansion of a network of cultural and economic associations operating under the supervision of the CCP and which functioned as key instruments of "people's diplomacy", thus allowing Beijing to pursue unofficial channels of international outreach and influence in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition by many Western states (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

In this context, despite Italy's commitments as a NATO member and Communist China's adherence to its revolutionary identity, the relations between the two countries began to show signs of rapprochement, yet at the expense of Rome's ties with Taipei. Indeed, Italy's admission to the UN in 1955 had removed the threat of a retaliatory veto from the ROC in response to a potential Italian recognition of Mao's China. Moreover, the Italian political leadership showed little interest in cultivating economic or cultural relations with Taiwan, directing its attention toward Maoist China. Indeed, the cultural and ideological orientation projected by the PRC resonated with the values of the Italian left and simultaneously aligned with the economic interests of the business sector, which viewed Communist China as a potentially enormous market. Additionally, it reinforced the broad-based political conviction across party lines that the isolation of the PRC could pose a significant risk to the stability of the international order (Fardella, 2014). In particular, an active role in advancing Sino-Italian bilateral engagement was assumed by various political and civil society actors, most notably Pietro Nenni, secretary of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), and by the Centre for the Development of Economic and Cultural Relations with China, chaired by Ferruccio Parri (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Notably, the cultural image that China presented to the Italian public during this period emphasised not its revolutionary or socialist identity – still closely aligned with the Soviet model – but rather its traditional and popular cultural heritage, which proved more accessible and appealing to the Italian collective imagination.

In the second half of the 1950s, there was an increasing and explicit demand within Italy for a more open approach toward China, one that considered emerging commercial opportunities while

also demonstrating political foresight (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). From this perspective, the Italian recognition of the PRC was to be evaluated primarily in terms of Italy's national interests and the prospects for its industrial sector, detached from ideological considerations or broader international political assessments. Although within the context of the Cold War trade with Communist China was politically conditioned by US approval, Sino-Italian commercial ties began to expand, largely driven by the initiative of private entrepreneurs, who leveraged the friendly relations between the PCC with both PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano) and PSI⁸. Consequently, Italy was able to capitalise on China's desire to strengthen commercial relations with European capitalist nations, a strategy that was institutionalised through the activities of the Commission for the Promotion of Foreign Trade (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

One of the crucial drivers of Chinese commercial expansion to the West was the need for the CCP leadership to counterbalance its growing dependency on the Soviet Union in an era further complicated by escalation of tensions between the two Communist countries (Samarani, 2008). Therefore, the degradation caused by the combination of the outbreak of the radicalisation of China's domestic political struggle with the 1960 Sino-Soviet split paved the way for a significant shift in Beijing's foreign policy towards the West, which was welcomed by Washington as a new era of "socialisation" of China in the Western-led order (Fardella, 2014). On the Italian side, following the rupture between Beijing and Moscow, there was a renewed political and ideological interest in contemporary China, particularly focused on exploring the distinctive features of the Chinese socialist experience and the relevance of Maoism as both an ideological framework and a tool for political action (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Importantly, this facilitated a flow of information and reporting on China which, although heavily ideologically mediated, contributed to a perceived sense of affinity.

Public interest in China during this period was thus fuelled more by ideological fascination than by cultural, economic, or humanitarian considerations. The myth of a China, which through the Cultural Revolution, placed class struggle and mass mobilisation at the centre of its critique of the system, quickly gained traction among those who looked at Mao's China as a model for radical societal transformation – one that seemingly transcended the power compromises that had undermined both the European and Soviet versions of socialism (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). However, this was a highly idealised representation of a renewed socialist Chinese society that largely overlooked the mechanisms of control and persuasion systematically employed by the

⁸ In the context of the promotion of commercial and economic ties between Rome and Beijing, the role of Enrico Mattei and ENI cannot be underestimated, especially as it had also significant political consequences (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

CCP's propaganda apparatus (Samarani, 2008). Nonetheless, the process of diplomatic rapprochement between Italy and the PRC made notable strides forward, despite the potential for the Cultural Revolution to undermine or delay the progress achieved. To the contrary, the political turbulence and radicalism that characterised China's internal dynamics during this period did not significantly hinder the Italian government's gradual recalibration of its stance, nor did it prevent the strengthening of informal economic and cultural ties that had begun to pave the way for full diplomatic recognition. In this context, indeed, the launch of Italian-language broadcasts by Radio China International in 1960 can be seen as part of Beijing's evolving foreign policy orientation, that increasingly identified Western Europe as a strategically significant area through which to challenge the bipolar logic of the Cold War (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

In the 1960s, pressures from the Italian economic sector in favour of a wider engagement with the PRC intensified, thus prompting the Italian Ministry of Foreign Trade to assess the potential for expanding bilateral trade relations (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). This shift coincided with significant transformations in the domestic political landscape: notably, the inclusion of the PSI into the 1963 Rumor's centre-left government contributed to a reorientation of Italy's foreign policy, moving it beyond the rigid dichotomy of Cold War bloc politics, aligning more closely with Beijing's theory of "intermediate zones"⁹. In this context, Italy's evolving international posture increasingly resonated with Beijing's geopolitical framework, paving the way for tangible progress in both the bilateral dimension of diplomatic and economic engagement, as well as in the broader debate surrounding the PRC's representation at the UN (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). This significant development was confirmed by the 1964 commercial agreement between Italy and the PRC which opened a new channel of communication and facilitated mutual knowledge between the two countries, while simultaneously boosting exchanges of goods and services. The agreement had also a significant political meaning as it reflected a broader strategic objective: to challenge the continued exclusion of the PRC from key international institutions, foster its integration into the international arena, and legitimise its presence as a sovereign actor. In so doing, it would create new opportunities for its recognition within the UN framework. It is significant that precisely in

⁹ According to this theory, although Western Europe was firmly situated within the capitalist bloc, it was subordinated to US imperialism. As such, its strategic interests could not be assumed to align entirely with those of the US. Hence, from Beijing's perspective, establishing relations with Western European countries was crucial in a broader effort to challenge the bipolar logic of the international system. By engaging with the Old Continent, China attempted to weaken both US and Soviet hegemony, perceived as obstructing the realisation of a fairer multipolar global order grounded in the principles of national sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

1964 De Gaulle's France and the PRC jointly decided to establish diplomatic relations as their mutual recognition resonated with the strategic interests of both countries (Fardella, 2014)¹⁰.

Although the need to normalise diplomatic relations with the PRC had gained broad cross-party consensus within the Italian political establishment, the path toward formal recognition proved diplomatically intricate, due to the necessity for Italy to calibrate its foreign policy moves in alignment with the strategic orientations of the US (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). The negotiations – originally spearheaded by Pietro Nenni and subsequently concluded by Aldo Moro, who had by then become Minister of Foreign Affairs – revolved around three core conditions: first, Italy's formal recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China; second, the acknowledgement of Taiwan as an integral part of the PRC's sovereign territory; and third, Italy's endorsement of the "One China" principle at the UN (Fardella, 2014). The Taiwan issue was overcome through a carefully negotiated formula whereby Italy "took note" of the PRC's "declaration" of sovereignty over the island. This phrasing was diplomatically significant, as it emphasised Italy's refusal to fully accede to Beijing's pressure for a more assertive endorsement of its position (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). With the official announcement of recognition on November 6th, 1970, Italy interrupted diplomatic relations with Taiwan and initiated a new phase in its engagement with the PRC (Fardella, 2014)¹¹.

Significantly, after the diplomatic recognition of the PRC, the bilateral relations between Italy and China were marked by a growing emphasis on the consolidation of economic ties. This occurred both within the institutional framework of development cooperation and through the initiatives of the Italian entrepreneurial sector – particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, which capitalised on the opportunities offered by the relocation of production activities to China (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Already in the second half of the 1970s, Italy had become an important supplier of industrial equipment to the PRC, with the Italian chemical industry playing a significant role in this burgeoning economic relationship. However, when examining the Sino-Italian relations in the post-normalisation period, two key dimensions must be considered. On the one hand, Italy's engagement with China became more closely integrated within the broader

¹⁰ De Gaulle intended to use the recognition of China as a lever to shift the global equilibrium more towards France and as a reminder of French *grandeur*. Mao, instead, sought to circumvent US diplomatic isolation and attract the recognition of other countries in both the West and the developing countries (Fardella, 2014).

¹¹ For Taipei, the communication channel with Italy would henceforth be maintained through its representation in the Vatican City State (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). From the late 1970s onwards, relations between Italy and Taiwan gradually resumed at the parliamentary level, with official state visits by the respective representatives, and in 1990 a Taipei Representative Office was established in Rome to oversee and promote bilateral economic and cultural exchanges (Taipei Representative Office in Italy, (2024) "Relazioni Taiwan-Italia", *Taipei Representative Office in Italy*, March 15, 2024. Available at: https://www.roc-taiwan.org/it_it/post/70.html. (Accessed: 18/04/2025)).

framework of the European Community (EC) relations with the PRC. On the other hand, the formation – unprecedented in the history of Sino-Italian relations – of a Chinese migrant community in Italy marked a turning point in the dynamics of exchange and mutual understanding between the two societies, adding a new socio-cultural dimension to bilateral ties (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

It was, nevertheless, the era of economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 through his “Open Door” policy that laid the foundations for a substantial expansion of Sino-Italian relations, which culminated in the signing of the 1986 Consular Convention, the first such agreement between the PRC and a European country (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). An important channel for boosting Italy’s presence in China was that of development cooperation, which was perceived by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as one of the most effective tools for bolstering Italy’s economic engagement with the PRC. Through this framework, development cooperation provided an institutional and financial umbrella that supported Italian small and medium enterprises seeking to invest in China’s modernisation efforts. By the mid-1980s, this strategy had enabled Italy to attain a significant standing in its relations with the PRC, positioning it as the most generous bilateral donor in terms of grants and the second-largest provider of development credits (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Additionally, both parties demonstrated a shared interest in enhancing Italy’s role in China’s development process, particularly with a view to widening cooperation in sectors, such as advanced industrial and dual-use technologies, which Beijing deemed essential for its national security. The primary beneficiaries of China’s economic opening and the support provided through development cooperation were large Italian enterprises. These companies were able to secure a significant foothold in the Chinese market, largely due to the establishment of joint ventures with local partners (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Italian commercial penetration in China was primarily led by major industrial players such as Montedison, which exported fertilisers; Fiat, particularly through the sale of small industrial Iveco vehicles; and ENI, albeit in a more limited capacity within the paint and coatings sector (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020).

Nonetheless, despite these initiatives, trade relations remained relatively modest throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Italy and China competed more than they cooperated economically because their economies mirrored one another in three respects: the presence of a strong manufacturing sector, a heavy reliance on exports, and a low-tech production bias (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). Italian firms, particularly in key sectors such as textiles, machinery, furniture, and home appliances, experienced even significant setbacks as they struggled to withstand the competitive pressure exerted by China’s export-oriented industrial expansion. Indeed, it was not until the early 2000s

that a more substantial and sustained intensification of economic exchanges between the two countries took place (Gambusi and Prodi, 2020). In this context, the events of 1989, particularly the violent repression of demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, marked a watershed moment in the PRC process of opening, with significant repercussions also for its foreign policy (Varsori, 2020).

In the aftermath of Tiananmen, diplomatic contacts between China and the West were largely suspended. However, Italy managed to play a crucial mediating role in restoring dialogue between the PRC and the West, particularly during its presidency of the EC (1990-1991) (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Crucially, Italy's political positioning as a "bridge" between China and the Western world was most evident in its intention to resume its investment programmes in China, which had constituted a major channel for Italian business penetration into the Chinese market in the previous decade. Notably, Italian foreign policy deliberately downplayed the issue of human rights violations, which was more prominently addressed in the context of Sino-American relations¹². This strategic choice was driven, on one side, by a desire to protect national economic interests aligned with China's ongoing modernisation efforts. On the other side, it reflected a broader belief that isolating China from the international community would neither encourage political reform within its authoritarian regime nor contribute to global stability. Instead, reintegration within the international community was seen as a more pragmatic and potentially constructive approach (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

Despite the high-level diplomatic engagement observed in the second half of the 1990s, Sino-Italian relations remained politically limited in their effectiveness (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). This was largely due to Rome's reluctance to address issues perceived as particularly sensitive by Beijing – such as, human rights and the relations between the PRC and the Vatican. On the economic front, structural difficulties within the Italian economic system, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises, began to emerge as significant obstacles to their positioning in the Chinese market. During this period, China began to export mechanical and electronic goods, textiles, clothing, metals, and chemical products to Italy, while importing Italian machinery, equipment, optical instruments, leather goods, and medical products. However, the continental scale of China, combined with the geographical dispersion of Italian business presence and the structural inadequacy and limited competitiveness of many Italian firms tended to disadvantage

¹² The then US President Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1993 with a political agenda highly critical of Beijing, having previously denounced President George H. W. Bush for his conciliatory stance toward Deng Xiaoping – derisively referred to in American political discourse as the "Butcher of Tiananmen". Indeed, a central tenet of Clinton's electoral programme was the promotion of human rights within the context of an increasingly open and liberal global order. As he asserted that a regime that tramples on human rights cannot be considered a friend of the United States (Rampini, 2005).

Italy (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Nonetheless, by the end of the millennium, the Italian government took an explicit and proactive stance in support of China's accession to the WTO, which is considered a crucial watershed in the history of international relations.

4.2 Italy and China in the new millennium

Since the beginning of the 21st century, significant transformations in the domestic and international contexts have led both China and Italy to recalibrate their respective foreign policy approaches, with China's accession to the WTO in December 2001 marking a significant turning point in Sino-Italian economic relations (Yanhong, Caligiuri, Sampaolo, 2023; Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Parallel to a growth in trade – particularly Chinese exports to Italy – starting from 2001 there was also a notable increase in direct investment by Italian firms in China. Significantly, the lower production costs and the possibility of accessing the expanding Chinese domestic market constituted the primary motivations behind these investment decisions. The sectors involved in this wave of investment largely mirrored those central to Italian exports, most precisely, mechanical engineering and industrial equipment, which were in high demand in China's ongoing industrialisation process. Less advanced segments of production, instead, were relocated to China to serve both local demand and other global markets seeking competitively priced goods, while higher-end international clientele continued to be provided by production based in Italy. Moreover, even in traditional sectors associated with the “Made in Italy” label – such as fashion, luxury, and furniture – China soon emerged as a strategic production base, offering opportunities to manufacture mid-range products at more competitive costs, which could then be marketed in other key regions (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Importantly, during the early 2000s, Chinese enterprises increasingly outperformed their Italian counterparts, both in international markets and within Italy itself, to the extent that “the relative loss of international competitiveness was one of the factors that contributed to Italy's unsteady economic performance” at the beginning of the new millennium (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021, p.8).

In 2004, the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his Chinese counterpart, Wen Jiabao, signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership” which called for bilateral and multilateral joint efforts to safeguard global peace and security as well as for setting up a China-Italy committee to upgrade bilateral cooperation in various levels (Xinhua News Agency, 2008). At the time, Italy's motivations behind its engagement with the strategic partnership were predominantly economic in nature, but the scope of the subsequent collaboration went beyond that sphere, directing towards the political and the cultural as well as towards multilateral issues (Ambasciata d'Italia a Pechino,

2023). However, as far as the economic and commercial field is concerned, the partnership has been interpreted by Italian policymakers and business leaders through a tripartite framework:

- 1) as a potentially profitable export market;
- 2) as a formidable competitor in the manufacturing sector;
- 3) as a prospective source of foreign investment, especially after the 2008 GFC (Boni, 2023).

Later that year, during the visit to China of the Italian President of the Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, China and Italy also signed multiple bilateral documents to further consolidate cultural exchanges and cooperation in health and sports (Yanhong, Caligiuri, Sampaolo, 2023). In so doing, the two governments reaffirmed the significance of enhancing high-level political contacts, while simultaneously promoting exchanges and mutual understanding (Xinhua News Agency, 2008).

From then on, the Sino-Italian relations have entered a new era of comprehensive development, manifesting most prominently in the mutual political trust and the frequent official visits of high-level leaders especially amidst the turbulent backdrop of the GFC (Yanhong, Caligiuri, Sampaolo, 2023)¹³. On a practical level, since its establishment, the joint government committee, headed by the respective Italian and Chinese Ministers of Foreign Affairs, has encouraged the development of ties along regional and territorial levels; financial and economic sphere; cultural level, especially as far as people-to-people exchanges are concerned (Boni, 2023). As the Chinese leadership emphasised, this inter-governmental body was going “to strengthen functions, and give full play to its role in political guidance; pool resources to raise the level of cooperation in key areas; build brands, and enrich bilateral cultural and people-to-people exchanges; innovate ideas, and strengthen public opinion foundations on both sides” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2013).

From Beijing’s part, Italy occupied a strategic position as a potential conduit between the Mediterranean basin and the broader European continent, two pivotal regions within the framework of China’s global engagement strategy. Indeed, Italy’s geographical location enhanced its appeal as a prospective asset-rich economy, offering attractive investment opportunities (Boni, 2023). Italy-China relations have been distinguished by three fundamental structural characteristics, more specifically, the prominent role of the manufacturing sector in both economies, a pronounced dependence on exports, and a shared tendency towards low-technology production. Building upon this foundation, two notable dynamics have then emerged: an

¹³ Concurrently, the commemorations held in 2010 and 2011 prompted renewed reflections on both the historical depth and the contemporary relevance of the strategic partnership (Andornino, 2012). For a more in-depth analysis of the official state visits between Italian and Chinese leadership see Yanhong, Caligiuri, Sampaolo (2023).

asymmetrical competitive relation and the asynchronous generation of opportunities. In the first case, the scale and cost advantages of the Chinese economy keep challenging Italian producers due to the different scope for monetary flexibility, the diverse structure of comparative production advantages and dissimilar corporate governance practices; in the second, the timing and nature of economic openings have differed significantly between the two countries, thus influencing the trajectory of the bilateral engagement (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Indeed, the PRC's growing presence in global markets inevitably triggered an early onset of competitive pressures, particularly acute for Italian enterprises. Beijing's revitalised engagement in international trade introduced profound transformations in the global economic landscape, especially within labour-intensive and low-technology sectors. In this context, Italy found itself increasingly vulnerable, as long-standing structural weaknesses in its domestic economy, together with a steady erosion of its overall international competitiveness, further undermined its position in global trade dynamics (Andornino, 2012).

With regard to production structures and corporate governance, the asymmetry between the Chinese and Italian systems is shaped by a constellation of interrelated factors (Andornino, 2012). Foremost among these is the markedly lower cost of low-skilled labour in the PRC, which confers a significant cost advantage over Italian firms. This disparity is further compounded by the relative inefficacy of China's regulatory apparatus in curbing practices such as price dumping, thereby exacerbating competitive imbalances. A further dimension of asymmetry lies in the different enterprise size distribution with Chinese firms – particularly those in key industrial sectors – tend to be considerably larger than their Italian counterparts. Additionally, the governance structures of many large Chinese enterprises are characterised by opacity and a high degree of state centralisation: these firms often operate through complex networks of subsidiaries and are functionally integrated into the broader apparatus of the party-state (Andornino, 2012). The practice of “revolving door” politics – that is, the routine circulation of personnel between high-ranking positions in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and official posts within the CCP and government – further reinforces this entanglement. Moreover, these enterprises frequently benefit from privileged access to credit and preferential treatment in public procurement, thereby securing a competitive edge that is structurally inaccessible to the predominantly Italian small- and medium-sized private firms.

As for asynchrony of opportunities in bilateral trade and investment flows, Italy's access to the Chinese market has remained structurally deferred, while Chinese enterprises have increasingly displaced international competitors across a range of sectors (Andornino, 2012). Although the

2008 financial recession has provided renewed impetus for a shift toward “a rebalancing of the Chinese economy through increased domestic consumption, investment in human capital and outbound foreign direct investment (FDI)”, China’s economic structure has remained predominantly oriented toward export-led manufacturing (Andornino, 2012, p.93). This China model has thus relied heavily on substantial inflows of international capital and focused on low value-added production and the assembly of imported semi-finished goods.

In this context, Italy has struggled to fully capitalise on the opportunities presented by the Chinese market, as manifested by the persistent trade deficit that Italy maintains with China. It could be argued that the asynchrony of opportunities for Italian enterprises was to a degree inevitable, considering that key Italian industrial sectors – primarily engaged in the export of high-end consumer goods associated with the “Made in Italy” brand – faced inherent limitations in penetrating a market traditionally characterised by modest size and relatively underdeveloped consumption patterns (Andornino, 2012). However, the structural characteristics of the Chinese market have only partially accounted for the pronounced imbalance in Sino-Italian trade relations. Indeed, equally critical have been the limitations inherent within Italy’s entrepreneurial and institutional frameworks, which have demonstrated a relatively muted responsiveness to the opportunities presented by China during this phase of economic expansion. Moreover, the absence of substantial Italian-owned distribution networks within China has hindered Italy’s commercial penetration. This has been compounded by a widespread tendency among Italian firms and entrepreneurs to operate in a fragmented and often unsystematic manner, at times outside the bounds of cohesive institutional coordination. Beyond this, Italy’s socio-cultural orientation – more directed towards the Atlantic than to the Far East – has further constrained the development of effective business strategies in East Asia. Collectively, therefore, these structural and cultural constraints have limited Italian investment and outsourcing activity in China, resulting in a relatively marginal presence within the broader framework of Sino-European economic relations (Andornino, 2012).

This notwithstanding, it has been argued that Chinese interests in strengthening its strategic partnership with Italy has been further amplified by Italy’s financial vulnerabilities in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, which have rendered the country particularly receptive to foreign capital, thereby positioning it as a favourable target for Chinese investment initiatives (Boni, 2023). Indeed, with the explosion of the subprime bubble in 2008, Sino-Italian relations evolved at a faster pace: while in Italy, the sudden credit contraction led to the deterioration of public finances and to an overall liquidity crisis endangering the solvency of the state, China’s reaction propelled

Beijing to a new global standing, highlighting Beijing's emergence on the global scene not only as an increasingly pivotal market but also as a key source of outward investment in both the private and public sector (Andornino, 2012). Hence, "the indirect influence that China exerts on Italy, and on Europe more broadly, at this juncture is significant" (Andornino, 2012, p.96). By refraining from committing significant liquidity to the Italian sovereign debt market in the absence of robust guarantees at the EU level, Beijing indirectly contributed to the pressures that compelled the European Central Bank to intervene to stabilise interest rates. This cautious stance, in turn, reinforced calls within the EU for Italy to implement structural reforms aimed at restoring investor confidence and ensuring the sustained participation of lenders in its government bond market, thus promoting broader financial stability across the Eurozone (Andornino, 2012). Crucially, Chinese investments in Italy were implemented "not only with the aim of penetrating Europe's single market, but also of gaining access to superior technologies, production processes and human capital" (Andornino, 2012, p.98).

In 2009, PM Berlusconi hosted Chinese President Hu Jintao in what marked the first high-level visit by a PRC leader to Rome in a decade. On that occasion, a bilateral cooperation agreement was signed, formally intended to enhance trade relations between the two countries. However, Berlusconi's underlying objective was to attract greater Chinese investment into the Italian economy (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). Despite these ambitions, the agreement did not yield the anticipated acceleration in economic engagement. To the contrary, exports to China experienced a significant deceleration in their growth trajectory (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Amidst the deepening Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, in fact, Chinese authorities remained cautious, showing reluctance to invest in Italian government bonds in the absence of broader guarantees from the EU. Berlusconi's overtures toward Beijing were therefore subsequently inherited by the technocratic government led by Mario Monti (2011-2013), who pursued similar objectives during a diplomatic mission in China, aimed at encouraging Chinese investment in Italy (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

The idea of China as a "strategic partner" and a vital source of economic sustenance progressively became embedded in the strategic calculus of successive Italian governments¹⁴. In June 2014, during an official visit to Beijing, PM Matteo Renzi signed the 2014-2016 Action Plan for Economic Cooperation and a MoU that outlined cooperation between Italy and China across six key sectors – namely, environmental protection and energy, agricultural products and processing,

¹⁴ On the occasion of his 2012 state visit to Beijing, then Italian PM Monti depicted China precisely as a "strategic partner" and emphasised the need for strengthening and enhancing the level of bilateral investments (Tg1, (2012) "Monti: La Cina partner strategico", *Tg1*, March 31, 2012. Available at: <http://www.tg1.rai.it/dl/tg1/2010/articoli/ContentItem-b14c95be-705f-4e44-bac2-9d1952b328ca.html>. (Accessed: 21/04/2025)).

food security, urbanisation, medicine and health, and aviation (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). Although domestically Renzi expressed profound scepticism toward China – particularly regarding the potential recognition of the PRC’s market economy status, which he publicly criticised – this did not deter him from engaging pragmatically with Chinese economic actors. On the contrary. It was precisely Renzi who, together with Franco Bassanini – then President of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP) – put in place one of the most significant and debated financial and industrial operations along the Rome-Beijing axis (Messa, 2018). At the end of July 2014, an agreement was signed between CDP and State Grid Corporation of China International Development, under which a 35% stake in CDP Reti was sold for just over €2 billion¹⁵. Under Renzi’s leadership, however, the capital of CDP Reti was opened to Chinese participation without triggering the Golden Power mechanism, due to the absence at the time of an implementing decree – signed only later (Messa, 2018). Moreover, in 2015, Italy joined 16 other EU member states in becoming a founding member of AIIB. Later, on the sidelines of the 2016 Hangzhou G20 summit, Renzi held private discussions with representatives of major Chinese corporations already active in Italy, including Suning, China National Chemical, Bank of China, and State Grid Corporation (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021)¹⁶.

Overall, these operations marked a historic gesture of trust in China’s contribution to development. Not only did Rome divest from strategic public and private assets, but it also chose to take part directly in one of the most significant initiatives underpinning Beijing’s broader strategy for expanding its global influence (Messa, 2018). Significantly, Renzi’s political overtures toward China endured beyond his tenure: in February 2017, the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, undertook a state visit to China, followed shortly thereafter by PM Paolo Gentiloni (2017-2018), who attended at the BRI Forum for International Cooperation. This fact was noticeable as he was the only G7 leader participating in the event (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

During this period, the composition of trade flows, particularly with regard to imports, did undergo notable changes. China was at that point capable of exporting to Italy goods with significantly higher technological complexity, particularly in the fields of electronics and mechanical engineering. In terms of the composition of Italian imports from China, electrical equipment and machinery accounted for 21.1% and 17.8% respectively (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Notably, the

¹⁵ CDP Reti had been established under PM Enrico Letta with the aim of safeguarding critical and strategic infrastructure – such as Terna, Snam, and Italgas – by ring-fencing them from the broader networks of ENI and ENEL and protecting them from potential foreign takeovers.

¹⁶ In more detail, Suning had bought the Milan-based football team Inter, China National Chemical had acquired Pirelli (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). Bank of China held equity stakes in companies such as Atlantia, Intesa Sanpaolo, UniCredit, Enel, and Telecom Italia, amounting to a total value of approximately €4.395 billion (Messa, 2018).

share of electrical equipment was increasing both in absolute terms and as a percentage of total imports, while machinery was growing in volume but remains relatively stable in proportion. Light manufacturing (textiles, apparel, and leather goods) comprised approximately 15% of total imports, but it was experiencing a decline in both volume and percentage terms.

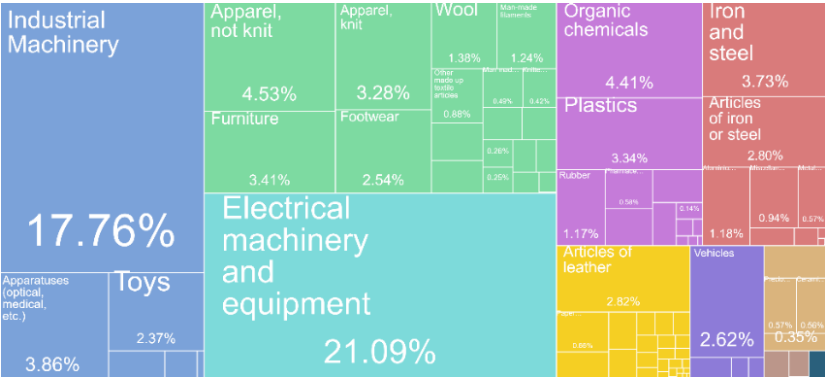


Figure 1. Italy's imports from China, 2018.

Source: Gabusi and Prodi, 2020.

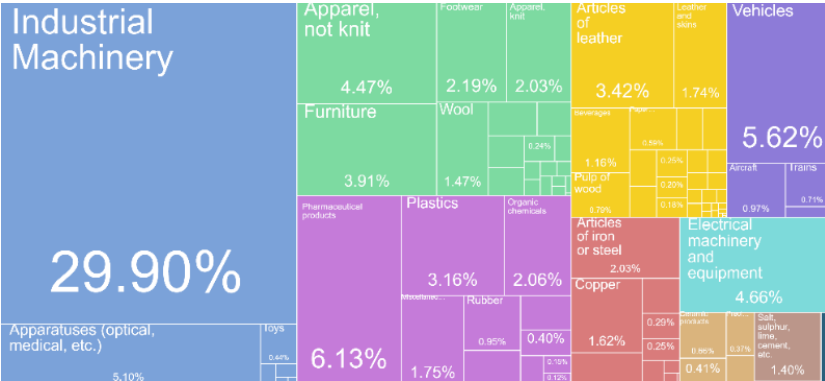


Figure 2. Italy's exports to China, 2018.

Source: Gabusi and Prodi, 2020.

As for Italian exports to China, they were primarily concentrated in industrial machinery and technology. Traditional “Made in Italy” sectors (food products, fashion, luxury, furniture) constituted around 20% of total export. That discrepancy could partly be attributed to the positioning of Italian high-quality agri-food products in a niche and exclusive market segment (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). More specifically, the decline in Chinese investment in Italy observed in 2018 can be attributed to a strategic divestment from sectors deemed non-essential, in line with new policy instructions issued by the Chinese government (Messa, 2018). These guidelines introduced stricter controls on outbound investments considered speculative in nature, particularly in areas such as real estate, sports, and entertainment. As a result, Chinese investment in Italy progressively shifted towards more strategic sectors, including advanced technologies, biomedical

industries, and infrastructure. This realignment mirrored China's broader ambition to transition from being the "world's factory" to becoming a global hub of innovation (Messa, 2018).

Taken together, these dynamics reflect a phase of intensifying yet structurally asymmetrical interdependence between Italy and China at the turn of the millennium. While Italy faced persistent constraints in fully leveraging the opportunities presented by China's expanding market – due to both internal structural limitations and external competitive pressures – Beijing framed the Italian economy within its broader geo-economic strategy, particularly as a strategic node in the reconfiguration of global trade routes and production networks.

Indeed, these interactions exemplify the modalities through which an emerging power attempts to secure symbolic and material inclusion within the hegemonic circle of international recognition, thereby advancing its pursuit of elevated global status. More specifically, in fact, the processes, investment negotiations and broader diplomatic engagement associated with the BRI since the mid-2010s illustrate a deliberate strategy through which the PRC has sought to cultivate patterns of deference and acknowledgement from established – and especially, Western – powers, like Italy (Andornino, 2022). Therefore, these high-level political initiatives underscore that much of the bilateral cooperation between China and Italy had already been pursued prior to the formal adoption of the BRI MoU in March 2019. In this respect, the Italian case substantiates the argument that the BRI has served as a strategic "rebranding" of projects and commercial ties that predate its official launch in 2013, and that can be traced back to the earlier "going out" policy. Similarly, Italy's pursuit of closer trade and investment ties with the PRC reflects a longer-term trajectory, consistent with broader European and global patterns aimed at strengthening economic relations with what has been the world's fastest-growing major economy (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

After the ascent of Xi Jinping, the trajectory of Sino-Italian economic relations has been shaped by a constellation of independent factors, both domestic and international. On the Chinese side, responses to the strategic containment exerted by the US during the first Trump Administration (2016-2020) have materialised in the progressive expansion of the BRI and the "Made in China 2025" programme, designed to bolster domestic innovation and technological self-sufficiency in high-value sectors while strengthening internal consumption (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). These strategic shifts, compounded by escalating Sino-American trade and technological tensions, bear significant implications for Italy. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic – while initially exerting short-term disruptions – has poised to influence the long-term global perception of China's international behaviour, further complicating the context within which Italy-China relations have matured.

4.3 Italy, China, and the twin challenges of BRI and Covid-19: strategic convergence and emerging tensions

In March 2019, bilateral relations between Italy and the PRC gained unprecedented international visibility. On March 23rd, on the occasion of President Xi Jinping's state visit to Rome, the Italian Minister for Economic Development, Luigi Di Maio, and the Chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission, He Lifeng, signed a MoU between the two countries on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (Italy and China, 2019; Andornino, 2023b). The agreement was accompanied by twenty-eight additional accords, comprising ten commercial and eighteen institutional agreements (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021)¹⁷. Beyond the expressing the willingness to cooperate in fields such as environment and sustainable energy, the joint communiqué affirmed the shared commitment of the two countries to advancing their comprehensive strategic partnership "in the spirit of mutual respect and mutual benefit for win-win outcome" committing "to promote multilateralism and maintain the international system with the United Nations at its core" (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). However, in December 2023, after five years of cooperation, Italy decided to unilaterally exit the BRI and bring this cooperation to an end, even though the two countries are still interacting.

Importantly, with this act, Italy became the first – and to date, the only – G7 member to formally endorse Beijing's BRI, to the extent that, even though, the MoU was a non-binding document that merely delineated the parameters for future cooperation, its signing triggered considerable debate both domestically and internationally (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). Italian authorities took care to align the language of the MoU with Western norms and the EU's Connecting Europe and Asia strategy adopted in September 2018. Indeed, its supporters emphasised the MoU's continuity with Italy's previous approach to China and argued that the agreement was compliant also with the principle listed in the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation. This notwithstanding, the initiative of the coalition government between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Eurosceptic Northern League, headed by PM Giuseppe Conte, was strongly criticised by the US and several European countries as a potential geopolitical concession to Beijing (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021)¹⁸.

¹⁷ See Governo Italiano, (2019a) *Intese istituzionali sottoscritte in occasione della visita del Presidente Xi Jinping*, March 22-23, 2019, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Intese_istituzionali_Italia-Cina.pdf ; and Governo Italiano, (2019b) *Lista delle intese commerciali presentate a Villa Madama. Visita di Stato del Presidente cinese Xi Jinping*, March 22-23, 2019, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Intese_commerciali_Italia-Cina.Pdf.

¹⁸ The Northern League changed its name to the "League" in December 2019 after an indictment for misappropriation of state funds by the Northern League's former leader, Umberto Bossi.

Interpretations about Italy's decision to join the BRI diverged. Some scholars have emphasised the choice to sign the MoU as a profit-driven willingness to defy Italy's EU partners and the US to expand its access to China's market and investments (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). For them, the MoU was a form of "soft balancing strategy" towards the EU so as to allow Italy to potentially leverage its closer ties with Beijing as a bargaining chip. Crucially, the timing of the agreement was particularly delicate, as it coincided with the European Council's deliberations prior to an upcoming EU-China summit, thus raising concerns among other EU member states. Other commentators argued that the debate around the MoU represented a way for Italy to defend its economic and strategic interests in the context of mounting tensions between the US and China, and the politicisation of the PRC in the US (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). According to this view, the populist parties in the governing coalition sought to redefine Italy's foreign policy to reflect an approach more independent from traditional EU-centric policies as well as Italy's desire to establish a platform for dialogue with a new global power at a time of perceived US disengagement. The M5S, in particular, saw the BRI as an opportunity to attract investment thereby stimulating economic growth, since the initiative promised infrastructure development and increased trade, which were appealing to a country struggling with economic challenges. To other observers, Italy's endorsement of the BRI could be interpreted as a strategic manoeuvre aimed at cultivating a tactical understanding with the PRC, with the expectation that such a gesture would generate diplomatic goodwill, and, in turn, yield long-sought economic benefits (Andornino, 2023a). Therefore, Italy's decision to join the BRI would align with a category of return-maximising diplomatic choices, marked by a level of engagement that would go beyond mere economic pragmatism. Precisely given that Italy was the first G7 member to formally support one of Beijing's flagship international initiatives, the Italian move would not entail a consistent or institutionalised alignment with Chinese positions but would rather reflect a calibrated form of engagement aimed at enhancing bilateral ties without compromising Italy's broader strategic autonomy (Andornino, 2023a).

It has been argued that for China the signing of the MoU represented a significant diplomatic success. Beijing saw Italy as an interesting partner, deemed relatively predictable, politically more salient in a post-Brexit Europe, comparatively porous to its influence, endowed with strategic assets, geopolitically relevant in the West Asia and Northern Africa regions, home to the largest community of PRC passport holders in Europe (Andornino, 2023a). Nevertheless, Beijing had expected a deeper economic engagement from Rome (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Notably, the day after the MoU was signed, President Xi travelled to Paris to conclude commercial agreements worth €30 billion, thus far exceeding the approximately €7 billion expected from the agreements

signed in Rome, which were more symbolic than economically transformative. In this view, the Italian government's hope that the deal would help Italy catch up with its European counterparts in trade competitiveness largely overlooked the fundamentally political nature of BRI-related agreements. As a matter of fact, since the BRI has been inscribed into the CCP's constitutions, such agreements served primarily as instruments of political signalling for Beijing (Gabusi and Prodi, 2020). Hence, even though the MoU was a non-binding document, for the PRC it was a demonstration of Italy's political support for the BRI as its most ambitious foreign policy initiative and as a demonstration of Italy's support for Beijing's proactive role in the international order (Dossi, 2020).

As was briefly mentioned in the previous section, Italy's march toward the BRI had begun already under the early 2010s centre-left governments, but it saw a dramatic acceleration under the Conte I government (2018-2019). Indeed, the multiple visits to China by then Minister of Economy and Finance, Giovanni Tria, and Undersecretary of State of the Ministry of Economic Development, Michele Geraci, in 2018, paved the way for the 9th meeting of the Italy-China Governmental Committee in January 2019, where the Foreign Ministers of the two countries declared their mutual interest in joint collaborations within the BRI (Dossi, 2020). The prospected signing of a Memorandum of Understanding within the BRI framework opened a heated debate in an unstable political situation, with a new pro-China strategy advanced by the government as opposed to the traditional Euro-Atlantic stance. However, the combination of uncoordinated initiatives by some members of the government and in-fighting in a coalition with highly heterogeneous views of foreign policy were the decisive elements of the Conte I's government's decision to sign the MoU (Dossi, 2020; Pompili and Valentini, 2022).

The political personnel engaged in the negotiations included members with a significant experience and various connections with China. Indeed, Minister Tria had studied in China in the late 1970s, while Undersecretary Geraci had been teaching in Chinese universities for a decade. In particular, Geraci's impact was profound in that he managed to centralise the management of Italy's China policy within the Ministry of Economic Development, thus allowing for a fast-paced deepening of Rome's ties with Beijing (Andornino, 2023a). Just before his appointment, Geraci had written a controversial piece on Sino-Italian relations for Beppe Grillo's blog, where he depicted China as a model for Italy in several fields, including the management of public security (Geraci, 2018). Geraci advocated for the engagement of China for the self-styled new "government of change" and assumed a highly visible role in Italy's China policy (Andornino, 2023a). In this regard, Geraci's establishment at the Ministry of Economic Development of a working group of

China experts tasked with promoting relations with China, the so-called “Task Force China”, had the stated objective of encouraging information flows within the Italian stakeholders of Sino-Italian relations so as to stimulate audacious policies.

Nonetheless, the Task Force China was not supported by a similarly ambitious bureaucratic structure in that the governing majority was deeply fractured, especially on what concerned Italy’s China policy. Indeed, the League opposed a full U-turn away from its traditional anti-China rhetoric, thus undermining the coherence of Rome’s attitude towards Beijing (Andornino, 2023a). For Matteo Salvini’s party, the PRC’s unfair trade practices and unsafe “Made in China” products posed serious threats to small local manufacturers and artisans struggling to remain competitive in the North of Italy. Once in the government coalition, however, the League never contested the MoU in an open way, but its Members of Parliament (MPs) insisted that Italy respected its traditional alliances, calling for reciprocity in trade and investment under the BRI (Dossi, 2020). In the opposition, the MoU was highly criticised by most political forces but for different reasons. While Forza Italia (centre-right) and Brothers of Italy (far-right) opposed not only the agreement but the whole initiative as a major economic and political threat, the Democratic Party considered the MoU a unilateral political concession made by the Conte I government to China (Dossi, 2020)¹⁹.

Therefore, the whole issue of the MoU was “a by-product of Italy’s contingent domestic situation in spring 2019” (Dossi, 2020, p.70). At the time, domestic and exogenous pressures had combined to generate a political timing that produced an asymmetrical effect. Indeed, by signing the MoU in the absence of sufficient time and political capacity to reach deals that could effectively contribute to boost Italy’s trade and investment competitiveness with its main European peers, the first Conte’s government bargained an “*immediate* salient tribute of political deference to China’s international status as an agenda-setter and norm-maker with an expectation for greater agency in *future* discussions” about crucial Italian policies (Andornino, 2023a, p.143). Hence, in so doing, “Italy tried to make its adherence to China’s core foreign policy initiative contingent upon the encapsulation of Italy’s interests in other, often unrelated, policy decisions on Beijing’s part” (Andornino, 2023a, p.143).

¹⁹ According to Forza Italia MP Deborah Bergamini, the government was closing ports to migrants but opening the country to a Chinese “invasion”, thus transforming Italy from “NATO’s aircraft carrier” into a dock for “the biggest infrastructure tentacle that the world has ever known”. Instead, the Democratic Party MP Ivan Scalfarotto, who was Undersecretary of the Ministry of Economic Development in the earlier Renzi and Gentiloni governments, the MoU was an achievement “in the worst possible way”, because deals with China had to be done “without selling out” the country (Dossi, 2020).

The second Conte's government (2019-2021) showed, instead, less enthusiasm for the MoU. In this context, it is worth underlining that soon after the signing of the BRI MoU, external factors have played a significant role in hindering collaboration with China – chief among which is the outbreak of Covid-19 (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). It has indeed been argued that the pandemic changed some of the assumptions that had motivated Italy's reasons for seeking deeper cooperation for China in the first place, since the financial opportunities brought by the NextGenerationEU initiative could have satisfied – at least temporarily – Italy's need for foreign investments. Beyond the health crisis, also the Russian invasion of Ukraine, coupled with Beijing's benevolent neutrality vis-à-vis Moscow's breach of basic international law had led to a realignment of Italy's foreign policy posture, thus reinvigorating the transatlantic alliance while widening the distance from the Far East (Andornino, 2023a).

From the perspective of Italian domestic policy, while the first Conte's government showed more positive attitudes which were reduced by the second, the subsequent Draghi's national unity government (2021-2022) displayed a more assertive posture (Andornino, 2023a). During the press conference concluding the G7 Summit in Carbis Bay, United Kingdom, in June 2021, PM Draghi reaffirmed Italy's Euro-Atlantic orientation and did not rule out the possibility of a revision of the BRI MoU, in the light of China being an autocracy that would not adhere to multilateral rules and share the same worldview as democracies (Andornino, 2023a; Carrier, 2021). Subsequently, the government took a more decisive stance and increasingly relied on its enhanced regulatory tool – the Golden Power – to scrutinise, veto multiple corporate takeovers by Chinese enterprises in Italy and prevent other commercial deals on national security grounds. For instance, in April 2021, PM Draghi blocked the sale of a 70% stake in the Italian semiconductor firm LPE to Shenzhen Investment Holdings, and, later in October, the acquisition of Verisem – a leading Italian agri-food company – by the Chinese-controlled Syngenta was suspended (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). A case that garnered international attention was the revision of the 2018 acquisition of Alpi Aviation by a Chinese company, after an investigation by Italy's financial-crime police which revealed significant breaches of transparency regulations²⁰.

It has been argued that China's responsibilities vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic are among the factors that had potentially undermined the shift in sentiment across parties in the Italian

²⁰ Notably, Draghi invoked for the first time the newly introduced *ex officio* procedure, which permits the Italian government to independently initiate a review of a transaction without prior notification. The Alpi Aviation's case was significant considering the company's strategic role in the production of aerospace and military technologies and its status as a supplier to the Italian Ministry of Defence (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

Parliament between 2019 and 2022 (Andornino, 2023a)²¹. The health crisis provoked by Covid-19 has been considered the most serious emergency that Italy has faced in the aftermath of the Second World War, aggravated by the fact that Italy was the first European hotspot (Sciorati, 2020). As Italy became the first European epicentre of the pandemic, there was a surge in scepticism towards Beijing, especially as questions were raised regarding the origins of the virus and the delayed transmission of crucial epidemiological information. In Italy, the pandemic started on January 31st, 2020, after two Chinese tourists in Rome were found positive for the virus.

Crucially, the case of the two tourists stimulated an acceleration in China-Italy relations since beyond encouraging a visit from the Chinese Embassy to the hospital where the first Covid-19 cases had been hospitalised, it also led to official exchanges between Italian and Chinese authorities (Sciorati, 2020). Indeed, in the first week (March 9th-16th, 2020) of national lockdown in Italy, President Xi had direct calls with both President Mattarella and then PM Conte, highlighting how “mutual support and win-win cooperation have always been the main theme of the China-Italy comprehensive strategic partnership” (Xinhua News Agency, 2020; Boni, 2023). Xi was also keen in conveying that China was ready “to stand by its Italian counterpart and to contribute to international cooperation in the fight against the pandemic and to create the Health Silk Road” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2020). Interestingly, during these exchanges, as in the calls between China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Di Maio, there were significant references to the BRI. In the first month of the pandemic in Italy, China promised to send medical equipment to Italy to help with the emergency situation: on March 12th, a China Eastern humanitarian aircraft with a team of 9 health personnel and medical equipment arrived from China to Italy (Chen, 2021). This Covid-related aid was warmly praised by Italian politicians, particularly by Di Maio who also remarked how Italy’s role as a bridge between East and West allowed the country to receive solidarity in a dark moment. Moreover, in an interview he declared that “those who mocked us for joining the Silk Road must now acknowledge that investing in that friendship allowed us to save lives in Italy” (Agenzia Nova, 2020)²².

Di Maio’s statements conveyed a clear and assertive message to Italy’s European and transatlantic partners, precisely in that they emphasised the appropriateness of Italy’s decision to sign the MoU

²¹ Other factors mentioned by Andornino (2023a) are Beijing’s harsh repression of Hong Kong protests in 2020, the repression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang, and the reluctance of the PRC to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, it must be stated that Brothers of Italy, which won the 2022 elections and withdrew from the MoU in 2023, has always opposed the agreement (Dossi, 2020).

²² My translation. See the original: “Chi ci ha deriso sulla Via della Seta deve ammettere che investire in quell’amicizia ci ha permesso di salvare vite in Italia”.

a year earlier. Implicit in his remarks, indeed, was a broader political critique: at a moment of acute crisis, it was not the EU but a distant country – China – that offered tangible and vital assistance to Italy (Chen, 2021). This sentiment of disillusionment stemmed partly from the EU’s structural limitations in exercising decisive political authority and the surge of medical nationalism, which constrained the Unions’ ability to deploy effective redistributive mechanisms to manage the health crisis. Indeed, “the EU’s initial lack of coordination and mechanism of immediate solidarity has contributed in creating political decisions within Europe, thus enabling China in gradually increasing its visibility and promoting soft power” (Chen, 2021, p.446).

China’s outreach to Italy and other countries globally was termed “mask diplomacy”. Crucially, Chinese activism in providing medical supplies and assistance during the early spread of Covid, was viewed as a strategic move to reassure that the Chinese attitude in the fight against the virus has been open, transparent, and responsible, and that China has been willing to cooperate with the international community without reservations. In fact, it has been noted that “apart from purely medical considerations, improving China’s image as a global leader, shaping its narrative about its coronavirus response, and strengthening its influence” were important factors which drove the Chinese *benevolent* initiative (Kowalski, 2021, p.214).

China’s Covid-related aid in Italy sparked several controversies in Europe. For some observers, China’s aid in Italy was intended as a soft power strategy to counter the narrative according to which the PRC was where the virus first emerged (Chen, 2021). Beyond this political goal, China would also focus on maintaining its economic ambitions in Italy, as the involvement of Chinese tech companies such as Huawei, Zte, and Xiaomi, in the Covid-related aid would testify. Others noted that Beijing’s ultimate goal was not assisting Italy, but rather the CCP leadership was carrying out information warfare to push its soft-power strategy while taking advantage of the absence of the US. This strand remarked on Chinese usage of its propaganda apparatus to dissociate the virus from Wuhan, where it originated, by broadcasting on official media platforms videos of grateful Italians praising China for its generosity (Chen, 2021). In so doing, China wanted to depict itself as a “Good Samaritan”, instrumentalising the virus to improve its global image and strengthen the CCP’s international legitimacy and status.

The Chinese Embassy in Rome was particularly active in framing China’s handling of the pandemic under a positive light. Two main narrative strands were employed by the diplomats in Rome: first, the effectiveness of the measures against the pandemic and President Xi’s role in steering the country’s response; second, China was a responsible global partner that has shared information to counter the pandemic (Chen, 2021). In this activism, Beijing’s generosity was

portrayed as China *giving back* to Italy the assistance that the latter had offered during the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. In addition to official diplomatic initiatives, also the multiple regional and city partnerships established since the 2004 strategic partnership were proactively engaged in the distribution of medical aid. For instance, the Guangdong province sent medical supplies to Emilia-Romagna and Puglia (Boni, 2023)²³. Aid from Zhejiang province was symbolically strong because it was from that province that the major waves of Chinese migrants originated (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017; Chen, 2021). Likewise, also city-to-city linkages were important touchpoints for Chinese medical supplies²⁴. Additionally, overseas Chinese communities played a crucial role in improving China's image after the outbreak of the disease and delivering medical supplies (Chen, 2021). Among the first to provide medical supplies, members of the Chinese diaspora in Italy mobilised swiftly to support local institutions, including hospitals and law enforcement agencies. One of the earliest and most symbolic acts of solidarity came from the Chinese diaspora in Prato, known for its thriving Chinese business presence in the textile, garment, and apparel industries, which donated approximately 50,000 face masks (Boni, 2023).

China's assistance to Italy during the Covid-19 crisis attracted significant international media attention. This dynamic must be read within the broader context of Italian public sentiment during the health crisis. Data reveal that 60% of Italians viewed China as an economic opportunity, while 52% did not perceive China as exerting political manipulation in Italy, thus indicating the relatively high level of public acceptance of Sino-Italian engagement at the time (Angelucci and Piccolino, 2020). Crucially, from a political communication perspective, Beijing's aid to Italy proved highly effective especially due to the significant media resonance within Italian society. Indeed, during the first months of the emergency, Italian main national newspapers depicted China's assistance positively and the arrival of the aid to Italy was conveyed through symbolic messages. Even though minor newspapers have criticised China's mask diplomacy, it has been reported that the main press offices, without distinctions of political alignments, used a particularly negative or politically motivated language (Chen, 2021). In this context, it is worth highlighting the role of the media partnership between the Italian news agency ANSA and its Chinese counterpart Xinhua, which consisted of a content-sharing agreement whereby ANSA hosted on its website Xinhua's content in Italian language (Boni, 2023). While the salience and the ambiguity of this deal will be discussed later, what is remarkable is the content of the bulk of Covid-related articles that were published in the first month of lockdown. A study reveals that 311 articles on ANSA's website focused on

²³ For the argument under discussion, it is worth highlight that Guangdong and Emilia-Romagna had signed an agreement in 2015 to become sister regions (Boni, 2023).

²⁴ Notably, the city of Xiancheng donated 60,000 masks to the city of Recanati, while the cities of Nanjing, Ningbo and Changsha made significant donations to the city of Florence (Boni, 2023).

China's mask diplomacy, and some specifically mentioned the medical supplies and aid that China provided to Italy (Boni, 2023).

As this section has shown, the period between 2019 and 2022 marked a significant, yet complex, phase in Sino-Italian relations. Indeed, Italy signed the MoU endorsing China's BRI, only to withdraw from it in 2023. At the beginning, the agreement was perceived by many as a symbolic alignment with one of Beijing's flagship global strategies, thus sparking heated debates and confusion within an already unstable and fragmented political landscape. Shortly after, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to a new dimension of bilateral engagement, with China's provision of medical aid to Italy receiving widespread media coverage and political endorsement, particularly at a time when the EU was seen as inadequate to the challenge. In this difficult moment for Italy, China's mask diplomacy efforts combined with grassroots initiatives from the Chinese diaspora in Italy to promote an image of Beijing as a responsible and cooperative friendly country thus reinforcing the narrative of strategic partnership.

From a theoretical standpoint, these developments exemplify the critical interplay between China's soft and sharp power strategies. Indeed, while it has been argued that through Covid-related medical assistance was part of Beijing's soft power design as the PRC attempted to project an image of benevolence, solidarity, and global leadership, the increasing visibility of Chinese state-affiliated actors and media narratives in the Italian public sphere raised concerns about influence operations and the potential erosion of democratic discourse (Chen, 2021; Pompili and Valentini, 2022; Lupis, 2023). As such, these twin developments – the BRI agreement and the pandemic – exposed deeper structural asymmetries, competing geopolitical priorities, and growing domestic scrutiny within Italy, ultimately contributing to a more ambivalent and contested bilateral relationship.

While the BRI and the Covid-19 pandemic have tested the resilience and limits of the Sino-Italian strategic partnership, they have also served as accelerators for a more nuanced and multidimensional engagement between the two countries. Notably, beyond state-to-state diplomacy and economic agreements, cultural relations have emerged as an increasingly prominent layer of China's public diplomacy strategy toward Italy. Whether through the promotion of language and education via CIs, the invocation of shared Silk Road imaginaries and of both countries' ancient heritage, cultural diplomacy has become instrumental in shaping perceptions and fostering a positive image of China's in Italy. As such, before adopting an approach that deploys the soft power/sharp power framework – as it will be done in the last chapter of this work

– it becomes essential to trace the evolution of Sino-Italian cultural relations within the broader architecture of China’s foreign policy.

4.4 The cultural dimension of Sino-Italian relations

Although culture has often been identified by both Rome and Beijing as one of the most fertile domains for recognising proximity – or even affinity – between the two countries, in practice, cultural relations have historically received less attention than that devoted to strengthening economic ties (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). This relative neglect has hindered Italy’s ability to consolidate its presence in the Chinese public sphere, thus limiting its capacity to challenge or reshape the persistent and often reductive stereotypes that continue to mould Chinese perceptions of the country²⁵. Similarly, knowledge of China in Italy has remained limited and fragmented, filtered through political and cultural biases that date back to the Cold War era or reflect anxieties about China’s current geopolitical rise (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). This has contributed to a climate in which mutual knowledge remains underdeveloped, despite formal agreements and occasional high-level initiatives to enhance bilateral cultural cooperation.

The foundations for bilateral cultural engagement were laid in 1978, during the post-normalisation period, when Italy and China signed two agreements respectively on cultural and scientific cooperation. These accords were concluded just as China was preparing to open up to international exchange – a cornerstone of Deng Xiaoping’s “Going-out” development strategy, which emphasised the importance of both scientific and humanistic knowledge from abroad (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). One notable manifestation of this new cultural openness was the significant body of work dedicated to translating Italian literature into Chinese. In the years following the end of the Maoist period – thus, after the Cultural Revolution – Chinese interest in Italian literature expanded significantly, encompassing a variety of genres, from classical texts to works of comparative literature.

The dissemination of Italian culture through literature was paralleled by the development of Italian language studies: between the late 1970s and early 1980s, Italian studies programmes were renewed across several Chinese universities. Interest in the Italian language has since grown steadily in China, although to a lesser extent than other Western languages. This linguistic and cultural engagement unfolded within a broader context of heightened attention to Italy’s artistic and cultural legacy, positioning the country as not only an appealing tourist destination but also a valuable partner in cultural heritage preservation and cooperation (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

²⁵ These have been frequently associated with fashion, food, and tourism, but rarely with contemporary innovation or political relevance.

Moreover, the number of Chinese students in Italy remained significantly lower compared not only to those studying in the US but also to those in other European countries that had been more proactive in promoting their higher education systems to Chinese audiences. It was only during the first decade of the new century that Italy began to formulate a more active strategy aimed at attracting Chinese students and at removing the bureaucratic obstacles that had long hindered student mobility (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

Since the 1990s, Italy has witnessed a steady increase in university students pursuing Chinese language and cultural studies. This trend reflected a growing public interest that would intensify significantly after 2001, gradually spreading through Italian society via a proliferation of cultural initiatives across the country (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). The earlier political and ideological fascination with China gave way to a more culturally motivated engagement, primarily focused on tradition. Between the 1980s and 1990s, Sino-Italian cultural relations were marked by a series of major events aimed at fostering mutual understanding of each other's artistic and historical heritage. These included landmark exhibitions and tours by renowned artists, which often took precedence over the development of broader, more sustained networks of cultural exchange. The first major exhibitions on Chinese civilisation in Italy date back to the 1980s, while Italy, for its part, sought to promote its cultural identity chiefly through classical music, opera, and theatre. Moreover, institutional agreements, typically renewed every two years, progressively broadened the scope of cooperation. Cultural collaboration, in fact, progressively focused on sectors deemed strategic, such as restoration, archaeology, cultural heritage preservation, architecture, and urban planning. Meanwhile, scientific cooperation concentrated on key areas including physics, aerospace, medicine, and environmental protection (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

While the broader context of globalisation and intensified exchanges has brought China and Italy into closer contact, fostering familiarity in everyday consumption and symbolic representations, deeper mutual understanding remains constrained by long-standing stereotypes and fragmented perceptions (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015)²⁶. In this light, structured cultural initiatives have taken on a pivotal role in recalibrating bilateral ties. These include bilateral academic partnerships, the promotion of language learning, and collaborations in the preservation of historical heritage. Equally significant are the curated historical narratives that draw upon shared legacies, most notably the evocative imagery of the ancient Silk Roads, and the figures of Marco Polo (1254-

²⁶ On a practical level, Sino-Italian relations have acquired tangible relevance in everyday life: Italians routinely purchase Chinese products and travel to China for business or tourism, while many Chinese follow Italian football, consume "Made in Italy" brands, and visit Italy's renowned cultural and artistic landmarks (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015).

1324) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), which have been frequently mobilised to frame contemporary Sino-Italian encounters in terms of rediscovered historical affinity (Marinelli, 2010). In particular, the experiences of Polo and Ricci have evolved into enduring cultural touchstones, frequently invoked not only within academic discourse but also in the spheres of diplomacy and trade negotiations between Italy and China. Indeed, their names serve as symbolic evidence of a long-standing, amicable, and mutually respectful relationship. In this sense, Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci are emblematic of Italy's cultural and intellectual outreach, reinforcing narratives of shared heritage and civilisational dialogue that continue to shape contemporary Sino-Italian relations (Marinelli, 2010)²⁷. "Today, these two illustrious Italians are combined to form symbolic and political capital, in both the Italian and the Chinese official narratives, to demonstrate the respective countries' cultural and political engagement in a global geopolitical scenario" (Marinelli, 2010, p.491)²⁸.

Another crucial historical narrative that has pervaded and shaped the relations between Italy and China is that of the Silk Roads. As it has been argued, "the Silk Roads are inherently a history which exceeds national borders" (Brown and O'Brien, 2024, p.2). More specifically, the Silk Roads are frequently conceptualised as a symbolic *bridge* linking the East and the West, with particular emphasis on the historical and cultural connections between China and ancient Rome. This framing has become a dominant trope in both cultural and political discourse, where it is used to evoke notions of mutual curiosity, commercial exchange, and intercultural dialogue. While such representations are evocative, there have been several concerns over the simplification and instrumentalisation of this complex historical phenomenon. Far from being a singular or unified route, the Silk Roads constituted a network of exchanges characterised by a multiplicity of actors and trajectories (Brown and O'Brien, 2024)²⁹. Yet, in contemporary narratives – particularly those endorsed or reproduced by state institutions – this diversity is often flattened into a sanitised and harmonious vision of "peaceful trade" and "people-to-people encounters".

Much of today's discourse presents the Silk Roads more as symbolic metaphors than as historically grounded realities. This metaphorical use can serve useful purposes – such as encouraging diplomacy and cultural exchange – but it often glosses over the complexity and diversity that

²⁷ Marco Polo is strictly connected with the narrative of Italy's engagement with international trade, while Matteo Ricci is the apostle *par excellence* of the Catholic faith, which he combined with a strategy of transcultural mediation (Marinelli, 2010).

²⁸ Significantly, Polo and Ricci are the only foreigners whose images are engraved in the China Millennium Monument (*zhonghua shijitan*), inaugurated to celebrate the new millennium and to praise the glorious reemergence of China on the global scene at the turn of the XXI century (Marinelli, 2010).

²⁹ The downplaying of any civilisations other than Rome or China hides the crucial roles of India, Persia, or Africa, as well as smaller states and nomadic peoples.

actually distinguished the historical routes (Brown and O'Brien, 2024). Nowhere is this more evident than in China's positioning of the Ancient Silk Road as a legitimising precedent for the Belt and Road Initiative, previously named One Belt One Road (OBOR). Indeed, by characterising the BRI as a *rejuvenation* of these ancient routes, Chinese official discourse draws upon the romantic aura of the Silk Roads to present modern infrastructure projects and geopolitical investments in a benign light. However, it has been argued that the current BRI would bear little resemblance to the fluid, multipolar exchanges of the ancient past. Rather, this novel Chinese invocation of the Silk Roads would serve a strategic function: to construct a narrative of continuity and to frame China's global engagement as a return to a golden age of cultural centrality and economic narrative – a narrative that resonates strongly with the CCP's China Dream (Brown and O'Brien, 2024).

In the context of Sino-Italian relations, the romanticised image of the Silk Roads has been central to the rhetoric surrounding cultural cooperation within the BRI. It is worth highlighting that Italy's official endorsement of the BRI in 2019 was framed not only in economic terms but also as a symbolic gesture aligning the country with a shared historical legacy of connectivity (Traverso, 2022). Cultural initiatives – such as exhibitions, joint archaeological projects, academic forums, and the promotion of language and heritage – have been presented as natural extensions of this ancient route reimagined for the 21st century. Significantly, 2020 was deemed a crucial year for the development of Sino-Italian ties, as it was designed as the China-Italy Year of Culture and Tourism. The initiative was conceived as a means to deepen cultural, and people-to-people exchanges, in the broader cooperative framework inaugurated by the BRI MoU. Simultaneously, it sought to commemorate the long-standing bilateral relationship between the two countries, as 2020 marked the 50th anniversary of the normalisation between Italy and the PRC (Traverso, 2022). The opening ceremony, held in Rome on January 21st, 2020, was attended by the respective Ministers of Culture and Tourism – Dario Franceschini for Italy and Luo Shugang for China (Ministero della Cultura, 2020; Chinaculture.org, 2020). The event began with a forum dedicated to *International Cooperation in the Tourism and Cultural Sectors between Italy and China*, which provided a platform for the exchange of perspectives on a range of shared challenges and opportunities. Key areas of discussion included strategies for integrating UNESCO World Heritage Sites into joint tourism itineraries, the evolving preferences of travellers in the digital age, sustainable tourism practices, the formulation of coordinated cultural promotion strategies, and the enhancement of hospitality standards across both countries. The year 2020 was intended to feature

a broad spectrum of bilateral initiatives³⁰. However, the outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent imposition of international travel restrictions compelled both governments to suspend or postpone the planned activities (Traverso, 2022).

In addition to high-level institutional agreements and state-sponsored initiatives, Chinese cultural presence in Italy is also sustained by a diverse network of associations, interest groups, and individuals committed to fostering Sino-Italian friendship and understanding (Messa, 2018). Among the most influential actors in this landscape is the Italy China Council Foundation (ICCF), established in 2003 by Cesare Romiti, which plays a pivotal role in advancing bilateral relations through both educational and business-oriented platforms³¹. The ICCF originated by integrating, strengthening, and complementing the goals and activities of two key institutions that have been active since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy: the Italy-China Chamber of Commerce (founded in 1970) and the Italo-Chinese Institute (established in 1971) (Italy China Council Foundation, 2025). Moreover, the ICCF operates a permanent training school and hosts the Centro Studi per l'Impresa (CeSIF), a research centre focused on China-related business intelligence. A further expansion of this cultural infrastructure occurred in 2014 with the establishment of the Italy-China Cultural Forum, spearheaded by Francesco Rutelli, former Italian Minister of Culture (Ambasciata d'Italia a Pechino, 2017; Messa, 2018). This forum was conceived as a space for structured dialogue and cooperation on cultural affairs, complementing both governmental initiatives and grassroots efforts.

As previously mentioned, the Chinese diaspora in Italy also functions as an essential cultural intermediary. This diverse community, historically concentrated in cities such as Prato, Milan, Rome, San Giuseppe Vesuviano, has evolved from its early roots in small-scale entrepreneurship to encompass a broad array of social, cultural and educational activities (Samarani and De Giorgi, 2015). Over time these dynamics have given rise to a constellation of community associations, student networks, and civil society groups that actively contribute to the promotion of Sino-Italian cultural relations (Messa, 2018). Particularly noteworthy is the contribution of Chinese student associations based in Italian universities, such as Bocconi and Turin's Politecnico, which serve as vibrant platforms for cultural exchange, academic cooperation, and mutual learning. Similarly, Chinese business associations, such as those representing merchants and entrepreneurs, have played a pivotal role in creating economic linkages and encouraging cultural visibility in urban

³⁰ Among the numerous initiatives there were art exhibitions – most notably the temporary display in Italy of China's renowned Terracotta Army – as well as musical performances, theatrical productions, film screenings, and collaborative efforts in cultural heritage preservation (Traverso, 2022).

³¹ It is remarkable that the home page of the official ICCF website opens with the slogan “Your bridge between Italy and China” (my translation: “Il tuo ponte tra Italia e Cina”). See: <https://www.italychina.org/>.

spaces (Messa, 2018). A distinctive role is played by Associna, an organisation representing second-generation (2G) Chinese Italians. Founded with the aim of bridging generational and intercultural gaps, Associna promotes initiatives that articulate a dual identity – rooted in Chinese heritage while firmly situated within Italian civic life (Associna, 2025). In this multifaceted ecosystem, the Chinese diaspora in Italy thus emerges not simply as a passive recipient of integration policies, but as an active agent of cultural diplomacy from below. Their everyday practices, symbolic representations, and community engagements constitute an important dimension of Italy's broader cultural relationships with China, contributing to reshaping mutual perceptions.

This bottom-up dynamic of cultural exchange between Italy and China is further complemented by the establishment and diffusion of CIs, which have expanded significantly in the Italian context since the mid-2000s. Significantly, in Italy the reception of CIs has been relatively balanced compared to other Western countries and their programmes are typically framed within the context of educational cooperation. Currently, there are twelve CIs in Italian universities and several Confucius Classrooms (Casarini, 2021)³². The Confucius Institute at Sapienza University (Rome) holds particular symbolic and historical significance in this context. Established in 2006 as the first CI in Italy and the second in Europe, it emerged from a long-standing academic relationship between Sapienza and the Centre for Sinology at Beijing Foreign Studies University, then under the direction of Professor Zhang Xiping (Istituto Confucio Sapienza, 2025; Strina, 2020). The process that led to the signing of the founding agreements was both lengthy and complex, reflecting the nascent and evolving nature of the CI project even within China at the time. Indeed, considerable effort was required to reconcile the procedural demands of the Chinese administrative apparatus with those of the Italian public university system. As such, the founding of the CI can be seen as the culmination of a sustained academic collaboration with a partner institution that has specialised in the teaching of foreign languages and cultures for over six decades (Strina, 2020). Beijing provides a significant portion of the funding – a practice welcomed by Italy's universities which are under severe budget constraints. In recent years, there has been a surge in demand for Chinese language courses and, therefore, Rome-Beijing cooperation in higher education and research has intensified (Casarini, 2021). Beyond those concerning CIs, more than 900 agreements between Italian and Chinese universities have been signed in order to expand cooperation in the

³² Confucius Classrooms are CI offshoots found in secondary schools, offering Chinese culture and language classes. The first was opened within the Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II high school in Rome in 2010. In those secondary schools administered directly by the Italian Ministry of Education, teachers paid by the Hanban teach students Chinese language as well as history and geography (Casarini, 2021).

area of student mobility, inter-university exchange or collaboration between businesses and research institutions³³.

Educational initiatives such as CIs, student-exchanges, and double-degrees programmes are generally evaluated in a positive way by Italian public opinion. In particular, CIs are praised for being bridges to Chinese knowledge and culture and instruments to improve mutual understanding and contribute to get people closer to the China world (Casarini, 2021). This notwithstanding, as will be better analysed in the following chapter, a debate has emerged in Italy regarding the CIs and their links to the CCP. Some critics have expressed concerns about the risks of CIs channelling CCP propaganda and claim that they would threaten academic freedom by self-censoring controversial topics such as Tibet, the repression of Uyghurs, and Taiwan, or by distorting historical facts (Casarini, 2021).

As this chapter has shown, Sino-Italian relations have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past several decades, evolving from modest diplomatic exchanges to a dynamic and multifaceted partnership that spans economic, political, cultural, and strategic dimensions. In retrospect, this partnership has achieved remarkable success in several aspects. At the heart of this relationship, in fact, lies a growing recognition of shared interests and mutual benefits, despite occasional tensions and challenges arising from differing political systems, economic priorities, and global alignments (Honghua and Pengfei, 2020). Governments, political parties, legislative bodies, and subnational organs have maintained close contact, while diplomatic, fiscal, and cultural communication channels continue to expand. On the global stage, both sides share many common interests, including the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2018 Paris Agreement, and the BRI – prior to Italy’s withdrawal two years ago. The troublesome history of the BRI exemplifies how the China-Italy partnership has not always been easy to construct, especially due to Italian political scenario, cultural biases and stereotypes, as well as trade imbalance and competition in the export market (Honghua and Pengfei, 2020). This complex interplay between strategic convergence and growing ambivalence in Italy-China relations highlights the need for a more granular assessment of how influence is exercised and contested in asymmetrical partnerships. To this end, the following chapter will investigate the Italian case through the analytical prism of soft and sharp power, with the aim of trying to discern the nature, scope, and implications of Chinese public diplomacy in Italy.

³³ It has been noted that Chinese students have a preference for hard science and some areas of humanities and arts, while Italian academia has achieved international excellence such as art history, archaeology or music. In Italy, the preferred academic destinations of Chinese students are the Politecnico of Milan and Turin, the LUISS University in Rome and the University of Bologna (Casarini, 2021).

Chapter 5 – Contemporary dynamics of China’s public diplomacy in Italy

China’s public diplomacy strategies in Italy have evolved rapidly in response to shifting geopolitical circumstances, Rome’s changing foreign policy orientation, and broader trends in EU-China and Western-Chinese relations. The termination of Italy’s participation in the Belt and Road Initiative in December 2023 marked a symbolic rupture, necessitating a recalibration of China’s diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement strategies (Galluzzo, 2023; Casanova, 2024). This notwithstanding, in this evolving landscape, Beijing has been quite active in promoting public diplomacy efforts in Italy, combining political and economic outreach, cultural and educational initiatives, media partnerships and information campaigns, and diaspora mobilisation to sustain and enhance its presence within Italian society. However, this has not come without sparking criticism and raising concerns about potential security threats. Indeed, recent domestic political developments have further complicated this scenario. In particular, the two COPASIR (Italy’s Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic) reports on foreign influence published in 2022 highlighted concerns over the strategic risks associated with Chinese investments, media partnerships, and cultural initiatives in Italy (COPASIR, 2022a; COPASIR, 2022b). In its reports, COPASIR raised an alarm regarding the dangers associated with Chinese penetration into various sectors of Italian life, highlighting the risk of Italy and Europe becoming increasingly dependent on China. Hence the documents have intensified the debate surrounding the nature of China’s presence in Italy: through its vast economic power and the numerous forms of exchange and public diplomacy initiatives undertaken over the years, China has consistently infiltrated Italian affairs, employing both soft and sharp power strategies (Lupis, 2023).

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of China’s current public diplomacy efforts in Italy, drawing on both primary data collected through expert interviews with academics, diplomats, members of diaspora associations and stakeholders, and secondary sources that examine recent developments. By doing so, the chapter not only offers an empirical snapshot of China’s ongoing diplomatic initiatives but also provides a nuanced understanding and a critical assessment of the effectiveness and reception of these strategies. The interviews, which form the empirical backbone of this analysis, offer critical insights into how these diplomatic initiatives are perceived by Italian experts and practitioners, as well as people of Chinese descent, shedding light on the practical realities of China’s soft power projection.

The analysis proceeds in four sections, each enriched with the insights matured from the experts’ interviews and reflections. The first section examines the redefined political and economic

relations post-BRI, focusing on key agreements and security concerns. This section is built primarily on the analysis of official reports, newspaper articles on Italy's withdrawal from the BRI, declarations about future bilateral commitments, and critical evaluations by experts and IR analysts. The second part explores China's cultural and educational diplomacy, with an emphasis on the role of Confucius Institutes, and student exchanges. The third section assesses China's media footprint in Italy, analysing Chinese media and digital diplomacy and promotion of public narratives. Crucial for this part is the analysis of the Sino-Italian media partnerships as well as the controversy about Huawei and 5G technology. The mobilisation of Chinese communities and diaspora associations in Italy is the focus of the fourth section, exploring the role of their significant role in the promotion of a positive image of China within Italian society. It is important to underline that the expert interviews have been carried out exclusively to members of second-generation Chinese associations, due mainly to language barriers.

A growing number of sectors have become involved in China's strategy toward Italy – ranging from political institutions to the business, finance, academic, cultural, and media worlds – attracted by the benefits, generous donations and funding, strategic investments, and recognition offered by Beijing (Lupis, 2023). Unlike the more widely acknowledged Russian influence, particularly in the cyber realm, China's influence in Italy remains an area shrouded in relative obscurity (Messa, 2018). Public discourse on the relationship with Beijing is predominantly framed in economic terms, often overlooking critical concerns raised by certain voices regarding, for instance, investments in key strategic sectors, even after Italy's withdrawal from the BRI. The overall aim of this chapter, therefore, is not merely to describe these initiatives, but to critically engage with their practical and political implication, so as to enrich the debate on the implication of Chinese initiatives in Italy. In analysing China's public diplomacy in Italy, the chapter will provide a detailed understanding of the multiple dimensions of China's public diplomacy in Italy, highlighting both the opportunities for positive engagement and the potential risks associated with China's more coercive strategies, offering a comprehensive analysis of how these dynamics shape Sino-Italian relations.

5.1 Economic-political diplomacy after the BRI

The fluctuations of Italy's China policy have been attracting considerable attention both domestically and internationally. While it was initially celebrated by both Beijing and Rome as a diplomatic success, the BRI MoU also raised numerous concerns which have intensified over time. This culminated in December 2023 with the formal notification of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation to the Chinese authorities that Italy would opt out of the

automatic renewal of the MoU (Andornino, 2024). Italy's discreet and carefully managed withdrawal from the BRI represented the culmination of a prolonged and complex diplomatic process³⁴. Far from being an abrupt rupture, this decision was the result of a gradual and deliberated reassessment of the strategic contours of Italian relations with China (Insisa, 2023). There were two main reasons behind Italy's decision not to renew the MoU: on the one hand, the economic expectations – both in terms of trade and investment flows – failed to materialise; on the other hand, Italy's participation in the Chinese initiative – being the only G7 country to have signed the MoU and holding the rotating presidency of the group in 2024 – had become increasingly politically untenable in the context of a progressively structured and intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the US and the PRC (Andornino, 2024; Casanova, 2024).

It has been reported that between 2018 and 2022, Italy's market share in China's imports remained essentially stagnant, holding steady at approximately 1.1%. Furthermore, the trade balance between the two countries exhibits a pronounced asymmetry, skewed in China's favour (Boni, 2024). While Italy's exports to China did grow – rising from €12.96 billion in 2019 to €16.42 billion in 2022 – Chinese exports to Italy surged at a much faster pace, from €31.66 billion to €57.50 billion over the same period. This sharp increase in Chinese imports resulted in a substantial trade deficit for Italy, which reached approximately €41 billion in 2022 (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2025). When extending the analysis beyond trade to include Chinese FDI in Italy, the data reveal similarly modest outcomes. Apart from a high-profile exception, Italy did not manage to attract a significant number of large-scale or strategic Chinese investments in the years immediately following the signing of the MoU³⁵. These limited investment inflows have thus called into question the practical economic benefits of Italy's BRI participation, highlighting the gap between the ambitious diplomatic narrative and the actual material outcomes (Boni, 2024).

Where China's engagement has been seen to yield results is in the political sphere and, more specifically, in the uptake of some Chinese narratives among some key Italian MPs, bureaucrats, and academics. Significantly, China's ability to gain influence in Italy experienced a notable boost with the launch of the BRI, but in the period immediately preceding the signing of the MoU, public

³⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, the origins of this reassessment can be traced back to the government led by PM Mario Draghi. More specifically, in June 2021, during the G7 Leaders' Summit in Carbis Bay, Draghi stated that his government would undertake a careful examination of the BRI MoU, thus reflecting a deeper awareness of the broader implications of Beijing's assertiveness in international politics and its impacts on the Italian domestic context.

³⁵ The reference is to the agreement between the Chinese energy company Jietion Solar and ENI to invest around \$2.2 billion in new solar energy projects (Boni, 2024).

perceptions of China in Italy had already bettered (Messa, 2018)³⁶. This shift has been interpreted as a consequence of Beijing's intensified financial engagement in key Italian strategic assets, which was broadly perceived as a vote of confidence in Italy's political and economic stability at a time when the country was still grappling with the effects of a prolonged economic crisis. Notably, Chinese strategic investments in Italy have involved major national companies such as CDP, Mediobanca, Generali, ENI, Enel, Telecom, and Saipem – each surpassing the 2% threshold that triggers disclosure obligations under the regulations for significant shareholdings of the CONSOB (Commissione Nazionale per le Società e la Borsa), the public authority responsible for regulating the Italian financial markets. This pattern of investment has raised concerns among analysts and policymakers, prompting suspicions that Beijing's financial activism in Italy may have been driven less by purely economic interests and more by underlying geopolitical ambitions (Messa, 2018; Goldstein, 2016). In particular, some observers have pointed to the possibility that such initiatives have been part of a broader Chinese strategy aimed at weakening the transatlantic alliance. By establishing a foothold in the Italian economy, China would potentially have been able to exert indirect influence on European decision-making processes, especially in instances where Italy's voice and vote play a pivotal role (Messa, 2018). Indeed, despite early warnings from the European Commission regarding acquisitions arranged by the PRC, Italian authorities at the time tended to prioritise what was perceived as a promising business opportunity over more cautious considerations related to national and EU security³⁷.

The prospected economic benefits, therefore, have seemed to prevail over every strategic evaluation. This dynamic was particularly evident in the case of the Ports of Trieste and Genoa, which emerged as a focal point of China's 21st Century Maritime Belt and Road. In this regard, the high-level discussions on the involvement of Italian ports dated back to 2016 when then Italian Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, Graziano Delrio, met the Chinese Ambassador to Italy, Li Ruiyu, to evaluate opportunities for collaborations in the framework of the BRI project and the development of Italian harbours (Vincenti, 2020). At the time, Minister Delrio presented the measures of the National Strategic Plan for Ports and Logistics, showcasing the opportunities offered by the Italian port system as a whole, and within the broader European maritime network.

³⁶ It has been reported that the share of unfavourable opinions of China in Italy dropped from 70% to 59% between 2014 and 2017 (Messa, 2018).

³⁷ In 2018, the European Parliament published a policy document assessing the state of EU-China relations, with the explicit aim of safeguarding the interests of the Member States. The document underscored the need for a more coordinated and strategic European approach to relations with Beijing. In response, several Member States expressed support for the development of a regulatory framework to govern such relations, with the goal of protecting Europe's strategic interests, ensuring public security, and preserving both competitiveness and employment with the EU (European Parliament, (2018) *Report on the state of EU-China relations*, A8-0252/2018. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0252_EN.html)

Importantly, Italy was one of the strategic terminals in China's projection in the Mediterranean, not only in economic terms, but prominently from a political and commercial perspective. "The Italian shores along the busy Mediterranean Sea configure themselves as strategic outlets for connecting maritime trade from the Far East via the Suez Canal with the near Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Slovenia and Hungary, making all its ports a viable alternative to the major terminal in Northern Europe" (Vincenti, 2020, p.42)³⁸.

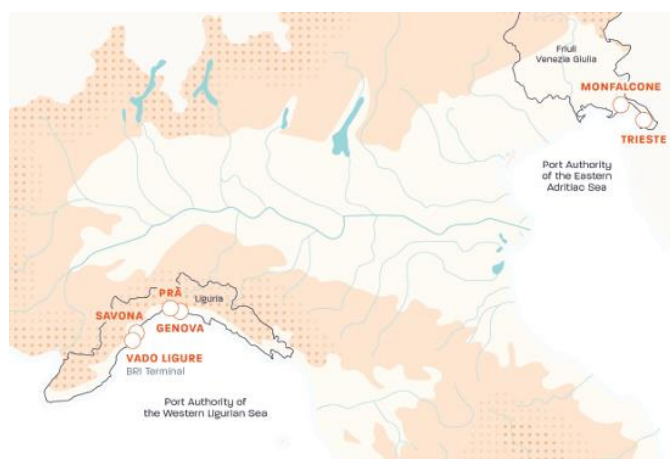


Figure 3. The Port Authority of the Western Ligurian Sea and the Port Authority of the Eastern Adriatic Sea.

Source: Ghiretti, 2023.

China's investments in Italian ports and particularly in Trieste has been seen in continuity with Beijing's investment campaign in Europe for the acquisition of the Piraeus port in Athens. Considering a few logistical disadvantages of the Greek harbour, the Italian ports have increased Chinese interests because they had some of the fastest custom clearance procedures in the Old Continent, deep waters, larger logistic areas behind them, and an efficient rail system (Vincenti, 2020)³⁹. These evaluations therefore led to the inclusion of the MoUs of the port of Genoa and that of Trieste with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) within the broader framework of the 2019 BRI MoU. Interestingly, CCCC is a construction company specialising in infrastructure projects, with expertise in highways and railways, airport and energy platforms, rather than in the maritime sector. Interestingly, none of the two Italian ports sought a partnership directly on their harbours: indeed, "Genoa was considering Chinese investment for the construction of a new breakwater dam, and Trieste for a railway station and rail connections" (Ghiretti, 2023, p.29).

³⁸ Without the involvement of Italian ports, the transit time for a cargo shipped from Shanghai to Basel (Switzerland) would take an average of 39 days (COSCO Shipping Lines website, Sailing Schedules/Find Schedule by City Pairs. Available at: <https://elines.coscoshipping.com/ebusiness/sailingSchedule/searchByCity>. (Accessed: 05/05/2025).

³⁹ This notwithstanding, Italy needed to invest in the modernisation of integrated infrastructure systems to become a fully efficient hub in the interconnection system between Europe and Asia.

Crucially, stakeholders were firm in asserting that the arrangements were an expression of a broader cooperation framework, keen on developing and enhancing ties with the CCCC in the context of an improved trade relationship between Italy and China. The same MoU stated that:

“[Italy and the People’s Republic of China] share a common vision about the improvement of accessible, safe, inclusive and sustainable transport. The Parties will cooperate in the development of infrastructure connectivity, including financing, interoperability and logistics, in areas of mutual interest (such as roads, railways, bridges, civil aviation, ports, energy – including renewables and natural gas – and telecommunications)” (Italy and China, 2019, p.3).

However, despite local authorities and partnering enterprises welcoming the prospect of revitalised trade flows, foreign investment, and job creation, concerns were simultaneously raised about the geopolitical implications of growing Chinese influence over critical infrastructure. Despite assurances that no ownership of the Italian ports was being transferred to Beijing and that cooperation would remain within regulatory boundaries, the symbolic and practical significance of China’s involvement in Trieste contributed to wider anxieties about the penetrations of strategic assets.

The main concerns surrounding the maritime Sino-Italian partnership – and more broadly, Italy’s adhesion to the BRI – can be summarised along four critical lines (Ghiretti, 2021). First, the initiative’s ambiguity: indeed, the BRI lacked clear goals, making it difficult for partner countries to evaluate its long-term implications. Second, the structural imbalance in implementation: most BRI-related projects were entrusted to Chinese companies and financed by Chinese banks, with minimal participation by local actors. This approach fuelled perceptions that the initiative exclusively played to Beijing’s advantage, serving the PRC’s economic and political interests. Third, the risk of so-called “debt trap”, whereby countries that become unable to service Chinese loans may be pressured to relinquish control over strategic assets. This concern has been amplified by high-profile precedents, most notably the case of the Port of Piraeus in Greece, where in 2016 China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) acquired 51% of the port, thus gaining a controlling stake. In so doing, the PRC managed to turn the port into a key node in the Chinese global maritime logistic network. Finally, many analysts and policymakers have pointed to Beijing’s long-term objective of acquiring leverage over global connectivity infrastructure for both economic and geostrategic purposes (Ghiretti, 2021).

However, these concerns were not merely theoretical. The experience of Greece has indeed been upheld as a cautionary tale of how deep economic ties with Beijing may translate into political

alignment or, at the very least, reluctance to oppose Chinese interests. In 2017, Greece notably blocked an EU statement that the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) criticising China's human rights record, somehow undermining EU efforts to confront Beijing's crackdown on activists and dissidents (Emmott and Koutantou, 2017). Moreover, in July 2020, Greece opposed to EU's attempts to introduce tougher measures as a response to the PRC's new security law on Hong Kong⁴⁰. Crucially, Greece had attended a videoconference about the BRI only a month earlier (Stroikos, 2023). It is in this context that in 2022 the COPASIR had explicitly warned of the growing influence of China across multiple sectors of Italian society, including strategic industries and critical infrastructure (COPASIR, 2022a). COPASIR highlighted the risk of Italy and the broader EU becoming overly reliant on China, not only economically but also in ways that could undermine national sovereignty and strategic autonomy. This growing awareness signals a shift in the Italian security and strategic understanding of Chinese economic-political diplomacy – not merely as a benign exercise in soft power, but increasingly as a form of sharp power that leverages asymmetrical dependencies, opaque partnerships, and influence networks to pursue geopolitical objectives.

The arrival of the nationalist-conservative coalition led by Giorgia Meloni in September 2022 accelerated the process of blocking BRI-related infrastructural projects and Chinese purchase of strategic assets (Casarini, 2024). Even though, Brothers of Italy had consistently opposed the BRI MoU from the very beginning, Meloni's government began publicly discussing the possibility of an Italian withdrawal from the initiative only in the spring of 2023 (Insisa, 2023). In June 2023 the Italian government passed a specific legislation to block ChemChina from taking control of Pirelli so giving a major blow to Chinese interests in Europe (Casarini, 2024)⁴¹. In the months before Italy's withdrawal, behind-the-scenes diplomacy was coupled with high-profile dialogues between the two sides to avoid the possibility of a Beijing's blowback against Rome, given the damage that Italy's decision inflicted on the international image of the BRI and Beijing's own penchant for indirect economic coercion (Insisa, 2023)⁴².

In order to manage domestic opposition and to avoid turning the withdrawal from the BRI into a media case, the communication was handled discreetly, with neither government publishing the decision on its official websites or communication channels (Casanova, 2024). As a result, the news only emerged a few days after, following an article by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della*

⁴⁰ Notably, Hungary shared Greece's position.

⁴¹ The acquisition of Pirelli in 2015 constituted a powerful symbol of China's investment inroads into Europe and of the opportunities that the BRI could and would entail for cash strapped governments and companies.

⁴² In September 2022, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Antonio Tajani, visited China, while PM Meloni met with her Chinese counterpart Li Qiang at the annual G20 Summit in India.

Sera. According to the information leaked to the newspaper, the Italian government had previously explored the possibility of renegotiating the terms of the agreement, seeking to revise the clause on automatic renewal in the absence of formal notice of withdrawal (Galluzzo, 2023). However, this proposal reportedly did not gain traction with the Chinese side, which declined Italy's request to reverse the terms and establish instead an automatic termination unless explicitly renewed. Given these circumstances, a formal notice of termination was deemed necessary (Casanova, 2024).

Rather than resulting in any retaliatory measure, Sino-Italian relations transitioned apparently seamlessly from the BRI framework. Significantly, the official communication concerning Italy's withdrawal from the MoU was accompanied by a letter signed by PM Meloni, in which the government expressed its commitment to reinvigorate the 2004 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. It would thus be this partnership the new conceptual framework for the development of bilateral relations following Italy's "BRI-exit" (Casanova, 2024). PM Meloni took care to clarify that Italy remained interested in maintaining mutually beneficial relations with China. On the PRC's side, it is crucial that Chinese state media have simply ignored news of the Italian withdrawal, maintaining a low-profile approach. It has been argued that China's reaction had to be cautious as engaging in punitive behaviour against Italy while Rome was signalling a pragmatic approach to post-BRI relations with China could have severely hampered Beijing's long-term agenda of reputation shaping (Andornino, 2024).

Given the intensifying US-China rivalry and in a broader context of marked degradation of trust in Sino-Western relations, China needed to be careful to keep balancing its generally more assertive foreign policy posture and strengthen its reputational security (Andornino, 2024). In 2023, in fact, China found itself in a much more complex position than at the end of the 2010s. Domestically, the PRC had been affected by weak economic growth after the country's *re-opening* after the pandemic, with long-standing structural issues – such as the bubble in the real estate market, the demographic decline due to decennial one-child policy, and the indebtedness of local governments – aggravated by severe political instability (Insisa, 2023)⁴³. Internationally, China had to contend with the revitalisation of transatlantic relations under the Biden administration, a dynamic to which Beijing arguably contributed through its posture of (pro-Russian) neutrality in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In parallel, China's relationship with the EU has become increasingly strained: in light of growing trade tensions, disputes have emerged over

⁴³ The former Foreign Minister Qin Gang, the former Minister of National Defence Li Shangfu, and the top leaders of the PLA Rocket Force had been purged.

Chinese electric vehicle exports to the European market, prompting the European Commission to initiate an anti-subsidy investigation against Beijing (European Commission, 2023).

Following Tajani's early-September visit to Beijing, which reopened diplomatic dialogue between Italy and China, a series of official missions to China signalled Italian willingness to revitalise bilateral ties (Casanova, 2024). Among these was the Italian Minister of Tourism Daniela Santanche's tour of Hong Kong, Macao, and Shanghai to promote Chinese tourism to Italy after the pandemic. However, the only high-level institutional visit of significant relevance was carried out by the Italian Minister of University and Research, Anna Maria Bernini, in late November 2023, when she attended the 12th China-Italy Science, Technology and Innovation Week, co-hosted with the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology (Agenzia Nova, 2023). The event, which focused on smart manufacturing and Olympic technologies – in view of the Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Games – was explicitly framed as part of efforts to reinvigorate the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries. Bilateral dialogue between China and Italy also emphasised climate change, polar science, marine protection, urban design, agriculture and food science, AI and cultural heritage (Casanova, 2024). Another politically significant development occurred in late November 2023, when the Chinese government unilaterally announced a temporary visa waiver for Italian citizens holding ordinary passports⁴⁴. This measure also applied to citizens of France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and Malaysia. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning, the visa exemption aimed to support China's high-quality development and opening-up. Notably, the policy was not reciprocal (Casanova, 2024).

While these high-level exchanges project continuity in bilateral cooperation, they could be perceived as reflecting a broader pattern of China's sharp power strategy: leveraging soft, apparently non-political domains such as education, technology, and tourism to sustain strategic influence even in the face of formal political disengagement such as Italy's exit from the BRI. The timing of Minister Bernini's mission and the persistence of high-level diplomatic contacts with Beijing have suggested an effort to maintain access and symbolic presence within Italy's strategic ecosystem. Additionally, China's visa waiver policy can be analysed as a strategic gesture designed to preserve channels of influence and access by appealing directly to European business communities and public opinions. By extending visa-free access to citizens of certain European countries – without offering the same in return – Beijing was able to maintain full control over the conditions of engagement. This asymmetry could thus be analysed as a deliberate use of sharp

⁴⁴ From December 1st, 2023, to November 30th, 2024, Italian nationals could enter the PRC for up to 15 days without a visa for business, tourism, family visits, or transit purposes.

power, whereby access to Chinese territory and economic opportunities was extended as a privilege rather than a mutual right. In so doing, the PRC reinforced its role as the gatekeeper of interaction, shaping the terms on which cooperation can occur. As such, these interactions merit scrutiny not merely as signs of regular public diplomacy but as potential instruments in China's broader toolkit to shape elite perceptions and policy sympathies in democratic systems.

In conclusion, Meloni's government decision not to renew Italy's participation in the BRI marked a watershed moment in Sino-Italian relations, inaugurating a new phase in bilateral engagement and public diplomacy strategies. This withdrawal prompted a comprehensive reassessment of Italy's strategic posture toward the PRC, leading to a dense diplomatic agenda aimed at redefining the overall framework of cooperation between the two countries (Insisa, 2025). At the core of this reorientation lies a renewed emphasis on trade and investment, two domains in which Rome seeks to rebalance relations with Beijing. However, this recalibration is unfolding in a geopolitical context increasingly marked by the securitisation of economic ties with China, particularly among EU Member States and G7 partners. The European Commission's recent stance on critical infrastructure, technological dependencies, and strategic sectors has constrained the space for engagement with Beijing. In Italy's case, this tension is compounded by the government's stated ambition to shield its domestic automotive industry from the growing competitiveness of Chinese electric vehicle manufacturers, thus aligning with broader European concerns regarding industrial overcapacity and market distortions linked to state subsidies in China (Insisa, 2025).

Therefore, Italy's disengagement from the BRI necessitates a redefinition of the overarching framework for cooperation aimed at preserving and revitalising the relationship through potentially less politically contentious avenues (Goretti and Simonelli, 2025). In particular, Italy is facing the complex challenge of striking a balance between relaunching its strategic partnership with China and reaffirming its commitment to the Euro-Atlantic alliance, especially within a broader context of increasing geopolitical competitiveness vis-à-vis China. This imperative has shaped a more selective and pragmatic approach to bilateral engagement. The outcome of this recalibrated posture is reflected in the 2024-2027 Action Plan jointly developed by Rome and Beijing, which seeks to strengthen cooperation across a range of areas such as trade and investment, finance, science and technology, education, sustainable development, healthcare, and cultural exchange (Governo Italiano, 2024). Notably, the Action Plan deliberately avoids sensitive sectors that were central to the original BRI MoU – namely infrastructure, logistics, connectivity, and regulatory harmonisation. By excluding these more controversial dimensions, the Plan would seem to signal an effort to depoliticise the bilateral agenda and re-anchor the partnership within a

framework that aligns more closely with Italy's Euro-Atlantic priorities (Goretti and Simonelli, 2025).

Italy's recent repositioning in its bilateral relationship with China has underscored the country's ongoing struggle to reconcile economic pragmatism and geopolitical alignment. Meloni's government has pursued a line that oscillates between caution – driven by security concerns over Chinese investments in certain strategic sectors – and the temptation to encourage greater Sino economic presence as a means of exerting pressure on European competitors, thereby enhancing Italy's leverage with the EU (Nelli Feroci, 2025). The government's approach has often shifted between prudence and opportunism: wary of Chinese influence in critical sectors, yet at times willing to leverage Beijing's interest in Italy as a bargaining chip within intra-European dynamics. Overall, despite the challenging task of managing a “de-risking” strategy in the context of Italy's withdrawal from the BRI, the bilateral relationship with Beijing remains inherently complex (Nelli Feroci, 2025). This is especially true for a country like Italy, which lacks a clearly defined national strategy toward China and is therefore compelled to continuously navigate a precarious balance between safeguarding national and European security interests and advancing its own economic and commercial objectives. In this liminal space, China's sharp power could find fertile ground, not through overt coercion, but through the persistent shaping of incentives, dependencies, and elite perceptions. The Italian case thus reveals the subtlety and resilience of Chinese public diplomacy, particularly in mid-sized democracies whose foreign policy is caught between alliance obligations and economic aspirations.

5.2 Cultural and educational diplomacy: strategies and perspectives

In November 2024, during the Italy-China Cultural Forum held in Beijing, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani signed a series of cooperation agreements and remarked that “culture unites our people” (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2024). The statement, delivered in a highly symbolic setting, on the occasion of the State visit of the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, to the PRC, epitomises the aspirations underpinning cultural and educational diplomacy: to foster mutual understanding, soften political tensions, and project influence through non-coercive means. At the end of the Forum, in fact, Minister Tajani signed three agreements:

- 1) the MoU between the Italian Ministry of University and Research and the Chinese Ministry of Education on the establishment of a regular consultation mechanism;
- 2) the Executive Programme of Cultural Cooperation;

3) the MoU on the translation of Italian and Chinese classical works between the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese National Administration of Press and Publication (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2024).

“Culture is a fundamental aspect in Italy-China relations. It is the foundation for reciprocal knowledge and for consolidating the ties that have united our peoples since ancient times,” said Minister Tajani, and “each new cultural initiative represents a further step in the road towards dialogue” (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2024). Yet, behind such diplomatic performances lies a more complex interplay of strategic interests, soft power ambitions, and diverging perceptions.

It has already been shown that in contemporary international relations, culture has become an indispensable tool of public diplomacy, serving functions that extend far beyond the facilitation of people-to-people exchanges. While cultural engagement continues to promote mutual understanding, foster academic and artistic collaboration, and encourage transnational mobility, it has also become a strategic means of national image-building and norm-diffusion. In the context of Italy-China relations, this dynamic has taken on a renewed significance. It has already been suggested that both Beijing and Rome consider education and culture as important forces not only in the advancement of innovation-driven development and scientific research, but also in the promotion of mutual understanding and bilateral ties (Casarini, 2021).

However, recent developments have prompted Italy to reassess aspects of this cultural engagement. Concerns have been raised about potential foreign interference in academic and research institutions, particularly regarding collaborations with Chinese entities (IlSole24Ore, 2024). In response, the Italian government has initiated a comprehensive action plan aimed at safeguarding the integrity of its universities and research centres, reflecting a growing awareness of the need to balance openness with vigilance. It is indeed significant that the government announced the action plan right before Minister Tajani signed the cooperation agreements in Beijing. In this evolving landscape, Italy finds itself navigating a delicate terrain: on one hand, it seeks to maintain and deepen cultural cooperation with China as a low-risk avenue for bilateral engagement, especially after its withdrawal from the BRI; on the other, it must address the strategic intent behind Chinese cultural outreach, particularly concerning issues of narrative control influence in academic settings, and potential political instrumentalisation.

In this context, the debate surrounding Confucius Institutes – and more broadly, Sino-Italian academic collaborations – has been at the centre of public and institutional concern for years. The criticality of the issue lies in a fundamental tension: on one side, there is a necessary openness

toward a country still largely unfamiliar to the Italian public but which is also the second world power; on the other side, there is the pressing need for regulatory and oversight bodies to clearly define the frameworks within which collaborations should be structured (Pompili and Valentini, 2022). In Italy, the debate around CIs has been open in 2014 by Maurizio Scarpari who has persuasively argued in a series of articles that these institutes – promoted under the banner of intercultural exchange – embody a strategic use of soft power that risks compromising academic freedom and intellectual pluralism (Scarpari, 2014a; Scarpari, 2014b). While ostensibly dedicated to the dissemination and teaching of Chinese language and culture, CIs are governed by agreements that often lack transparency. More specifically, Scarpari argued that the critical aspect of CIs was precisely its state-driven nature, since they were a direct emanation of Hanban (Scarpari, 2014b). It was the Hanban that directly financed ICs all over the world, and this made Chinese cultural institutes markedly different from their European counterparts: the origin of their funding would deprive ICs of their independence. Scarpari explained that host universities have been attracted by the huge PRC's financing and have neglected the constraints imposed over their activities, thus creating the conditions for behaviours that were at times overly compliant, if not outright self-censoring, which ultimately undermined the quality of the cultural offering (Scarpari, 2014b). The Italian sinologist brought the case of the American university of Stanford which received an initial funding of four million dollars, under the condition that certain sensitive topics – such as Tibet – would not be addressed. Precisely in order to safeguard their freedom of thought and institutional autonomy, several leading universities in the US, Europe, and Australia have declined to host CIs on their campuses (Scarpari, 2014b).

This situation has contributed to a growing international academic debate, which has culminated in various public appeals calling either for the closure of CIs or, at the very least, for their relocation outside university premises. In Italy, the debate has remained relatively limited, largely confined to individual initiatives rather than institutional positions (Casarini, 2021). It was precisely Maurizio Scarpari – together with Stefania Stafutti of the University of Turin – who took a particularly firm stance in a 2019 article published in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading daily newspaper (Scarpari, 2019). Both scholars condemned China's mass detention policies targeting Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the repression of pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, voicing concern over the way of CIs disseminate Chinese government's narratives on these issues (Casarini, 2021). Scarpari, in particular, was highly critical of what he described as the “double standard” practiced by many of his colleagues when addressing – or avoiding – sensitive topics regarding China. He accused them of being unwilling to take a clear position, deeming it inappropriate to engage with issues that might be deemed uncomfortable by Chinese authorities.

In doing so, he argued that they were conflating culture and politics, treating the two domains as if they were unrelated (Lupis, 2023).

In a 2021 article, Scarpari contended that the backlash against CIs would not alter the ongoing debate in Italy since Italian universities show little willingness to reconsider their cooperation model with the Hanban, driven primarily by both cultural and financial motivations (Scarpari, 2021). This was deemed highly significant, as the CIs provide much-needed funding to Italian academia, which remains chronically underfunded. Hence, so the argument goes, for many universities, the financial support from Beijing would be difficult to forgo (Casarini, 2021).

Another significant contribution to the public debate around CIs in Italy was that of Antonio Tripodi, a member of the Academic Board at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice. In an op-ed published in *Corriere della Sera*, Tripodi accused the university of self-censorship and of yielding to Beijing's influence, driven by the desire to secure the financial resources that the Italian government has been unwilling or unable to provide (Tripodi, 2019). According to Tripodi, this dependence on external funding has resulted in a lack of events or discussions in Venice addressing sensitive topics such as Taiwan, Tibet, or Tiananmen in recent years. Tripodi's article highlighted a crucial role associated with CIs: their establishment within universities often extends beyond language and cultural teaching, influencing broader academic dynamics. Funds provided by Beijing – often funnelled through the Chinese Embassy and the CIs – may spill over into other university departments and research centres. This financial inflow can lead to forms of self-censorship within the academic environment. In so doing, the CI can serve as an entry point for Chinese influence into the academic sphere (Tripodi, 2019).

In contrast to the critical views expressed by Scarpari and Tripodi, it is important to recognise that the debate surrounding the Confucius Institutes in Italy, while not without controversy, has not reached the same intensity or influence as it has in other European nations or the United States. While concerns regarding academic freedom and potential Chinese influence persist, the situation in Italy remains relatively nuanced, with many scholars and institutions advocating for a more balanced, pragmatic approach. As noted in an interview with Professor Federico Masini, director of the Confucius Institute at Sapienza University of Rome, and as explicitly stated in the Agreement establishing the CI at Sapienza University, the mission of CI in Rome is to

“strengthen the educational cooperation between China and Italy, support and promote the development of Chinese language education, and increase mutual understanding among people in China and in Italy” (Sapienza Università di Roma, 2011)⁴⁵.

Therefore, according to Masini, the core of CIs is precisely the *promotion* of the knowledge of Chinese reality and culture. Interestingly, Masini remarked that the role of the ICs has evolved significantly over the past two decades. When the CI in Rome was established in 2006, China was not the second-largest economy in the world: it is important to reflect not only on their institutional trajectory, but also on the broader geopolitical transformations that have accompanied this period. The China of twenty years ago is markedly different from the China of today, and the shifting dynamics between global powers have profoundly influenced the perception and function of CIs. Hence, the role of CIs should be analysed through a diachronic approach, by asking which were the project and the model of CIs before and which are the current ones.

Masini explained that initially CIs were conceived as instruments to address a perceived knowledge gap – namely, that China understood the world better than the world understood China. This is why CIs were embedded within academic institutions to promote Chinese language, culture, and intellectual traditions: they were envisioned as platforms for fostering mutual understanding and presenting a multifaceted image of China abroad. In their early years, CIs served thus as powerful engines for cultural diplomacy, facilitating scholarly exchanges and providing hundreds of students and educators with opportunities to engage with both Chinese and Western academic models. In the Italian case, this reciprocal engagement contributed to a positive, two-way flow of knowledge and cultural appreciation. However, over time, the role of CIs has weakened in several contexts, especially in North America and Australia, where government decisions have led to the closure of many Institutes. In this scenario, Masini remarked that countries like Italy and Germany have instead remained relatively insulated from this trend, and CIs continue to operate. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that what was once a model aimed at cultural exchange and knowledge dissemination has, in some circumstances, been reinterpreted or even reversed.

When asked about the role of CIs as tools of Chinese soft power, Masini emphasised that while they are often framed as part of China’s broader public diplomacy strategy, their original and, arguably, most enduring function has been that of fostering reciprocal understanding. Rather than being unidirectional tools for image promotion, CIs have largely operated as platforms for mutual

⁴⁵ The author has interviewed Professor Masini on April 29th, 2025.

knowledge-sharing between China and host countries. In the Italian context, the Institutes have primarily facilitated the study of Chinese language and culture, offering students and teachers a unique opportunity to engage with Chinese society in a way that goes beyond what a domestically confined curriculum could offer. The aim has not necessarily been the promotion of a singular or *sanitised* image of China, but rather to open up spaces for direct experience and informed perception. Whether the results of this engagement ultimately benefit China's image and public diplomacy mission abroad is, according to Masini, in many ways, secondary to the core educational function of these institutions. In fact, how it has remarked the director of the IC in Rome, universities, by their nature, are tasked with advancing intercultural and academic exchange. Hence, the presence of CIs within these academic structures would simply align with the broader mission of higher education: to cultivate critical understanding through exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural traditions. In this sense, CIs in Italy can be seen less as strategic instruments of influence, and more as participants in the global academic ecosystem, one premised on the mutual enrichment that arises from cross-cultural engagement.

Professor Masini recognised that a recurrent critique of CIs concerns their alleged role as a branch of the CCP propaganda system to disseminate political narratives under the guise of *harmless* cultural diplomacy. In the Italian case, however, there is no evidence of direct political messaging or top-down communication guidelines imposed by Chinese authorities, particularly in terms of narrative framing or the handling of sensitive topics. Italian CIs have deliberately steered clear of politically sensitive themes in Sino-Italian relations, focusing instead on language instruction and cultural programming. In this regard, CIs in Italy would operate with a degree of autonomy that challenges some of the more alarmist critiques prevalent in anglophone discourse. That said, Masini was keen on specifying that the absence of overt political content should not be misinterpreted as neutrality in a geopolitical vacuum: the choice to avoid controversial topics is itself a form of diplomacy that wants to preserve channels for academic and cultural exchange, while reducing the risk of conflict with host institutions or the broader public opinion. It is precisely this approach that is deemed to have enabled the maintenance of productive dialogue and the circulation of ideas between Chinese and Italian academic communities. In so doing, it would also reflect a pragmatic understanding of the local context, in which sensitivity to political implications is a prerequisite for the continuity of transnational cooperation.

The public perception of China in Italy has also undergone a notable transformation in recent years, said Professor Masini. Whereas twenty years ago there was considerable enthusiasm for Chinese cultural events and greater visibility for such initiatives, this interest has diminished in the current

climate. This shift could be partly attributed to broader geopolitical influences – most notably, the stronger alignment of Italian public opinion with prevailing cautionary narratives in the US and EU, both of which have adopted more critical and reactive stances toward the PRC. Nonetheless, Masini argued that the diffusion of Chinese language education within the Italian educational system would tell a more nuanced story. Indeed, with an estimated 10,000 students studying Chinese in Italian schools, universities, and cultural institutes, the cultural footprint of China in Italy remains significant, thus signalling an enduring demand for deepening understanding of the Chinese world. Moreover, everyday interactions – such as those facilitated by Chinese restaurants and local communities – continue to foster a positive perception of Chinese people, even though these grassroots dynamics seem to contrast with the often more sceptical outlook found among Italy’s “informed public”, whose views tend to be shaped by political discourse and international media framing. Therefore, Masini emphasised that the enduring appeal of Chinese cultural traditions among segments of the Italian population offers a foundation for continued engagement, and potentially, for the development of a more balanced understanding of China. In a rapidly changing world, such an approach is not only valuable but also necessary since it is only through knowledge and mind-openness that societies can prepare themselves for meaningful participation and understanding in an increasingly interconnected global order.

5.3 Chinese digital footprint in Italy: narratives and reception

In recent years, China has embarked on a meticulous plan to expand its media footprint and its external communication strategies in Italy through a growing presence in both traditional and digital media. Through both traditional media outlets’ initiatives – such as the content-sharing partnership between Italy’s ANSA and China’s state-run Xinhua News Agency – and the strategic engagement of digital platforms and private actors like Huawei, Beijing has sought to craft favourable narratives about its governance model, economic prowess, and role on the global stage. Importantly, “to reshape the international news environment and make it more China-friendly, Beijing has leveraged its economic power and political influence” (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023, p.75). However, even though the media efforts form a central pillar of the CCP public diplomacy toolkit, their reception in Italy has been mixed. Both the two 2022 COPASIR reports raised concerns about potential influence operations embedded within cultural and media exchanges, highlighting the risks associated with uncritically amplifying narratives aligned with Chinese state interests. In fact, Italy was no exception to the PRC’s efforts to mould international narratives so as to consolidate the legitimacy of the CCP’s rule. Rome was deemed of strategic importance because it was the first G7 country to give formal support and join Xi’s signature foreign policy initiative, the BRI.

Since Xi Jinping took office, the CCP has significantly intensified its attempts to mould the global perception of China, maximising the reach of propaganda abroad and expanding its media presence to disseminate positive narratives regarding China. In Italy, this media landscape encompasses not only state-owned outlets directly controlled by the CCP – like Xinhua, China Daily, or CCTV – but also private or community-based media run by Chinese nationals residing in Italy, such as the weekly Europe China Daily and the radio station Radio Panda FM (Lupis, 2023). These actors pursue differentiated communicative strategies tailored to their target audiences. For Chinese-speaking communities in Italy, their role is primarily to provide practical and reassuring information about life and recent developments in the host country, while also fostering a sense of national belonging and cultural identity. For Italian audiences, by contrast, the aim is to present a more favourable and friendly image of China and its initiatives like the BRI, as well as to counter what the Chinese government perceives as negative or distorted narratives disseminated by Western media outlets (Lupis, 2023).

In its effort to update and refine its public diplomacy strategy, the Chinese government has undertaken a broader range of initiatives and employed diverse tactics. Some of these actions may be regarded as legitimate forms of soft power – that is, practices commonly employed by other states to promote their economic and political interests or to share their cultural heritage abroad. However, China’s activities within the global media landscape have proven more controversial. As a matter of fact, it has been argued that Beijing’s campaign for a so-called “new world media order” often translates into the dissemination of CCP propaganda, the spread of misleading content and false accusation against critics, and the exportation of a state-controlled media model that includes censorship techniques (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023).

To this end, China’s state media have strengthened strategic partnerships with foreign media outlets and journalists’ unions, establishing a number of cooperation agreements with their Italian counterparts. These agreements typically include content-sharing arrangements, co-production of programmes, and the training of journalists (Lupis, 2023). Although it is possible to find some significant Sino-Italian partnerships in the media industry even before 2019, it was the signing of the BRI MoU that provided an important occasion to renew the various existing collaborations and to sign new agreements between Chinese and Italian media. To a broader extent, “all major Italian media groups have partnership agreements in place with Chinese counterparts, although such arrangements vary in terms of content and scope” (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023, p.79). In this context it is worth highlighting that Chinese media not only are interlinked under the CCP’s management and control’s system, but they also share each other’s content.

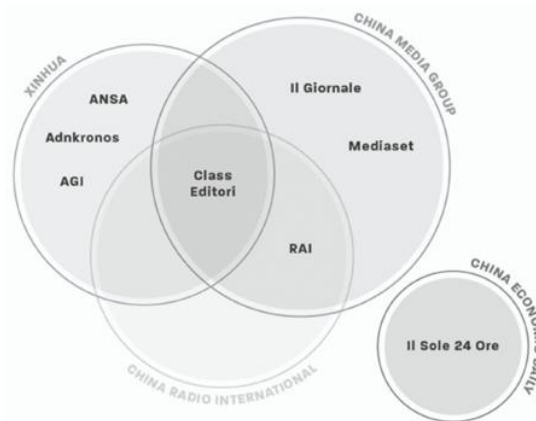


Figure 4. Collaborations between Italian and Chinese media, 2020.

Source: Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023.

Significantly, one of the most tangible outcomes of these media agreements is the direct publication – both on the publicly accessible websites of Italian news agencies and within subscription-based dispatches – of news items concerning China and Sino-Italian relations, which are produced by Chinese state media. Therefore, such partnerships have been designed not only to facilitate a broader dissemination of Chinese narratives within the Italian media ecosystem, but also to promote mutual understanding and professional exchange. This notwithstanding, they have also raised several concerns about editorial autonomy since these arrangements would enable Chinese media content to reach the Italian public unfiltered and largely unmediated. Such uncritical dissemination would be further facilitated by the limited level of China-specific expertise within Italian journalism, which often lacks the necessary analytical framework to contextualise or critically assess narratives originating from Chinese official sources (Lupano, 2021).

It is worth remarking that Sino-Italian media arrangements are often governed by confidential clauses. This would complicate an extensive and transparent assessment of their scope or a comparison of the terms across institutions. Nevertheless, by triangulating publicly available documents, press releases, and expert interviews, it is possible to reconstruct the nature of these partnerships and gain insight into the degree of penetration that Chinese state-affiliated media have achieved within the Italian media landscape (Lupis, 2023).

One of the most notable examples of Sino-Italian media cooperation is the partnership between Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI) – one of Italy’s leading news agencies, owned by the multinational energy company ENI – and Chinese state media. Crucially, AGI was among the first Italian outlets to engage with its Chinese counterparts by launching, in 2008, *AGI China 24*, a web-

based news portal created in collaboration with Xinhua and CRI, dedicated entirely to China-related news (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023). Although the initiative was short-lived, it laid the groundwork for more formalised cooperation: in 2014, AGI signed a MoU with Xinhua Europe for content sharing and the agreement was renewed in 2019 on the occasion of President Xi's state visit to Italy (AGI, 2014). Similarly, in 2017, another major Italian news agency, Adnkronos, entered into a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua. As a result, Adnkronos started to regularly publish English-language content provided by the Chinese news agency – in spite of Xinhua's well-established role as a propaganda arm of the CCP (Adnkronos, 2017). This case is vital in showcasing the broader risks inherent in such partnerships: without adequate filtering or editorial scrutiny, there is a risk of amplifying uncritical narratives aligned with Beijing's strategic messaging. In fact, the effects of these agreements extend beyond the agencies themselves: newspapers such as *Libero*, for instance, often rely on news services like AGI or Adnkronos. Therefore, in the absence of dedicated foreign correspondents or specialised knowledge about China, many Italian media outlets reproduce agency content with minimal oversight, inadvertently contributing to the dissemination of Chinese state-sponsored narratives and propaganda (Lupis, 2023).

Even though it can be considered a relatively minor player in the Italian news environment, Class Editori is the institution with most connections with Chinese media (Ghieretti and Mariani, 2023). In fact, since 2010 the media conglomerate has engaged in a series of collaborative initiatives with Xinhua, encompassing content-sharing agreements, co-hosted events, and joint on-line training courses. This partnership deepened in 2015 when the two news outlets published a bilingual magazine in Mandarin and Italian and opened Yishang Class, a multimedia platform for the promotion of the 2015 Milan Expo (Class Editori, 2025). In January 2019, Class Editori and Xinhua's China Economic Information Service jointly inaugurated a new website designed to inform Italian businesses about the commercial opportunities linked to the BRI. The media group has also developed a partnership with CMG, which includes the joint publication of the "Focus Cinitalia" column on *Milano Finanza*'s digital platform and the co-production of tv programmes. However, the editorial independence and transparency of these collaborations have raised concerns, particularly given the strategic alignment with Beijing's global communication agenda⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ On July 16th, 2021, an article titled "Xi Jinping's classical literary quotes" was published on *Focus Cinitalia* – as part of the initiative *Reading the classics to understand China* – along with a video offered by Xinhua and CGTN, which opened with the impact that the Industrial Revolution in the West has had on the environment. The purpose of this content was promoting China's environmental awareness while simultaneously exposing the damages to the environment done by the Western industrial revolution, opposing it to the wisdom of the Red Dragon (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023).

Notably, Class Editori is one of the thirty founding members of the Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership (BREIP), established in 2019 to provide informational and operational support to stakeholders engaged in BRI-related activities. This affiliation places the Italian media company within the broader network of international partners committed to disseminating narratives that align with China's economic diplomacy (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023).

Continuing along the trajectory of growing media collaborations between Italian and Chinese outlets, another notable case is that of *IlSole24Ore* – one of Italy's most influential business papers and the official voice of Confindustria, the General Confederation of Italian Industry. On March 20th, 2019, the Italian business paper signed a MoU with the Chinese *Economic Daily*, a prominent state-run publication (Pelosi, 2019; Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023). The following day, *IlSole24Ore* launched the *Focus China* section on its website, featuring seventeen articles whose content echoed a largely favourable stance to Beijing (IlSole24Ore, 2025). Despite all pieces being labelled as “promotional information”, several lacked authorship and attribution, while others were direct translations from the Chinese business paper⁴⁷. Moreover, in 2021, *IlSole24Ore* drew criticism when it appeared among nearly 200 international media outlets that hosted “media drops” – that is, sponsored advertorials placed by the *People's Daily*. These full-page advertisements carried titles such as “Confidence in the Chinese Solution for World Economic Recovery” and “China-Italy Trade Reaches New Records”, thus further underlining the alignment of media messages with Beijing's strategic economic narrative.

Concerns over journalistic ethics at *IlSole24Ore* have persisted in recent years, resurfacing most notably in 2023 following the publication of a four-page supplement. On March 28th, 2023, the business paper's editorial committee issued a public statement criticising what it described as a “highly ambiguous editorial model”, arguing that the material was not transparently presented as advertising content and that the sponsoring entity was not clearly identified (IlSole24Ore, 2023). According to the editorial board, the insert amounted to “pure propaganda”, aimed at encouraging Italian investment in China. They deemed the initiative “unacceptable”, asserting that it effectively offered the newspaper's pages to an economic system and a state lacking the fundamental features of a democracy, thereby erasing any meaningful distinction between political and commercial messaging (Lupis, 2023). The editorial committee further denounced the newspaper's complicity in amplifying the voice of a regime characterised not only by its traditional suppression of political pluralism, freedom of expression, and protection of minority rights, but also by an increasingly

⁴⁷ One particularly contentious article presented a collection of Xi Jinping's statements on the BRI.

hardline foreign policy stance marked by overt support for the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin.

A few years earlier, on March 20th, 2019, on the eve of President Xi's official visit to Italy, Rome hosted the "Strategic Dialogue Between Chinese and Italian Media", an event that brought together nearly 200 representatives from both countries' media sectors. The initiative served as a high-profile platform for deepening existing media partnerships⁴⁸. However, despite the centrality of media cooperation in the public diplomacy agenda, most of the collaborations were not included among the 29 official agreements signed during the visit and "attached" to the BRI MoU. Only the accords involving the two major Italian media outlets, RAI and ANSA, respectively with CMG and Xinhua were formally recognised (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023). The reason why only ANSA and RAI signed cooperation agreements with their Chinese counterparts during Xi Jinping's visit to Rome lies not only in their prominence with the Italian public media landscape but also in their long-standing partnership with Chinese media outlets. It is worth highlighting that none of the agreements is publicly available, but research on the partnership can be carried out only through secondary sources and interviews to relevant stakeholders. It could thus well be argued that transparency is not a defining feature of Sino-Italian relations in the domain of media and information exchange (Lupis, 2023).

RAI began formalising collaborations with Chinese media as early as 2016, as part of a broader strategy to establish partnerships with Asian and global actors. Within this framework, the collaboration with CMG has become particularly significant due both to the size and rapid growth of the Chinese media market (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023). This was especially relevant for RAI Com, the subsidiary responsible for distributing RAI content worldwide and for negotiating international television and radio agreements. From a commercial perspective, in fact, the Chinese market represents a unique opportunity for RAI. Nonetheless, the Italian media outlet soon realised that penetrating the Chinese television sector and identifying formats that could resonate with local audiences was far from straightforward (Lupis, 2023). For years, RAI attempted to co-produce content appealing to Chinese viewers, yet with limited success. In order to move beyond traditionally historical themes – such as those centred on the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci or the explorer Marco Polo – RAI had to comply with the editorial constraints and propagandistic framing required by the Chinese authorities (Lupis, 2023). A notable example is the case of the planned 2020 celebrations for the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Italy and China, which were cancelled due to the pandemic. In their place, RAI ultimately broadcasted the

⁴⁸ The event was organised by CMG in collaboration with the *Economic Daily*, Class Editori, and *IlSole24Ore*.

documentary *Chang'an meets Rome* – entirely produced by CMG – characterised by the celebratory and propagandistic tone that typically defines the group's production⁴⁹.

The collaboration that has drawn the most criticism from both Italian and international observers is that between ANSA and Xinhua. Similar to the case of RAI, the partnership predates the BRI MoU, as it began in May 2016 with an agreement that provided for the exchange of news content and the co-production of material between the two agencies (Redazione ANSA, 2016). From ANSA's perspective, the agreement was framed as a strategic initiative aimed at strengthening the agency's outreach in Asia, where it already maintained a long-standing presence through correspondent offices across various countries. On the other hand, Xinhua interpreted the collaboration as a major achievement, emphasising that Italy's leading news agency had entered into a partnership with China's state-run outlet – an organisation known for actively promoting a pro-China interpretation of global affairs (Pompili and Valentini, 2022). Following the signing of the BRI MoU in 2019, ANSA not only increased its coverage of China-related news but also began publishing a growing number of articles directly sourced from Xinhua – at times exceeding the number of China-focused articles produced by ANSA itself. In more detail, a reported 430% increase in China-related news coverage occurred after 2019 compared to the years 2017 and 2018. Notably, the number of news items sourced from Xinhua rose from zero in both 2017 and 2018 to 758 in 2019 and surged to over 2,460 in 2020. While the outbreak of the Covid pandemic undoubtedly played a significant role in drawing heightened media attention to China, the trend of publishing Chinese-sourced content did not substantially decline even after the initial peak of pandemic-related coverage (Ghiretti and Mariani, 2023).

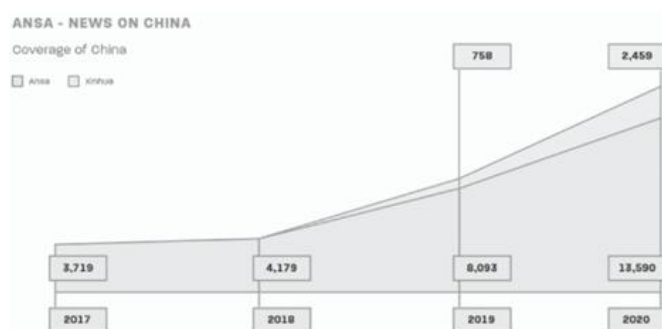


Figure 5. China-related news on ANSA.

⁴⁹ The CCP newspaper *Global Times* described it “the first documentary collaboration between both countries under the Belt and Road Initiative. It aims to present an audio-visual feast featuring the Silk Road spirit and promote mutual learning among civilizations” (Global Times, (2020) “Second season of 4K micro documentary ‘Chang’an meets Rome’ shines light on friendly China-Italy relations”, *Global Times*, November 8, 2020. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1206078.shtml>. (Accessed: 09/05/2025)).

The most contentious episode, however, occurred in 2021, when ANSA hosted a full-page advertisement on its website from the *People's Daily*. The advert included two celebratory articles praising China's economic recovery and the strength of China-Italy trade relations. This triggered a wave of criticism, with ANSA being accused of disseminating propagandistic or misleading information about China without adequate verification or contextualisation (Lupis, 2023). In response to mounting criticism, ANSA opted to include a disclaimer beneath news items sourced directly from Chinese state media, initially stating: "Editorial responsibility does not lie with ANSA", which was later revised to: "Responsibility lies with Xinhua" (Pompili and Valentini, 2022). This adjustment underscored the tensions between ANSA's own principles – enshrined in its statute – that commit the agency to rigorous independence, impartiality, and objectivity, and the editorial line of Xinhua. The latter, in its 2021 annual report, explicitly declared that its work is "guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", highlighting its function as a direct instrument of Party-state propaganda (Harth, 2022). The backlash ultimately led the Italian news agency to suspend its collaboration with Xinhua in 2022.

It is important to acknowledge that the practice of omitting the explicit attribution of foreign editorial sources is not unique to Xinhua; similar dynamics can be observed in ANSA's handling of content from other international news agencies. However, what makes the case of Xinhua particularly problematic is the overtly propagandistic tone – often bordering on disinformation and fake news – characterising much of the material it produces (Lupis, 2023). When Xinhua dispatches are published without clear attribution, Italian readers may mistakenly assume they are original ANSA reports and thus fail to detect the ideological slant embedded in the narratives. This dynamic is further complicated by the generally limited familiarity in Italy with the political and media landscape of the PRC. Indeed, the fact that Xinhua functions as the mouthpiece of the CCP is not widely known among Italian audiences, thereby hampering the capacity for critical interpretation and engagement with the content and fostering the risk of uncritical assimilation of narratives aligned with the interests of the Chinese party-state.

Concerned by the pervasiveness of authoritarian actors' interference, Italian intelligence and security agencies along with the COPASIR have for several months continued to closely monitor the situation. They did so under the conviction that, particularly with regard to the upcoming national elections, the Committee deemed essential to assess the national risks associated with the growing perception that Italy could be particularly vulnerable and permeable to authoritarian influence, in particular that of the PRC. The COPASIR reported that among the various

investments into global *infowarfare* strategies, Beijing's activities were often carried out precisely through foreign agreements or informal relationships with foreign news agencies, which are ultimately linked to the CCP and would thus tend to be heavily skewed in favour of the Chinese side (COPASIR, 2022b).

Mentioning the BRI MoU and the series of agreements signed on the same occasion – including those involving RAI and ANSA – as the evidence of Chinese interference and global ambitions, the Committee warned that the shift in communicative strategies from operations directly executed by state actors to those designed by states but outsourced to ostensibly independent agencies has contributed to the emergence of a market for fake news and “industrialised disinformation”, as well as to the rise of “computational propaganda” (COPASIR, 2022b). In an evolving context, it was possible to observe the widespread adoption of complex information manipulation strategies that include disinformation and misinformation. These practices were found to be often accompanied by media manipulation, data-driven tactics leveraging the targeting capabilities of major social media corporations, and “trolling”⁵⁰. Furthermore, the COPASIR noted that such strategies may involve harassment of users' digital profiles as well as the mass reporting of content and accounts, effectively exploiting the content moderation algorithms of digital platforms.

The dynamics described by the COPASIR became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, which served as a critical testing ground for state-led disinformation campaigns in Italy and beyond (Cook, 2021). Indeed, the health crisis involuntarily created an ideal environment for the proliferation of coordinated influence operations by foreign autocratic actors, including China. Taking advantage of engrained informational asymmetries, Beijing was able to leverage disinformation strategies to shape public narratives around the origins of the virus, the effectiveness of its domestic pandemic response, and its humanitarian assistance in the vest of mask diplomacy to foreign countries such as Italy. Through a carefully orchestrated strategy, China sought to expose the vulnerabilities of democratic systems in managing the pandemic, by highlighting the inefficiencies of Western-developed vaccines and the shortcomings of public healthcare services. According to the COPASIR, all this formed part of a broader communication and media propaganda effort aimed at discrediting and weakening Western democracies (COPASIR, 2022b).

⁵⁰ The document provided the definition of “disinformation”, “misinformation”, and “trolling”. It described “disinformation” as the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading content with the intent to deceive. “Misinformation” refers to the spread of inaccurate information without awareness of its falsehood and, therefore, without the deliberate intent to mislead. “Trolling” is understood as the propagation of inflammatory or defamatory content intended to provoke emotional responses.

The impact of Chinese Covid propaganda in Italy was particularly pronounced during the early stages of the pandemic. By combining high-profile deliveries of medical aid with a coordinated media strategy, Beijing was able to reshape Italian public perception and deflect blame for the virus's origins. It has been reported that just over the course of a few weeks, Italy has gone “from an allegedly anti-Chinese racist country (the same definition often used by Beijing's diplomats to reject the accusations of delays in managing and communicating the COVID-19 pandemic by Chinese authorities) to manifest enthusiasm for its iron fist in combatting the coronavirus and its model, the Wuhan one, notwithstanding the lack of empirical evidence on its effectiveness due to the persistent lack of transparency by Chinese authorities on the number of infected and victims” (Carrer, 2020). This shift in perception has been explained by the support provided to Beijing's propaganda machine by Italian media which have offered it “a huge and ‘disproportionate’ television coverage” (Carrer, 2020). For instance, RAI devoted significantly more coverage to the arrival of Chinese Covid aid to Italy than to US President Trump's announcement of a 100-million-dollar assistance plan to Rome.

Therefore, the extensive visibility given to Chinese mask diplomacy to Italy played a crucial role in amplifying Beijing's narrative of benevolence and competence during the Covid-19 crisis. Drawing from the Chinese communication playbook, a multifaceted strategy was deployed in Italy that extended beyond pure humanitarian aid. It indeed included the manipulation of economic cooperation frameworks, efforts to shape and dominate the narrative, the co-optation of political and economic elites, and the instrumentalisation of the Chinese diaspora (Zeneli and Santoro, 2020). The cornerstone of Chinese Italy policy in 2020 was precisely the overmagnification of its assistance using public diplomacy and social media to disseminate the mask diplomacy narrative. Moreover, by linking this narrative to the BRI framework, Beijing sought to cultivate a sense of nationalistic triumphalism in Italy – one that resonated with political discourse framing the initiative as an opportunity for Rome to reclaim a prominent role also in EU-China relations.

However, China's expanding digital footprint in Italy has not only raised concerns in the realm of media. In fact, it has also triggered securitisation debates, particularly regarding critical infrastructure. As briefly mentioned above, one of the most controversial issues has been the involvement of Huawei in the development of Italy's 5G network. In fact, concern over the penetration of 5G technology and the ownership of such networks has been increasingly viewed in geopolitical terms, in particular within the great power competition between the US and China. Both the two global powers fear that their competitor could gain an upper hand in the development

and roll-out of this technology (Ghiretti, 2020). In this context, Italy represents an interesting case for assessing the implications of the US-China animosities over 5G, also at the broader EU level.

As early as 2020, EU institutions voiced their concerns about the potential risks posed by Chinese technology providers, publishing a guideline toolbox on 5G for Member States and recommendations on the issues (Ghiretti, 2020; European Commission, 2020a). More specifically, the EU urged to enhance security standards for mobile network operators, refine the evaluation of supplier-related risks and impose stricter limitations on vendors deemed high-risk, while also promoting greater diversification in the supply chain (European Commission, 2020b). In the case of Italy, the development of 5G technologies has raised concerns especially after the signing of the 2019 BRI MoU, as it is deemed that Beijing considers Huawei's presence in Italy as a concrete attempt to develop its own Digital Belt and Road Initiative in Europe (Negro, 2024). The concerns around the 5G debate in Italy stemmed from the fear that the Chinese company, due to its close ties with the CCP and obligations under Chinese law to cooperate with state intelligence services, could be used as an instrument of espionage or cyber-enabled influence operations.

Huawei has a wide presence in Italy, especially in the Southern part⁵¹. In fact, its infrastructural investment foresaw the creation of ICT networks in cooperation with Telecom Italia in Basilicata, Calabria, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily already in 2004 (Negro, 2024). Huawei's penetration and relative success in the Italian market can be attributed to a multifaceted strategic approach, encompassing narrative shaping, institutional engagement, economic integration, and grassroots involvement. First, the company has actively sought to depoliticise its image by promoting a carefully curated corporate identity – emphasising its status as a private enterprise 'wholly owned by its employees' – in an effort to distance itself from the Chinese state and deflect suspicions of political affiliation. Second, Huawei has engaged in intensive lobbying efforts at the EU level, positioning itself as a major actor in institutional dialogue⁵². Third, the firm has invested directly in various EU Member States, including Italy, as a demonstration of its investment capacity to serve both as economic leverage and a form of strategic reassurance. Lastly, Huawei has prioritised engagement with local communities through funding of education and training initiatives,

⁵¹ By late 2023, Huawei had a headquarter in Rome, one in Milan, several branches in ten other Italian cities, four R+D centres, a business and innovation centre, a cyber security transparency centre, and overall, almost 750 employees (Negro, 2024).

⁵² By 2021, Huawei ranked fifth among tech companies lobbying EU institutions, with annual expenditures reaching €3 million, thus highlighting the extent of its political engagement (Bank, M., Duffy, F., Leyendecker, V., Silva, M., (2021) "The lobby network: Big Tech's web of influence in the EU", *Corporate Europe Observatory*, August 2021. Available at: <https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/The%20lobby%20network%20-%20Big%20Tech%27s%20web%20of%20influence%20in%20the%20EU.pdf>).

sponsorship of sporting events, and support for talent competitions, aimed at building trust and fostering goodwill among both public authorities and the general population (Negro, 2024).

Despite Huawei's efforts to normalise and legitimise its presence, in 2019, the COPASIR released a report explicitly warning against the involvement of Huawei and other Chinese tech companies in Italy's critical digital infrastructure (COPASIR, 2019). The Committee launched its telecommunications-security inquiry in the aftermath of a large-scale cyber-attack that compromised the Italian public administration's certified-mail system, affecting some 3,500 domains and nearly 500,000 users (Bechis, 2019). The COPASIR thus summoned various Italian stakeholders for testimony, including Italian intelligence agencies, telecom operators, and firms deemed of strategic national interests, such as ENI and Leonardo S.p.A. The 2019 report concluded that, beyond raising security standards for the implementation of next-generation infrastructure, it would have been prudent to evaluate the potential exclusion of certain foreign firms from participating in the provision of 5G network technology. In this context, the Committee deemed the concerns surrounding the involvement of Chinese companies in the installation, configuration, and maintenance of 5G infrastructure to be largely justified (Bechis, 2019).

Despite Huawei's repeated reassurances about its independence and commitment to transparency, the COPASIR explicitly highlighted the systemic risks posed by Beijing's domestic legal framework, which blurred the boundaries between private enterprise and state interests (COPASIR, 2019). In particular, the 2017 National Intelligence Law required all citizens and organisations to cooperate with state security and intelligence agencies upon request. Similarly, the Cybersecurity Law compelled network operators to support law enforcement and intelligence corporations in safeguarding national security and strategic interests. Together, these legislative instruments cast serious doubts on the reliability of Chinese technology providers, thus making their involvement in the development of critical digital infrastructure a matter of strategic concern for national security (Bechis, 2019).

Against this backdrop, in March 2020, the COPASIR called on the Office of then PM Conte to adopt more explicit regulatory measures and develop a strategic framework to safeguard the deployment of 5G networks in Italy (Ghiretti, 2020). A few months after, as several EU Member States began taking a stance in the broader 5G debate, Italy's largest telecommunications operators, Telecom Italia (TIM), announced its decision to exclude Huawei from a public tender for the rollout of its 5G networks⁵³. While not officially framed as a security measure, the decision was

⁵³ TIM's announcement on July 9th, 2020, was preceded by the advocacy initiative of multiple US delegations in Europe aimed at the exclusion of Huawei from national 5G infrastructures due to security concerns.

justified according to the logic of diversification of suppliers, which was one of the EU's recommendations for Member States. On August 7th, the Italian government enacted a decree aimed at enhancing the security of the country's 5G rollout. The decree introduced regulations designed to improve government oversight of the location and modifications of 5G apparatuses, promote supplier diversification, and impose fines on providers that fail to comply with these rules. In principle, the decree would have permitted Huawei to participate in the development of Italy's 5G networks. However, it also placed telecom operators working with high-risk vendors – like the Chinese company – into a complicated bureaucratic framework, creating confusion about accountability and oversight. In practice, the decree essentially left the decision to private operators (Ghiretti, 2020).

Arguably, the solution adopted by the Italian government in 2020 provided plausible deniability that political considerations did not directly influence the decision (Ghiretti, 2020). Nonetheless, it raised two significant concerns. First, by delegating power to private companies, Rome placed crucial decisions in the hands of commercial entities rather than governmental oversight. Second, the approach focused more on deterrence through fines than on pre-emptive measures to ensure effective security. It has thus been noted that while delegating decisions to private companies could seem like a politically savvy way in the optics of skirting political and geopolitical sensitivities, the decree could have incorporated more binding provisions to better address long-term security challenges (Ghiretti, 2020).

Overall, the debate surrounding Huawei's involvement in Italy's 5G infrastructure and China's broader digital diplomacy illustrates a broader challenge in balancing national security concerns with economic interests and political sensitivities. By allowing private companies to make the final decision on 5G development, Italy has created an intricate regulatory framework that might be insufficient in addressing the broader risks associated with Chinese digital diplomacy. In fact, while Italy has taken some steps towards securing its digital infrastructure, also by activating the Golden Power mechanism, the reliance on fines and the lack of more stringent measures still leaves Italy vulnerable to potential geopolitical manipulation.

It could be argued that Huawei exemplifies the soft power approach in the way Chinese companies have marketed themselves as contributors to Italy's economic development, using tools like public diplomacy, media campaigns, and sponsorships of local programmes. On the other hand, for some Beijing's attempts to control critical infrastructure in Italy would embody a more sharp power dimension. In fact, as Italy navigates the challenges posed by Huawei's participation in 5G, the involvement of the Chinese company in Italian digital assets would not just be a matter of genuine

economic cooperation but also a geopolitical manoeuvre, as it encapsulates the potential for the Chinese party-state to exert control over technological systems in Italy, eventually influencing political decisions. This is why the COPASIR has strongly emphasised that the Italian government should adopt a more comprehensive and anticipatory approach to digital security. According to the Committee, the government must assess, in light of the provisions established by the decree-law 105/2019, the necessity of limiting risks to the country's network infrastructure, including potential actions against operators whose direct or indirect links with foreign governments are evident (COPASIR, 2019). In fact, entrusting the development of next-generation networks to such actors could jeopardise sensitive data and information pertaining to Italian citizens, institutions, and companies, ultimately compromising the country's national security and integrity.

5.4 The role of Chinese communities and diaspora associations in Italy

The role of Chinese communities and diaspora associations deserves attention in the assessment of the broader framework of China's public diplomacy efforts in Italy. Far from being passive recipients of state narratives, diaspora communities – and particularly their representative associations – can serve as informal yet strategic extensions of Beijing's public diplomatic projection abroad (Repnikova, 2022). Indeed, the strategy of enhancing China's global image and international standing by emphasising its cultural heritage and traditional values has been repeatedly affirmed in official discourse. This emphasis was notably reiterated during the 18th CCP National Congress in October 2012 and again in August 2013 at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work. On that occasion, President Xi Jinping underscored the imperative for China to assert its discursive sovereignty regarding the way in which the country is represented and narrated abroad (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025).

In the context of the government's diaspora policies, which have traditionally focused on supporting and actively promoting China's modernisation, national unity, and international relations, there has been a growing emphasis in recent years on the importance of overseas Chinese as “public diplomats” (*gong-gong waijiao*) (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). These individuals are seen as key agents capable of publicly communicating, in a visible and potentially effective manner, the image that Beijing seeks to project to the world. By doing so, they contribute to the development of international relations between the homeland and the countries in which they reside. Also in the Italian context, Chinese community networks have at times acted as cultural mediators and promoters of bilateral goodwill, while simultaneously being mobilised – directly or indirectly – to support narratives aligned with the CCP's official positions. This dual role underscores the importance of examining how diaspora engagement intersects with foreign policy objectives,

particularly in countries like Italy, where economic ties and political sensitivities with China are complex and evolving.

The presence of Chinese overseas communities in Italy is rooted in the broader historical patterns of Chinese migration. Despite the longstanding importance attributed to the overseas Chinese in the broader process of nation-building, the relationship between the PRC and the diaspora proved problematic from the very outset (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). Many members of the Chinese diaspora were either never citizens of the PRC – having migrated prior to its founding in 1949 – or retained citizenship under the ROC, based in Taiwan. In the early decades of the Cold War, shaped by the logic of bipolar confrontation and the so-called “domino theory” of communist expansion, the PRC came to view Taipei as the more effective actor in exercising influence over overseas Chinese communities. This perception was pushed to an extreme during the harshest and most ideologically radical campaigns of the Maoist era, when families with relatives abroad were often subjected to suspicion, persecution, and in many cases, outright violence.

A significant turning point occurred with the formal recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate representative of China at the UN in 1971, followed by Deng’s reforms in the late 1970s. These developments, thus, marked the beginning of a new, more pragmatic phase in the PRC’s approach to the diaspora: under this revised policy, Beijing began to actively court overseas Chinese communities by offering privileges, incentives, and symbolic recognition to those considered “patriotic overseas Chinese” (*aiguo Huaqiao*). Central to this strategy was the instrumentalisation of nationalist sentiment – often articulated through emotional appeals to the “ancestral homeland” (*zuguo*) and the pursuit of “root-seeking” (*xungen*) journeys – as a means of strengthening ideological and affective bonds with the diaspora (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). Therefore, the reform era represented a major turning point in the PRC’s relationship with its overseas community. Over the course of the three decades in which China emerged as a leading global economic and political power, its influence over the diaspora expanded in parallel. A key development during this period was the rise of a new wave of emigration, primarily from historically significant migration hubs in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). This new migratory flow gradually came to overshadow earlier waves of mass emigration, not only in terms of visibility but also in social influence and prestige within host societies⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ Significantly the imagery surrounding Chinese emigration shifted during this period: the central figure moved from the diasporic Chinese who identified primarily with the “China outside of China” as their key point of social, political, and cultural reference, to the citizens of the PRC residing abroad.

This transformation was further mirrored in the growing vitality of Chinese associational life abroad. Chinese diaspora associations – once largely rooted in older, localised networks – began to reflect the changing demographics, interests, and transnational connections of this new generation of migrants (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). Significantly, members of the numerous associations formed by emigrants from the PRC were often successful entrepreneurs whose economic and political trajectories were closely tied to the pursuit of social recognition and development opportunities within China. As a result, these associations have consistently maintained strong ties both with PRC diplomatic representations in their respective host countries and with Chinese governmental institutions overseeing “overseas Chinese affairs” (*quiaowu*) – namely, the State Council’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.

In the new millennium, and especially after the ascent of Xi Jinping, the CCP placed renewed emphasis on the role of overseas Chinese communities, shifting its focus toward encouraging their successful integration and active participation in the public and political life of their host countries, as well as assuming leadership roles within their respective diaspora communities (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). These efforts – while strongly tied to the promotion of Chinese identity and national belonging – were underpinned by the strategic rationale that overseas Chinese could contribute to China’s modernisation and development not only through remittances and transnational networks, but also by leveraging their social mobility and cultural or political visibility within societies that were increasingly seen as potential strategic partners in the globalisation of Beijing’s economy. In this sense, overseas Chinese were imagined as agents of influence and bridges between China and the world, capable of shaping positive perceptions of the PRC while fostering mutually beneficial connections between local communities and the Chinese party-state through a proactive *diaspora engagement* (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025).

Italy, unlike other European countries with a longer history of Chinese migration, has from the outset been a primary destination for migrants originating from mainland China, particularly from the southern part of Zhejiang province (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017)⁵⁵. Although it was not among the first European nations to experience this migratory phenomenon, Italy today hosts the largest population of citizens from the PRC in Europe. Most of these migrants continue to trace their origins to the same districts from which their ancestors emigrated four generations earlier.

⁵⁵ In recent years, the predominant migratory flow from Zhejiang has been joined by smaller inflows from other regions of China, including Fujian, the northeastern provinces – particularly Liaoning – and Shandong. Nonetheless, these groups remain a minority within the broader Chinese population in Italy. As of 2017, family reunification continued to represent a significant component of migration dynamics, and a notable increase in the number of Chinese university students enrolled in Italian institutions had also been recorded.

Moreover, their networks remain closely tied to the ancestral clans that shaped the initial waves of migration at the beginning of the 20th century, thus maintaining a strong continuity in both regional and kinship-based affiliations within the Chinese community in Italy. This strong regional and kinship continuity helped shape the patterns of integration of Chinese migrants into Italian society (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017). Over time, Chinese emigrants skilfully embedded themselves into the Italian economic and social fabric, initially through the restaurant and catering sector, which became a visible and accessible entry point. This was soon complemented by their growing presence in the manufacturing sectors, particularly in leather, synthetic leather, and textiles. These activities flourished not only in metropolitan areas such as Milan, but also in key industrial textile districts across the country, including Carpi, Prato, and Rovigo. Therefore, the prevailing model of economic integration among Chinese migrants in Italy is primarily oriented toward the reinvestment of earnings into entrepreneurial activities. The capital generated by Chinese-owned businesses through their labour in Italy is, for the most part, reinvested domestically – most notably in the establishment of new enterprises managed by members of the same family (Brigadoi Cologna, 2021).

The Chinese population in Italy is composed predominantly of families and constitutes a stable component of the country's demographic landscape⁵⁶. While these communities are largely composed of first-generation (1G) immigrants born and raised in China, a younger cohort of Italy-born or early-arrival Chinese (the second-generation immigrants – 2G) are progressively emerging as crucial social actors in the Italian scenario (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017). From a sociological and cultural perspective, new generations – often of mixed (*hunxue*) Sino-Italian heritage – face the complex task of negotiating multifaceted cultural identities. Their experience is further complicated by increasingly nationalist and essentialist discourses surrounding both “Chineseness” and “Italianness” in the public sphere of both their home and host countries. As a result, identity formation within the Chinese population in Italy is far from homogeneous. Individuals interpret and express their sense of belonging and subjectivity in diverse ways, shaped by generational, linguistic, and experiential factors. Notably, civil society organisations – both those led by 1G and those run by 2G Chinese migrants – are among the most active in advocating for citizenship reform and broader civic inclusion (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017). These groups represent a critical force in promoting a more plural and inclusive understanding of Italian identity

⁵⁶ The overall demographic impact of the Chinese community in Italy is expected to grow over time, not primarily due to new waves of migration, but rather because Chinese residents in Italy tend to enter the workforce, marry, and have children earlier than the national average.

– one that reflects the historical and ongoing contributions of Chinese communities to contemporary Italy.

It is worth highlighting that diaspora associations reflect both generational divides and differing relationships with the country of origin. Broadly speaking, 1G Chinese associations tend to prioritise business interests and cultural preservation, often in a conservative and traditionalist way. Historically, 1G Chinese associations in Italy have aligned – both by design and by interest – with the positions of the Chinese government. These organisations were primarily established to maintain contact with Chinese institutions and representations in the host country and often engaged almost exclusively with official actors from the PRC (Brigadoi Cologna, 2021). However, in the past decade, a few associations have emerged, aiming to give political and social expression to the voices of second-generation Chinese in Italy. A prominent example is Associna, the first advocacy organisation formed by 2G individuals, which seeks to promote a new collective subject: that of young people of Chinese descent born or raised in Italy (Associna, 2025). Associna aims to provide this demographic with visibility and opportunities for civic, cultural, and political participation. Its pioneering role has inspired the creation of other social and cultural promotion associations such as the Union of Young Italo-Chinese (UGIC) and served as a model for the Italy-China Entrepreneurs Union (UNIIC), the first business association representing 2G Chinese entrepreneurs⁵⁷.

Second-generation associations distinguish themselves from their first-generation counterparts by their use of Italian as their primary working language and by their explicit commitment to fostering active citizenship among Chinese residents in Italy. These dynamic organisational spaces, which seek to build increasingly diversified relationships both with China and within Italian society, represent natural interlocutors for the promotion of stronger Italy-China relations (Brigadoi Cologna, 2021). These associations initially emerged primarily as actors capable of negotiating with Italian institutions on a more equal footing, particularly in linguistic and cultural terms. They are among the most prominent recipients of the renewed attention that Beijing has devoted to the overseas Chinese diaspora.

On a broader scale, Chinese overseas communities have played a crucial role in the transnational strategies of the Chinese party-state. It is not a coincidence that, in March 2018, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council was formally absorbed into the United Front Work

⁵⁷ In recent years, the role of UNIIC within the broader landscape of Chinese diaspora associations has expanded. It has received formal recognition from Chinese consular authorities, and its leadership has been involved in numerous high-profile initiatives aimed at fostering closer ties with Chinese institutions responsible for overseas Chinese affairs.

Department of the CCP's Central Committee (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). This institutional reform aimed to consolidate the organisational, cultural, and political work related to the Chinese diaspora under the direct control of the CCP's central leadership. The restructuring raised concerns internationally regarding the ideological and political mechanisms through which the CCP seeks to engage with overseas communities, particularly given the United Front's strategic function in shaping the diaspora's social and political identity in alignment with the ideological framework of the China Dream. Significantly, therefore, the official rhetoric has undergone a marked shift, moving away from a previously ambiguous ideological stance toward the diaspora, to a narrative that portrays overseas communities as "essentially Chinese" by virtue of their genetic heritage and ancestral lineage (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). This discursive transformation draws heavily on the patriotic theme of the Great National Rejuvenation, framing the diaspora as an integral part of the broader Chinese nation regardless of territorial or civic affiliation.

Against this backdrop, also the perception and role of the Chinese diaspora in Italy experienced a turning point with the signing of the BRI MoU in 2019. In fact, amidst the growing disillusionment with a China increasingly distrustful of the West, fuelled by the debate surrounding Chinese sharp power, the optimism of the engagement era gradually diminished, giving way to concerns about growing interference and manipulation by Beijing in Italy (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025). This shift has thus raised the pressing issue of how to appropriately navigate the transition from a narrative framework centred on constructive engagement with a rising power – one with which Italy has maintained generally positive relations – to a new paradigm marked by greater caution and strategic circumspection in dealing with a geopolitical rival and ideological adversary. It has been observed that, in the Italian context, the national security apparatus' declared sensitivity to potential Chinese interferences in the country's political, social, economic, and academic spheres partially explains the atmosphere of suspicion surrounding certain economic and cultural exchange initiatives⁵⁸. However, when it comes to the Chinese diaspora in Italy, media narratives tend to adopt an alarmist tone *tout court*, often lacking nuance and failing to distinguish between legitimate cultural engagement and alleged political influence (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025).

These concerns have become particularly pronounced in recent years with the emergence of allegations surrounding so-called "Chinapol", a term used in media and policy circles to describe suspected informal policing and surveillance activities carried out by Chinese authorities or actors

⁵⁸ The most-frequently cited examples include the stark dissonance found in media portrayals of initiatives such as the BRI or the CIs. These cases typically follow a recurring pattern: an initial phase of enthusiasm focused on the opportunities such initiatives appear to offer is soon replaced by a phase of disillusionment – if not outright paranoia – often driven by growing geopolitical concerns and fears of foreign interference.

linked to the Chinese party-state within overseas Chinese communities (Lupis, 2023). Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, signs of growing cooperation between Italian and Chinese law enforcement agencies were already raising eyebrows. In 2018, the Italian government approved so-called “joint patrols” between Chinese and Italian police forces as part of an initiative by the Italian Ministry of the Interior aimed at ensuring public safety and improving communication with Chinese tourists (Ministero dell’Interno, 2018)⁵⁹. In 2019, the first Conte government announced the extension of the joint patrol initiative to the cities of Rome, Padua, Milan, and Turin, stating that Chinese police officers would accompany Italian security forces in territorial surveillance activities aimed at safeguarding public safety, while also facilitating communication with Chinese tourists – both in their interactions with local authorities and in the event of emergencies (Ministero dell’Interno, 2019).

Although the programme was suspended due to the pandemic, the issue of joint patrols between Italian law enforcement and Chinese police has since resurfaced in both the media and Italian parliamentary debate. In February 2022, Beijing launched the “Fuzhou Police and Overseas Chinese Affairs Overseas Service Station” initiative – a programme that envisions the establishment of fully operational “virtual” police stations abroad, where Chinese citizens can renew their driver’s licenses and receive consular assistance, according to Chinese authorities (Lupis, 2023). This initiative has however drawn criticism in the Italian press, particularly through articles by journalist Giulia Pompili in *Il Foglio* (Pompili, 2022a; Pompili, 2022b). Her coverage was among the first in Italy to respond to a report published in 2022 by the Spanish NGO Safeguard Defenders, which examined the transnational operational capacity of Chinese public security authorities. These would be “service centres for overseas Chinese” that act as liaison points between the public security bureaus in the home districts of Chinese citizens residing in Italy. Their primary function is to assist with bureaucratic procedures related to emigration, civil registration, and the issuance of various certificates – areas in which the public security bureau typically serves as the main administrative counterpart within the PRC. However, among the publicly stated function of these centres is also the promotion and facilitation of police-related activities abroad (Brigadoi Cologna, 2025).

Despite reports and allegations by several NGOs – such as those concerning the case of Mihiriban – the issue of Chinese police stations in Italy has not prompted any significant response from the

⁵⁹ That same year, a bilateral extradition treaty between Italy and China – originally ratified by the Italian Parliament in 2015 – officially entered into force. Notably, by extension of the “One China” principle, the treaty also applies to Taiwan.

Italian authorities⁶⁰. Unlike in other European countries, there have been no public statements, internal investigations, or official inquiries (Lupis, 2023). Nevertheless, some members of opposition parties continue to raise concerns about alleged Chinese espionage activities in Italy. These concerns have been echoed in various journalistic investigations, such as an inquiry by the tv programme *Report*, which exposed the presence of Chinese-made security cameras installed at RAI headquarters. These devices, through their proprietary software, were allegedly transmitting sensitive data to servers based in China (Lupis, 2023). These episodes have contributed to a climate of suspicion surrounding the Chinese presence in Italy, often conflating diaspora communities with the actions of the Chinese state. In the absence of clear institutional responses, public discourse remains polarised – oscillating between legitimate security concerns and the risk of fuelling xenophobic narratives.

Building on the discussion of the Chinese diaspora in Beijing's public diplomacy strategy in Italy, valuable insights emerged during an interview with Marco Wong, honorary president of Associna and a prominent voice in Italy's Sino-Italian civic landscape⁶¹. Wong highlighted in particular the activism of second-generation Chinese during the Covid pandemic, portraying them as key agents in promoting a positive image of China and fostering constructive dialogue between communities. During the early phase of the health crisis, 2G Chinese associations in Italy – Associna in the first place – played a prominent role in bridging Chinese aid efforts with local Italian communities, particularly by facilitating the distribution of medical supplies and masks at a time when Italy faced acute shortages. These initiatives were widely perceived as constructive and garnered positive attention. Wong was keen on specifying that, unlike 1G organisation, which tend to avoid engagement with the Italian media also due to linguistic and cultural barriers, 2G representatives – often native Italian speakers – were able to actively participate in public discourse, not necessarily to advocate a pro-China stance, but to support broader mutual understanding, including the experiences of Italians living in China.

As Wong recounted, the pandemic unfolded in multiple phases. In the initial stage, when fears of contagion were high, there was suspicion toward the Chinese community, particularly in areas like Prato – of which Wong was a municipal councillor. However, this sentiment shifted dramatically

⁶⁰ The case of Mihriban Kader concerned a Uyghur woman who fled to Italy in 2016 to escape persecution by Chinese authorities for violating the one-child policy. Mihriban and her husband chose Italy as a destination in the hope of remaining under the radar, trusting in the protections offered by the Italian legal system. They left their four underage children behind in Xinjiang, relying on the family reunification provisions enshrined in Italian law. However, Chinese authorities reportedly prevented the reunification by detaining the children in a re-education camp. The Italian institutions, for their part, made no apparent diplomatic effort to facilitate the family's reunification, nor did they issue any public comment on the matter (Lupis, 2023).

⁶¹ The author has interviewed Marco Wong on April 18th, 2025.

after the first officially recognised case of Covid was identified in Codogno rather than in a Chinese-dense area. The responsible behaviour of the Chinese community – self-imposed lockdowns, voluntary contact tracing, and strict adherence to public health guidelines – was widely praised and contrasted with broader social anxieties. Subsequent phases, however, were marked by more complex dynamics. As China maintained strict lockdown policies, disruptions in global trade flows and vaccine access concerns – such as uncertainty over whether undocumented Chinese residents could receive the vaccine – reintroduced elements of tensions and uncertainty. Therefore, Wong also noted that while early communities’ initiatives helped improve public perception, the pandemic ultimately contributed to a deterioration in the image of China abroad. Beijing’s prolonged border closures and strict containment measures led, in fact, to a kind of international self-isolation that hindered not only diplomatic engagement but also the everyday people-to-people exchanges that often sustain mutual understanding. In the Italian context, this vacuum was filled by media narratives that, according to Wong, frequently portrayed China in a distorted or overly negative light – whether due to lack of knowledge, cultural bias, or broader geopolitical agendas. In the absence of alternative perspectives – particularly from individuals with direct experience of life in China – such narratives risk becoming dominant and unchallenged, reinforcing an increasingly polarised image of China in the Italian public discourse.

When asked more specifically about the role of the Chinese diaspora within the broader ‘telling-China’s-story’ framework, Wong offered a critical reflection on the widespread lack of awareness – both among Italians and within the Chinese community itself – regarding the history and the dynamics of Chinese migration. He observed that migration has been often perceived by Chinese nationals as a temporary condition, which has sometimes discouraged long-term investment in local language acquisition and civic engagement. As a result, many members of the Sino community have remained socially and culturally insular. This limited mutual understanding contributes to the persistence of stereotypes and misperceptions. Wong pointed out that negative attention toward the diaspora – exemplified by controversies such as the abovementioned “Chinapol” and the growing suspicion surrounding CIs – often stems from a broader climate of distrust, partially fuelled by foreign media reports and political narratives, sometimes imported uncritically into the Italian context. While he acknowledged that Italy has adopted a relatively softer stance toward China compared to countries like the US or Australia, he also noted the paradox in perceiving cultural diplomacy initiatives as inherently threatening. In his view, the fear that a country may exercise soft power reflects a deeper, prejudicial bias. At the same time, Wong conceded that even within China, there is an ongoing discussion about the need to rethink and reform the role and structure of CIs in response to these evolving global perceptions.

In reflecting on how China could more effectively enhance its soft power in Italy, Wong proposed a multifaceted set of recommendations that span legal reform, cultural strategy, and diaspora engagement. He emphasised the structural limitations imposed by current nationality laws – both Italian and Chinese. For him, the lack of automatic citizenship acquisition for those born or raised in Italy significantly hampers political inclusion, while the prohibition of dual citizenship under Chinese law discourages political participation. This, Wong argued, severely limits the diaspora’s capacity to exert meaningful influence in host societies, despite their notable economic presence. The absence of Chinese-Italian political representatives at higher institutional levels reflects this democratic exclusion, curtailing the diaspora’s potential as a vehicle of soft power.

Wong also stressed the need to revise or find viable alternatives to current cultural diplomacy platforms, such as CIs, given the criticisms around their presence in Italy and in the West more generally. In their place, he suggested policies that promote people-to-people exchanges – for example, visa-free travel initiatives that would allow Italian citizens to visit China for short stays. Facilitating such exchanges, he argued, would foster mutual understanding and counteract the distorted or limited representations of China prevalent in Italian media and public discourse.

He further noted that the role of first-generation diaspora associations remains largely instrumental from the perspective of Chinese diplomatic missions in Italy. In fact, these associations are often seen primarily as instruments for organising symbolic displays of support – such as the choreographed welcome for President Xi’s 2019 state visit to Italy – rather than as strategic partners in dialogue or public diplomacy. Wong thus called for a more reciprocal approach, in which these communities are not treated merely as loyal supporters but as potential “antennas” for gauging local sentiment and informing more nuanced engagement strategies.

Finally, Wong reflected on the multiple channels through which soft power is expressed, noting a stark contrast in familiarity: indeed, while most Italians believe they know the US through media, entertainment, and cultural exports – despite many never having visited the country – most would struggle to name even three Chinese cities. This discrepancy, he argued, is partly rooted in structural limitations on the Chinese side. Chinese cultural products are often designed primarily for the domestic market, which, due to its sheer size, is considered sufficient for commercial success. Moreover, creative constraints imposed by censorship – far more stringent in China than in countries like Italy – further limit the global appeal of such content, rendering it less competitive than Hollywood productions, for instance, even though recent trends suggest gradual change. Another challenge lies in language: Mandarin is a linguistically isolating language, lacking the affinities that facilitate learning across linguistic families. This would make it particularly difficult

for Chinese speakers to learn foreign languages and, conversely, for non-Chinese speakers to access Chinese culture – thus constituting an additional barrier to soft power projection.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that the Italian case illustrates the inherent tensions in the Red Dragon's public diplomacy strategy, particularly when diaspora engagement intersects with securitarian narratives and media suspicion. While Beijing continues to rely on 1G associations as vehicles of soft power, the growing activism of 2G Chinese Italians reveals the potential for more nuanced, locally rooted forms of cultural diplomacy. Yet, the effectiveness of these efforts is constrained by structural limitations – ranging from restrictive citizenship laws to weak political representation – and by the broader credibility gap that still affects China's international image. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from symbolic performances of loyalty to genuine intercultural dialogue, where diaspora communities are not merely instruments of influence but active agents of mutual understanding.

Final considerations

The analysis conducted throughout this study has sought to unpack the complex and evolving nature of China's public diplomacy strategies in Italy, situating them within the broader framework of Beijing's international rise and its quest for discursive power. Against this backdrop, China's approach reveals a calculated blend of soft and sharp power, reframed through the lens of "Chinese Characteristics". This dual strategy is not only instrumental but deeply ideological, rooted in a vision of global engagement that seeks to assert China's normative legitimacy and China's *voice* while preserving the central and undiscussed role of the CCP.

A crucial dimension that has emerged from this study and from an interview with Ambassador Maria Assunta Accili is the centrality of cultural diversity and civilisational self-perception in understanding the logic underpinning China's global communicative strategies⁶². The Chinese party-state's approach to public diplomacy is not a mere projection of foreign policy interests, but a reflection of deeply rooted cultural models and a longstanding effort to craft a global image that aligns with its internal political objectives and historical consciousness. This vision draws on three interrelated modalities: official communication; strategic use of new technologies for ideological conditioning; and the promotion of China's distinct social, historical, and political identity – rigorously with Chinese Characteristics. Ambassador Accili argued that it is at the heart of this model that lies a convergence between internal and external dimensions of governance and influence. Public diplomacy, therefore, becomes both a tool of international legitimation and a mechanism to safeguard internal stability by shaping perceptions abroad without compromising the Party's monopoly on truth and authority at home.

Hence, China has transitioned from revolutionary isolation to assertive global presence. Yet, even as it seeks to 'approach the world and make the world approach China', the underlying challenge is still the management of the tension between openness and control, between projecting influence and resisting perceived cultural contamination – a perceived threat not only to administrative and public order, but more profoundly to the psychological and ideological hold of the CCP on individual consciousness. This is motivated by the fact that within the framework of the Chinese political system, the individual holds limited intrinsic value: rather, it is the collective – the nation, the society, and above all, the Party – that assumes primacy. As such, personal interests are often

⁶² The author interviewed Ambassador Accili on May 2nd, 2025. Since March 27th, 1986, Ambassador Maria Assunta Accili served as First Secretary at the Embassy of Italy in Beijing from 1986 to 1991, where she assumed the role of Head of the Chancellery. On May 1st, 1990, she was promoted to Counsellor of Legation. Subsequently, she held the post of Representative of the Italian Economic, Trade and Cultural Office in Taipei from 2003 to 2007. She also worked as the Secretary General of Italy at the Shanghai Expo 2010. She is currently the President of the Circolo degli Esteri.

expected to yield to the imperatives of national development and social harmony. Loyalty to the CCP, whose legitimacy is framed around strategic foresight, policy effectiveness, and operational success, is cultivated as a civic virtue. This comes, however, at a cost that from a liberal-democratic perspective appears dramatic: the persistent curtailment of individual freedoms, especially in the political and civil spheres, even as economic liberties have been selectively expanded.

Therefore, China's extraordinary transformation has been accompanied by a parallel narrative emphasising the Chinese people's capacity for sacrifice. Patriotic sentiment, while fostered through state propaganda and communication strategies – like the appeal to the Great Rejuvenation of China – is also often expressed in spontaneous, collective acts, which illustrate the extent to which the Chinese public has been mobilised to embody and support the symbolic projection of national power⁶³. In this context, adherence to the political vision of the current leadership is closely linked to the China Dream, that is, a narrative centred on overcoming the historical humiliation and reclaiming China's rightful place on the global stage, justified precisely by its cultural depth, civilisational continuity, and geopolitical destiny. Then, to understand how China communicates and tells its story, it is essential to recognise not only the linguistic and metalinguistic aspects, but also the philosophical underpinnings that inform its strategic narratives – underpinnings that diverge significantly from Western paradigms of public diplomacy and international engagement.

Ambassador Accili explained that at the centre of China's external communication lies a fundamental objective: the reconciliation of ideas. When Beijing addresses international audiences, its strategic aim is to steer global perception toward alignment with its own worldview – a way of preserving both stability and continuity with its historical narrative. In this context, the revival of Maoist principles would not be mere ideological nostalgia, but rather a tool to reinforce the notion that the general public remains central to national power dynamics. Domestically, such references are essential for the legitimisation of an increasingly assertive propaganda apparatus, framed as necessary for strengthening regime authority and countering the psychological warfare made more complex by the digital age. Social media, tightly controlled by the CCP within China and instrumentalised abroad through state-aligned actors, serve as megaphones to amplify a narrative that seeks to position Beijing as the answer to the uncertainties generated by ideological confrontation with the West.

⁶³ In her interview, Ambassador Accili recalled the example of the 2010 Shanghai Expo, during which thousands of residents and small businesses in Pudong relocated voluntarily to make way for the event. Accili critically highlighted that this outcome had been enabled by a state-led campaign that framed participation as a civic contribution to Beijing's global rise.

In the Chinese context, therefore, communication and storytelling are not merely accessories to its public diplomacy: they are mechanisms of political legitimation. Within this framework, culture has been revalorised and upheld as a vehicle of national power. It is not simply celebrated but rather instrumentalised to assert influence and instil pride within Chinese communities worldwide. The cornerstone of this external communication strategy is the concept of “mutual learning among civilisations”, framed as the foundation of a Common Shared Future for Mankind. Therefore, cultural diversity is not a barrier but a path toward convergence – one that, under Chinese leadership, begins in Asia and gradually encompasses all of humanity. According to Ambassador Accili, there is a growing idea, actively promoted by Beijing, that China is embracing the world. From a Chinese perspective, indeed, there would be a perception – at times implicit, at times explicit – that the world is gradually becoming more “Chinese”. This outlook is particularly evident in how China approaches Asia, which is envisioned as China’s own backyard, a space where it seeks to reaffirm cultural primacy. Within this framework, Chinese public diplomacy tends to elevate Chinese culture as the foundational imprint of other regional cultures – yet at the risk of overlooking the complex ethnic, religious, and historical dynamics that define Asia’s internal diversity⁶⁴.

Drawing a comprehensive assessment of the current scenario in Italy, over the decades the PRC has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to make strategic use of international development aid and, more generally, of the proactive efforts at bilateral engagement promoted by the Italian side. Italy, in fact, has invested substantial resources in the form of technology transfers, educational cooperation, development assistance, concessional loans, and economic support. Far from being passive beneficiaries, Chinese authorities skilfully managed to integrate these resources into their broader national development strategies with long-term effectiveness. Significantly, this process was accompanied by a gradual ideological transformation that helped recalibrate China’s international posture. This has allowed Italy to be perceived in China as fertile ground for dialogue – both at the governmental level and within civil society – offering channels for engagement and cultural cooperation. At the same time, Italy has sought to maintain the integrity of its liberal-democratic nature, by hosting critical voices against the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime, showcasing a pluralism and a freedom of expression that have not gone unnoticed in Beijing. A key example of this dual dynamic is Italy’s controversial decision to join the BRI: while politically immature in its execution and ultimately offering no tangible benefits to Italy, this move was highly

⁶⁴ This logic has also been clearly articulated in the Global Civilisation Initiative, where Beijing strives to position its civilisational heritage not only as a source of pride but as a universal framework through which its rise should be understood and accepted in order to reinforce the legitimacy of China’s global aspirations.

advantageous for Beijing, especially at a time when international criticism over human right abuses and concerns about its sharp power rise, had led to growing diplomatic isolation of the Red Dragon.

Notwithstanding the missteps, Italy has since demonstrated a pragmatic ability to recalibrate its stance, managing to disengage from the BRI's more symbolic commitments while maintaining a strategic partnership with China. It could be argued that this balancing act reflects Rome's broader role in international affairs – one that acknowledges the necessity of multilateral cooperation on global challenges that cannot be tackled unilaterally, including climate change, social inequalities, global health, and security. Moreover, the long-standing cultural ties between Italy and China have always been viewed in Beijing not only as a legacy of past exchange but also as a potential asset for the future. In particular, the richness and adaptability of Italy's cultural experience are seen as potentially beneficial to the development and internationalisation of the Chinese cultural and communicative environment. As mentioned above, Italian historical figures – Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci in the first place – occupy a special place in China's civilisational narrative, not simply because they engaged with China, but because they 'became Chinese' in the process, contributing constructively to Chinese intellectual and scientific development (Marinelli, 2010)⁶⁵. This historical precedent continues to shape Beijing's perception of Italy – not as a geopolitical rival or economic competitor but rather as a cultural interlocutor of stature. In the logic of China's contemporary cultural diplomacy, therefore, Sino-Italian relations would be premised on mutual respect. Under this perspective, Italy would be seen as a legitimate partner capable of understanding and responding to the civilisational depth that China seeks to project on the global stage.

Overall, in the Italian case, the distinction between soft and sharp power proves particularly difficult to draw with precision. In fact, while China's cultural diplomacy initiatives, media outreach, and educational exchanges might still be framed as soft power tools aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture, they often operate in ways that suggest more strategic if not straightforwardly opaque intentions. Rather, this analysis suggests the emergence of a spectrum of influence deeply embedded in asymmetrical partnerships, symbolic gestures, and a selective appropriation of historical-cultural ties. It can thus be argued that this ambiguity reflects the broader challenge of analysing Chinese public diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics, a hybrid model of public diplomacy where attraction, persuasion, and curiosity are often blended with

⁶⁵ Notably, in the Millennium Monument in Tiananmen Square (Beijing) – a space dedicated to commemorating the great contributors to Chinese history – Ricci and Polo are two of the only foreign figures honoured. Significantly, they were not merely transmitters of Western knowledge, but figures who respected and internalised Chinese modes of communication, becoming in many ways representatives of the Ming dynasty to both Asia and Europe.

assertiveness, competition, pressure, opacity and manipulation. In Italy, this convergence is further complicated by an unstable domestic political landscape that has at times facilitated, rather than scrutinised, such dynamics – leaving open the question of whether China’s engagement should be understood as benign cultural exchange, calculated strategic positioning, or a combination of both.

From an institutional and operative point of view, over the past several years, Italy has made relatively few efforts to establish dedicated frameworks for managing relations with China. One prominent example is the Technical Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation with China – launched in 2014 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – tasked with multiple objectives, including enhancing understanding of China’s Science & Technology (S&T) system, identifying opportunities for bilateral scientific collaboration, and securing funding for joint research initiatives (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). However, the committee did not meet according to a regular schedule and its agenda was entirely determined by contingent matters. This notwithstanding, this experience could provide a model for the establishment of a China Information and Policy Coordination Unit – set up within the Directorate General for Global Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – which could report to both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, inform policy choices, monitor their consistency with EU legal frameworks and coordinate policy implementation (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021). Additionally, the Golden Power mechanism should be reinforced, by improving the notification system of the transactions between the business community and Italian institutions, thus allowing for a more thorough scrutiny. Moreover, given the discretionary nature of the regime – which makes the Golden Power mechanism susceptible to the internal balance of ruling coalitions – it should be made mandatory for the government to set up in advance parameters for its use (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

In the context of safeguarding fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and press freedom, the Italian Communications Authority (AGCOM) should intensify its oversight of private agreements between Italian media organisations and media entities from authoritarian regimes. While such collaborations are legally permissible, research indicates they may inadvertently facilitate the dissemination of fake news or become vehicles for disinformation and misinformation campaigns (Gallelli and Mariani). To address this risk, AGCOM could play a more proactive role by issuing clear guidelines for managing partnerships with foreign state-controlled media, thereby helping to curb the spread of disinformation through mainstream media channels. Moreover, the establishment of a dedicated Technical Unit on Media would foster greater coordination and information-sharing among key stakeholders, including public bodies, NGOs,

and EU institutions. This initiative would support the development of shared best practices in monitoring and countering disinformation (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

Therefore, as also Ambassador Accili recommended, engaging with China requires a posture of respectful assertiveness. Chinese interlocutors tend to appreciate counterparts who express a clear and principled point of view – provided it is articulated within the cultural parameters they value, such as face (*mianzi*), harmony, convergence of perspective, and unity (Messetti, 2022). This thus would call for a profound commitment to knowledge, given that understanding China means studying its history, political culture, and communicative codes. Only through such knowledge can we interpret and respond appropriately to a system that follows logics often distant from our own – and even learn in terms of long-sightedness, resilience, and efficacy, as Professor Masini suggested. In light of the foregoing analysis, the central research question of this study emerges with greater clarity: *To what extent can Chinese public diplomacy strategies in Italy be classified as sharp power efforts? Which are the main fields and actors contributing to the development of these strategies, and how can Italy effectively counter a potential sharp power threat?*

China has become a daily topic of discussion, yet the discourse surrounding it often remains superficial. The evidence gathered indicates that while certain strategies – particularly in the realms of education, media partnerships, and economic-political diplomacy – do exhibit features of sharp power, the boundaries between soft and sharp power remain blurred. Indeed, the convergence of soft and sharp tools and methods underscores the hybrid nature of Chinese public diplomacy, in which elements of attraction and subtle coercion intertwine, thereby complicating any straightforward distinction between legitimate influence and strategic interference.

Media narratives are frequently shaped by preconceived theses or presented in a partial manner, ultimately serving to reassure existing – often negative – opinions rather than fostering a deeper understanding of the many dimensions involved in engaging with such a complex and distant reality (Messetti, 2022). The interpretative lenses through which Beijing is viewed are inevitably coloured by one's own cultural background; however, relying exclusively on these frameworks risks reducing China to a binary caricature – a Dragon painted in black or white, as either an absolute threat or the epitome of efficiency. Rather than conceiving of cultural difference in essentialist terms – as fixed and oppositional – it is more productive to approach it through the notion of “distance” or “discrepancy”, which reveals potential for intellectual and relational fecundity. In this sense, the encounter between two such distinct worlds as China and Italy should not be seen as a call to abandon one's identity or values. Instead, it offers an opportunity to suspend

the instinctive tendency to judge ‘the Other’ through Western categories, and to open a space for meaningful and reciprocal dialogue.

Hence, respecting the Chinese perspective is necessary, but not sufficient: the values at the basis of the liberal-democratic system – particularly those concerning human rights, democratic accountability, and the role of the individual – cannot be traded off. Dialogue must be sincere and transparent, not reduced to propaganda. Yet, for Beijing, propaganda still plays a central role in projecting legitimacy both domestically and internationally and in structuring its public diplomacy strategies. In fact, while China has long sought recognition as a responsible global actor, today its growing assertiveness and logic of competitiveness reveals ambitions that many would describe as hegemonic. Although these ambitions are rarely expressed explicitly, they are increasingly visible in practice. The question remains whether a China-led world order would be more respectful or less intrusive than those historically shaped by other great powers. The answer is far from certain. What is clear, however, is that any meaningful engagement with China must balance openness with critical awareness.

The global discourse on Chinese public diplomacy has long been framed within the binary opposition of soft power and sharp power. This debate has predominantly centred on China itself – the sender of public communication – with limited attention paid to the agency of the recipient. In the case of Italy, analyses have often overlooked or underestimated the country’s responses, implicitly assuming a unidirectional dynamic in which sharp power initiatives inevitably translate into influence over the target. However, the Italian case challenges this assumption, illustrating that the reactions, choices, and institutional frameworks of the receiving country play a decisive role in shaping, mitigating, or even redirecting the impact of Chinese public diplomacy. Rather than being passive recipients, target states like Italy can act as filters and gatekeepers, influencing the effectiveness and reach of Chinese public diplomacy strategies. We must be willing to open channels of bilateral and multilateral cooperation and dialogue, but without relinquishing the values that define us. Respectful awareness – not passive acquiescence – is thus the basis for a mature and sustainable relationship with China.

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