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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni**

viella

A large, faint, light blue decorative mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features intricate geometric and floral patterns.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE ITALIAN EFFORT TO GAIN THE CHINESE MARKET:
RECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORY OF ITALY-CHINA TRADE RELATIONS

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Donatella Strangio, *Italy-China Trade Relations: A Historical Perspective*, Cham: Springer, 2020, 131 pp. (ISBN: 978-3-030-39083-9).

The year 2020 marks an important landmark in relations between Italy and China. It's the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which aligns with the Italy-China Year of Culture and Tourism. An anniversary that comes at a particular moment in Sino-Italian relations, marked by crucial events such as the visit of President Xi Jinping in Rome and Palermo in May 2019. In particular the event that changed the course of relations between Rome and Beijing saw Italy become the first G7 country to officially endorse the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that stipulates the Italian-Chinese partnership for the Economic and Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century. The signing of the Memorandum put Italy in the spotlight and world public opinion analysed Sino-Italian relations. Donatella Strangio *Italy-China Trade Relations: A Historical Perspective* is a comprehensive scholarly account of the political penetration and trade relations that Italy established with China, with particular reference to the period from the second half of the 19th century to the birth of the Fascist empire. It is published at a turning point in Sino-Italian relations, analysing the subject from an economic history and international economics perspective.

The author has used sources of the Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as from other archives such as the Bank of Italy's Historical Archive and the Italian National Library. In particular, the Political Affairs Series Inventory was consulted in the Historical Diplomatic Archives, and the commercial exchanges between Italy and China are reconstructed starting from the various politically-oriented inventories' documents.

Donatella Strangio analyses the economic context of both China and Italy, and the various commercial agreements between Italy and China are exhaustively reconstructed. The nature of archival sources limits the research to the only Italian projection towards China. Several studies have been completed on relations between Italy and China and many of these are based on the same archival sources of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The book *La Memoria della Cina. Fonti archivistiche italiane sulla Storia della Cina*

(The Memory of China. Italian archival sources on the history of China) edited by Alessandro Vagnini and Sung Gyun Cho, accurately describes the contents of the same archive.

Until the early 20th century – Strangio reports – in Italian institutions there were no adequate analyses of the complexity of China and the balance of power that the European powers had initiated. The hope of the then-Minister of Agriculture and Commerce of the Kingdom of Sardinia, Luigi Torelli, convinced that the opening of the Suez Canal would guarantee the access of Italian goods to the Chinese market, is exemplary of this approach.

Given the purely political nature of archival sources, a substantial part of the volume focuses mainly on the administration of the concession of Tientsin. The documents available in the archives for the period from 1919 to 1930 are significantly more ample and the author manages to draw an exhaustive picture of the commercial relations between the two countries. These are based on the sale of arms, establishing national banks, possible mining authorisations, conferences and the reforms of treaties and customs tariffs. All practices describe the colonial approach of foreign powers present in China which was to exploit the territory even further and to increase their influence there.

However, even in the maximum period of Italian projection towards China, the efforts of the institutions seemed not to be sufficient. They failed to set up trade organisations which all other European nations, including small powers, had initiated. According to the author, the essential categories in which to be incisive and make commercial headway in China were: banks, shipping lines and trade organisations. The Italo-Chinese Bank was founded in 1919 and, in the same year, an intense trade between Italy and China began. Strangio lists in detail the reasons for the Italian commercial failure in China, elements which characterised the projection of Italy in the Asian country until recent times. These ranged from poor knowledge of both culture and customs and the commercial dynamics of the Chinese merchants, to the lack of institutional support in the form of advertising and communication. Furthermore, there was no connection between commercial agents and Italian banks and no setting up of consortiums and trusts.

The author stresses how the Italian presence in China always had to contend with a chronic lack of capital, with the reluctance of Italian entrepreneurs to finance risky activities, and in particular, disorganisation at both diplomatic and commercial level. The author underlines how Italian institutions have always tried to distinguish themselves from other western powers, trying to maintain an approach away from the colonial imprint. A dynamic which did not generate empathy in Chinese institutions.

The book closes with a description of commercial relations in the 70s and 80s with the kind of ideal landing place for commercial relations between Italy and the People's Republic of China: the Agreement with

Jiangsu Province and the Agreement with the Guangdong Province, both in the 2000s.

Overall Donatella Strangio's reconstruction represents a relevant addition to the discipline of Economic History. The book is essentially aimed at scholars and advanced students of International Economics and Economic History who wish to approach the study of Sino-Italian relations. At the same time, it is an excellent compendium for Chinese scholars who seek a reconstruction of the economic exchange between China and a medium power of the time like Italy.