



## On the Problem of Re-Recognition in Contemporary Sino-Italian Relations

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### Abstract

China and Italy enjoy a glorious history of friendly exchanges. In spite that the development of Sino-Italian relations has been relatively smooth and steady, the two countries are still facing a variety of problems, which are mainly due to the lack of necessary knowledge about each other. Mutual understandings between the two parts have been lagging behind their bilateral exchanges and cooperation. In other words, the two nations need to “re-recognize” each other in new situations and contexts. This paper reviews briefly the three main stages of Sino-Italian relations since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, introduces different importance placed on their bilateral relations in different periods, deconstructs their changing understandings about “the other” and gives an explanation to a number of typical shortcomings that the two peoples are facing in the re-recognition.

**Key words:** Sino-Italian relations; Historical evolution; Re-recognition

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### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays on most occasions in Sino-Italian exchanges, when people talk about the relations between the two

countries, what we hear is almost “time-honored”, “profound history” and other kinds of praises. Even when mentioning the status quo, it is still “going well”. No one would question the glorious past of Sino-Italian friendship. Indeed, “from ancient times to the eighteenth century” (Bertuccioli & Masini, 1996, p.vi, italics added), Italy was at the forefront of Sino-European exchanges and played a leading role (Marinelli, 2010). Otherwise, in the embossments representing the five thousand years of Chinese Civilization in China Millennium Monument Museum, the only two places for foreigners would not have been given to two Italians: *Ma Ke Bo Luo* (Marco Polo) and *Li Ma Dou* (Matteo Ricci). Undoubtedly, this was an extraordinary privilege. However, no matter how glorious the past was, it cannot cover up all sorts of problems that we are facing today.

Judging these problems, we cannot say that diplomats of the two sides don’t understand the importance of bilateral cooperation, but due to historical reasons, in quite a long historical period, People’s Republic of China and Republic of Italy did not place each other in an important position, not being fully aware of the necessity of bilateral exchanges and mutual understandings. This ignorance then resulted in little cooperation. Currently, Sino-Italian cooperation level is obviously out of proportion with their announced “comprehensive strategic partnership”. Italy is just the fifth largest trade partner of China in the EU, and Chinese investments in Italy have frequently encountered setbacks for legal, tax and other various reasons. In more than two thousand Italian enterprises in China, there are quite a number of people suffering from being “unacclimatized”. Many Italian companies in China have chosen to move, totally or partially, to Vietnam, Pakistan or other countries, under the multiple pressures including the rising labor costs, the appreciation of RMB and so forth.

The cooperation in culture, education, science and technology between the two countries is still in the primary stage. In December 2004, Italian President C.

Ciampi was unexpectedly informed during his visit in China that Italy was hosting less Chinese students than Switzerland. Hence he reprimanded and ordered Italian officials to enhance their work, which then resulted in the subsequent “Marco Polo plan” and “Turandot plan”. Even so, in cultural exchanges with China, Italy still lags behind the UK, France and Germany. Obviously this situation is out of proportion with Italy’s role as a “Cultural Power (Potenza Culturale)”.

The author suggests that effective recognition and good understanding constitute the basis of any successful communication and cooperation, and the difficulties and obstacles that China and Italy are facing and trying to overcome should almost be ascribed to a lack of knowledge and errors in recognition. In our view, the core problem that is standing in the way of Sino-Italian cooperation is the problem of recognition. Based on literature, field survey and the author’s personal experience<sup>1</sup>, this paper aims to discuss and emphasize the necessity of “re-recognition”. After a brief review of the three main stages of Sino-Italian relations since 1949, we will introduce different importance the two parts placed on Sino-Italian relations in different times, analyze their changing understandings about “the other” and explain a number of phenomena in their re-recognition.

## 1. THE NEGLECT OF “COGNITION” IN “ISOLATION” TIME

There was no diplomatic relation between the two countries in the first 21 years after the founding of New China. In 1970, the two countries established diplomatic relations, but not until the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up, did the Sino-Italian exchanges go forward significantly. In more than 30 years, Sino-Italian relations could be visualized as several events: On December 1962, P. Togliatti, General Secretary of Italian Communist Party, made groundless accusation against China and triggered a heated debate between the two parties, during which Chinese people complained about Togliatti and denounced him as a “revisionist”. In November 1970, the two countries established diplomatic relations, but substantial bilateral exchanges were very limited, and the relations between the two countries were influenced, to a considerable extent, by the international political climate,

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especially by Sino-US relations. In 1972, the documentary “China” directed by Neorealist director M. Antonioni provoked public indignation and condemnation in China. In order to facilitate the masses’ criticism, his name has been simplified as three Chinese characters: *Ni Ao Ni*. At that time, *Ni Ao Ni* was absolutely the most mentioned foreign name in China, and he seemed to have become a westerner even better known than Marco Polo.

During this period, the substantial exchanges between the two countries were still at low levels and the fields of cooperation were very limited, so China did not realize nor perceive the importance of Italy, while Italy had no foreign policy toward China, and “China was only a marginal dot on Italy’s geopolitical map” (Sisci, 2009, p.123).

At that time, propaganda to Italy was mainly the Italian translation of Chairman Mao’s works, and Wang Huanbao, Wang Jun and other Italian professors at Beijing Foreign Studies University, have participated in the Italian translation of the “Red Books”. Only a small part of the translation was introduced in Italy, and the notorious terrorist organization “Red Brigades” was most interested, neither the Communist Party nor other leftist parties, so it did not have significant impact on the masses of Italy. In that period, sinologists in Italy had few if any opportunities to come to China for research. Without observing directly and understanding the realities in China, scholars could not but do research by studying second-hand materials. They devoted themselves to the study of ancient China, and they became familiar with all classical authors and proficient in studying *The Four Books* and made significant achievements in the translation of Confucian works and in classical Chinese language teaching. This “sinology tendency” was just an “expedient” in particular times and led to a collective neglect of contemporary Chinese reality amongst the Italian intelligentsia. This ignorance continued, till the late 1980s and the early 1990s, exerting a profound historic influence. And today it is still restricting the development and progress of Italy’s modern Chinese teaching and contemporary China studies.

At that time, Chinese thought Italy as an imperialistic country, while Italian Communist Party was criticized as a typical representative of the revisionists. At the same time, ordinary Italians were more willing to give a positive evaluation to China: China was considered, by the leftists, as a pioneer against the hegemony of the United States. After the student movement in 1968, the images of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong became a fashion symbol of Italian left-wing youth, often appearing in clothing, ornaments and daily necessities. On the other hand, Italy’s right-wing perceived China as a potential ally against the threat from Soviet. The simple logic “enemy’s enemy is my friend” at that time had a certain rationality and Italian government also thought to try to establish some sort of relations corresponding with the international political background, but due to the limitations of the mutual

understandings, they couldn't carry out a constructive work in a way that China could understand and accept. Hence such collaboration remained just a plan.

So during that period, between Italy, which was regarded as an enemy, and China, which lived only in Italian people's imagination and expectation, essential exchanges remained very limited. Illusions and propaganda were far more than actual contacts and communication. Due to political estrangement and distrust in such a particular era, the two sides lacked the possibilities to understand each other, and when "understanding" became unreachable, like "flowers in the mirror and the moon in the water", communications seemed helpless and the necessity to know each other was naturally ignored.

## 2. THE "COGNITION" LAGGING DUE TO HISTORIC COINCIDENCE

With the deepening of Reform and Opening-up, Sino-Italian economic and commercial relations have developed rapidly, with a large number of Italian enterprises entering China through the bridgehead- Hong Kong. In 1985, Italy even overtook France and UK, becoming the second largest trade partner of China in Western Europe (Zhang, 1992, p.55). In the early 1990s, when Europe and the United States were isolating China for obvious reasons, Italy took the lead in developing relations with China, carrying out a series of exchanges. The collaboration between the two sides even extended to some sensitive areas, such as military cooperation. Italian Prime Minister G. Andreotti, Foreign Minister G. De Michelis and other senior officials visited China successively. Li Peng, Chinese Prime Minister, also wished that Italy could act as a bridge in the recovery of Sino-Western relations. As a result, Sino-Italian relations were strengthened unprecedentedly. The two sides also signed a good number of cooperation agreements on the upcoming development of Pudong.

Under the attention of the two governments, the two sides exchanged a large number of students in 1980s and 1990s and provided assets for the Sino-Italian cultural exchange in the future. F. Masini, who became a famous Italian sinologist, professor at Sapienza University of Rome, the dean of the Confucius Institute, was studying in China in that period. But this didn't last for a long time, because with an anti-corruption storm named "Mani Pulite" which swept the Italian politics and aroused the collapse of traditional political parties and political leaders, the Prime Minister Andreotti was put in jail. New political stars were in a race for power, and they were too busy to fulfill Italy's many promises, including their participation in the development of Pudong. So Italians "created a terrible impression in Beijing and struck a serious blow to Italy's credibility as a serious and reliable political and economic partner" (Coralluzzo, 2008, pp.10-11). China turned to the US, UK, France, Germany, Japan and other countries for cooperation, which contributed

significantly to China's high-speed economic development and also promoted their own growth, while Italians missed historic opportunities and led Sino-Italian cooperation into a stagnation, and the necessity to know each other decreased again.

As time goes by, the sustained rapid growth of Chinese economy has created a middle class: Though the proportion is not so high, it is composed of numerous people. As the second largest manufacturer in Europe, Italy must focus on the Chinese market and a considerable number of consumers who have strong ability to pay, especially when they think about their key industries, known as "3F": fashion, food and furniture. Since quite a part of the so-called "Made in Italy" does not belong to rigid demand, after the economic crisis, the domestic market and European market shrank seriously. In such context, more Italian enterprises came to China in pursuit of new opportunities. The current Prime Minister of Italy M. Renzi visited China in June 2014 three months after taking office. His visit showed an unprecedentedly remarkable attention he paid to Sino-Italian relations. However, many Italians simply think Chinese "eat noodles, are fond of their families, stick to their friends... China, unlike some other countries, even neighbors like France or Germany, seemed closer, more understandable." (Sisci, 2009, p.119). In other words, "they can do without a deeper understanding of the country and its extensive history and culture. They can skip and ignore the difficult language, happy with just a few words, and can thus boast of being 'sinologists'." (Ibid.) So the result was that Italy couldn't adapt itself to the Chinese environment, nor do anything when they know that Americans made a fortune with pizza, ESPRESSO and CAPPUCCINO, which Italian did best, and their brands, such as ILLY, LAVAZZA were difficult to grow. When a lot of counterfeits or non-Italian products labeled as MADE IN ITALY, such as Da Vinci furniture, earned huge profits just thanks to the high reputation of Italy, many Italian brands of outstanding quality were difficult to promote effectively. As the world's largest producer of Wine, Italy accounts for only 6% of the Chinese market, while France possesses nearly half. When they realize again that the knowledge and understanding about China are necessary, they notice that they lack resources and channels, and it's difficult to find qualified people who understand China well and can communicate smoothly. A fact that they have to accept is that their preparatory work is lagging behind the bilateral cooperation in action.

There are few people who know China in Italian authorities. There has never been a Sinologue like Kevin Rudd in the previous cabinet lists. Italian Consul General in Chongqing, Mr. Maffettone, has been named in Chinese as "Ma Feitong" by himself. When we hear this name at the first time, it feels quite philosophical, but we will find that it is the homophone in Chinese of an anesthetic (morphinones) if we repeat it several times. In Chinese

cultural context, it obviously should have been avoided. In 2013, Rome Tourism Promotion Delegation reached Guangzhou to carry out publicity with the help of Italian General Consulate in Guangzhou. While preparing an introducing PPT for the long history of a luxury hotel, there even existed some words saying “just on the other side of the wall, not far away, there is the ancient tomb \* \* \* with 2000 years of history... in the evening, you can walk leisurely along the wall”. Such a description showed that they had no understanding of Chinese taboo for death. The author happened to encounter and then reminded them kindly with an explanation in detail. Then Consul General Benedetto Latteri eventually changed the introduction into a more acceptable form to the Chinese public.

The long lasting neglect caused serious ignorance, and Italy is still failing repeatedly to grasp opportunities because of this ignorance. No wonder that Italian scholar L. Monzali complained that Italy could not fully “enjoy the dividends” of China’s development like many other European countries do, and he pointed out that the lagging in the Sino-Italian exchanges and cooperation is what Italian people are paying for their ignorance (Monzali, 2010).

### 3. THE NECESSITY OF RE-CONSTRUCTING “COGNITION”

A great number of people, including those who have been participating in international exchanges and cooperation for a long time, have the illusion that Italy cannot afford to lose China, but China may not have to take Italy into account, since there are Russia, Germany, France and many other partners which China can cooperate with (Failla, 2009). As a conclusion, it would not be necessary to understand and recognize Italy. F. Failla, coordinator of Sino-Italian government committee, the first consul general of Italy in Guangzhou once had similar expressions, but they were modest words. Today many people do treat Sino-Italian relations as above. In fact, Italy plays an important role for China, which is different from other countries. And this is exactly what Chinese people often ignore.

First of all, Italy is a member of G8, one of the founding members of the European Union, though it slipped from the seventh largest economy to the tenth place during the economic crisis, it is still a major economy, and the prospects of its cooperation with China are bright. According to the statistics from Chinese Customs and CCPIT, the bilateral trade volume between China and Italy in 2013 amounted to 41.2 billion dollars. Although compared to 2012, it decreased slightly, a doubling achieved in 10 years still cannot be overlooked (CCPIT, 2014). People tend to think that the goods China imports from Italy are mainly pricey luxury. In fact, according to the Ambassador of Italy A. Bradanini’s introduction to First Finance Daily, machinery exported to China accounts for about 85% (Qian, 2014). Talking

about this percentage, we should be aware that when his predecessor A. Iannucci was in office, the number he told China Radio International was only “more than half” in 2011. These equipments are slightly inferior to the similar German products at the technical level, but the price is lower more than 1/3, and a considerable part of machineries are used in the “3F” mentioned above, having significant positive effects on the upgrading of Chinese SMEs.

Italy is known as “the kingdom of SMEs”, and more than 90% of their domestic enterprises are SMEs, which contribute more than 80% of the GDP. This is a kind of phenomenon that is unique in the world nowadays. The Italian model of development protects the environment for the best, saving energy, resources, and with “exquisite production, giving the product the best taste.” (Luo, 2004, p.72) Ferrari, which is a world famous automobile manufacturer, is a typical representative of the small and medium-sized enterprises in Italy. Exchanges and mutual learning can enrich the thought on the mode of economic development. China is a populous nation, so we should not rely only on larger and stronger enterprises, while ignoring the impacts that small and medium-sized enterprises have on employment and on the rise of people’s income. There are great potentials and strong complementarities in the bilateral cooperation on small and medium-sized enterprises. Combining our advantages on markets, manufacturing skills, with the Italy’s human resource advantage, innovation advantage, brand advantage, we could create a model of development featured by high added-value, low consumption and innovation. Cooperation between Chinese and Italian SMEs, due to its unique complementarities, pertinence and compatibility, is incomparable for any cooperation with others.

Understanding Italy and developing the cooperation with Italy is also conducive to the implementation of the “going out” strategy of China. Huawei’s development in Italy has been successful. As a sector leader of motorcycle manufacture in Europe, Piaggio has launched its asset-restructuring with Zong Shen Group from China, and their collaboration has stimulated their vitality and creativity (Iannucci, 2011). In 2014, Shanghai Electric purchased shares of Ansaldo Energia, while ZOOMLION was busy buying Italian concrete producing enterprises. In July of the same year, Chinese State Grid Corp bought the equity of CDP RETI, and Prime Minister of Italy, Renzi, attended the signing ceremony held in his Premier House. Scholars believe that with its investments in Italy, China is getting ready for further participation in European market and aiming at grasping high technology, production processes, human resources and other important factors (Pietrobelli et al., 2010).

There have been few historical disputes and conflicts between Italy and China, and the relatively moderate, flexible attitude of Italy often enables it to play a constructive role as a bridge in China-EU relations, especially when there are significant divergences between

China and Europe, Italy often succeed in mediating between the two sides. Accordingly, the importance of Sino-Italian relations is far beyond the bilateral scope (Failla, 2009). Italian officials at all levels, such as ex-ambassador G. Menegatti, have criticized the EU for prohibiting arms sales to China. In addition, Italy's attitudes towards the reform of the Security Council have also been being highly consistent with China for long.

Italy is also a country with profound history, which has the largest number of world cultural heritage, and the number will account for two thirds in the cultural heritage list by UNESCO if combined with China. The protection of the cultural heritage of China should learn from Italy and seek new cooperation. In 2006, the restoration of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City was undertaken successfully thanks to the Sino-Italian work teams. Italy is also a developed industrial country, and one of the best countries in ecological and environmental protection, with more than 20% of its territory belonging to the nature reserve, so the bilateral cooperation in environmental protection is also of great significance.

The year of 2014 marked a "new era for developing friendship and cooperation" in the contemporary Sino-Italian relations (Andornino, 2015, p.9), and the two Prime Minister's exchange of visits as well as China's high investments of eight billion Euros, brought their partnership into a new stage, completely changing China's traditional status that was regarded as the edge in the Italy's national strategic planning (Ibid.). However, high leaders' concern and large amount of investment may not necessarily lead to successful cooperation which requires competent professionals to follow up. In fact, not only PBoC, Shanghai Electric and State Grid, but also their Italian partners, have been lacking the experience of cooperation and sufficient knowledge about the other part. Therefore, being aware of the problem of "re-recognition" and finding cross-cultural talents who can manage the cooperation will be the key to success.

The Sino Italian cooperation has broad prospects and great potentials, but the cooperation is ultimately based on fully understandings, which require people who really know each other to work together. Due to the traditional lack of attention and understanding between the two countries, many historical "outstanding loans" are still restricting the further development of Sino-Italian cooperation. If we don't pay enough attention and cannot solve the problem of understanding, both sides will run the risk of missing a major historical opportunity.

## CONCLUSION

In the past few decades, China and Italy ignored the understanding and recognition of each other due to complex changes in international and domestic politics, leaving many historical "outstanding loans", which aroused a lot of difficulties and obstacles to the exchanges and cooperation between the two sides and a great loss

of opportunities. Nevertheless, in recent years, "political and economic interaction between the two countries grew in intensity in the volatile context of the global financial crisis" (Andornino, 2012, p.87). On the one hand, Italy expects to overcome the economic downturn and gain more opportunities to develop its market abroad, by collaborating with China. On the other hand, interacting with Italy, China will have more possibilities to learn to optimize its development model, taking better consideration of the economic growth, environmental protection and social development. In that case, China's "soft power" will be expected to increase for its own participation in international competition. Both sides are embracing unprecedented historical opportunity and need each other more than ever. Therefore, mutual re-recognition and re-understanding have become particularly important.

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