

One Belt One Voice: Chinese Media in Italy

by Francesca Ghiretti and Lorenzo Mariani

ABSTRACT

Chinese media are the voice of the Chinese Communist Party at home and abroad. It is no surprise therefore that collaborations between Chinese and foreign media have been attracting more international attention. One issue that has not been yet explored is the nature and implications of the inclusion of two important Italian media actors such as Rai (the state-run broadcasting company) and Ansa (Italy's main press agency) in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by Italy in support of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019. These deals fit in a broader picture of an Italian media environment that is being increasingly targeted by Chinese media. However, the impact that such an effort has had on the Italian public opinion has been very limited so far and the Italian media landscape keeps offering free and varied information.

China | Italy | Mass media | Public opinion

keywords

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Introduction

Since Xi Jinping took office as party general secretary in 2012 (and then as president in 2013), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has significantly intensified its efforts to shape the global perception of China. Besides relying on traditional forms of public diplomacy and soft power, it has carried out a number of activities – some of which not entirely benign – aimed at maximising the reach of its propaganda abroad, spreading positive narratives regarding China while simultaneously attempting to suppress critical voices. Beijing has also pushed its national media outlets to expand internationally. In recent years, China's state media have indeed strengthened collaboration with foreign media outlets and journalists' unions.

Against this backdrop, on the occasion of the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in support of the Belt and Road Initiative between China and Italy in March 2019, two of the most important Italian media outlets, Rai and Ansa, signed bilateral agreements with Chinese counterparts, respectively: China Media Group (CMG) and Xinhua. This was a formalisation of the already flourishing ties between Italian and Chinese media outlets, which started almost a decade ago. Although the agreements signed within the MoU have increased China's capabilities to present its state-controlled content directly to Italy's public opinion, Beijing's strategy to promote a more favourable opinion of China does not appear to have paid off. Through the use of open-source documents, interviews and press release, the following analysis examines the multitude of connections between Italian and Chinese media companies and assesses the level of penetration of that Chinese state-run media in the Italian media environment – a phenomena so far overlooked in the existing literature. Assuming that the expansion of such agreements can be linked to the CCP's strategy to control the narrative on China abroad, we provide evidence that the exposure to Chinese propaganda has so far produce poor results in terms of shifting the Italian public opinion towards an overall more favourable view of China.

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1. Tell China's story well: Beijing's strategy to control international narratives on China

Over the last decade China has embarked on a meticulous plan to renew and expand its external communication strategies. As the country gained more relevance on the global stage and its economic and political ambitions transcended its borders, the Chinese leadership felt the need to modernise the country's public diplomacy strategies and develop new narratives tailored for foreign audiences. Although the forerunner of this initiative can be traced back to Hu Jintao's tenure as party secretary general (2002–2012), it is under Xi Jinping that the CCP has sped up the process.¹ In August 2013, during the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference, the Chinese president urged governmental bodies and news agencies to "tell China's story well".² Xi argued that "We [the CCP] must meticulously do foreign propaganda work well", fighting negative preconceptions spread by Western countries – such as the "China Threat Theory" or the "China Collapse Theory" – and promote a more favourable view of China abroad by "disseminate China's voice well, and strengthen our discourse power internationally".³ Xi's speech set in motion a drastic change in China's public diplomacy that in a few years has revolutionised not only the way in which Beijing communicates with the world – "wolf warrior" diplomacy, social media platforms, etc. – but also the nature and content of the messages conveyed to foreign audiences.

Xi's call to strengthen the party-state's ability to control the global discourse on China and disseminate Chinese ideas internationally is motivated by a variety of factors. Domestically, this foreign outreach is an offshoot of a broader communication campaign aimed at reinforcing patriotism among Chinese citizens and thus the legitimacy and centrality of the CCP. This new domestic narrative is epitomised in the concepts of the "Chinese Dream" and the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", which were incorporated into the Chinese constitution in 2017 as main pillars of the "Xi Jinping Thought".⁴ Boosting China's image abroad and reinforcing its "self-confidence" when addressing foreign audiences has been instrumental in preventing critical voices from infiltrating the domestic discourse.⁵

The other goal has been cultivating favourable views from foreign governments in order to find external – or indirect – sources of legitimisation for the party's rule.

¹ Danielly Silva Ramos Becard and Paulo Menechelli Filho, "Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: instruments in China's strategy for international insertion in the 21st Century", in *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2019), Article e005, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201900105>.

² Xi Jinping's 19 August Speech Revealed?, in *China Copyright and Media Blog/News*, updated 22 December 2014, <https://wp.me/pXyRR-Po>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Heike Holbig et al., "China's 'New Era' with Xi Jinping Characteristics", in *ECFR China Analysis*, December 2017, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=4011>.

⁵ Chris Buckley, "China Takes Aim at Western Ideas", in *The New York Times*, 19 August 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/asia/chinas-new-leadership-takes-hard-line-in-secret-memo.html>.

Xi's vision of a more prominent global role for China has led to the abandonment of the well-known strategy, attributed to former leader Deng Xiaoping, of "keeping a low profile" and to the adoption of an assertive foreign policy approach. China has consequently adapted its communication capabilities to its new role of superpower.

On the one hand, this was a conscious and planned change, warranted by the need to overcome the poor results of the country's soft power strategy. Indeed, although during the Hu Jintao era China invested significant political and economic capital to present – and at times explain – to a foreign audience the country's ambitions and perceptions, this did not translate into a more positive view of China abroad. Public opinion polls show that between 2005 and 2018 the global perception of China experienced a downward trend, especially in developed and democratic countries.⁶ The rise in unfavourable views also reflects concerns about China's growing assertiveness in foreign affairs – hence the need to create a new communication strategy that not only matches China's growing ambitions but also helps smooth undesired negative effects.

Upgrading the public diplomacy toolbox was also a means to better promote Beijing's new global initiatives. With China's public and private economic interests expanding across the globe, a new national branding would increase the attractiveness of China-led projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the reliability of new economic institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The need for a new approach in its external communication was thus not only a matter of politics and geopolitics but also economics.

On the other hand, the change in the national public diplomacy was also in a way imposed on China by the side effects of its own success story. While during the 1990s the economic rise of China was perceived by other countries as a positive story of recovery and adaptation, with the expansion of Chinese interests abroad critical voices increased significantly. Faced with an international context increasingly alarmed by its ambitions, since Xi took power in 2013 China developed a more proactive communication strategy, no longer only aimed at dismissing criticism, but also at fighting back by pointing out inconsistencies and controversies regarding its opponents.

1.1 Beijing's new approach to external communication

Beijing's strategy to "tell China's story well" has translated into a threefold plan that encompassed the dissemination abroad of new expressions (新表述), new categories (新范畴) and new concepts (新概念).⁷ State-run media with strong connections

⁶ Yu Xie and Yongai Jin, "Global Attitudes toward China: Trends and Correlates", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, 18 May 2021, DOI 10.1080/10670564.2021.1926088.

⁷ Liu Tao, "新概念 新范畴 新表述——对外话语体系创新的修辞学观念与路径" (New Conception, New Category and New Expression: A Rhetorical Interpretation for Innovating International Discourse System), in

abroad – Xinhua News Agency, CMG, China Radio International (CRI), China Global Television Network (CGNT) – have been urged to use “new expressions” when describing the country: portraying China as a developing country that is at the forefront in the development of new technologies and is culturally rich and strong.⁸ This has also involved a vigorous response to criticisms against the CCP’s rule, which has been coming primarily from Western countries.

CCP mouthpieces have also been encouraged to promote the Chinese understanding of Western ideas, thus creating “new categories” of universal concepts – such as democracy, human rights, multilateralism – but with “Chinese characteristics”. An active role has been played by three agencies in this respect: The Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department (CCPPD), the State Council Information Office (SCIO), and the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the latter being the entity deputed to direct and monitor financial transfers to foreign media.⁹

The third pillar has been direct expression of the dissemination of “new concepts”, whose core idea has been to popularise Chinese norms and values to counter what Beijing perceive as the Western monopoly of global narratives and normative discourse. Drawing from its own political culture, China has pushed for the internationalisation of concepts such as the “community of common destiny for mankind”, the China-centric vision for a new international order drawn from the traditional idea of “all under heaven” (天下).¹⁰ This approach echoes the cultural relativism theory – according to which each nation has the right to set its own definition of customs, beliefs, values, and choose its own development path – which is deeply embedded in the Chinese political philosophy.¹¹

1.2 The internationalisation of China’s media

In its attempt to upgrade its public diplomacy strategy, the Chinese government has carried out a great variety of actions and used different tactics. Part of these initiatives can be regarded as legitimate: forms of soft power widely utilised by other countries when promoting their economic and political activities or their cultural heritage abroad. But China’s actions in the global media environment are more controversial. Independent observers such as Reporters Without Borders (RWB) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) have criticised Beijing’s

Journalism and Communication, No. 2/2017 (February 2017), p. 6-19, <https://xwxs.jnu.edu.cn/68/d8/c6892a223448/page.psp>.

⁸ Justyna Szczudlik, “‘Tell China’s Stories Well’: Implication for the Western Narrative”, in *PISM Policy Papers*, No. 169 (September 2018), https://pism.pl/publications/Tell_Chinas_Stories_Well_Implications_for_the_Western_Narrative.

⁹ Reporters Without Borders, *China’s Pursuit of a New World Media Order*, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/node/42141>.

¹⁰ Justyna Szczudlik, “‘Tell China’s Stories Well’: Implication for the Western Narrative”, cit., p. 8.

¹¹ Kaiyu Shao, *EU, China, and the Concept of Human Rights: from a Cultural Relativism Perspective*, Master’s thesis, Lund University, August 2013, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/4001011>.

global campaign for a “new world media order” by spreading the CCP’s propaganda, disseminate misleading contents and false accusations against its opponents, as well as exporting China’s media model abroad – including its censorship techniques.¹²

To reshape the international news environment and make it more China-friendly, Beijing has leveraged its economic power and political influence. The CCP can count on a variety of actors spanning official propaganda agencies, private companies and businesspeople loyal to the party based abroad. A prominent role is played by state-run media, which since 2013 have expanded their networks abroad and have become more embedded in the global media landscape. Recent independent reports show the existence of recurring tactics used by state-led entities to target foreign media outlets, journalists’ unions and freelance reporters.¹³ These are:

- *Training programmes for foreign journalists.* Mostly dedicated to professionals from developing countries, these training schemes offer an “alternative model of journalism” to rival the Western journalism culture based on democratic principles such as independence, impartiality and reliability.¹⁴
- *Exchange programmes or fully funded trips to China.* Publicised as initiatives to acquire additional knowledge about the country, these activities serve the purpose of exposing foreign journalists, editors and media owners to official perspectives with the hope of inducing the production of more favourable contents.¹⁵ More recently, these programmes have targeted not only think tankers and academics, but also influencers and bloggers with significant audience on social media platforms.¹⁶
- *International events that promote China’s vision and understanding of journalism.* Initiatives such as the World Media Summit – created in 2009 – and the BRICS Media Summit – launched in 2016 – are China’s alternatives to international forums that Beijing perceives as an expression of Western media hegemony on global news.
- *Cooperative schemes with foreign media outlets or journalist unions.* Usually in the forms of memoranda of understanding, these agreements between Chinese media outlets and foreign counterparts often envisage content-sharing partnerships for

¹² Reporters Without Borders, *China’s Pursuit of a New World Media Order*, cit.

¹³ Ibid.; Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, *The China Story: Reshaping the World’s Media*, Redfern, International Federation of Journalists-IFJ Asia Pacific, June 2020, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/ifj-report-the-china-story-reshaping-the-worlds-media/category/publications.html>.

¹⁴ Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, *The China Story: Reshaping the World’s Media*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁵ Sarah Cook, “China’s Global Media Footprint. Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence”, in *Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience Series*, February 2021, <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-and-democratic-resilience-series-chinas-global-media-footprint>.

¹⁶ Ben Ellery and Tom Knowles, “Beijing Funds British Youtubers to Further Its Propaganda War”, in *The Times*, 9 January 2021.

video and articles. This kind of cooperation is particularly sketchy. Chinese outlets tend to provide pre-translated articles that most of the time are published by the foreign counterparts without the necessary fact-checking or content control. Moreover, little is known about the content of such agreements since the vast majority of them are usually protected by non-disclosure provisions.¹⁷

- *Acquisition – or purchase of majority share – of foreign media outlets.* Even though this cannot be regarded as a widespread phenomenon, Chinese companies as well as individuals with close ties to the government have been involved in the purchase of foreign media outlets. To date, most of the acquisitions have taken place in developing countries, with few exceptions such as that of Médea – one of the largest media group in Czech Republic – which was acquired in 2020 by the Chinese financial conglomerate Citic Group.¹⁸ According to some reports, in some cases, this has led to increased restrictions on local journalists.¹⁹

Italy was no exception to China's attempt to mould international narratives on it in a way that would strengthen the legitimacy of the CCP's rule. In fact, Italy was especially important because it was the first G7 country – and therefore the wealthiest economy by far – to agree to give formal support to Xi's signature foreign policy initiative, the BRI.

2. China and Italy media relations

President Xi's state visit to Rome and the signing of the BRI MoU in March 2019 provided the perfect scenery to renew the numerous existing collaborations between Chinese and Italian media. However, two years after the state visit and several years after the beginning of most collaborations, Italy's perception of China has not improved. According to one of the most recent studies on Italian public opinion about China, since 2017 the perception of 44.7 per cent of Italians towards China has remained unchanged, 38.5 per cent consider it has worsened and only 16.8 per cent see an improvement.²⁰

To trace the reason for the failure of China's attempts at improving its image in Italy, we must first understand the Italian media landscape. The media landscape in Italy can be described as predominantly inward-looking. There are multiple reasons that explain this phenomenon but overall this trend represents the meagre

¹⁷ Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, *The China Story: Reshaping the World's Media*, cit.

¹⁸ RWR Advisory Group, *CITIC Gains Majority Stake in Medea Media Agency, Gaining Control Over Czech Media Landscape*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.rwradvisory.com/?p=4261>.

¹⁹ Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, *The China Story: Reshaping the World's Media*, cit.

²⁰ The survey was carried out on a sample of 1500 people representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density. Beatrice Gallelli et al., *Italian Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19. Longing for Economic Engagement Amid General Distrust*, Bratislava, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/IT-poll-report.pdf>.

predisposition of Italian readers to consume information about foreign affairs. Recent polls from the German Marshall Fund (GMF) shows that Italians are among the worst informed on the foreign policy of their country, with 54 per cent of the respondents declaring to be not well informed or not informed at all.²¹ The only exceptions concern news on the European Union and its member states, countries in the Mediterranean basin – especially in connection with news regarding migration flows – and the United States. This narrow focus also reflects the foreign policy interests of the Italian government – and subsequently that of the public opinion.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that coverage of a country as remote as China has rarely occupied much space in Italian media. There have been foreign correspondents and authors who have tried to push the established boundaries and disseminate knowledge on Asia and China. However, they appeal to a niche readership. The situation has slowly yet clearly changed over the past decade. With China gaining a more prominent role in the international arena, the demand for China-related news by Italian readers has grown significantly.²² Journalists with a specialisation either on China or Asia have not only increased in number but also obtained larger space in public debates. That has allowed for the flourishing of well-informed and fact-based journalism on China as well as for a rich debate on a country about which most Italian have very limited knowledge.

The historically scarce predisposition of Italian readers to consume news about China, however, is in stark contrast with the multitude of partnerships that – over the past ten years – have been signed by Italian media outlets and their Chinese counterparts. These growing links can be explained only partially by the willingness of Italian outlets to provide their audience with first-hand news about China. The reality is that these partnerships translate into sources of funding for Italian media companies through advertisement, the purchase of content space, travel to China as well as, in certain cases, the promise to access the Chinese market.²³ The economic advantages offered by these partnerships are especially important in the light of the prolonged crisis of the publishing and media industry in Italy, a phenomenon that touches many other Western countries.

Economic incentives explain the inclusion of memoranda between Chinese and Italian media among the 29 agreements signed in March 2019 on the occasion of the state visit of Xi to Rome. The significant number of collaborations between Chinese and Italian media make Italy an interesting case study to explore the magnitude of the Chinese media penetration in developed and democratic countries.

²¹ German Marshall Fund and Bertelsmann Foundation, *Transatlantic Trends 2021*, June 2021, p. 18-19, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/transatlantic-trends-2021>.

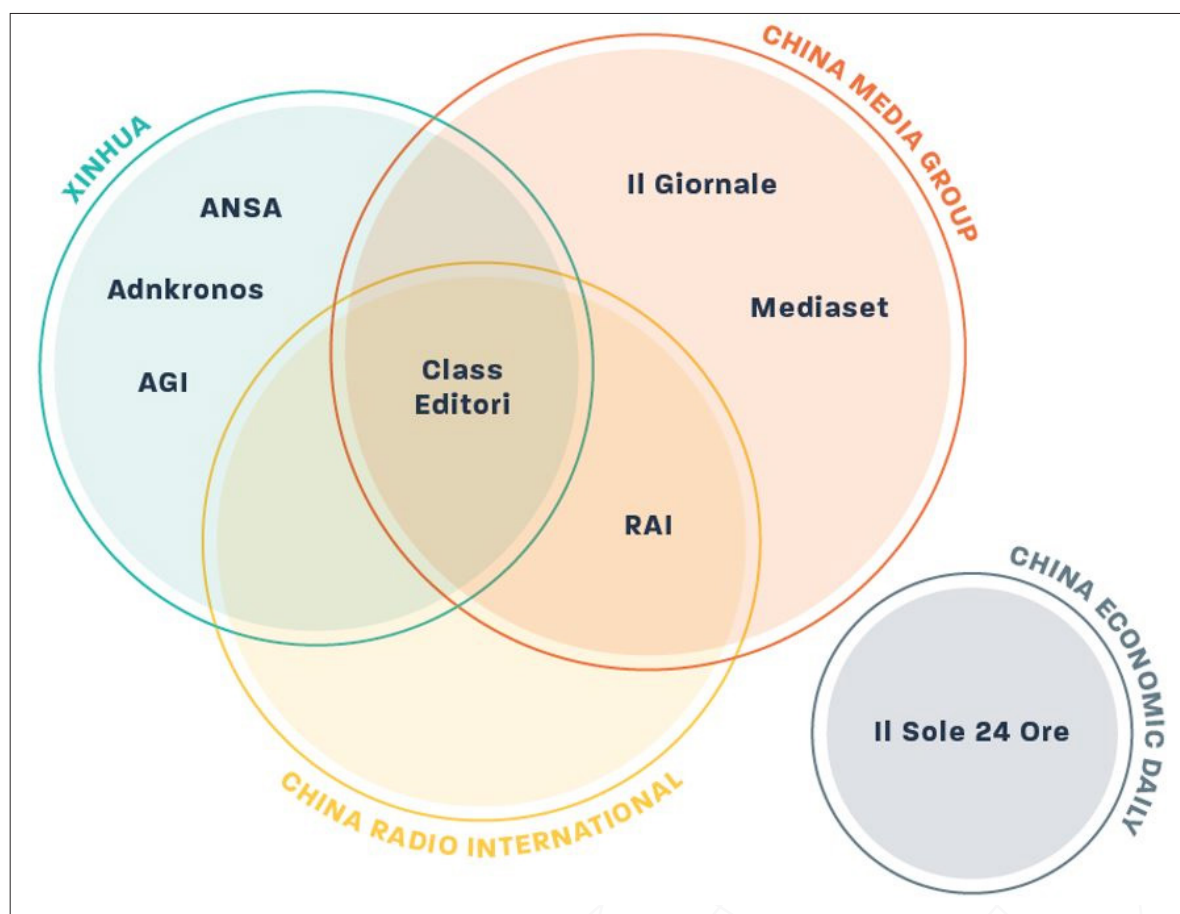
²² Interview with Italian journalists, 1 December 2020 and 4 February 2021.

²³ Interview with an Italian journalist, 19 May 2020.

2.1 Chinese media's footprint in the Italian news environment

Chinese state-run media have largely relied on MoUs and content sharing agreements to penetrate the Italian media environment. Indeed, as shown by the following figure, all major Italian media groups have partnership agreements in place with Chinese counterparts, although such arrangements vary in terms of content and scope.

Figure 1 | Collaborations between Italian and Chinese media



The picture above might give the impression that Italian media hold collaborations with separate Chinese media. However, it must be emphasised that Chinese media not only are interlinked – as they all respond in different ways to the CCP – but also share each other’s content.²⁴ For example, irrespective of the Chinese partner with which Italian media actors have struck an agreement, in the large majority of cases video contents is provided by CGTN, with no further editing.

²⁴ For additional information on media sector in China, see Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Given their private nature, the contents of the agreements are not in the public domain and are usually protected by non-disclosure clauses. This makes it difficult to carry out a detailed content analysis and, above all, a comparison between the agreements. Nevertheless, thanks to open-source documents, interviews and press releases it has been possible to piece together the magnitude of such partnerships and thus better understand the level of penetration that Chinese state-run media have so far reached in the Italian media environment.

Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI), is one of the main Italian news agencies. It is owned by the Italian multinational Eni. AGI was among the first media outlets to partner with Chinese news groups. In 2008, together with Xinhua and China Radio International, they launched *AGI China 24*, a web branch of AGI devoted exclusively to news about China, which, however, lasted only a few years.²⁵ In 2014, the agency signed an MoU with Xinhua Europe that included content sharing.²⁶ The partnership was then renewed in 2019 on the eve of Xi's visit to Italy.

In 2017, the Italian news agency Adnkronos signed a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua.²⁷ As a result, Adnkronos publishes news provided by Xinhua in English, irrespective of the fact that Xinhua is a mouthpiece of the CCP. The case of Adnkronos well exemplifies one of the main risks of content sharing agreements. Other news outlets, like in the case the Italian newspaper *Liberio*, use news agencies to get their information.²⁸ In the absence of either own information or journalist with specific expertise, some news outlets end up re-proposing news taken from press agencies uncritically, thereby contributing to spreading propaganda.

Class Editori is a media conglomerate that publishes ten financial and lifestyle magazines – the most famous of which is *Milano Finanza*, a business paper. The conglomerate also broadcasts three television channels: Class New, Class Tv Moda, and Class CNBC. Although it can be considered a relatively small player in the Italian news ecosystem, Class Editori is the entity with most connections with Chinese media. Since 2010 it has partnered with Xinhua for content sharing, the organisation of joint events and on-line training courses.²⁹ In 2015 the two outlets published a joint magazine – distributed both in Mandarin and Italian – and opened a multimedia platform (Yishang Class) to promote the World Expo hosted in Milan.³⁰ In January 2019, Class Editori and the China Economic Information

²⁵ See AGI China's archived website: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140927215401/http://www.agichina24.it>.

²⁶ "Nuovo accordo Agi-Xinhua su informazione economica", in *AGI*, 2 July 2014, https://www.agi.it/estero/agichina/nuovo_accordo_agi-xinhua_su_informazione_economica-3235034/news/2014-07-02.

²⁷ "News, video e web: firmata intesa Nuova Cina (Xinhua)-Adnkronos", in *Adnkronos*, 4 December 2017, https://www.adnkronos.com/news-video-e-web-firmata-intesa-nuova-cina-xinhua-adnkronos_7S3nklG18SnjDNi9epKvh.

²⁸ See *Liberio's* website: <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/search/?keyword=xinhua%20&sortField=pubdate>.

²⁹ See Class Editori's website: *Partnership*, <https://www.classeditori.it/partnership>.

³⁰ See Yishang Class' website: <https://www.yishangclass.com.cn/?p=1025>.

Service of Xinhua opened a new website, *Classxhsilkroad.it*, whose main purpose is to collect information regarding the opportunities offered by the Belt and Road Initiative for use of Italian companies.

Class Editori has ties also with China Media Group. Their partnership stretches from the joint publication of the column *Focus Cinitalia* on the webzine *Milano Finanza* to the co-organisation of TV shows.³¹ Even in this case, the content of such collaborations is rather questionable. For instance, on 16 July 2021, an article titled "Xi Jinping's classical literary quotes" was published on *Focus Cinitalia* as part of the broader initiative "Reading the classics to understand China". The article was complemented by a video offered by CGTN and Xinhua, which opened with the impact that the Industrial Revolution in the West has had on climate and natural resources. By tracing China's environmental consciousness back to the Tang era (618–907), the goal was to highlight the damages done by the Western industrial revolution and place it in contrast with the millennial wisdom of China.

In 2014, Class Editori signed a joint venture with Italian International Radio and Media (IIRM), an Italian subsidiary controlled by the Chinese group HMI, owner of the radio frequencies used by Radio China International.³² In 2019, the two groups renewed their content sharing partnership, which includes the joint broadcasting of the 100-episodes documentary "Chang'an meets Rome" produced by CMG.³³ Class Editori is one of the thirty members of the Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership (BREIP), founded in 2019, which has the aim to provide users with information and assistance in the framework of the BRI.

On 20 March 2019, *Il Sole 24 Ore* – Italy's leading business newspaper, owned by the General Confederation of Italian Industry (Confindustria) - signed an MoU with China's *Economic Daily*. The day after, *Il Sole 24 Ore* published seventeen articles in a dedicated space on his website named "Focus China", the content of which was rather unbalanced in favour of China.³⁴ All articles were listed as "promotional information" and while some of them lacked any reference regarding the authorship, others appeared as translated pieces from the *Economic Daily*.³⁵ Among the most controversial was one article that featured a collection Xi's quotes on the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2021, *Il Sole 24 Ore* was among the nearly 200

³¹ Cinitalia, "Focus Cinitalia - Storie della class media", in *Milano Finanza*, 12 July 2021, <https://www.milanofinanza.it/news/focus-cinitalia-storie-della-class-media-202107121146046632>.

³² "Class Editori crea una joint venture con la cinese HMI", in *Il Messaggero*, 19 November 2014, https://www.ilmessaggero.it/economia/flash_news/class_editori_crea_joint_venture_la_cinese_hmi-704958.html.

³³ "China Media Group e Class Editori firmano un Mou di cooperazione", in *Milano Finanza*, 28 June 2019, <https://www.milanofinanza.it/news/china-media-group-e-class-editori-firmano-un-mou-di-cooperazione-201906281531103841>.

³⁴ See *Il Sole 24 Ore's* website: *Focus China*, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/dossier/focus-cina-ABqTXAgB/english-version-ABx9OBgB>.

³⁵ Lin Huocan, "China's Economic Growth is Well-Grounded", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/china-s-economic-growth-is-well-grounded-AB1sCFgB>.

international media outlets criticised for hosting so called “media-drops” ads bought by the Chinese state-owned *People’s Daily*. The ad – in the form of a full-page article – featured two articles titled “Confidence in the Chinese Solution for World Economic Recovery” and “China-Italy Trade Reaches New Records”.³⁶

Besides partnering with Italian media groups, Chinese outlets operate independently. One of the first comers in this regard has been China News Service (CNS), the second largest state-owned media after Xinhua, which in 2001 launched the magazine *Cina in Italia* (China in Italy). The initial aim of the publication was to promote greater integration of the Chinese community in Italy. Over time, it has expanded its target audience. Today the magazine is sold in newsstands and distributed in mid-high Italian hotels, in flights to and from China operated by China Eastern Airlines as well as in the Italian Parliament.³⁷

In a similar fashion, CMG, in partnership with the Italian branch of China Radio International, produces a magazine named *Cinitalia*, the content of which is available in both Italian and Mandarin. The magazine *Cinitalia* is then accompanied by an app, a YouTube channel and social media profiles on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.³⁸

Thanks to a partnership agreement signed in 2018 with the conservative Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* – owned by Silvio Berlusconi’s family – CMG manages to distribute *Cinitalia* to a rather vast audience. Interestingly, *Il Giornale*’s editorial line towards China has been – and still is – especially hawkish. This has not prevented the newspaper from dedicating a specific section on its website to republish articles from *Cinitalia* whose content expectedly gives a rather positive and uncritical overview of China and Italy-China relations.³⁹ Biased information does not stop at relations between the two countries. For example, in 2018 the magazine dedicated its front page to the opening of the XIII National People’s Congress in China. However, instead of focusing on the real “scoop” – i.e. Xi’s abolition of the presidential term - the piece highlighted the positive aspects of the reforms.⁴⁰ *Cinitalia* has featured also more controversial articles, praising Beijing’s “fight against terrorism” in Xinjiang or accusing the US of double standards in its criticisms of Chinese’s policy in Hong Kong.⁴¹

³⁶ China Media Project, *Inside China’s Global Media Blitz*, 17 March 2021, <https://chinamediaproject.org/?p=46942>.

³⁷ See Italian Chinese Chamber of Commerce’s website: *Cina in Italia*, <http://www.china-italy.com/it/node/5535>.

³⁸ Nicola Casarini, “Italy Oscillates on China”, in *Echowall*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.echo-wall.eu/node/75>.

³⁹ See *Il Giornale*’s website: *Cinitalia*, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/autore/cinitalia-150046.html>.

⁴⁰ See *Cinitalia* No. 1/2018, http://www.china-italy.com/sites/default/files/CINITALIA%20N.1%20-%202018_ONLINE.pdf.

⁴¹ *Cinitalia*, “Così la Cina combatte il terrorismo nello Xinjiang”, in *Il Giornale*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/cos-cina-combatte-terrorismo-nello-xinjiang-1937973.html>; *Cinitalia*, “Blinken parla di Hong Kong ma ignora diritti umani in Usa”, in *Il Giornale*, 4 June

Il Giornale is not the only business owned by former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi that has connections with Chinese media. Mediaset Group, the largest private commercial broadcaster in Italy, has a longstanding collaboration with China Media Group.⁴² As early as 2007, the two entered into a joint venture partnership in which Mediaset acquired 49 per cent of the sport channel of China Global Media, CSPN. In 2009, Mediaset Group shares decreased to 12 per cent, however.⁴³ On the occasion of Xi's state visit, TGC24, a news outlet owned by Mediaset Group, broadcast the "Week of Chinese TV". During that week content produced by China Media Group, including the "Xi Jinping's classical literary quotes" was broadcast not only by Mediaset Group but also by Class Editori.⁴⁴

On 20 March 2019, one day before Xi's visit to Italy, the "Strategic dialogue between Chinese and Italian Media" was held in Rome. The event, attended by almost two hundred participants from the news ecosystems of both countries, was organised by CMG in cooperation with the Economic Daily, Class Editori and *Il Sole 24 Ore*.⁴⁵ Noticeably, many of the collaborations mentioned above were renewed in 2019. The link between such renewals and the signing of the MoU was evident. However, none of the above made it into the official 29 agreements signed that day, with the exception of the agreement of Rai and Ansa with China Media Group and Xinhua.

3. The 2019 MoU: An analysis of Rai and Ansa's agreements

The reason why only Ansa and Rai signed collaboration agreements with Chinese counterparts on the occasion of Xi's state visit is their relevance in the Italian media landscape. Rai (Radio Televisione Italiana) is Italy's national public broadcaster company and one of the largest companies operating in the sector, accounting for almost 36 per cent of total audience share.⁴⁶ Ansa (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa

2021, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/blinken-parla-hong-kong-ignora-rispetto-dei-diritti-umani-1952039.html>.

⁴² Mediaset also holds collaborations with Huawei. However that collaboration is not content-related but focuses on provision of infrastructures, software and hardware. See Huawei website: *Leading Media Company Secures Its Future in IPTV*, <https://e.huawei.com/topic/leading-new-ict-fr/mediaset-iptv-case.html>.

⁴³ Federico Fubini, "La tv cinese di Berlusconi, un flop da decine di milioni", in *La Repubblica*, 1 February 2014, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2014/02/01/news/berlusconi_affari_cina-77430038.

⁴⁴ "'Citazioni letterarie di Xi Jinping' consegue l'ampio apprezzamento del pubblico italiano", in *China Radio International*, 22 March 2019, <http://italian.cri.cn/1741/2019/03/22/283s338806.htm>. The same content was shared with other partners. During Xi's state visit to Greece, for example, similar programmes were broadcasted on Greek TV. See "Greece Welcomes Xi with TV Series and Film Launched", in *China Daily*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201911/11/WS5dc8bef5a310cf3e355768c0.html>.

⁴⁵ "Roma, al via il 'Dialogo tra Media cinesi e italiani'", in *China Radio International*, 21 March 2019, <http://italian.cri.cn/1781/2019/03/21/64s338642.htm>.

⁴⁶ Rai, *Rai: un anno di ascolti vincenti*, 2 January 2020, <http://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/articoli/2020/01/Rai-un-anno-di-ascolti-vincenti-0e69568d-a9ce-44e6-ad5a-6feb5fb07c18.html>.

Associata) is Italy's main news agency, used by Italian and foreign journalists to browse up-to-date news. Ansa also represents a primary source of information for the Italian public opinion, recording almost 179 million views per month on its website.⁴⁷

On top of the importance of Ansa and Rai, the pre-existing collaborations with the respective Chinese media must have also weighed in their inclusion amongst the other 29 agreements that were "attached" to the MoU. Unfortunately, neither of the agreements is publicly available. The information provided in this paper have been gathered through research on secondary sources and interviews.

3.1 Rai

Rai's attempts to develop collaborations with Chinese media predates March 2019 and can be traced back to 2016.⁴⁸ The relationship between Rai and CMG is embedded in a network of collaborations and agreements Rai holds with Asian as well as global partners. In such a context, the collaboration with CMG is neither exceptional nor preferential. Nonetheless, because of the size of the Chinese market, that specific cooperation is attractive for Rai.

Rai Television

Rai Com is the branch in charge of commercialising Rai's products all over the world. Among its core duties there is that of striking agreements with international partners, whether concerning TV, radio or else. Another relevant sector in which Rai's seeks for partnerships with foreign entities is the film industry. From a commercial point of view, China's wide news market, which can hardly be matched elsewhere, makes China a unique opportunity for Rai. However, getting access to the Chinese broadcasting market as well as finding a format that Chinese audiences would appreciate is difficult. For years, Rai has tried to co-produce content potentially appealing to the Chinese audience. So far, these attempts have borne little fruit. On this matter, the general nature of the MoU of 2019 did not provide a solution, leaving the situation unchanged and existing obstacles standing.⁴⁹

For example, according to sources within Rai, when the agreement of 2019 with CMG was signed, the then chief of Rai's Tv-dramas tried repeatedly to realise co-productions with CMG, but it was impossible to reconcile differences and create a successful production. Our source has highlighted the protracted difficulties in getting Chinese counterparts to agree on any TV content that goes beyond the usual cultural-historical programmes on Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit that spent

⁴⁷ See Ansa website: *Our Numbers*, https://www.ansa.it/corporate/en/info/our_numbers.html.

⁴⁸ Rai, *Firmato MoU con China Media Group*, 22 March 2019, <http://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/articoli/2019/03/Firmato-MoU-con-China-Media-Group--8c088f24-51f0-4449-be76-d2b06843824f.html>.

⁴⁹ Interview with a source from Rai, November 2020.

thirty years in China during the Ming dynasty between 1582 and 1610, and/or Marco Polo, the famous 13th century Venetian trader/traveller. The collaboration format that was supposed to facilitate future plans that was envisioned in the agreement of March 2019 failed soon after the visit and no longer exists.⁵⁰ In part, this failure stems from China's inflexibility over contents and process. There was little room for manoeuvre over contents beyond the usual cultural topics. While Rai was fine with this, it could not meet Chinese expectations that content would be produced and broadcasted quickly.

Despite this, Rai was able to make plans with CMG to broadcast the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the People's Republic of China that were to be held in 2020. Unfortunately, the pandemic of Cov-Sars-2 forced authorities to cancel most of the celebrations and thus most of Rai's planning. In the end, Rai broadcast the documentary "Chang'an meets Rome", which however was produced by CMG.⁵¹ The documentary broadcast on Rai Storia, Rai Play, Class Editori as well as CCTV. China's *Global Times* described it as "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".⁵²

Rai was not the only Italian media to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic relationship. Class Editori managed to co-produce a documentary for the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic relations titled "Una strada percorsa insieme, 50 anni di relazioni tra Cina e Italia" (A path taken together: 50 years of Italy-China relations).⁵³ The CMG and Class Editori documentary was broadcast in numerous Chinese and Italian channels, among which CCTV, the channel Sky Italia of Class CNBC and the previously mentioned app of Cinitalia.

Rai Radio

Rai and CMG have also been holding collaborations on radio broadcasting for a long time. An MoU with China Radio International was signed in 2015 but expired in 2017. However, the collaboration went on. In 2018, when Rai was renegotiating the agreement with CMG, a journalist of China Radio International followed the Italian music festival Sanremo.⁵⁴ Despite the marginally more successful outcomes in collaborating with CMG in radio broadcasting, Rai's core ambition – broad access to China's market – has largely remained unfulfilled.

⁵⁰ Rai, *Firmato MoU con China Media Group*, cit.; Interview with a source from Rai, November 2020.

⁵¹ The documentary is available online: <https://www.raisplay.it/programmi/changanmeetsrome>.

⁵² "Second Season of 4K Micro Documentary 'Chang'an Meets Rome' Shines Light on Friendly China-Italy Relations", in *Global Times*, 8 November 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1206078.shtml>.

⁵³ The documentary is available online: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=232135704950951>.

⁵⁴ Rai, *Firmato MoU con China Media Group*, cit.

Looking to the future, 2022 is going to be the year of Italy-China tourism and Rai and CMG are exploring ways to collaborate and cover the occasion. In this case too, China plans to leverage the Chinese interests in “easy” areas such as sport and the opera. Therefore, Rai Com is working out a package to offer Italian sport and opera to a Chinese audience, as well as the creation of documentaries on the world of design and fashion.⁵⁵

In spite of the MoU, Rai-CMG cooperation has proven unsuccessful. Rai has failed to foresee and then adapt to the inflexible Chinese approach and the Chinese have little understanding for Rai’s long production times.⁵⁶ Not only are collaborations between Rai and CMG yet to find a consistent expression but they also appear to be rather one-way. Either Italy adapts to China’s requests or China goes it alone. Many plans are in the pipelines, but differences between the two partners make their realisation difficult. The difference in approach and the distinct interests in content are augmented by the diverging drivers behind the collaboration. China Media Group’s main goal is to widen the knowledge and coverage of China in Italy and create a positive perception of China, while Rai’s goal is to access the Chinese consumers for reasons led by profit. The MoU has not provided a solution to any of these problems.

Rai has been covering China increasingly anyway. The content that is not the result of collaborations with China is not necessarily portraying China positively. It shows different aspects and points of views that increase the audience’s knowledge of China, whether positive or negative.⁵⁷ For example, Report, Rai’s main investigative journalism programme, has devoted numerous episodes to controversial issues about China: 5G, the use of Chinese technology in Italy and human rights abuses in Xinjiang.⁵⁸ Consequently, it seems that if part of the increased coverage of China is the result of the collaboration with CMG, a significant portion is simply the result of a growing attention towards an increasingly important – and controversial – global actor.

3.2 Ansa

Ansa is the other official signatory of an agreement with a Chinese media, Xinhua, that took place during Xi’s state visit. Much like in the case of Rai, the exploration of a collaboration between Ansa and potential Chinese counterparts was not a novelty of the MoU of 2019. In fact, Ansa and Xinhua had already signed a collaboration

⁵⁵ Interview with a source from Rai, November 2020.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See RaiPlay’s website: *Cina*, <https://www.raipley.it/ricerca.html?q=Cina>.

⁵⁸ Cataldo Ciccolella and Giulio Valesini, “L’occhio del Dragone”, in *Report*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.rai.it/programmi/report/inchieste/Locchio-del-Dragone-91d2b796-2cb6-411f-a4ea-a261b6267396.html>; Rosamaria Aquino, “La commessa cinese”, in *Report*, 11 January 2021, <https://www.rai.it/programmi/report/inchieste/Gli-smascherati-80631be5-078e-4565-906a-84cec407673d.html>.

agreement in May 2016.⁵⁹ Despite the allegedly increased presence of Ansa in Asia, it remains unclear what the 2016 agreement entailed, and which advantages Ansa gained out of it. The agreement envisaged the exchange of news between Ansa and Xinhua and collaboration to co-produce contents. Despite this pre-existing relationship, the content offered by Ansa on China changed only following the MoU of March 2019. Ansa has since not just increased its own coverage of China-related news (not surprising or unusual) but also hosted an increasing number of Xinhua-provided news stories (which are now the majority of China-related news offered by Ansa) as shown by the figure 2.⁶⁰ The inclusion of the Ansa-Xinhua agreement amongst the 29 signed under the MoU is due to the existing relationship between the two news agencies and the importance of Ansa for the Italian media landscape.

According to Ansa's website, the agreement of 2019 included the diffusion in Italy of a Xinhua news bulletin in Italian language, distributed exclusively by Ansa, called Xinhua Italian Service. Businesses and institutions can purchase such a news bulletin. However, in 2021, to the best of our knowledge, the service seems to be inactive. What is active is the publication by Ansa on its website of Xinhua's news translated into Italian. Apparently, Ansa is not alone in receiving news directly from Xinhua. "Xinhua News Agency distributes news across the globe in eight languages – Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese and Japanese. The Italian service increases the number of Xinhua news service languages to nine."⁶¹

Much like Rai, Ansa goes to great length to specify that the agreement signed with Xinhua is one of the numerous agreements the agency has signed with foreign partners. Notably, in 2016, when the first agreement was struck with Xinhua, Ansa was also launching Ansa Latin America, so the agreement with the Chinese media outlet should be seen as part of a broader strategy to strengthen Ansa's global presence.

Nevertheless, there is a major difference between the agreement of 2016 and that of 2019, at least for the average reader. If one navigates the Ansa website and makes a comparison of the degree of coverage dedicated to China through the years, one immediately notices a stark difference occurring after 2019 (see figure 2). If after 2016 media coverage regarding China remains consistent with the past, hence very limited, after 2019 not only did news on China increase dramatically, but a large

⁵⁹ "Italia-Cina: accordo di collaborazione tra Ansa e Xinhua", in *La Stampa*, 17 May 2016 (last modified 22 June 2019), <https://www.lastampa.it/economia/2016/05/17/news/italia-cina-accordo-di-collaborazione-tra-ansa-e-xinhua-1.35005650>; "Italia-Cina: accordo tra ANSA e Xinhua", in *Ansa*, 17 May 2016, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/asia/2016/05/16/italia-cina-accordo-tra-ansa-e-xinhua_41469a4a-ec5e-4c52-8c81-193ae4b0bc47.html.

⁶⁰ "ANSA e Xinhua News Agency: accordo di collaborazione per la distribuzione di contenuti", in *Ansa*, 22 March 2019, https://www.ansa.it/corporate/it/news_eventi/comunicati_stampa/2019/03/22/ansa-e-xinhua-news-agency-accordo-di-collaborazione-per-la-distribuzione-di-contenuti_ee954be9-cc57-4b63-9199-c03b4cff128c.html.

⁶¹ Yang Yi, "Xinhua News Agency, ANSA to Jointly Launch Xinhua Italian Service", in *Xinhua*, 23 March 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/23/c_137917481.htm.

amount of news from Xinhua suddenly appear. Data collected by the authors show an increase of more than 430 per cent in China-related news after 2019 compared to the years 2017 and 2018. News taken by Xinhua went from zero in 2017 and 2018 to 758 in 2019 and more than 2460 in 2020. Clearly, the pandemic played a role in bringing China to the attention of Italian media, but even after the initial period of high coverage of the pandemic the number remains remarkably high.

Figure 2 | China-related news on Ansa

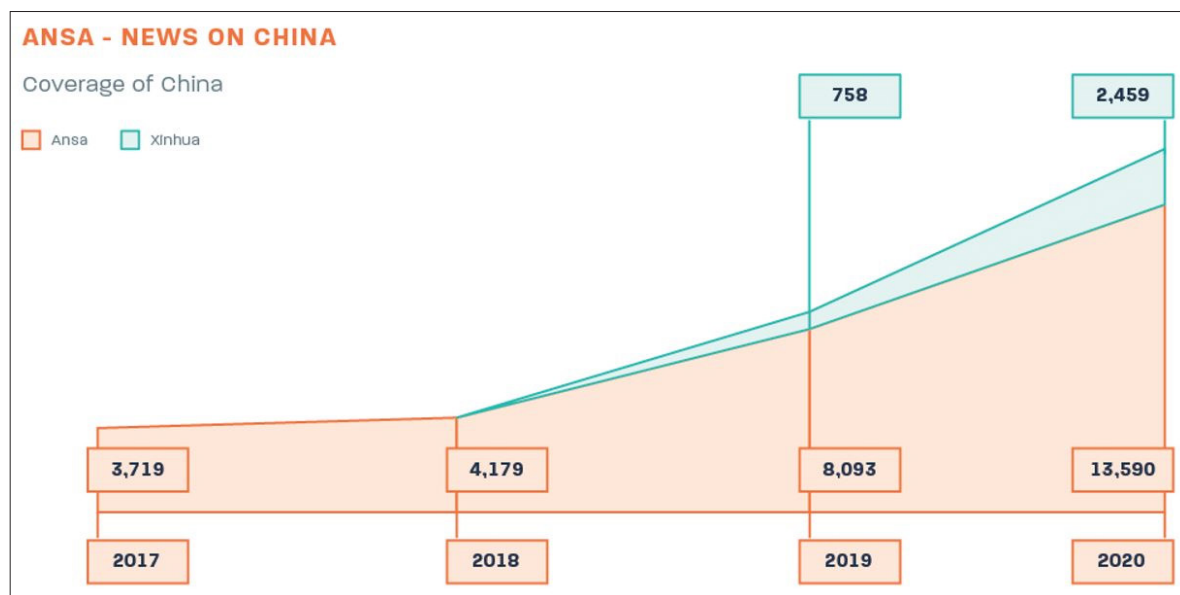


Figure 3 | Example of Xinhua news published by Ansa

ANSA.it • Mondo • Notiziario Xinhua • **Cina: ferrovia alta velocità simbolo di prosperità**
 Responsabilità editoriale Xinhua.

Cina: ferrovia alta velocità simbolo di prosperità

Olivia Cheung, ricercatrice China Institute Università di Londra

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(XINHUA) - WASHINGTON, 26 MAG - Dalla prima linea nel 2008, al record mondiale nel chilometraggio, la ferrovia ad alta velocità cinese ha simboleggiato il potere economico del Paese, la rapida modernizzazione, la crescente abilità tecnologica e l'aumento della prosperità. È quanto affermato da Olivia Cheung, ricercatrice presso il China Institute dell'Università di Londra, riportata dalla CNN venerdì scorso.

By looking at the agreement signed by Ansa in 2019 and the increase in coverage that followed two questions arise. Are readers aware of the origin of this information? And if so, is the information directly translated from the text provided by Xinhua or is it an elaboration made by Ansa? Ansa ensures that every news reported from Xinhua is labelled as such (as per figure 3). However, the news are not elaborated by Ansa but translated from the available Chinese version. For example, the news in Figure 3 is titled: "China high-speed train symbol of prosperity". One can hardly imagine the average Italian media using such type of hyped narrative. That kind of narrative is however typical of Chinese media and communication. Thus, even though Ansa is the one selecting the news to publish, the process of selection could be improved.

Both elements give rise to potential problems. Despite Ansa's attempt to flag the origin of the information by labelling the news as Xinhua's, the grand majority of the Italian public will not know what Xinhua is and thus will read the news as any other content published by Ansa. This is not necessarily true for journalists that might use Ansa to check the news available, although the previously mentioned case of Libero proves that it is not always the case. The issue is not unique to Xinhua, as the same dynamics exist with other foreign agencies whose news are published by Ansa. However, the propagandistic nature of the information from Xinhua makes its case more problematic: if readers look at news articles that originated from Xinhua and treat them as Ansa reports, they will not consider the potentially propaganda-like cut of Chinese news. Here, another issue arises, the lack of awareness of the Italian public regarding China. In fact, even in a scenario where the label works and the Italian public understands it comes from a Chinese source, how many will know how to approach that information? The answer is: very few.

It must be noted that much of the news is harmless, and Ansa keeps covering China also outside of the partnership with Xinhua by producing its own news about China. Overall, if one were to assess the impact of these two agreements on the output of Rai and Ansa, one could not avoid but notice that Ansa is the bearer of the largest impact, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Yet, if one compares the collaborations with Chinese media groups of Italian outlets that that were not part of the 29 official agreements and those of Rai and Ansa, the main conclusion is that Rai and Ansa are not doing anything new, different, or more controversial than other Italian media do. They have simply received more attention as a result of them being amongst the 29 official agreements and of their importance in the country. Interestingly, they appear to have remained more limited in scope and impact on outputs compared to those of, for example, Class Editori.

Conclusions: Assessing China's penetration in Italian media

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has enhanced its efforts to improve its image abroad. The campaign to "tell the China story well" has amounted to great

investments both economically and politically. The internationalisation of Chinese media with the objective to better embed them in the international media system is functional to this strategy. Amongst all the strategies adopted by Chinese media on behalf of the CCP, the one most used in the Italian context is that of broad memoranda of understanding for collaboration, which often include agreements for the sharing and co-production of contents.

The collaborations between Italian and Chinese media are numerous, longstanding, and difficult to map out. Most of these collaborations predate the signing of the MoU in 2019 and are not listed amongst the 29 official agreements signed on the occasion of Xi's state visit. In this regard, the MoU did not bring new collaborations. Still, directly, or indirectly, it boosted some of those already existing. Directly, that between Ansa and Xinhua. Indirectly, for example, that of Class Editori and China Media Group. It should be noted though that, while some of the content co-produced (especially for TV broadcasting) is intended to speak to audiences of both countries, the stream of news is generally one-sided since Chinese media do not republish articles from their Italian counterparts.

If the content of the agreements is vague, implementation is anything but optimal, as the agreement between Rai and CMG demonstrates. The outreach effort by the CCP towards the Italian public has produced so far very little results, as the perception of China in Italy has not improved.⁶² Public opinion is obviously influenced by a variety of factors, and therefore the lack of concrete results cannot be imputed solely to the ineffective communication strategies carried out by Chinese media. The mounting criticisms towards Beijing on critical issues – such as lack of transparency over the origin of covid-19, human rights violations or the political use of new technologies – have undoubtedly played a role in curbing China's campaign to win Italian hearts and minds.

It was not the scope of this research to shed light on all the factors that influenced the shaping of Italian public opinion on China. However, a tentative analysis identified a few explanations linked to the Italian media landscape. First, the lack of interest of the Italian readership in foreign policy means that a part of the public might not be interested in looking at such information to begin with. Second, the Italian public is keener in using TV as means of information rather than newspapers or websites. TV coverage of China remains prevalently critical, or sceptical at the very least (and often oversimplistic) of China. For example, Report, Rai's main investigative journalism programme, has broadcast an investigation on China's use of surveillance technology in Xinjiang.⁶³ Third, and perhaps most importantly, the Italian media landscapes keeps offering a variegated debate on China that displays different positions.

⁶² Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People", in *Pew Research Center Reports*, 30 June 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/?p=49754>.

⁶³ Cataldo Ciccolella and Giulio Valesini, "L'occhio del Dragone", cit.

The lack of results in favour of the Chinese strategy does not mean that these collaborations do not generate controversies. Because of their propagandistic content, the publication of the translation of Chinese articles without editorial changes or fact-checking practice exposes the Italian public to potential disinformation. One solution would be to label them for what they are: news with a propagandistic cut. That would help Italian readers as well as generalist journalist to better understand the nature of what they are reading without limiting, let alone censoring, the inflow of information.

The pandemic increased the attention on China, further igniting the debate and the interest of the Italian public towards China. Outlets, platforms and authors previously relegated to a niche readership gained increased prominence and followers. Two emblematic cases are the newsletter *Katane* from Giulia Pompili, a journalist for the national daily *Il Foglio*, and *China Files*, an online platform that brings together journalists with expertise on China and Sinologists. *Katane* brings news and analysis about Asia. Funded in 2017, the newsletter now counts more than 4,000 followers.⁶⁴ *China Files*, founded in Beijing in 2008 by Simone Pieranni, a reporter of the daily *Il manifesto*, saw an increase of followers in 2020, after the beginning of the pandemic of covid-19. Since then, it has expanded its network of collaborations as well as outputs.⁶⁵

This type of journalism contributes to improving the understanding of China rather than offering pre-packaged information or “cultural” contents that stay clear of any potential controversial issue. Outlets that have collaborations with Chinese media keep offering their own content too, which does not necessarily depict China positively. *Ansa* and *Il Giornale* are two perfect examples of this. The reader, however, should be under no illusion that all Italian journalism covering China is offering high quality contents. There are still numerous news outlets that do not employ journalists specialised in China and keep offering a superficial coverage of the country.

Despite the numerous and longstanding collaborations between Italian and Chinese media, Italy remains a country that offers a pluralistic view of China. More interest in China by the audience as well as more coverage of China by Italian media should, therefore, be encouraged further. As China becomes increasingly important, media should hire journalists and staff with expertise on China. Overall, Italy is not very well equipped to respond to the challenge posed by the internationalisation of Chinese media, but it can and should do more to provide the audience with the tools to recognise propaganda and fake news. However, that is an issue that goes beyond collaborations with Chinese media and requires broader thinking about how to respond to propaganda and fake news.

Updated 1 October 2021

⁶⁴ Interview with Giulia Pompili, May 2021.

⁶⁵ Interview with staff of *China Files*, March 2021.

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