

Silk Road Academic Connections: China–Italy Cooperation in Higher Education and Its Implications for the West

by Nicola Casarini

ABSTRACT

Cooperation in higher education and research is a positive aspect of the broader Italy–China relationship as it contributes to the advancement of the scientific and cultural environment in both countries. China has invested considerable sums to promote cooperation and exchanges with the Italian academy, including through the establishment of a dozen Confucius Institutes and a number of Confucius Classrooms. Italian universities have set up academic partnerships with Chinese entities on almost every subject. These have improved Italy's research outlook, but have also posed inevitable risks of self-censorship and kowtowing to Chinese wishes. Moreover, there has been a surge of academic sponsorships by Chinese firms, in particular ICT companies such as ZTE and Huawei, which raise further concerns for Italy's security interests and cooperation with its Western allies.

China | Italy | Education | R&D | Science | Technology

keywords

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Introduction

Cooperation between Italian and Chinese universities and research institutes has gone hand in hand with the overall development of Italy–China relations. Italy was one of the first Western countries signing an intergovernmental agreement with China on science and technology cooperation in 1978 and to open up its universities to Chinese scholars and students.¹ Cooperation has intensified in the last years, in particular in the run-up to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in support of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) between Italy and China in March 2019. The MoU contains clear references to higher education, academic, cultural and science and technology (S&T) cooperation.

The Chinese government regards education and scientific research as important forces in the implementation of the country's innovation-driven development. Cooperation with Italy (as well as with other EU countries) is seen as instrumental for helping China address gaps in the capacity and quality of its own higher education and research systems in areas where Italian academia has achieved international excellence. Likewise, Italy considers cooperation with China an important aspect for advancing scientific research and mutual understanding as well as for improving bilateral ties.

¹ Maurizio Marinelli and Giovanni Andornino (eds), *Italy's Encounters with Modern China. Imperial Dreams, Strategic Ambitions*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014, p. 14.

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China and Italy are active in promoting joint projects and collaborations between their state-funded research centres. The Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development (Agenzia nazionale per le nuove tecnologie, l'energia e lo sviluppo economico sostenibile, ENEA) collaborates with the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS). The National Institute for Nuclear Physics cooperates with the Institute of High Energy Physics (IHEP), a division of the CAS.² The Italian Space Agency collaborates with the China National Space Administration.³ In addition, some key research institutes of Italy's National Research Council (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, CNR) cooperate with various departments of the CAS and of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).⁴

China has also invested considerable sums to fund cooperation projects in several Italian schools, universities and research institutes, including the establishment of a dozen Confucius Institutes and a number of Confucius Classrooms in Italy. The majority of Italian universities has established academic partnerships with Chinese universities on almost every subject, from art history to economics, from particle physics to digital technologies. Moreover, there has been a surge of academic sponsorships by Chinese firms, in particular information and communication technology (ICT) companies such as ZTE and Huawei, raising questions about the implications for Italy's national interest and the security of its Western allies.

This study maintains that Italy–China cooperation in higher education and research, including academic sponsorships by China-linked firms, have been largely beneficial for the two sides. However, given that collaboration in the field of science and technology (S&T) is not fully neutral, it has been increasingly scrutinised by policymakers, although the Italian government has not yet taken any initiative to limit – or ban – specific research collaboration/projects with China. This puts Italy out of sync with some of its allies – such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands, which have all adopted measures to monitor China's growing influence in university campuses and even banned specific projects and/or academic sponsorships by China-linked individuals and organisations based on national security considerations.

This paper aims to contribute to the debate about Chinese influence in Italian higher education and research environment. It highlights aspects that warrant further discussion and possibly action by policymakers committed to minimising risks for Italy's national security and that of its Western allies that may derive from academic collaboration with Chinese institutions.

² Marco Maggiora, "Italy-China: A Consolidated Synergy for Particle Physics", in *INFN Newsletter*, No. 42 (December 2017), p. 2-5, <https://home.infn.it/newsletter-eu/newsletter-infn-eu-42.html>.

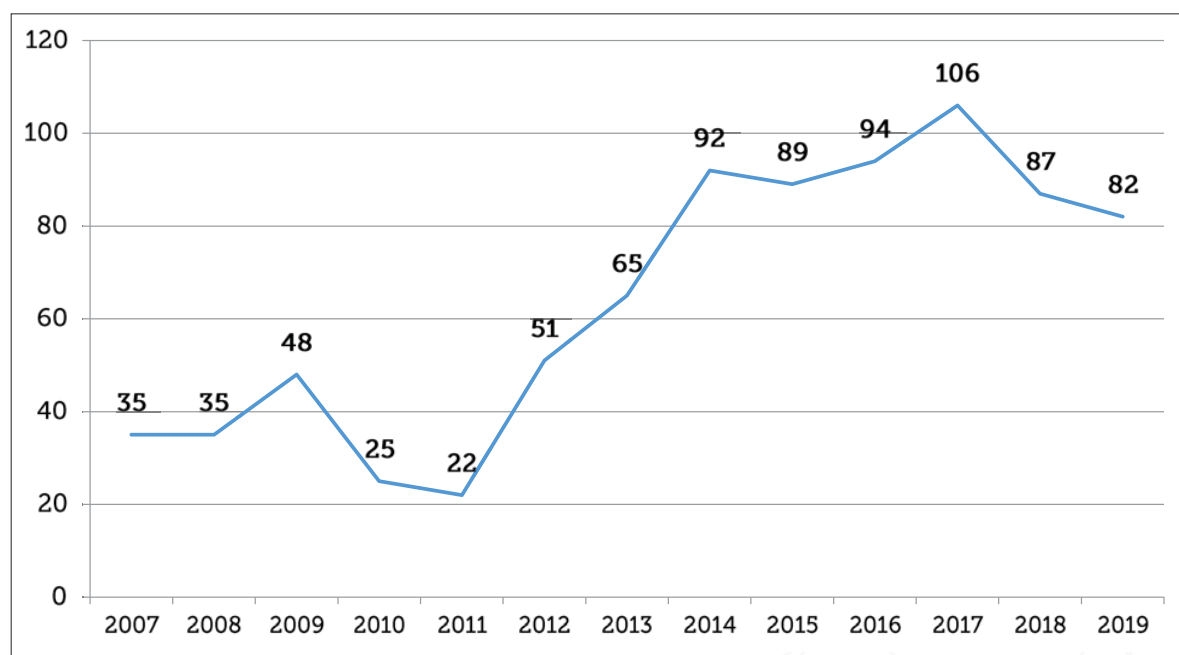
³ Elena Dusi, "Italia e Cina insieme nello spazio: firmati gli accordi per l'esplorazione del cosmo", in *Repubblica*, 23 March 2019, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2019/03/23/news/italia_e_cina_insieme_nello_spazio_firmati_gli_accordi_per_l_esplorazione_del_cosmo-222343826.

⁴ For more details see the website of the China's Embassy in Italy: *Cooperazione scientifica e tecnologica*, 30 June 2004, <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/kjhz/t141433.htm>.

1. Italy–China cooperation in higher education and research

Italy–China collaboration in higher education and research has intensified greatly in recent years, including in the area of student mobility, inter-university collaboration, or cooperation between businesses and research institutions. To date, 932 collaboration agreements between Italian and Chinese universities have been signed, three hundred of which with first-tier Chinese universities.⁵ These numbers are in line with what China has done with other European countries (with the exception of the United Kingdom, which stands out in terms of number of cooperation agreements and academic ties with Chinese entities).

Figure 1 | Number of new academic agreements signed by Italian and Chinese universities per year



Source: Cineca database: *Le collaborazioni interuniversitarie tra l'Italia e i Paesi del Mondo: Collaborazioni interuniversitarie*, <https://accordi-internazionali.cineca.it/index.php?pag=AV>.

According to Italian Ministry of University, Education and Research (MIUR), from 2008 to 2019 the number of Chinese students in Italy (without government grants) increased from 1,136 to 4,662 (since 2020 there has been a slight decrease due to the covid-19 pandemic). Two programmes created by the MIUR – the Marco Polo and Turandot programme – have been very successful.⁶ For the academic

⁵ Lorenzo Mariani and Francesca Ghiretti, "Economy and Culture: Two Tracks for China's Soft Power In Italy", in Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin and Vera Kranenburg (eds), *China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times*, The Hague, Clingendael, April 2021, p. 52-56, <https://www.clingendael.org/node/12620>.

⁶ The Marco Polo programme gives the possibility to Chinese students who do not speak Italian to

year 2019–20, around 2,471 Chinese students (1,744 for Turandot and 727 for Marco Polo) were enrolled in Italian universities.⁷ While Chinese students apply for positions across the whole spectrum of subjects, there is a preference for hard science and some areas of the humanities and arts where Italian academia has achieved international excellence such as art history, archaeology or music. The preferred academic destinations of Chinese students in Italy are the Polytechnics of Milan and Turin, the LUISS-Guido Carli University in Rome and the University of Bologna. However, it is now possible to see Chinese students in almost all Italian universities, including those offering online learning modules.

The growing number of Chinese students in Italy has led to the creation of such associations as the Chinese Students and Scholars Union in Italy⁸ as well as some local groups, such as Ciao Cina, active in the Naples area.⁹ Moreover, a number of alumni networks have emerged that are understandably keen to promote a positive image of China in Italy.¹⁰ An example of this is the donation of facemasks to the civil protection agency of Lombardy during the initial outbreak of covid-19 in March–April 2020 by Chinese alumni of the Polytechnic of Turin who collected money in China via WeChat (Lombardy in northern Italy was the region that was hit first and hardest by covid).¹¹ The explicitly stated mission of many alumni networks is the commitment to the creation of cross-border communities.¹² The example provided and the many others that can be publicly found on university websites show how these networks can cultivate a positive perception of China and help promote China–Italy ties.

1.1 Italy's place in China's higher education and scientific research strategy

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), higher education and scientific research are key to the implementation of the country's innovation-driven growth strategy. By 2035, China aims to be one of the most advanced countries in terms of learning,

get an entry visa and enroll in a university (in courses of study with a reserved quota for Marco Polo students). Turandot is a programme covering arts, music and design that makes possible for Chinese students to enroll in the Italian Academic Institutions of Higher Education in Art and Music (AFAM) with the same advantageous prerogatives offered by the Marco Polo programme. For more details see UNESCO website: *MARCO POLO and TURANDOT Programmes*, <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/node/10564>.

⁷ For more details see: Antonio Fiori, "La collaborazione Italia-Cina in ambito formativo: verso una regionalizzazione?", in *ISPI Commentaries*, 16 December 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/node/28689>.

⁸ See the official website: <https://www.cssui.org>.

⁹ See the official website: *Chi siamo*, <https://www.associazioneciaocina.com/?p=11102>.

¹⁰ Lorenzo Mariani and Francesca Ghiretti, "Economy and Culture: Two Tracks for China's Soft Power In Italy", cit.

¹¹ Leonardo Di Paco, "Coronavirus, ecco il regalo degli ex allievi cinesi al Poli: raccolgono 17mila euro e comprano mascherine", in *La Stampa*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2020/03/19/news/coronavirus-ecco-il-regalo-degli-ex-allievi-cinesi-al-poli-raccolgono-17mila-euro-e-comprano-mascherine-1.38612646>.

¹² See the Alumni PoliTO website: *Chinese Alumni Community*, <https://www.alumni.polito.it/polito-chinese-alumni-community>.

human resources, and talent cultivation in higher education. By 2049, China wants to be a world leading country in S&T and innovation. These goals are not just slogans. They are supported by numerous strategic policies as well as considerable financial investments.¹³ China's research plans are built around the strategic areas identified in the 13th and 14th Five-Year Plan as well as Made in China 2025, the country's state-led industrial policy aimed at boosting the development of high-tech industries and high-end productions.

China needs international collaboration to address gaps in the capacity and quality of its own higher education and research system. In June 2020, the Ministry of Education and seven other ministries jointly published a plan to further open up education, including deeper international collaboration and exchange in all subjects and at all levels.¹⁴ Moreover, the government is seeking to build connections between the higher education and research system and BRI policies to strengthen China's attractiveness as a study destination and build a Chinese-led education community.

As said above, China has invested in various cooperation projects with Italian schools, universities and research institutes, including through the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms. Besides promoting cultural and academic exchanges, those investments also serve other goals, notably:

1. Help China address gaps in the capacity and quality of its own higher education and research systems in fields where Italian academia has achieved international excellence (this includes both humanities in areas such as archaeology and art history, as well as hard sciences in areas such as engineering and aerospace).
2. Exert influence on the way China is narrated in Italy, in the attempt to have researchers and academic institutions avoid some topics (such as human rights, Xinjiang, etc.), present a positive view of China and of the BRI and stifle (as much as possible) criticism of Chinese authoritarianism.

The former goal is pursued primarily through joint projects and academic partnerships with Italian universities and research institutes, while the latter is achieved mainly through the activities of the Confucius Institutes.

¹³ For more details see: *Science and Technology System Reform Act (1985)*; *National High-tech R&D Program (863 Program)*, 9 July 2010, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceno/eng/kj/program/t715317.htm>; China's State Council, *The National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006-2020). An Outline*, 2006, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/National_Strategies_Repository/China_2006.pdf. For a comprehensive analysis of Italy–China S&T cooperation see: Lorenzo Mariani, "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Internationalisation of China's Scientific Power: The Case of Italy", in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|40 (September 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13975>.

¹⁴ Chinese Ministry of Education, 教育部等八部门关于加快和扩大新时代教育对外开放的意见 (Opinion by eight government bodies including the Ministry of Education on accelerating and expanding the opening-up of education in the new era), 23 June 2020, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/202006/t20200623_467784.html. For a background analysis of the above document see: Australian Ministry of Education website: *China's Education Modernisation Plan towards 2035*, last updated on 1 April 2020, <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/international-network/china/PolicyUpdates-China/Pages/China-s-education-modernisation-plan-towards-2035-.aspx>.

2. The Confucius Institutes in Italy

In Italy – like in the rest of the world – Confucius Institutes have been positioned as the flagship of Chinese cultural promotion and educational exchange.¹⁵ There are today twelve Confucius Institutes in Italian universities¹⁶ and several Confucius Classrooms, which are CI offshoots found in secondary schools, offering Chinese language and culture classes.¹⁷

The CIs are integrated into their host universities. Italy's biggest CI – and Europe's second largest – is the one opened in 2006 within the Department of Oriental Studies at the Sapienza University of Rome (Italy's biggest university). Other important CIs in Italy are those in Naples and Venice. As to the Confucius Classrooms found in secondary schools, the first was opened within the Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II high school in Rome in 2010. A few years ago, a Confucius Classroom was opened in the Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II in Naples and subsequently in Arezzo in Tuscany. In those secondary schools administered directly by Italy's Ministry of Education, teachers paid by the Hanban (the government agency affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education that oversees the Confucius Institute programme) teach students Chinese language as well as history and geography.

Beijing provides a significant portion of the funding and pays the salaries of the teaching staff – a practice warmly welcomed by Italy's universities and secondary schools, which are under severe budget constraints. Moreover, there has been a steep demand for Chinese language courses in recent years, in particular in secondary schools, as an increasing number of young Italians look at China as a promising opportunity for their careers.¹⁸

¹⁵ For more details see: Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin and Vera Kranenburg (eds), *China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times*, The Hague, Clingendael, April 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/node/12620>.

¹⁶ They are: Istituto Confucio Sapienza Università di Roma; Istituto Confucio Università degli Studi di Milano; Istituto Confucio di Napoli; Istituto Confucio di Pisa; Istituto Confucio di San Marino; Istituto Confucio Università Cattolica Sacro Cuore di Milano; Istituto Confucio Università degli Studi di Firenze; Istituto Confucio Università di Macerata; Istituto Confucio Università di Padova; Istituto Confucio Università di Torino; Istituto Confucio Università di Bologna; Istituto Confucio Venezia – Ca' Foscari.

¹⁷ Data from: DigMandarin website: *Confucius Institutes Around the World – 2021*, last updated on 22 February 2021, <https://www.digmandarin.com/?p=5269>. DigMandarin is an organisation controlled by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (also known as Hanban), a government agency affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education that oversees the Confucius Institute programme. While officially under the Ministry of Education, Hanban's governing council is chaired by Sun Chunlan, a vice premier and member of the powerful Politburo. From 2014 to 2017, Sun led the United Front Work Department, which runs a massive influence operation inside and outside of China, reporting directly to the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee.

¹⁸ Antonella De Gregorio, "Boom del cinese tra gli studenti italiani. Storie di un anno in Cina", in *Corriere della Sera*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.corriere.it/scuola/studiare-e-lavorare-all-estero/notizie/boom-cinese-gli-studenti-italiani-null-5fba1e1a-a533-11e7-ac7b-c4dea2ad0535.shtml>.

An academic article called “Image of Confucius Institute in Italian Media Discourse” by Marco Volpe (from the Sapienza University of Rome) and Li Quiyang (Xiangtan University, Hunan), published in 2016, helps us better understand the perception of the CIs in Italy. The two authors investigated how the Italian cultural elites reacted to the establishment of Confucius Institutes.¹⁹ They collected and examined 32 articles that had been published since 2010 on Italian national dailies, including *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *Il manifesto*, *La Repubblica*, and periodicals such as *Internazionale*, *Mondo Cinese*, specialised websites such as Cinaforum.net and Agi China 24 as well as other online channels.

The results were the following. Forty-seven per cent of the reports showed a positive attitude toward the Confucius Institutes in that they highlighted the usefulness of learning Chinese in professional careers, the importance of the CIs as “bridges” to Chinese knowledge and culture, and the value of the CIs as instruments to improve mutual understanding and contribute to get people closer to the China world. Fifty-three per cent of the reports showed a negative attitude toward the Confucius Institutes due to the risk of CIs channelling CCP propaganda and the threat they pose to academic freedom, as CIs or CI-driven projects avoid controversial topics (such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, human rights) or promote fake historical facts (i.e. Taiwan as part of China).

Since the article by Volpe and Quiyang was published in 2016 various scholars have contributed to the debate, with some pointing out that China is not the only country using cultural diplomacy to achieve political goals. In addition, academics from different Confucius Institutes in Italy flatly reject the charge that they lack academic freedom and insist on the integrity of the research programmes they run.²⁰ A debate has thus emerged in Italy regarding the Confucius Institutes and their links to the Chinese Communist Party, similarly to what has happened in other Western nations.

2.1 Backlash against the Confucius Institutes

Recently, a number of Western countries have ramped up efforts to close CIs and Confucius Classrooms. In August 2020, the US State Department classified the Washington-based Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a foreign mission of China on the grounds that it is “an entity advancing Beijing’s global propaganda and malign influence campaign on U.S. campuses and K-12 classrooms”.²¹ Following the backlash against CIs in the United States and other Western countries, Beijing decided to set up a new organisation tasked to manage the CIs worldwide – the

¹⁹ Marco Volpe and Li Quiyang, “Image of Confucius Institute in Italian Media Discourse”, in *Sinología Hispánica*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2016), p. 25-56, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18002/sin.v2i1.5249>.

²⁰ Veronica Strina, “Sinologie – Censimento degli Istituti Confucio in Italia”, in *China Files*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.china-files.com/sinologie-censimento-degli-istituti-confucio-in-italia>.

²¹ Naima Green-Railey, “The State Department Labeled China’s Confucius Programs a Bad Influence on U.S. Students. What’s the Story?”, in *Monkey Cage*, 25 August 2020, <https://wapo.st/31oVFxe>.

Chinese International Education Foundation – as well as to rebrand the CIs as Centres for Language, Education and Cooperation (CLEC).

The debate in Italy has been more narrowly focused, as it is confined to individual initiatives. For instance, in 2019 two leading sinologists – Stefania Stafutti from the University of Turin and Maurizio Scarpari from the University of Venice – took critical positions in the media with articles in the *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's main daily. They criticised China's policy of detaining Uighurs in Xinjiang and the crackdown on pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong, and expressed concerns about how the CIs were used to promote the Chinese version of facts. Scarpari specifically brought to public attention the question of the Confucius Institutes in Italy and their propaganda activities, calling for removing Confucius Institutes from Italian universities.²²

In another article, published in January 2021 on *Sinosfere*, Scarpari further argued that the backlash against – and the rebranding of – the Confucius Institutes would not change the debate in Italy, explaining that there seems to be no willingness from Italian universities to rethink their cooperation model with the Hanban for cultural and financial reasons.²³ The last point is particularly important, since the CIs bring money to an Italian academia that is chronically underfunded. It seems quite difficult for Italian universities to give up on funding coming from Beijing.

Antonio Tripodi, a member of the Academic Board of the University Ca' Foscari in Venice, also took part in the debate with an op-ed in the *Corriere della Sera*. He accused the university of self-censorship and kowtowing to Beijing for fear of missing out much needed financial resources that the Italian government was unable/unwilling to provide. The result, Tripodi contends, is that in the last years not a single event and/or debate has been organised in Venice on issues related to Taiwan, Tibet or Tiananmen.²⁴

Tripodi's piece in the *Corriere della Sera* touched upon a sensitive aspect related to the Confucius Institutes, namely that their establishment inside a university can have spill-over effects that go beyond the teaching of the Chinese language and culture. Funds coming from Beijing – often via the Chinese Embassy – are sometimes channelled through the Confucius Institute to other departments

²² Maurizio Scarpari, "La Cina e noi: fuori gli Istituti Confucio dalle università italiane", in *Corriere della Sera*, 16 December 2019, https://www.corriere.it/la-lettura/19_dicembre_16/cina-noi-fuori-istituti-confucio-universita-italiane-461cd4ca-1f61-11ea-92c8-1d56c6e24126.shtml. For the article of Stefania Stafutti see: "L'appello della docente: 'Xi Jinping incontra gli studenti di Hong Kong'", in *Corriere della Sera*, 20 November 2019, https://www.corriere.it/esteri/19_novembre_20/appello-docente-xi-jinping-incontri-studenti-hong-kong-466f6342-0bad-11ea-a21c-9507e0a03cd5.shtml.

²³ Maurizio Scarpari, "All'ombra dell'anaconda. Considerazioni sinologiche", in *Sinosfere*, 13 January 2021, <https://wp.me/p8pI64-2v5>.

²⁴ Antonio Tripodi, "L'influenza degli Istituti Confucio è (anche) colpa di università succubi", in *Corriere della Sera*, 19 December 2019, https://www.corriere.it/la-lettura/19_dicembre_19/istituti-confucio-cina-polemica-replica-tripodi-veneziana-la-lettura-9591dd64-2265-11ea-8e32-6247f341a5cc.shtml.

and research centres of the host university and can indeed lead to forms of self-censorship – as denounced by Tripodi. In other words, the CI may serve as an entry point for Chinese influence into the academic system. This is an issue that echoes the debate occurred at the EU level and in other European nations in the last years, following a number of incidents.

2.2 Pushback against Chinese influence on campuses

One of such incidents took place at Prague's Charles University, where secret payments to its Czech-Chinese Centre by the Chinese embassy created a scandal and raised concerns that the centre was being used by Beijing to influence Czech academia. The university closed the centre and fired some of the involved faculty members.²⁵ Another incident involved the Free University of Berlin, which faced criticism when it emerged that, in exchange for funds from Beijing to establish a Chinese teaching programme, it had signed a contract forcing it to abide by Chinese law.²⁶ Critics said this would give the Chinese government undue influence when it came to teaching about sensitive issues. The London School of Economics suspended its plan for a China programme after academics criticised the fact that the proposed programme was to be funded by an outspoken defender of Chinese government policies.²⁷ Meanwhile, a committee of the British House of Commons reported that it had "heard alarming evidence about the extent of Chinese influence on the campuses of UK universities".²⁸ In the Netherlands, a recent report concluded that the Chinese government wielded political influence on Dutch campuses. The report said the Chinese government exerted such influence primarily by (directly and indirectly) pressuring scholars, students and publishers into self-censorship, but also by limiting research opportunities of scholars and through censoring publications.²⁹

In Italy, the question regarding Chinese influence in the campuses of Italian universities has been addressed by a few politicians, without reaching, however,

²⁵ Alžběta Bajerová, "The Czech-Chinese Centre of Influence: How Chinese Embassy in Prague Secretly Funded Activities at the Top Czech University", in *ChinaObservers*, 7 November 2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/?p=1514>.

²⁶ David Matthews, "Chinese Contract with German University Criticized", in *Times Higher Education*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/node/321676>.

²⁷ Primrose Riordan, "London School of Economics Academics Outraged by Proposed China Programme", in *Financial Times*, 27 October 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/2dd5ed50-f538-11e9-a79c-bc9acae3b654>.

²⁸ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *A Cautious Embrace: Defending Democracy in an Age of Autocracies*, 5 November 2019, p. 5, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmfaaff/109/109.pdf>. The same allegations were contained in the report by King's College London and Harvard Kennedy School: Jo Johnson et al., "The China Question. Managing Risks and Maximising Benefits from Partnership in Higher Education and Research", in *M-RCBG Associate Working Papers*, No. 161 (March 2021), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/node/304280>.

²⁹ Ingrid d'Hooghe and Jonas Lammertink, *Towards Sustainable Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research*, Leiden, Leiden Asia Centre, October 2020, <https://leidenasiacentre.nl/?p=10378>.

the government level.

Members of the two far-right parties – the League and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) – as well as members of the centrist Forza Italia and of the transatlantic wing of the centre-left Democratic Party have been active in denouncing Chinese growing attempts at gaining influence in the national higher education system. A report published by the right-leaning Fondazione Farefuturo on the Chinese challenge and the position of the Italian Republic received a fair amount of attention.³⁰ The report presents several examples of Chinese attempts at gaining influence in Italy.³¹

What emerges from this debate is a growing concern that China links pose a threat to Italy's freedom in higher education, echoing similar worries in other European countries. For instance, in an op-ed published in the *Financial Times* in June 2021, Tom Tugendhat, Chair of the UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Select Committee, after denouncing an overreliance of the British academic system on China for a steady stream of students, research partnerships and funding, called for the government to mandate a compulsory reporting of all sponsorships by China-linked firms and academic partnerships with Chinese institutions.³²

Italian universities have established academic partnerships with their Chinese counterparts on almost every subject. These partnerships have been accompanied by a growing number of academic sponsorships by China-linked firms. For instance, Chinese ICT companies such as Huawei and ZTE have supported partnerships between Italian and Chinese universities.

3. The interplay of academia and business

In July 2017 the Italian branch of ZTE, one of China's major ICT companies, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Tor Vergata University of Rome to establish the ZTE Joint Training Center (JTC), tasked with developing and promoting managerial training in collaboration with the Tor Vergatas's engineering department. In November 2017 ZTE and the University of L'Aquila signed a cooperation agreement to establish a 5G joint innovation research centre.³³

³⁰ "Fase2. Urso (FdI): domani Farefuturo presenta Rapporto come la Cina agisce per sottomettere l'Italia e la UE", in *La voce del patriota*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.lavocedelpatriota.it/?p=24466>. See also the blog of Adolfo Urso: <https://adolfo-urso.it/tag/cina>. Urso is Senator of Fratelli d'Italia and President of Copasir – the Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic, a body of the Italian Parliament deputed to survey and oversee the activities of the Italian intelligence agencies.

³¹ Giulio Terzi Di Sant'agata and Laura Harth (eds), *Conoscere per deliberare. La sfida cinese e la posizione della Repubblica Italiana*, Rome, Fondazione Farefuturo, May 2020, <https://farefuturofondazione.it/?p=5869>.

³² Tom Tugendhat, "China Links Pose a Threat to Academic Freedom in Britain", in *Financial Times*, 19 June 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/f96e158c-a7ce-489d-846a-3445114752dd>.

³³ See the website of the Tor Vergata University of Rome: *Accordo ZTE - Ateneo di "Tor Vergata" per formare i manager del futuro*, last modified on 4 April 2019, <https://web.uniroma2.it/module/name/>

In December 2017 a roundtable conference called *ZTE and Italy Grow Together* was held in Rome. It was moderated by Hu Kun, President for Western Europe and CEO of ZTE Italia. The guests included Jeffery Hedbery, CEO of Wind Tre (a major telecom company); Andrea Falessi, the external affairs manager of Open Fiber; Paola Inverardi, the Dean of L'Aquila University; Giuseppe Novelli, the President of the Tor Vergata University of Rome; the economist Noreena Hertz; as well as representative from China's embassy, Xuan Zheng. Hu Kun specifically said that Italy is one of ZTE's key countries in its global 5G deployment and that ZTE would invest considerably in the Italian telecommunications market. Hu also pointed out that ZTE's core strategy in Italy was to actively cooperate with local operators and the government, invest in scientific research with local universities to build a 5G industry-university integrated ecosystem in Italy.³⁴

An outcome of this strategy was the conclusion on 8 February 2018 of a memorandum of understanding between ZTE and the Rome City Council of a contract for the Roma 5G project. According to the contract, ZTE would participate in the future 5G network and wireless network technology test project and develop the network infrastructure needed for digital smart city services. In August 2019 Hu in person supported the establishment of one of ZTE's internship camps in Italy in collaboration with his home university in China, the Xi'an Jiaotong University (located in Xian, Shaanxi, China).³⁵

Notwithstanding the arrival of the Draghi government – supported by a coalition of national unity with a strong transatlantic orientation – ZTE has stepped up cooperation with Italian universities, in particular through an increase of funding to its two main academic centres in Italy: the aforementioned Research and Innovation Center in L'Aquila and the ZTE-University of Rome Tor Vergata Joint Training Center.³⁶

Huawei has also been active in sponsoring academic partnerships and cooperation agreements. In 2008, Huawei established in Segrate (Milan) its Global Research & Development Center, which since 2011 has served the company all over the world.

Furthermore, Huawei has funded joint projects with: the Polytechnic of Milan on optical technologies and algorithms to be used for fixed access (FBB); the University of Trento on optical filter assembly feasibility study activities; the University

[Content/action/showpage/content_id/46184](https://www.uniroma2.it/module/name/Content/action/showpage/content_id/46184).

³⁴ See the website of the Tor Vergata University of Rome: *Accordo Ateneo "Tor Vergata" con ZTE Italia: nasce polo di alta formazione su ICT e management*, last modified on 4 April 2019, https://web.uniroma2.it/module/name/Content/action/showpage/content_id/44271.

³⁵ Sohu, 中兴通讯与意大利拉奎拉大学签署合作协议 建立5G联合创新研究中心 (ZTE and the University of L'Aquila in Italy Sign a Cooperation Agreement to Establish a 5G Joint Innovation Research Center), 5 November 2017, https://www.sohu.com/a/202465655_171073.

³⁶ For more details about these cooperation initiatives see: ZTE Italia, *ZTE Leading 5G Innovations*, 2018, p. 10, <http://www.zteitalia.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ZTE-Italia-Eng.pdf>.

of Perugia on MEMS device technologies and design (MEMS stand for micro-electromechanical system, a technology used to create tiny integrated devices or systems that combine mechanical and electrical components); the University of Bologna on the Ray-Tracing Core Algorithms Collaboration Project; the University of Pavia on BiCMOS components for 5G access millimetre-wave (BiCMOS is a semiconductor technology); and the University of Cagliari on Reliability and Spectroscopy analysis.³⁷

Finally, Huawei is the main sponsor of a collaboration between the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC, a public technological university located in Chengdu, Sichuan) and the Polytechnic of Milan on 6G. Among the alumni of UESTC is Sun Yafang, Chairwoman of Huawei from 1999 to 2018.

The question arises as to whether the sponsorship of academic partnerships and cooperation projects by ZTE and Huawei has influenced the debate on 5G in Italy in a way that fits Chinese interests. While evidence of direct causation is hardly observable, it is interesting to note that the Conte governments (Conte I and II in the period between June 2019 and February 2021) resisted repeated calls from the United States to ban Chinese ICT companies from the development of 5G networks in Italy. As Francesca Ghiretti argues, the Conte governments adopted legislation on the rollout of 5G in Italy's telecom systems that contains various loopholes.³⁸

This course of action continues to this day. The Draghi government has so far refrained from excluding Chinese ICT companies from Italy. For instance, in May 2021 the Italian unit of telecoms group Vodafone secured conditional approval from the government to use equipment made by Huawei in its 5G radio access network. However, the Draghi cabinet did impose a set of prescriptions including restrictions on remote intervention by Huawei to fix technical glitches and an extremely high-security threshold.³⁹ This notwithstanding, the move is a victory for Huawei.

The academic sponsorships by ZTE and Huawei raise security and strategic implications that concern, of course, much less the academic fields of the humanities and the social sciences and much more the fields of science and technology (S&T).

³⁷ For more details on Huawei academic partnerships and cooperation projects in Italy see: Edward Chan, *Building a Better Connected World*, presentation at the conference "Investire in Italia: quadro normativo ed istituzionale per gli investimenti esteri", organised in Rome on 13 June 2017 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, https://www.esteri.it/MAE/resource/doc/2017/06/huawei_-_chan_-_sito.pdf.

³⁸ Francesca Ghiretti, "Europe's Manoeuvring on 5G Technology: The Case of Italy", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|67 (September 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12149>.

³⁹ Elvira Pollina and Giuseppe Fonte, "Italy Gives Vodafone 5G Deal with Huawei Conditional Approval - Sources", in *Reuters*, 31 May 2021, <http://reut.rs/3yT95N>.

4. S&T cooperation

Cooperation with China in S&T is carried out by some of Italy's top universities. The Polytechnic University of Milan (the largest technical university in Italy) offers a joint degree with Tsinghua University in Beijing and a joint Masters' degree with Tongji University in Shanghai. The Polytechnic University of Turin (Italy's oldest technical university) has cooperation programmes in place with ten Chinese universities and has a joint doctoral programme with Tsinghua University in Beijing, with Shanghai Jiaotong University and with the South China University of Technology. With the latter, the Polytechnic University of Turin set up in 2015 the South China-Turin Lab, which focuses on a number of sectors, including engineering, aerospace and automotive.

The importance of S&T cooperation in strategic sectors such as aerospace was underlined during the signing ceremony of the MoU in support of the BRI in March 2019. Among the additional protocols there was an agreement between the Italian Space Agency and China National Space Administration on cooperation in the development of the China Seismo-Electromagnetic Satellite 02 (Cses-02). This cooperation was the follow-up of an already existing collaboration for the Cses-01, signalling that Sino-Italian scientific collaboration has old and deep roots.

Italy–China academic collaboration in S&T is enshrined in a number of documents. For instance, during the 9th Italy–China Week of Science, Technology and Innovation held in Milan, Rome, Cagliari and Naples in December 2018, nineteen academic and economic cooperation agreements were signed, including in areas such as aircraft design, aerospace research, smart robots and new materials.⁴⁰

From 25 to 29 November 2019, the governments of China and Italy organised the 10th China–Italy Week of Science, Technology and Innovation, which was held in Beijing and Jinan. Attended by two thousand delegates and around three hundred among universities, research centres and companies, the event provided the occasion for the signing of fifteen bilateral agreements – ranging from engineering to artificial intelligence and new materials – and the inauguration of the first Sino-Italian Technological Park in Jinan, a 1.6 billion euro investment. Then Italian Minister of Education, University and Scientific Research Lorenzo Fioramonti declared that 832 deals were already in existence between Chinese and Italian universities and that more cooperation was expected in joint research projects and industrial cooperation in sectors where both countries have achieved excellence.⁴¹ It is, however, difficult to find evidence as to what concrete outcomes

⁴⁰ For a complete list see: CNR, *Settimana Italia-Cina dell'Innovazione - Lista accordi/MoU*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.cnr.it/it/intervento-presidente/allegato/1557>. See also: CNR, *Italia-Cina: al via la settimana dell'innovazione*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.cnr.it/en/speech-president/8458>.

⁴¹ "Italia-Cina: chiusi 15 accordi tra Università e centri ricerca", in *Askaneews*, 30 November 2019, https://www.askaneews.it/economia/2019/11/30/italia-cina-chiusi-15-accordi-tra-università-e-centri-ricerca-pn_20191130_00082.

these projects have achieved.

Italy–China collaboration in S&T has been enshrined in a document titled *Italia-Cina: collaborazione scientifica e tecnologica. Piano d'azione verso il 2025* published in December 2019 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is tasked with helping the internationalisation of Italy's scientific and technological sectors. All major fields are included in the Italy–China S&T cooperation: from space and aerospace to advanced materials, to intelligent manufacturing, next-generation information technology and robotics.⁴² The document was realised with the contribution of the Association of Italian Universities and Italy's Scientific *attaché* in China as well as the participants in the Technical Group for Italy–China S&T cooperation overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The document enjoyed full political support from the 5 Stars Movement (M5S), still the largest party in Italy's parliament, which at that time controlled both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through Luigi Di Maio (by then also the leader of the M5S) and the Ministry of Education, University and Scientific Research through Fioramonti, who at the time was a member of the M5S (he has now left it). The M5S continued a strategy that had been initiated by the previous centre-left governments.

Italy–China academic cooperation in the fields of S&T is a positive aspect of broader Sino-Italian relations. However, this form of cooperation needs to be understood nowadays in the context of growing US-China rivalry and the EU's growing criticism of Chinese practices on research and intellectual property. For instance, several top universities in the United States have begun to review their research ties with Chinese universities and companies, and some have decided to ban future research collaboration with them. In January 2020 the European Commission underlined that cooperation on research and innovation with China should be premised on the imperative to protect EU research findings and intellectual assets.⁴³ Some EU countries, notably Germany and the Netherlands have adopted measures to monitor China's growing influence in university campuses and even banned specific projects and/or academic sponsorships with China-linked individuals and organisations. The Italian government, for its part, has not banned so far any project and/or academic partnership with China. The only – indeed notable – exception has been former Minister Fioramonti's decision, upon strong insistence by the United States, to block collaboration on the construction of the Chinese space station *Tiangong 3*.⁴⁴

⁴² Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Italia-Cina, collaborazione scientifico tecnologica. Piano d'azione verso il 2025*, December 2019, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/38974>.

⁴³ European Commission, *European Commission Steps Up Protection of European Intellectual Property in Global Markets*, 9 January 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_12.

⁴⁴ Stefano Piccin, "L'Italia abbandona il programma spaziale cinese", in *AstroSpace*, 6 February 2020, <https://www.astrospace.it/?p=867>.

Conclusion

Cooperation in higher education and research is a positive aspect of the broader Italy–China relationship as it contributes to the advancement of the scientific and cultural environment in both countries. Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms provide university and high school students with an invaluable opportunity to learn Chinese language and culture from teachers sent – and paid – directly from Beijing. Claims that the Confucius Institutes serve also CCP propaganda are not groundless, however. They need to be weighed against the cultural and financial benefits that the CIs entail for the host university (or high-school). Criticism of CIs is welcomed since it reflects a growing awareness among stakeholders of China’s attempts at exerting influence abroad – although such criticism must also be placed in the context of heightened tensions between the West and China and thus with the risk of being instrumentalised for political purposes.

Cooperation between Italian and Chinese universities and research institutes is to be welcomed, as scientific research needs open dialogue and exchanges to thrive – even accounting for the inevitable risks of self-censorship and/or kowtowing to Beijing’s interests. Chinese companies and authorities have intensified S&T collaboration to acquire scientific, technological and industrial knowledge from Italian campuses. Interestingly, during the Cold War this form of cooperation was even encouraged by the United States as tightening ties with China at that time was crucial to the success of the US containment of the Soviet Union. A number of developments in the last years have changed this landscape, most notably the emergence of a more assertive and authoritarian China under President Xi Jinping as well as the intensification of the US–China rivalry. In this new geopolitical context, Italy’s cooperation with China on some academic subjects as well as in the framework of projects sponsored by Chinese firms such as ZTE and Huawei raise security and strategic implications for Italy and its Western allies.

The centre-left governments that have largely ruled Italy in the last decade (with the exception of the populist coalition between the M5S and the League between June 2018 and September 2019) have not taken steps in the direction of limiting – if not banning altogether – academic partnerships, joint projects and more generally research and S&T collaboration. It remains to be seen whether the more Atlanticist Draghi government will translate its greater caution about China into concrete measures that would put limits to the most sensitive and security-related aspects of Sino-Italian cooperation in higher education and research.

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