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Italian Colonialism in Asia: the Unknown History of the Italian Concession of Tianjin, China

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Abstract

My short essay focuses on the history of the Italian concession of Tianjin, China, granted to Italy in 1901 and ceded back to China in 1947, and how it contributed to the relationship between Italy and China in the following years. The Italian concession in Tianjin is part of the Italian colonial past although, differently from the other colonies which were totally subjected to the Italian government, Tianjin was an example of "informal imperialism", a sort of rented territory that the foreign powers had the right to treat as a national area and rule according to their own national laws. The foreign citizens living in the concessions were not supposed to respect the Chinese law, rather their own national legislation. The concessions of the nine foreign powers in Tianjin, including the Italian one, had always represented a defeat for China that had to kneel to the military superiority of the West in the context of the Opium and Boxer Wars. This is why what was built by the foreigners was modified over the years, and many buildings and roads were given different names mirroring the various ideologies of the following historical times. Nevertheless, after China's opening to the free market, in the late 1970s, the past foreign presence in China was reinterpreted and transformed into an opportunity to intensify the internationalization of the country, boosting exchanges with the West, economic activities and tourism.

Keywords: *Italy, China, Tianjin, colonialism, concession*

Introduction

The history of Italian colonialism in Asia is still relatively unknown. More was written about the African colonies and the Dodecanese, though the attempt to popularise these black pages of the Italian past is still very limited. In secondary schools, e.g., these topics are rarely dealt with. Recently, China's participation in the neoliberal global economy increased contacts and exchanges between East and West, so more was written and revealed about the Italian concession in Tianjin (Di Meo, 2015, p.165). My article focuses on the Italian presence in Tianjin, from 1901 to 1947, and its legacy in the relationship between China and Italy in the following years. I tried to discover why Italy took part in the "scramble for China" and what kind of colony Italy established there.

In the XIX century, Italy was in China as an ally with other European countries, trying to weaken China, forcing it to accept the commercial exchanges with the West that it refused. The military balance was in favour of Europe and, after the Opium Wars, the Qing dynasty was obliged to open its ports according to British decisions. Britain, other European countries and Japan gained extraterritoriality, i.e., the right to apply their laws in their

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Chinese territories. To defend their representatives in Beijing and defeat the anti-foreign Boxers, a coalition of European and Japanese troops intervened, occupying the capital after a 55-day siege. Italy took part in the conflict and, after the western victory, it obtained its own concession in Tianjin, in 1901. From 1860 to 1947, the city of Tianjin became the site of the nine foreign concessions of Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Belgium. As a whole, the concessions covered a small area of 15.5 km2 and Italy was given a territory of half km2. Tianjin became a kind of "hyper colony" because of the concentration of so many different foreign powers. It was a very modern town as the Europeans and Japanese transformed its wetland and poor huts into a flourishing economic center. However, the foreign presence represented a humiliation for China and its submission to western imperialism. After Tianjin's return to China, the Chinese tried to conceal their past by changing the foreign names of buildings and roads into names belonging to Chinese History and tradition. Only after China's opening to the free market economy, in the late 1970s, and its interest in globalisation, the foreign presence in Tianjin was reinterpreted as a past no longer to be hidden, it was seen rather as a starting point for more intense contacts with the western world.

My essay tries to follow the history of Tianjin's Italian concession, how it developed during the Italian presence in China and after Italy gave it back. What Italy left in China was memories and traces that the Chinese no longer wanted to forget, on the contrary, it became the beginning of a deeper relationship with the West within the context of the neoliberal globalization.

Historical Context

In the XIX century, China tried to set limits, in its territory, to the presence of some European powers which had expanded since the XVI century. In order to keep up with the western nations, the weakening Qing dynasty had to buy goods and weapons from the Europeans, while Chinese merchants were more and more attracted by the West, a double dependence which undermined the stability of the Chinese empire. The Qing had always controlled their commercial foreign enclaves along its coasts, forcing the foreigners to respect imperial laws, but in the XIX century the balance of power was in favor of Europe. Britain's two Opium Wars with China, in 1839–42 and 1855–60, show how a stronger military power could force a weaker state to accept the commercial exchanges it wanted to refuse (Burbank & Cooper, 2011, p. 294). Opium, tea, coffee, tobacco and sugar were goods that attracted Chinese consumers. The East India Company was a relevant buyer of Chinese tea and seller of the opium produced by Britain, especially in India. In 1830, the Qing Empire outlawed the opium trade in order to defend the Chinese economy and public health. The risk of a consequent economic collapse led Britain to declare war on China, forcing it to open its ports on British terms. The first British-Chinese Opium War ended with a British victory signed in 1842 with the Treaty of Nanjing. The British could now reside in their Chinese territories and carry out their trade under their own laws. Another humiliation for China was the British and French occupation of the Forbidden City, at the end of the second Opium War, and the burning of the imperial palace. By the mid-nineteenth century, several foreign powers had gained extraterritoriality, i.e., the right to apply their laws in their Chinese territories and to be judged by their own courts all over China (Burbank & Cooper, 2011, p. 296). Another challenge for Empress Cixi was the presence of Christian missionaries whose preaching questioned the Chinese tradition. From the 1850s to the 1870s, a wave of revolts broke out and by the end of the century the anti-Christian and anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion exploded. As the Empress ambiguously

supported the Boxers against the foreigners, a coalition of European and Japanese troops intervened to defend their legations in Beijing and, in 1900, to put an end to the 55-day Boxer siege (Ray, 1963) occupying the capital with the Battle of Beijing. As Italy took part in the conflict, it obtained a concession in the town of Tien Tsin (later called Tianjin), southeast of Beijing.

Tianjin

The original name of Tianjin, Tianjin Wei, can be translated as "the guard to the bridge to heaven" referring to its location and its role of protecting Beijing where the Emperor or "Son of Heaven" lived and ruled. It was a very populous city in Northern China with extraordinarily busy commerce and shipping traffic (Marinelli, 2007, p. 130). Between 1860 and 1947 the Chinese port of Tianjin was the site of nine foreign concessions. In 1860, Tianjin became the concession of Britain, France and the United States. Between 1895 and 1902 concessions were given to Japan, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Belgium. Italy kept its concession from 1901 to 1947 when, with the 1947 Treaty of Paris, it was deprived of all its colonies including the Asian concession. As regards Tianjin, this was just a formal act since, in 1943, Italy had already agreed with Japan to give up its Chinese possessions and cede the authority to the Nanjing Government (Marinelli, 2007, p. 147).

Tianjin had always been the port of Beijing, 120 km to the northwest. In the second half of the XIX century, it became the most westernized and modern part of China, a major international trading city with a railway and telecommunication networks, modern educational and legal systems and a mining industry (Marinelli, 2009, pp. 399–400). Altogether, the concessions covered an area of 15.5 km2, the Italian concession being one of the smallest, around half km2, just larger than the Belgian one. There are no precise statistics about Tianjin's total population, but in 1860 the population may have been about 300,000, while in 1920 there were around 837,000 Chinese, 5,914 Europeans and Americans, 4,000 Japanese and 1,200 Russians. Foreign concessions in Tianjin were progressively dismantled in the early XX century: the American concession was ceded to Britain in 1902, Germany and Austria-Hungary left in 1917, Russia in 1920 and Belgium in 1929. At that point, the only four remaining concessions were those of Britain, France, Japan and Italy. The Italian one lasted till 1947 (Marinelli, 2009, p. 400).

Ruth Rogaski defined the city as a 'hypercolony' due to the concentration and juxtaposition of different foreign areas (Marinelli, 2009, p. 402). The American journalist John Hersey, born in Tianjin, the son of missionary parents, gave this description of his town:

> What a weird city I grew up in. For three or four Chinese coppers, I could ride in a rickshaw from my home, in England, to Italy, Germany, Japan, or Belgium. I walked to France for violin lessons; I had to cross the river to get to Russia, and often did, because the Russians had a beautiful wooded park with a lake in it (Hersey, 1982, p. 54).

Tianjin was not just a victim of foreign penetration, it was one of the most modern places in China and could boast of a number of 'firsts' in Chinese history: it had the first Chinese railway, the first modern mail service, the first mint, the first newspaper, the first set of stamps, the so-called dragon stamps. The coexistence of foreign presences shaped the city making it a unique combination of foreign flavors and indigenous cultural identity. This made Tianjin move out of Beijing's shadow, becoming more modern than the capital (Zhang, 2018, p. 72).

All the nine concessions in Tianjin (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 32), except that of the United States, shaped their part of the town with their home country's architectural style so that this area around the banks of the Hai Ho River became a 'European architectural enclave' (Zhang, 2018, p. 74). Each foreign power reproduced its own urban environment and provided modern facilities like drainage, lighting, schools, hospitals, prisons, barracks. They transformed this rural area into a flourishing economic center. After the conflict with the Boxers, the concessions got the right to set up barracks so that Tianjin became the city with the largest number of foreign soldiers in China. This military presence was a symbol of imperialist infiltration into China and of the weakness of the Qing dynasty. After the fall of the Qing empire, in 1911, many former Qing officials moved to Tianjin where they built villas in the concession area.

The Italian Concession of Tianjin

The Italian concession in Tianjin (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 25) was the only representation of Italian colonialism in Asia. When Italy obtained it, it contained a low-level wetland (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 27), a cemetery (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 19) and many huts for Chinese laborers (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 10). In 1917, a terrible flood of the Hai Ho River killed 500,000 people in Tianjin. The only part of the town that was not flooded was the Italian concession where many Chinese and foreigners were able to save their lives. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs received numerous expressions of deep gratitude (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 164).

The administration of this Chinese territory was different from the African colonies. The concession was a kind of rented territory, Italy had to pay China 2,800 golden *lire* per year (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 159). The transformation of this poor area into a flourishing district required a large sum of money. In 1912, the Italian Government lent 400,000 *lire* for the public works (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 163). Vincenzo Fileti (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 60), a lieutenant in the Boxer War who was appointed Consul General of the Italian concession from 1909 to 1919, played a fundamental role in providing funds for the reconstruction of the Italian district (Zhang, 2018, p. 75). The financial resources for the Italian area's self-sustaining came above all from the local properties, not from trade or productive enterprises which were few. In time, the Italian concession's role as a commercial enclave weakened and it became just a symbol of Italian pride, especially during Fascism. Nevertheless, this small and almost insignificant territory was transformed, more than the other foreign concessions, into one of Tianjin's most important landmarks of Chinese history and culture (Zhang, 2018, p. 76).

Postcolonial Tianjin

When the Chinese Communist Party went to power, in 1949, it aimed at cancelling the traces of China's colonial past. The concessions represented western imperialism and a humiliation for China. The communists tried to put an end to the privileges enjoyed by the foreign powers, defending the values of equality, mutual respect, territorial integrity and sovereignty. One of the ways to forget the past was that of changing the names of buildings, streets and urban areas. Thus, Rue de France, in the French concession, became Liberation Road while Victoria Road, in the British concession, was named North Liberation Road. Similarly, during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the famous Kiessling Restaurant was renamed Workers-Peasants-Soldiers Cafeteria, though,

later on, during the politically more moderate early 1970s, the name was changed back to the original one, thanks to the restaurant's employees' petition to Premier Zhou Enlai, motivated by the fact that the original name attracted more customers. Similarly, the post-war administrators must have thought that it was meaningless to destroy the well-constructed buildings of the foreign powers; it was wiser to use them as offices or houses for Chinese citizens (Zhang, 2018, p. 77).

China has recently become a free market economy integrated into the global world. Post-Mao China has largely refused some revolutionary, anti-imperialist choices and some symbols of Maoist China, so that what remained of the colonial past, like the architecture in the foreign concessions, has been reconsidered and many buildings have been renovated and integrated into the country's local cultural heritage (Zhang, 2018, p. 79). History has been reinterpreted and the representations of the past are changing in the new political and economic climates of post-socialist, neo-liberal China (Denton, 2014, p. 9). As regards Tianjin, the municipal government preserved many foreign-looking constructions due to their exotic aspect that could boost tourism and commercial activities. Local authorities invested, in particular, in the renovation of the well-kept Italian and British areas. The Italian-Style Exotic District, largely located in the former Italian concession, and the Five Great Avenues in the former British concession are now relevant cultural tourist attractions in Tianjin. In the late 80s, the Mayor of Tianjin was interested in transforming the Italian district into a new cultural area but financial difficulties prevented the achievement of this goal. He visited Italy and Europe several times to find support and funds, without relevant results. In 2003, the project was resumed by another Mayor of Tianjin, Dai Xianglong, an influential politician who had strong connections to China's national banks. He was given a huge loan which he invested above all in the restoration of the Italian concession. It was a complex and expensive work because the Italian area had more than 300 historical buildings, many of them were dismantled while around 130 survived. Chinese companies cooperated with Italian ones. The center of the renovated Italian session was Marco Polo Plaza (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 31) and Dante Square (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 75). In the middle of Marco Polo Plaza stood a stone column with the bronze statue of the Goddess of Peace, holding a sword in her hands (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, pp. 244–245). After the restoration, the sword was replaced with an olive branch (Zhang, 2018, p. 83). Though the Italian concession represented a humiliating experience, it acquired a new significance in modern China when modernity, globalization and free trade assumed positive meanings in view of Tianjin's international prestige and tourist success (Zhang, 2018, p. 84). The reconstruction of the Italian section started in 2002, was largely completed in 2005 and then opened to the public. This time too, the original names of streets and buildings were changed, but for a different reason, i.e., to encourage tourism and business activities. The names Marco Polo Road and Dante Avenue were restored while the new titles of the area "Italian-Style Exotic District" or "Italian Style Town" show that China no longer wanted to hide the past Italian presence in Tianjin, on the opposite, the Italian name was preserved to give the area a flavor of authenticity and internationalism linked to the charm that the Italian cultural and artistic heritage often arouses all over the world (Zhang, 2018, p. 84). As tourism has recently gained extraordinary importance in China, Chinese leaders see historical buildings as a precious treasure and their restoration as a way to increase communication and cultural contacts between the two peoples (Zhang, 2018, p. 85). Lou Shuwei, a well-known scholar and expert on the history of Tianjin, highly praised the role of Vincenzo Fileti, Consul General of the Italian concession between 1909 and 1919, in his essay "Fileti and the Opening of the Italian Concession in Tianjin", published in 2001 (Zhang, 2018, p. 85). Similarly, the

authorized publication "A Glance at One Hundred Years and the Return of the Italian Style" praises the former Italian concession and suggests that a visit to it represents an experience of immersion in early XX-century Italy. The Italian district is described as the most charming among the former foreign concessions (Zhang, 2018, p. 86). There seems to be no longer hatred towards the heritage left by the Italians and the other foreigners. People of Tianjin transformed its painful history into a promising perspective making full use of its rich historical resources (Zhang, 2018, p. 87).

Tianjin's Peculiar Imperialism

Tianjin is different from the other Italian colonies. How can Tianjin be properly defined? a concession? a colony? a settlement? a part of an empire? These terms are sometimes ambiguously used. A settlement is a commercial area administered by a foreign private company, like the East Indian Company. A concession, instead, is a territory in a certain nation, ceded to a foreign country with a contract that gives the foreigners the power to rule that area according to their own laws on the basis of extraterritoriality. Tianjin was a concession because it belonged to China but the foreign countries could rule their concessions according to their own laws and the citizens were judged by their own courts, not by the Chinese legislation. The Italian concession was sometimes defined as a colony, a microscopic one, similar to the other Italian colonies (Di Meo, 2015, pp. 168–169), but it was not a proper definition: the colonial territories belong to the colonizing state, while a concession is a territory temporarily ceded to foreigners according to a sort of rent contract.

As Sabina Donati suggests, the Italian concession of Tianjin was an example of "informal imperialism" (Donati, 2016, p. 447). The expression was invented by the British, but concerned other countries, too. If imperialism refers to the expansion of a country's territory in the form of colonies, "informal imperialism" means an empire without colonies, based on free trade treaties imposed upon weakened states. The power of the western nations on Qing China and Ottoman Turkey are examples of informal imperialism. Britain developed this technique of forcing the decisions on a weak country which cannot defend itself because of economic and military inferiority (Donati, 2016, p. 450). An informal empire did not imply complete territorial subjugation and full colonial control. After the Opium War, British trade in China developed as informal imperialism because it was forced on and not welcomed by the Chinese, thanks to Britain's coercive methods and gunboat diplomacy (Donati, 2016, p. 451). Informal imperialism was based on a system of treaties, the so-called "unequal treaties", which regulated the lives, jobs, properties of the foreigners who resided in the treaty ports under the consular jurisdiction of their country of origin, and could be judged according to their national laws in the name of extraterritoriality. The foreign powers had the right to administer these areas with their own taxation and police force. The treaty system was, for the foreign powers, a means to secure economic opportunities and, for China, a way to appease the "western devils" limiting the erosion of China's sovereignty through signed agreements.

Italy was not just a spectator of the evolution of this form of imperialism (Donati, 2016, p. 452). It joined the group of foreign powers in China in 1866, though it boasted of a previous long contact and friendship with China, thanks to great personalities like the Venetian merchant Marco Polo and the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. At the time of the Boxer uprising, the Italians living in China were few; they worked above all in the commerce and production of silk and as sailors in the transportation of coolies, i.e., people

condemned to forced labor, transported to distant places in inhuman conditions (Di Meo, 2015, pp. 31−32). There were several Italian missionaries too, most of them under the protection of France instead of Italy, because of the difficult relationship between the recently unified Italian State and the Pope (Di Meo, 2015, pp. 37−39).

After the victory of the Eight-Power Alliance on the Boxers and the signature of the Boxer Protocol in 1901, Italy signed the 1902 Sino-Italian agreement with which Rome extended its privileges in the Legation Quarter of Beijing, received a percentage of the Boxer indemnity and an exclusive concession in Tianjin. Thus, Italy did not only take part in imperial colonialism in Africa, but also in the scramble for trade privileges in Asia, through an informal imperial strategy. The reasons behind this choice can be summarized with two connected expressions: great power politics and search for prestige at international level (Donati, 2016, p. 453). The Italian authorities in China tried to emphasize the economic potential of the Tianjin treaty port for Italian traders and entrepreneurs but, in fact, the diplomatic efforts to create commercial networks were not so successful and the presence of the Italian trade in Tianjin remained modest. According to the Italian observer and lawyer Elio A. Perogio, the "made in Italy" was basically a myth in the whole Asia (Donati, 2016, p. 454). Statistics confirm that there was not an increase of trade between Italy and China during the liberal era: China's total imports and exports amounted to 11,334 Hk.T (Haikwan taels) in 1910 and 8,369 Hk.T in 1922 while, in the same period, China's total trade passed from 857,386 Hk.T in 1910 to 1,629,926 Hk.T in 1922. An obstacle to Italian commercial development in China was the absence of a regular Italian shipping line linking major Italian ports to East Asia. To trade with East Asia, Italian companies had to use foreign ship liners at very disadvantageous conditions (Donati, 2016, p. 455).

Organizing the Italian Concession

Few Italians lived in Tianjin: 4 individuals in 1911 and 51 in 1922; the Chinese in the Italian concession were the majority, 13,800 in 1903 and 9,900 in 1918; foreigners of western nationalities were 120 in 1918. Italian governments did not show much interest in the Italian concession. There was not an efficient banking institution that could have supported Italian investments in China. Only in 1920, the Italian government gave the authorization to open a Banca Italo-Cinese in Tianjin, though in the French concession, not in the Italian one (Donati, 2016, p. 456). It promoted the expansion of commercial relations between China and Italy, although Italian companies and capital were very limited (Donati, 2016, p. 457).

Comparing the Italian to the Japanese concessions, we can see that the latter's commercial activities thrived in the first two decades of the XX century. Both concessions seemed very unpromising at the beginning, the Italian one being full of marshy lands and salt deposits. When Tokyo received the territory in 1898, no more than 50 Japanese lived there. By 1921 they were 5,000. The Japanese population expanded together with commerce and industry and the Japanese government actively supported trade in China due to the crucial importance of its large neighbour. Italian governments, on the other hand, were much less active and interested in the Tianjin concession. They seemed to have sent their representatives there, just because they did not want to be excluded from the "Chinese banquet" and in order to keep a place in the international concert of powers in East Asia. Ambassador Salvago Raggi and Vincenzo Fileti thought that this carelessness severely damaged the prestige of Italy in the Far East (Donati, 2016, p. 458).

The limited number of Italian citizens in Tianjin made it difficult to build an independent municipality in the town. The result was that, until 1922, the administration remained in the hands of the Italian Consulate and the Italian Legation in Beijing. Italian consuls had the power to lay taxes and maintain a police force in Tianjin with eight royal *carabinieri* under the authority of a *maresciallo*. There were also thirty-six indigenous guards involved in the control of the public order. In Tianjin, as well as in any colony, collaboration with the natives was essential. An independent municipality did not exist during the liberal era, it was created in September 1922, at the end of the liberal era, and approved in January 1923, during the fascist time. The administration of the concession was transferred to an elective Italian Municipal Council under the presidency of the Italian Consul. The question of a municipality in Tianjin arose in 1913 and concerned above all the problem of the voting system. The future Italian municipality had to be voted by a group of electors who had to be the Italians living in the concession (with or without property) plus the citizens of the other foreign powers (only if property owners). Nothing was said about the indigenous people living in the concession, meaning that they were excluded from the electorate. These decisions define a hierarchy of rights based on nationality and property (Donati, 2016, p. 463). In 1922, more precise rules concerning voting rights were introduced: the Municipal Council had to be composed of 5 *consiglieri,* to be increased to 7 when the number of Italian and other foreign electors would be higher than 100. The councillors had to be Italian, only one of them could be a foreigner of the Eight Powers. The exclusion of Chinese was not total, as it was in 1913; a certain participation was admitted: only Chinese property owners, resident in the concession for at least one year, paying a monthly rent of 30 Mexican dollars, had the right to elect or to be elected in the *Comitato Consultivo Cinese*, a Chinese committee composed of three natives having only a consultative role in the examination of local taxes and budget issues (Donati, 2016, p. 463). The Italian Municipal Council met for the first time in November 1923, in the neo-Renaissance palace in Corso Vittorio Emanuele III (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 47) opposite the Italian consulate. When the fascists went to power, the territory got under the control of a *podestà* (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 165) who replaced the municipal authority. During Fascism, Galeazzo Ciano moved to China first in 1927, remaining there for nearly two years, and then in 1930 as General Consul staying there for three more years. During his presence in China, the collaboration between the two countries reached its climax and he tried to spread the fascist ideology in China (Di Meo, 2015, pp. 132–135).

Italy's power in Tianjin was certainly limited if we compare it to the other Great Powers. However, the presence of the Italian flag in Tianjin, like the flags of the other foreigners, remained an expression of China's weakness, its financial and economic dependence and the aggressiveness of the Great Powers (Donati, 2016, p. 468).

Jews in Tianjin

An interesting topic concerning the administration of Tianjin was what happened to the Jewish population after the advent of Fascism. China was traditionally tolerant to other cultures and to the Jews. The country never produced the religious prejudices and racial discriminations that gave rise to anti-semitism in Europe. The presence of Jews in China probably goes back to the VI century b.c.e (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 62). Jews and Chinese have always had great respect and admiration for each other (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 104). Empress Wu Zetian (625–705) was not the only sovereign who welcomed other cultures and built a multiethnic and multicultural empire (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 55). Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta wrote in their diaries that they had met Jews in China

(Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 66). During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the town of Kaifeng hosted a large community of Jews who were wealthy and never suffered persecution (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 67). There has never been a *ghetto* in China, except during nazi times. One of the negative stereotypes about Jews in Europe, the interest for profitable activities, trade and banking, is seen in China with admiration (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 56–57). Among the possible plans for the founding of a Sionist state, China was one. During Nazi-fascism around 30,000 Jews came from Eastern Europe to China and were protected there, especially in Shanghai (20,000 Jews in 1939), Harbin (12,000 in 1920) and Tijanin (3,500 in 1940). The Chinese Consul in Vienna, He Fengshan, provided the Jews with documents and permits to escape persecution, saving a lot of lives (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 59). When the Japanese invaded Shanghai and Hong Kong, in 1941, they confiscated the properties of the Jews, but the "final solution", required by their nazi allies, was never practiced and the Jews were never confined to the Germans.

In 1860, the Tianjin Jewish community consisted of 10 families including, above all, people arriving from Russia where tsarist anti-semitic persecutions were increasing (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 92). Many Jews in Tianjin lived in the British concession where trade and economic activities flourished. In the Italian concession in Tianjin there were 11 Italian Jews in 1913 and 29 in 1934 (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 94). In Tianjin the Jews hardly ever suffered from anti-semitism, except by a few Germans and White Russians. The Jewish community in Tianjin must have been relevant if, in 1925, fascist Italy sent a Jewish consul, Guido Segre, to the concession (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 104). Jewish migration from Europe increased in 1938 and 1939 when racial laws became stricter. Around 30,000 European Jews found refuge in Shanghai, a smaller group in Tianjin. They were welcomed and protected in China (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 106). The darkest time for Jews in China was when the Japanese invaded Shanghai and Hong Kong, in 1941, they confiscated the properties of the Jews but they did not kill them (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 109). The Japanese were not anti-semitic, they were rather interested in integrating people, like the Jews, who could promote economic development. Japan never followed the European racist laws against Jews, Rom people and disabled. This does not mean that the Japanese were not racist: their racism was rather against Asian populations, considered inferior, that Japan wanted to subjugate into a unified pan-Asian nation. The Nanking massacre and the genetic experiments in Japanese concentration camps prove this attitude (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 148). After 8th September 1943, the Italians in Tianjin and in China became Japan's enemies and all those that did not recognise the fascist Salò Republic were taken to Japan's prison camps.

Under Japan's power, Tianjin was also the shelter of the last Chinese Emperor Pu Yi who was deprived of his power after the birth of the Republic of China, in 1911. When Kuomintang took power, in 1924, Pu Yi was forced to leave the Forbidden Town, moving to his father's Zaifeng residence first, then to the Japanese Legation in Beijing, and finally to Tianjin, where he had apparently good relations with the foreign representatives, though good treatment and special permissions were just reserved to him, not to other Chinese (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 118). He then became the puppet sovereign of the Manzhouguo Empire controlled by the Japanese (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 138).

Italian and Chinese Points of View About the Tianjin Concession

Maurizio Marinelli highlights how positively the official Italian sources describe the conquest of Tianjin, in contrast to the Chinese sources. Italian information reveals a progressive success of the infrastructural projects that transformed the poor Chinese area full of wetland and wretched dwellings into a beautiful district glorifying the strength of the Italian nation. Italian sources tend to obscure the presence of Chinese citizens, considering them subalterns (Marinelli, 2007, p. 124). According to the journalist Gennaro Pistolese, in 1935, the total population in the Italian area was 6,261, which included 5,725 Chinese and 536 foreigners, among which 392 Italians: "Our concession has a demographic consistency superior to the other concessions in Tien-Tsin", he stated, comparing the data of the concessions of Japan (5,000 people), Britain (2,000) and France (1,450).

Many Italian writers in the Thirties, in line with the fascist regime, tried to describe the events in China (and in the African colonies, too) as examples of "benign colonialism", emphasizing the success of the Italian civilising mission (Marinelli, 2007, p. 125). For the Italian government, the acquisition of Tianjin was very significant in terms of national prestige and international acknowledgement, even though it was not an economic success. The sources describing the concession at the arrival of the Italians insist on the negative conditions of the area divided into four main zones: the "stinky" salt deposit; the poor huts were the Chinese workers lived in "misery" and "indigence"; the "vast abandoned and flooded cemetery"; the wetland which could be as deep as 3–4 meters, completely frozen in the winter (Marinelli, 2007, p. 128). Similarly, the other concessions were described in negative terms and derogatory expressions were often used to portrait the local population. This recurrent motif, i.e., the very bad conditions first and the improvements introduced by the foreigners later, was a way to justify the occupation of Tianjin showing how the presence of the foreign powers improved the area. The foreigners, though, were certainly not in Tianjin to improve the landscape and the living conditions of the natives.

According to Maurizio Marinelli, certain sources about the Italian Tianjin reveal the construction of an instrumental narrative emphasizing, on one hand, the positive role of Italians in China, and, on the other, the transformation of a humiliating colonial past into a good opportunity for China's development into a modern liberal globalized nation. A good example is the catalog of a photographic exhibition held in December 2004 at Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Beijing, *Sulla via di Tianjin: mille anni di relazioni tra Italia e Cina. Un quartiere italiano in Cina* (Cardano & Porzio, 2004). On the book cover, you can see Japanese children, certainly, and embarrassingly, mistaken for Chinese (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, cover page). The catalog contains a good collection of photos and archival documents about the Italian concession from 1902 to the 1930s. According to Marinelli, the title is deliberately misleading: the Italian concession in Tianjin was not a neighbourhood but a "state within a state". The improper word "quartiere/neighbourhood", mystifies the historical context in order to produce an over-positive image of the colonial presence as a form of "benign colonialism". The term "quartiere" conveys both the idea of a defined district and that of a community based on some forms of personal contacts and familiarity. This definition masks the true Italian aggressive colonial experience in China, on one hand, and, on the other, it is in line with the present intention of the Chinese authorities to represent the period of the concessions as the beginning of Tianjin's internationalisation and capitalist globalisation, obliterating the colonial past in order to make the colonial buildings into attractions for foreign capitals and domestic consumers (Marinelli, 2007, p.

132). Far from being an area for friendly neighbours living together, the Italian concession was, nevertheless, restructured and rebuilt with the intention to preserve its Western-style roads and the European style elegant residences.

In the concession, the Chinese presence was often ignored and despised. The Italian Consul had the right to have buildings pulled down if they did not conform to the Building Regulations. All public entertainments had to be authorized by the police while a special permission was required to open Chinese theaters which had to respect morality and safety rules imposed by the Italian authorities (Marinelli, 2007, p. 134). The Chinese had to keep their homes clean, including the road in front of their houses. Another form of discrimination established that any native of bad character had to be expelled by the concession, which indicates a power with a high level of discretion (Marinelli, 2007, p. 135).

The dominant neo-Renaissance style of the Italian consular buildings can be interpreted as a way to affirm the prestige of Italy and its positioning at the same level as the other colonial powers. In fact, the style had become popular in Europe, especially between 1840 and 1890, and neo-Renaissance buildings were present in the French concession, too (Marinelli, 2007, p. 137).

During the fascist time, the narrative of a benign colonialism reached its climax with an emphasis on the contrast between a negative past transformed into a positive present by the fascists. The past was backward and hopeless, while the present showed improvement, progress and modernity. It was a hagiographic picture of the Italian "civilising mission" based on the claim that Italy's was a "proletarian colonialism", therefore less pernicious than the others, since it aimed at securing greater prosperity to the indigenous people (Cavallarin & Henry, 2012, p. 166). The Italian concession became an expression of "Italianness", a model of morality, modernity and hygiene, with its large roads, elegant buildings, a modern hospital, the availability of electricity, potable water and sewage systems.

Dr Ugo Bassi, holding a lecture on "Italy and China" at the Fascist University of Bologna in 1927, described the Italians as lovers of knowledge and adventure, proud of their humanist culture and glorious Roman past. They just wanted to take civilisation, aid and rescue to other populations, they distinguished themselves in China because they did not commit the terrible crimes that the other foreign troops committed (Marinelli, 2007, p. 139). He was contradicted, among the others, by Giuseppe Messerotti Benvenuti (1870–1935) whose 400 photos and 58 letters were in the catalog of the 2004 exhibition (Cardano & Porzio, 2004, p. 8). Masserotti mentioned the massacres and the atrocious excesses of the Italian soldiers too, who were not less cruel than the military of the other concessions. If they happened to do less damage, it was just because they sometimes arrived later, when the villages had already been plundered and destroyed (Marinelli, 2007, p. 142).

The image of an Italian benign colonialism is in contrast with the content of the Chinese historical sources, at least till the 1980s. Chinese sources see Italy in line with the other nations. Italy, Belgium and Austria were latecomers in the scramble for concessions, but they imitated the aggressiveness of the others using military alliances and aggressive warfare (Marinelli, 2007, p. 144). Some articles describe stories of gambling, drug use and illegal trafficking as being specific in the Italian concession. The Christian cult was perceived as a sign of imperialism, too (Marinelli, 2007, p. 145). The Chinese did not take the Italian concession for relevant; in a *History of Tianjin* (Yanjiusuo, 1987, p. 208), e.g., just three lines are dedicated to the whole history of the Chinese-Italian relations (Marinelli,

2007, p. 142). The confrontation of Italian and Chinese sources helped to unmask the beguiling narrative of a positive "civilizing" Italian intervention in Tianjin (Marinelli, 2007, p. 147). More recent Chinese sources give a positive representation of the colonial past because it is seen as the beginning of Tianjin's internationalisation and participation in global neoliberalism.

Conclusion

My short essay focused on the history of the Italian concession in Tianjin from its origin in 1901, to its return to the Chinese Government in 1947. I traced the main historical events, the relationship between Italy and China and how the interpretation of the Italian presence changed according to the different following periods and the different points of observation. The Italian concession represented for the Italian authorities an imperialist conquest boosting national pride, especially during the fascist era, and proving that Italy was not inferior to the other European Great Powers. The administration of the concession, though, did not provide many economic advantages. Dissenting voices, like that of the *Corriere della Sera* journalist Luigi Barzini, revealed the hypocrisy behind the myth of Italy's "civilising mission", what the British call "the white man's burden". The Chinese interpreted the Italian presence in their territory as an act of aggressive imperialism and as a humiliation for China and its people. This point of view, though, changed in time according to the different regimes governing China and the new trends of the global economy. The Maoist leaders condemned the presence of the Great Powers in China as an imperialist violation of China's right to self-determination. In time, this interpretation weakened as soon as China joined the group of neoliberal countries in the globalized world. Starting from the 1980s, the foreign presence in China in the first half of the XX century, was seen as the first step of China's internationalization, while the architectural and cultural heritage of the past is now evaluated as a positive incentive to tourism and to the economic and cultural exchanges between East and West.

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