

Donatella Strangio, *Italy-China Trade Relations. A Historical Perspective*, Springer, Cham (Switzerland), 2020, pp. 140.

After years, indeed decades of lagging far behind other Western countries, in recent years Italy has intensified its effort to play a larger role in trade with the People Republic of China. The improvement in trade relations between the two countries may have a beneficial effect on their future political and diplomatic relations. Published on the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Italy and the PRC, Donatella Strangio's *Italy-China Trade Relations. A Historical Perspective* blends a critical approach to data analysis with detailed and extensive use of archival materials.

While Sino-Italian relations have been fundamentally economic, Strangio underscores the progress made in various other fields, including academic and scientific cooperation. She appropriately points out the persistence of some technical barriers to economic relations, for example, problems regarding the application of customs duties and the forms of internal-market protection on both sides. Furthermore, accession to the WTO has led China to standardize the rules for international business, especially as regards legislative and regulatory matters such as the protection of investments and of intellectual property rights, and to crack down on counterfeiting. Following the Introduction, Chapter 2 analyses the political and economic situation in China until the *Belle Époque*; Chapter 3 examines China and its transformations during the great divergence; Chapter 4 discusses economic conditions and developments in Italy and the country's efforts to close the gap with the other European imperialist powers; Chapter 5 dwells on trade and agreements between Italy and China; Chapter 6 deals with the relations between the two countries and the actions undertaken by Italy to penetrate China and achieve equal standing with the other European powers there; Chapter 7 traces the evolution of commercial relations from the 1970s to today; and Chapter 8 draws some conclusions, with a summary of how relations developed and changed between the golden age of the post-war period and the era of globalization.

Strangio analyses the trajectory of Sino-Italian trade relations from the dawn of the 20th Century to Italy's decision to take part in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), profiling the evolution of bilateral trade ever since Italy's penetration of China in the *Belle Époque*. His book addresses the delicate question of economic ties between the newly born – and still endangered – Republic of China and the Kingdom of Italy before the First World War and in the interwar years. It also illuminates the interwoven economic and political ties between the two countries in the 1930s, when Italy, while displaying friendship toward China, gradually shifted its diplomatic preference toward an increasingly aggressive Japan. Against this background, while Italian trade with China did grow more rapidly than in the previous years, its overall volume paled by comparison with that of China's trade with other European and non-European countries. As Strangio observes, "Policymakers were unable to grasp the mismatch between the goals to be pursued and the resources available." Mimicking their approach to European affairs, they were living under "the illusion that Italy could provide military aid, thereby guaranteeing a policy of neutrality between China and Japan." On the economic level, various cooperation schemes were attempted but fell short of the desired results. There were various reasons for these failures: lack of capital, Italian entrepreneurs' inexperience in operating in a competitive regime, the backwardness of Italian industry compared with European rivals in China, inefficiency in the organization of Italy's diplomatic missions and offices, and a reluctance to grant deferred payment.

In China, too, there was no real commitment to creating a profitable business relationship with Italy: Chang Kai-Shek was only interested in receiving weapons and military assistance to fight the Communists, and any schemes for economic cooperation were only useful to attract international capital in order to block Japanese expansionism (Borsa 1994, pp. 289–290; Schmidt-Glintzer 2002, pp. 60– 61). Nevertheless, trade between Italy and China is an interesting case, illustrating the complexity of international dynamics even after the end of the Second

World War. The demise of the Japanese Empire and the birth of the People's Republic of China were the paramount events of the emerging Asia-Pacific system. The American-led San Francisco system was one of the pillars of U.S. policy in Asia, aimed chiefly at containing the Sino-Soviet bloc. The Cold War-imposed absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries was actually counterbalanced by a reciprocal interest in developing economic ties of some kind. However puny and unsubstantial, these relations laid the foundations for the diplomatic revolution in 1970. After the painful years of the Second World War and the political and economic changes in Italy and China, trade relations between the two countries strengthened. Given the trade trends and the trade agreements analysed, it seems highly likely that economic relations between Italy and China will become even closer, with plenty of scope for further growth, and exert a positive influence on their future political and diplomatic relations.

Ultimately, Italy is moving closer to China. The initiatives undertaken by Italy seek to advance the presence of Italian firms on the Chinese market; this policy can create ample possibilities for successful Italian investment and much more as well.

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