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China's Normative Influence in Europe

The Case of Sino-Italian Relations under the Belt and Road Initiative

Filippo Boni

Introduction

China's rise has been one of the most consequential developments of the past twenty years.¹ The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, with the promise to create a New Silk Road from China to Europe through massive infrastructure investment, has accelerated China's ascendance to the world stage, and it has expanded its economic and political footprint globally. Starting from the Global South, and moving progressively towards Europe and more developed economies, Beijing's inroads into the political, economic, and social fabric of partner countries have garnered the attention of academics, journalists, and government officials concerned with understanding the motives and impacts of China's international behaviour. The main question, to which a burgeoning body of literature has devoted its attention, is whether China and, more generally, non-Western, rising powers are undermining and challenging the US-led, Liberal International Order (LIO) (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020; Economy, 2022; Ikenberry et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Rolland, 2020).

The literature on China's relationship with the LIO can be summarized around three main strands. First, there are those who argue that China is not going to replace the US as the world's dominant power. The prominent Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong, for instance, notes that 'Beijing has no clear plan for filling this [the US'] leadership vacuum and shaping new international norms from the ground up' (2019: 40). Similarly, Fareed Zakaria points

¹ The author would like to thank Indrajit Roy, Jappe Eckhardt, Giles Mohan, and Ran Hu for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. The chapter has also benefitted from the feedback received at the workshop 'The Politics of Chinese Investment in Europe' at the University of York in 2019, and at the Political Studies Association annual conference in 2021.

out that China ‘has not gone to war since 1979. It has not used lethal military force abroad since 1988. Nor has it funded or supported proxies or armed insurgents anywhere in the world since the early 1980s. That record of non-intervention is unique among the world’s great powers’ (2019).

Opposed to these views, there are scholars and analysts who instead suggest that the BRI is a deliberate attempt by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to build a ‘Sinocentric “community of shared destiny” in Asia’ which will eventually turn China into a normative power capable of setting the rules of the game in global governance (Callahan, 2016: 3). Echoing this more sceptical approach to China’s global outreach, in the ‘Strategic Outlook’ Joint Communication of 12 March 2019, the European Commission for the first time termed China a ‘systemic rival’ (EU Commission, 2019: 1). Along similar lines, the NATO Strategic Concept in 2022 mentioned for the first time that China’s ‘stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our [the Alliance’s] interests, security and values’ (NATO Strategic Concept, 2022). Finally, there is also a third strand in the literature which takes a middle ground, arguing that China partly integrates and partly challenges existing rules and norms (De Graaf et al., 2020; Glaser, 2019). The essence of this strand is perhaps best captured by Lina Benabdallah, who observes that Beijing’s approach is one that ‘simultaneously supports/integrates the international order and also changes parts of the order that do not match its preferences’ (2019: 93).

Situated within these debates, this chapter’s contribution is two-fold: first, the analysis assesses the extent of China’s normative influence in Europe by investigating how Chinese narratives on key issues pertaining to the LIO are entering the Italian political discourse and whether political elites take on board such narratives. The chapter argues that while Italy’s historic, Western-orientated strategic posture has not been altered as a result of a deepening Sino-Italian entente—as shown for instance by Italy’s endorsement of the G7’s proposal of an alternative to the BRI (Meacci, 2021)—there has been an uptake among some of the elites (for example, members of parliament, bureaucrats) of China’s narratives on key issues, including human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong’s democratic status.

Second, the analysis presented here contributes to the burgeoning, yet still relatively limited, literature assessing the role that populist parties play in shaping foreign policy while in government (Coticchia and Vignoli, 2020; Chryssogelos, 2017; Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). In doing so, the analysis focuses on Italy’s Five Star Movement, as they were the party that won the 2018 elections and obtained 33% of the seats in Parliament. As such, they were in a position to steer key government policies, including foreign policy,

given that the foreign minister was one of the leaders of the movement (until 2022). Despite the party's relevance waning over time, especially in the post 2021 period, the analysis presented here sheds important light on the role that populist parties play in relations with China while in government.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the case selection and the methodology used in the analysis. The third section discusses the conceptual framework of strategic narratives that is used in this chapter, by foregrounding the importance of 'system', 'identity', and 'issue' narratives. This section also introduces the main messages that China has been presenting to foreign audiences about its rise and on some of the key issues (for example, Hong Kong and Xinjiang) that are then analysed in the empirical parts. The fourth section looks at China's engagement with Italian political elites, with a specific focus on one of Italy's ruling parties, the Five Star Movement (M5S). The final section dissects the impact that the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Italy on the BRI had on the promotion of China's view on key issues as part of the partnership between Xinhua and ANSA.

Case Selection and Methodology

Italy is an ideal case study to assess China's normative influence in Europe for a number of reasons. First, it became the first G7 country to sign an MoU with China on the BRI during President Xi Jinping's visit to the country in March 2019. Such a move has put Italy under the spotlight and at the centre of the wider Sino-US global competition. In relation to the MoU, *The New York Times* emphatically titled it 'Italy's Deal with China Signals a Shift as US Influence Recedes', and the Trump Administration expressed its concerns about Italy's decision very vocally, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticizing China's 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Agence France Press, 2019; Horowitz, 2019). In a similar fashion, the then EU's budget commissioner, Günther Oettinger, went as far as to note about the Italy-China deal that 'a European veto right, or a requirement of European consent could be worth considering' (Euractiv, 2019). As such, what happens in Italy can be indicative of wider trends in EU-China and Sino-US relations alike.

Second, between 2000 and 2021 Italy was the third largest recipient of Chinese FDI in Europe, after the UK and Germany (Kratz et al., 2022). In the Italian government's views, the MoU was aimed at providing Italian businesses market access to China, in order to increase bilateral trade between the two countries and boost Italy's exports to China. As the then

Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, claimed during a speech in Parliament in 2019, 'our economic and commercial attention [towards the BRI] is entirely legitimate and ... in this way we will be able to strengthen our exports towards a market of gigantic proportion' (Camera dei Deputati, Resoconto Stenografico Assemblea n.144, 2019). Italy's desire to increase its economic ties with China, coupled with the latter's attempts at gaining influence in Europe, represent an ideal convergence of interests to assess the extent to which growing economic relations translate into normative influence.

To this end, the chapter has collected and analysed, through critical discourse analysis, a wealth of new empirical material to assess the impact of the signing of the MoU on the BRI on two specific areas: the uptakes of Chinese narratives among Italian elites; and the impact that media partnership agreements have on the way in which key issues are presented to the general public. To explore elite uptakes of narratives, the chapter has analysed the articles published between 2013 and 2020 on the official blog of M5S. To investigate the media partnership, the analysis is based on 219 articles between 2013 and 2020 that were published by Italy's main independent news agency, Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA), which entered into a partnership with Xinhua as a result of the MoU. This enabled an assessment over time of the changes, if any, that the MoU has brought about for ANSA's coverage on key issues.

Norm Entrepreneurship and Strategic Narratives: A Conceptual Framework to Understand China's Normative Influence

In line with the 'power as influence' approach outlined in the introduction to this volume, this chapter builds on insights from the literature on how rising powers engage with the norms and values underpinning the international order as well as engaging with the scholarly works on strategic narratives. In doing so, it incorporates in the analysis both state as well as previously under-explored sub-state actors (for example, the media), thereby moving beyond the theoretical state-centrism present in much of the literature dealing with China's normative influence in Europe.

In looking at how rising powers engage with the LIO, Bettiza and Lewis (2020) have identified four types of contestation that illiberal powers engage in, namely liberal performance, liberal mimicry, civilizational essentialization, and counter-norm entrepreneurship. In this chapter, the analysis focuses on counter-norm entrepreneurship, namely a form of contestation

which involves articulating and advancing globally a set of non-liberal (1) social and political norms and (2) visions of international order. They argue that the deployment of narratives pertaining to new norms and values represents an 'attempt to positively promote a coherent set of "illiberal" ideas, institutions, and practices worldwide that reflect an ideological alternative to liberal forms of domestic and international order' (2020: 11). Along similar lines, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle have provided a framework to understand what they have called 'strategic narratives', defined as 'means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics, and to shape the perceptions, beliefs, and behaviour of domestic and international actors' (2014: 1). Strategic narratives are articulated around three levels: (1) system narratives, looking at the nature and future of the international system; (2) identity narratives, about the actor's identities; and (3) issue narratives, about topical, contextual problems. Building on these works, and looking specifically at Russian narratives in France, Oliver Schmitt presents an analysis of the effectiveness of these narratives, arguing that if a strategic narrative is successful, 'it should be possible to observe the gradual transfer of content of the Chinese strategic narratives within the French political discourse' (2018: 494). This latter point is of particular interest, since it brings into the analysis a discussion of whether local political elites and publics buy into these narratives advanced by foreign powers, a theme that will be assessed in detail in the ensuing parts of the chapter.

Before moving on to the empirical sections, it is important to identify what are Chinese discourses around domestic and international issues, as well as what type of image Beijing seeks to portray abroad. This is key, as the role of discourse and image building in Beijing's approach to foreign policy has become increasingly more important over the years. The 'Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere', issued by the central party office in April 2013 and known as 'Document 9', instructed 'all levels of Party and Government, especially key leaders' to 'make work in the ideological sphere a high priority'. The document further specified that the CCP and its leaders and cadres 'must persist in correct guidance of public opinion, insisting that the correct political orientation suffuse every domain and process in political engagement, form, substance, and technology' (Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere, 2013). Along similar lines, at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in November 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping noted that China needed to 'give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). As part of his message at the 19th National Congress of the

Communist Party of China in October 2017, President Xi Jinping reinforced this message by noting that one of the priorities was to 'strengthen the penetration, guidance, influence, and credibility of the media' (Xinhua, 2017). As these official pronouncements demonstrate, Beijing's desire to control international narratives has become a key component of the country's public diplomacy. There are some key themes around which China portrays itself on the world stage, some of which pertain to the international system and China's visions for and role within it, while others are related to key domestic issues. Regarding the former, 'peaceful rise', 'community of shared destiny', and 'non-interference' are some of the dominant themes that are primarily aimed at reassuring other countries that China's ascent is not a zero-sum game and that it does not threaten any country or region. On the domestic front, 'one country, two systems' when referring to Hong Kong, the sanctity of 'sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity', as well as a 'Xinjiang model' of managing ethnic diversity are discourses often put forwards by authorities and state media.

Engaging Italian Elites

The way in which Chinese narratives are absorbed among elites is particularly important to investigate, since it provides evidence of how China is progressively relaxing its focus on 'non-interference' while simultaneously aiming to cultivate consent in key states (Zou and Jones, 2020). Among the main Italian political parties, the M5S has been at the forefront of debates about its role in promoting closer Sino-Italian ties and in the signing of the MoU on the BRI. To be sure, under the Democratic Party's centre-left government (2013–2018), then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni attended the BRI summit in Beijing in April 2017, and his predecessor from the same party, Matteo Renzi, had repeatedly expressed an interest in tapping the full potential of an economic relationship with China (Fatiguso, 2017). However, it is one thing to eye business opportunities with China, and another to sign an MoU expressing the will to endorse China's global ambitions.

Those who were in favour and facilitated the signing of the MoU often presented an economic rationale behind the decision. Rejecting the controversy that the signing had created, both with Washington and other European partners, the then undersecretary of state for economic development stated that the deal was 'about helping companies do business' (Reuters, 2019). However, in the three years after the MoU was signed, the economic benefits of the partnership were yet to be seen. By looking at official data from the Italian

Trade Agency, there seems to be a limited impact that the MoU has had on Italy-China trade exchanges, as demonstrated by a number of indicators.

First, between 2017 and 2022, Italy's market share in China's imports remained constant at 1.1%. Second, trade balance between the two countries has not changed in a meaningful way, and Rome was not able to rebalance its trade relationship with Beijing, which is still tilted in the latter's favour. While Italy's exports went up from 12.96 billion in 2019 to 16.44 billion in 2022, so have the imports from China, which rose from 31.66 billion in 2019 to 57.50 billion in 2022, with a negative trade deficit at -41 billion in 2022. (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 11 August 2023). If we expand the picture to investments from China to Italy, we find that apart from the notable exception of Jietion Solar (China) Co.'s deal with Eni SpA, an Italian firm and one of the major oil companies in the world, to invest about 2.2 billion USD to develop new solar projects, Italy failed to attract many concrete projects in the year following the signing of the MoU (Crawford, 2020). China's engagement has instead started to yield results in the political sphere, and specifically in the uptake of Chinese narratives among some of the key Members of Parliament (MP), bureaucrats, and academics, especially those close to the M5S.

The penetration of Chinese narratives becomes evident when looking at the content of the articles published about China (including its culture, politics, and society) on the website BeppeGrillo.it (now rebranded as 'Il Blog delle Stelle'), the blog of Beppe Grillo, the founding father and political guarantor of the M5S. Here we find examples of both 'system' and 'issue' narratives, as well as of the uptake of alternative visions of the LIO by some of the elites in key countries. In June 2018, only ten days after the self-proclaimed 'Governo del Cambiamento' (Government for Change) was sworn in following the March 2018 elections, the blog published an article penned by the then undersecretary of economic development, which was a sort of manifesto for the relationship that the new government intended to establish with China. Interestingly, some passages of the article advocated for learning the Chinese way of dealing with a number of financial ('Who can help us manage our debt? It is China'), public security ('Which is the country where public security is effective? It is China'), and geopolitical issues alike ('Which is the country which is closely aligned with Russia and which can help us rewrite Asia's geopolitics? It is China').² Following this article, between June 2018 and January 2020, there were twelve more articles published on this online

² A similar argument was also made in another article, published in May 2018, which outlined the five pillars of China's economic success (Geraci, 2018). The translation of this and the other articles in the chapter was done by the author.

platform, all promoting greater cooperation and understanding between Italy and China. As far as system narratives are concerned, when the US started directing its criticism at the Italian government's decision to sign the MoU on the BRI, one article ironically stated that such a decision had unleashed the reaction of the 'little White House', also reporting the words of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs which defined the criticism as 'absurd' (Parenti, 2019c). In a similar fashion, China's rise is defined as 'peaceful', and Beijing is praised for 'not judging and for trying to understand before expressing an opinion and advancing proposals', thereby making a not-so-veiled reference to the non-interference principle (Parenti, 2019b). In addition, in another article titled 'BRI: A New Form of International Relations', the author praised China's cooperation with Africa, stating that Beijing's approach to the African continent provides 'evidence of a different cooperation model that can become a point of reference for the entire world' (Parenti, 2019a).

Beyond system narratives, another important example is the way in which the Xinjiang issue has been covered in the blog. In particular, an article published in September 2019, at the height of reports coming out of Xinjiang about the re-education camps for Uighurs, argued that the Italian government, and Western media by and large, have 'raised conjectures and fabrications on Chinese responses to terrorism'. The article was the report of a visit that the author undertook to Xinjiang and whose conclusion was that internment camps did not exist and that it was just a 'label' used by the CNN and the BBC 'to discredit the Chinese government, presented as one repressive of minorities'. In addition, the article mentioned the words of the Director of the Historic Institute in Serbia, who reportedly claimed that 'in Serbia too we should have adopted these measures [i.e. the ones adopted in Xinjiang], and we have instead imprisoned radicalised youngsters, thereby worsening their existential conditions' (Parenti, 2019d).

In order to assess the elites' uptake of narratives, it is also important to see if politicians and organizations 'walk the talk' and implement decisions, or whether they remain silent, on key issues defining a country's political outlook. Developments in Hong Kong during 2019 are a case in point. Anti-Extradition Bill protests significantly mobilized people in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China and led to a tightening of Beijing's control over the territory.³ While the Italian government, including members of the M5S, officially expressed concerns about the worrying developments in Hong Kong, there is evidence that the Chinese narratives on this issue—primarily focusing on the controversial national security law passed in June

³ For an assessment of the developments in Hong Kong, see Tritto and Abdulkadir (2020: 163–183).

2020—are penetrating among key members of parliament of one of Italy's ruling parties.

When asked about the Italian Government's position on the ongoing Hong Kong protests during a visit to China to attend the China International Import Export in Shanghai, the Italian Foreign Minister claimed that 'Italy does not interfere in other countries' affairs,' thereby keeping a neutral stance on the tensions in Hong Kong (ANSA, 2019). On 28 November 2019, Joshua Wong, one of the main leaders of the Hong Kong protests, was invited to give a talk, via Skype, at the press conference 'La posizione di Italia e UE sulle vicende di Hong Kong' (Italy's and the EU's position on recent developments in Hong Kong). This event was organized by most of the major political forces in the Italian parliament, but excluded M5S representatives, and it was criticized by the Chinese Embassy in Rome with unusually strong words. According to the press release, the spokesperson of the Chinese mission argued that it was a 'serious mistake as well as an irresponsible behaviour' and stated that they were 'strongly dissatisfied with it' (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2019). This statement sparked reactions by Italian authorities, starting from Italy's Foreign Minister, Mr Di Maio, who stated that 'commercial ties ... cannot undermine the respect for our institutions, our Parliament and our government' (Bechis, 2019). In a similar fashion, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, a M5S MP, defined China's remarks as 'unacceptable'. A few days later, the same committee unanimously approved a resolution on Hong Kong which called for a European approach on the issue, and which clinched one of Italy's core foreign policy principles, namely the 'defence of individuals' liberty and rights', as one of the members of the committee declared on Twitter. At the time, though, a M5S MP published on the Movement's blog an article calling for a radical change in the framing of the resolution on Hong Kong, as well as for Italy's non-interference to continue. In his appeal for reconsidering the statement coming from the Italian Parliament, he called for looking at human rights 'from the angle of humanity, not that of CNN', and defined the 'West' and the 'exporters of democracy' as exports primarily of 'chaos, great conflicts, urban guerrillas and a dramatic worsening of human rights' (Cabras, 2019), thereby echoing some of the criticism that China often directs against the US.

The developments discussed in this section are indicative of two trends. First, claims that Italy is shifting strategically from the US and Europe towards China are clearly misplaced. As Mr Di Maio claimed in an interview in 2020, 'Italy is in the Euro Atlantic alliance, in NATO and in the European Union', adding that 'Italy has always been a country with friendly ties with a lot of

states in the world, and a bridge between East and West' (SkyTg24, 2020: 3:20–3:29). There are also a wide range of parties across the left-right political spectrum, including the Partito Democratico, Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, and +Europa, that have warned of the potential implications of Beijing's growing clout in Italy. Second, the analysis presented in this section shows how Chinese narratives, whether system- or issue-based, were taken on board by some intellectuals and MPs of one of Italy's ruling parties between 2018 and 2022. An explanation for this uptake can be found in Olivier Schmitt's work looking at why narratives succeed. He argues that 'the degree to which an external strategic narrative resonates with local political myths determines the effectiveness and impact of the strategic narrative' (2018: 488). The 'political myth' of anti-Americanism has been one of the core values of the M5S from the very inception and, in this context, China's revisionist narratives have found a fertile ground in a party that already held some of the views advanced by Beijing.

'Telling the China Story': An Assessment of the ANSA-Xinhua Partnership

Another important, yet under-studied, area of Sino-Italian relations under the BRI is the media cooperation between the two countries (for exceptions see Ghiretti and Mariani, 2021; Boni, 2022). The MoU on the BRI signed in March 2019 included the important content-sharing agreement between ANSA, Italy's main independent news agency, and Xinhua, as well as the MoU between RAI, Italy's State Television, and China Media Group.⁴ These agreements were part of a wider web of media engagements, including: (1) the partnership between Italian media company Class Editori, which publishes a business paper, with Xinhua and China Media Group; and (2) il Sole 24 Ore, Italy's main business daily newspaper, signing a partnership with *Economic Daily*, a Chinese state-sponsored paper (Han and Harth, 2022). Beyond the Italian case, media cooperation is one of the key areas in which China has invested in its public diplomacy outreach. In an editorial published on 25 November 2019, the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* stated that 'China needs to counter Western public opinion war' (*Global Times*, 2019). This article, as well as a few others in the following days, aimed at

⁴ The full texts of both agreements are available at: 'Firmato accordo di collaborazione ANSA-Xinhua', ANSA, 23 March 2019, http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2019/03/22/firmato-accordo-di-collaborazione-ansa-xinhua-_ff9868d9-050d-4747-b0ab-5a7a3fa44206.html; 'Memorandum di Intesa tra RAI-Radiotelevisione italiana S.p.a. e China Media Group', http://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Intese_istituzionali_Italia-Cina.pdf.

pushing back against Western reports on Xinjiang, especially in the wake of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)'s release of leaked documents about detention camps in China's Westernmost region. Chinese economic activities, growing political clout, and, by and large, its going global policy have been accompanied by systematic media efforts that helped frame BRI-related issues and to present Chinese views to the domestic audiences in the countries where political and economic ties were being developed. According to a 2018 Reporters Without Borders report, China has adopted the strategy to present China Watch supplements as 'reasonably enjoyable reads' which are 'nonetheless Trojan horses that enable Beijing to insinuate its propaganda into the living rooms of elites' (Reporters Without Borders, 2018).⁵ The report ended with some fifteen recommendations for governments to push back and limit China's growing influence over the media. However, a study of Chinese media in Africa focusing on Kenya and South Africa suggested a limited impact of China's media activities, but noted that 'an indirect effect might be occurring: some students, both in Kenya and South Africa, were receptive toward some of the news values and journalistic norms that characterize Chinese news reporting in Africa' (Wassermann and Morales, 2018). It is therefore important to assess the media strategy deployed in China's relations with Italy.

To this end, the analysis focused on the media coverage on ANSA's website of the Xinjiang issue between 1 October 2013 to 31 January 2020. Xinjiang has been selected in order to ensure methodological rigour, as it is suitable to be analysed over time, given that it has been a regular staple in discussions and allegations, especially from the US and the West, about alleged abuses of Uighurs for a long time. For this reason, it is possible to gauge the variations, if any, that the partnership between ANSA and Xinhua has brought about. The search was performed using the search engine on ANSA's website. The keyword inserted was 'Xinjiang', and the search returned 260 articles overall.

Figure 4.1 below presents the types of narratives that are being put forwards, drawing on the classification of 'system', 'identity', and 'issue' narratives that was introduced in the conceptual framework.

The analysis in the ensuing section focuses on the articles (140) that were published after the MoU was signed. After filtering for articles that were not relevant, the total number of articles included here is sixty-five; these

⁵ China Watch supplements are four- to eight-page inserts, sponsored by Chinese media outlets (most notably China Daily), aimed at promoting China's views on key issues. These supplements have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as in newspapers in the UK, Spain, and Australia.

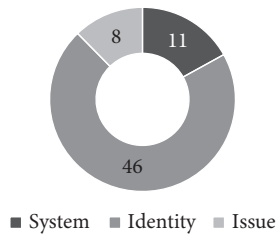


Figure 4.1 Chinese narratives on Xinjiang, as part of the ANSA-Xinhua partnership

Source: Data analysed by the author, from the website ANSA.it

were then coded following the ‘system’, ‘identity’, and ‘issue’ classification introduced in the analytical framework.

Among the pool of articles analysed, eleven articles dealt with system narratives, namely aimed at promoting China’s vision and the values underpinning inter-state relations and how the latter should be approached by countries. One article titled ‘Common Destiny: How the BRI changes people’s lives’ was promoting a documentary on the BRI, while others were more directly aimed at punishing or rewarding China-focused policies from the US and other organizations. One article, for instance, said that ‘China has warned the United States that if they continue having double standards on anti-terrorism, or if they try to violate the sovereignty and security of other countries, they will end up swallowing a bitter fruit and their own interests will be damaged’ (Xinhua, 2019a). Along similar lines, another article titled ‘China condemns the law approved in the US on Xinjiang’ claimed that the US were ‘launching unfounded allegations against the Chinese government’s policies in the region’ and that the US were therefore ‘seriously interfering in China’s internal affairs’ (Xinhua, 2019b). While the US were criticized, countries that complied with China’s non-interference policy were instead praised. An example of this are the remarks reported about Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s meeting with the Arab League, in which China’s top diplomat stated that his country ‘appreciated the Arab Leagues’ support on Xinjiang-related matters’, adding that China ‘favourably welcomes Arab functionaries who would visit Xinjiang to testify the results of China’s efforts against terrorism and radicalisation’ (Xinhua, 2020).

The bulk (forty-six in total) of the articles analysed contained ‘identity’ narratives, namely those types of messages aimed at promoting an actor’s identity to international audiences. In particular, the identity that China has been trying to promote on Xinjiang revolves around a number of themes. First, Xinjiang is portrayed as a success story in building social housing and in lifting people out of poverty; in this context, one article stated that 645,000

people were brought out of poverty in 2019, as a result of the 13th Five-Year Plan for 2016–2020, also adding that Chinese authorities were aiming to eradicate absolute poverty in the region. Second, Xinjiang is portrayed as a key commercial hub as part of the BRI, between China and Europe; while highlighting a 31.1% increase in Xinjiang's trade with the world, two articles mentioned that the bulk of such trade was with countries and regions that were part of the BRI. A third theme that emerges from the articles analysed in relation to the identity of Xinjiang is the region's rich natural resources alongside the ability to generate energy from renewables, with articles mentioning oil exports from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan as well as the completion of a solar power plant. Finally, Xinjiang is promoted as a tourist destination, with a rich cultural, natural, and historical heritage.

The third type of narrative is issue narratives, namely those that are aimed at promoting Chinese views on a given issue—in this case internment camps and human rights violations in Xinjiang. There are eight articles falling into this category, and they are rebuttals of the US's criticism over Xinjiang and of the *New York Times's* reporting on the issue, as well as of the 'Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act 2019' passed by the US Congress, which is defined by one Xinhua article as an act moving 'unfounded allegations against the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang' and a 'serious interference' in China's internal affairs.

The empirical evidence presented here demonstrates how China's vision on key issues pertaining to some of its core interests are being promoted as part of the media partnership agreements that come attached with the BRI. In addition to the content that is presented, it is also important to look at the frequency with which these articles are posted. By analysing the dataset used in this chapter, a pattern emerged that for every article that ANSA independently published on the issue (that is, outside of the partnership with Xinhua), there were eight from Xinhua promoting China's narratives, whether system, identity, or issue, on Xinjiang.

By way of providing an assessment of the content analysed in the dataset presented above, two points are worth emphasizing. First, the flooding of Xinhua information on the website did not translate into ANSA reporting less independently than before on Xinjiang, as there were five items (including videos and a picture gallery) that mentioned internment camps and human rights abuses in the region. As such, on this particular aspect the impact of Chinese narratives has been very limited. The second point, and an area that it would be important for future research to assess systematically and over time, is the extent to which the availability of China-backed content has an impact on the way in which the wider public interprets international issues.

Conclusions

This chapter was a first attempt at assessing the normative implications of China's growing ties with Italy. Here the analysis has focused on two sets of actors, namely state (that is, the main government party between 2018 and 2022) and sub-state (that is, the media). Against such a backdrop, the chapter has demonstrated how, as a result of the MoU on the BRI, China's core narratives on key international issues have been progressively absorbed by some of the elites among one of Italy's ruling parties. At the same time, the chapter has also shown that claims that Italy's Euro Atlantic posture was changing following the MoU were inaccurate. More generally, it is important to note that the M5S' openness towards China is not shared by many of the other parties. When interviewed in May 2020, Emma Bonino, former Italian Foreign Minister and leader of the 'Più Europa' party, warned that 'with regards to China's ambitions there is a need to be very cautious, including on Beijing's investments in critical infrastructures', adding that Italy 'should remain strictly anchored to the Western liberal democracies' (LA7, 2020). In addition, politicians from both centre-right and centre-left parties have, since 2019, joined the 'Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China', an international cross-party group of legislators working towards reform on how democracies approach China. In order to comprehensively assess how Sino-Italian relations have evolved in recent years, there is a need for future research to scrutinize, along the lines traced in this chapter, the full spectrum of political parties, and whether there was an uptake of Chinese narratives among them. Similarly, future research should explore the multi-scalar nature of China's public diplomacy in Italy, including at the regional and local levels. This would enable a better appreciation of the full spectrum of bilateral engagements occurring under the aegis of the BRI, and what implications these have for the Liberal International Order.

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