

5. ITALIAN DIPLOMATS IN CHINA DURING THE REPUBLICAN ERA (1912-1949)

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Introduction

As is well known, the Italian presence in China during the Republican period (1912-1949) was centered in certain treaty-ports, in particular Tianjin, where there was an Italian Concession, and Shanghai. There was a very marginal presence in Hankou and Canton, while in Peking there was an official Italian presence within the Legation Quarter. From the birth of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 until the last years of the 19th century, Italian consular missions in China were often entrusted to honorary consuls, in many cases people involved in business who had a good knowledge of the locales and already had an established network of relationships in place; for some years consular missions was handled almost exclusively by foreigners, particularly the British and the Germans.

At the end of the 19th century it is estimated there were fewer than 200 Italians living in China, many of whom were military personnel or missionaries, the missionary impetus being obviously very close to Italy's heart. There were very few businesses operating in China and there was a minimal presence of Italian ships in Chinese ports, especially given that there was no direct shipping link between the two countries. The launch of the Tianjin concession undoubtedly strengthened Italian plans for developing their own activities and presence in China; nevertheless it was a few years before the project would take off: it is estimated that in the early years of the 20th century there were probably no more than about fifty Italians in Tianjin, mainly entrepreneurs in the building and engineering sector (Marinelli 2010).

Reconstructing the history of the Italian presence in China during the first half of the 20th century, in quantitative and qualitative terms, is the goal of my ongoing research, of which this present contribution is the first step: a rather difficult task considering that the Italian presence in China was always modest compared to that of the European powers such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany. If anything, the main problem is in the gaps and fragmentary nature of the documents and data available, in the dispersion of these in a thousand directions in dozens of archives and libraries, in the blanks that exist in the historical records for certain years and periods that to date have not been completed (see, for

example, the cases at the Historical Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central State Archive).

Nonetheless, it is necessary and important to try to fulfil this task, even if in a limited and partial way, not only because the story of those who lived and worked in China is part of Italy's historical memory but also inasmuch as the events surrounding those Italians are an integral part of the political, economic, cultural and human events that marked the lives of the foreign communities in China in that historical period and, in particular, of their experiences in terms of contact zones in a general context marked by highly asymmetrical relations of power (colonialism) and by boundaries which not necessarily indicate the end of the contact but rather a constituent part of it.

My contribution would like to analyse main reports and memoirs by some selected Italian diplomats during the periods they spent in Republican China, focusing on their experience of work and life and on their views of China and the Chinese. In particular I will focus on two diplomatic experiences: that of Ambassador Taliani and of Ambassador Fenoaltea, who lived and worked in China in two very different but in both cases very important historical moments.

The Italian presence: some statistics

It was only in 1926, during the early fascist period, that the National Institute of Statistics (*Istituto Centrale di Statistica*, Istat) was created as a public research body charged with producing and diffusing data, information and statistical analysis. Before then the work of statistical surveys was entrusted to the Statistics Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Trade and Industry (*Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Commercio e Industria*), whose information about Italian expatriates was poorly reliable because, for instance, "China and Asia" were included under the heading "other countries" together with Oceania. Combining such really limited statistics with those included in reports by Italian diplomats on the spot we can say that Italians living in China in the first decade of the 20th century were about 1.000; their number decreased quickly in the Twenties, touching about 600, due to repatriations that occurred and a parallel ban on emigrations imposed after the outbreak of the First World War. Only in the Thirties outbound migration recovered, clearly con-

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nected to fascist colonial policy (Commissariato generale dell'emigrazione 1926, 1534–35 and 1538–39; Sori 1979).

In mid-1927, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a census of Italians living abroad: they recorded that 913 Italians were living in China: 513 were male and 250 female, most of them born in Italy, while 82 were born abroad. The geographical areas showing the distribution of Italian presence were based on the jurisdictions of the consular districts across which the Italian diplomatic presence was spread. The largest community was dependent on the Hankou consular district (which included the provinces of Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, Jiangxi, Henan, Shenxi and Gansu): 323 individuals, of whom 210 were males and 113 females. Then followed Shanghai (which comprised the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong and Anhui): 275 individuals, of whom 174 were males and 101 females; and then Tianjin (which comprised the provinces of Zhili and Shanxi and the city of Peking): 239 in total, made up of 131 males and 108 females. Further afield were the districts of Canton (which covered the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan): 31 Italians; and Harbin (which oversaw Manchuria): 45 in total. Most of the Italians living in the district of Shanghai resided in the city of Shanghai: they lived usually in the International Settlement or in the French Concession; in Peking lived 60 of the 239 individuals counted within the district of Tianjin (Ministero degli affari esteri 1928).

On 21 April 1931, the Seventh General Census of the Italian Population was taken and, for the first time, the *Istituto Centrale di Statistica* published a specific volume on the colonies and possessions in which estimates were provided also on the foreign and Chinese populations in the Tianjin Italian concession on the day of the survey. The results showed that the total population of the Concession was 6,263, of which 394 were citizens of the Kingdom of Italy, with a strong increase compared to the 239 indicated in 1927 in the entire consular district, 141 foreigners and 5,725 Chinese and others. The census also revealed the overwhelming majority of Italians were male (359 out of 394), between the ages of 15 and 29 (83.2%) and that most were unmarried (335 males out of 359, and 22 females out of 35). Their geographic provenance was primarily from the North of Italy (particularly Liguria, Veneto and Lombardy), followed by Central Italy (a significant number from Tuscany), then those from the South and the islands. As far as regards their employment, setting aside children of less than ten years of age, most were

employed in public administration (90%) with some others active in the industrial, commercial and transport sectors, as well as a dozen religious (Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia 1935, volume V).

The Diplomatic presence: some general notes

In 1902 a few Royal Decrees defined Italy's consular jurisdiction in China, along the lines already indicated in the preceding pages; in the coming years changes and additions were made to what was decided in 1902. In particular, in Peking an Italian Legation was created in 1889, which was ruled over by numerous special envoys and plenipotentiary agents, including the Marquis Giuseppe Salvago Raggi, who had the daunting task of recovering the fortunes of Italian prestige after the failed attempt to gain a commercial and territorial base in China at Sanmun (Sanmen) in Zhejiang province; and Carlo Sforza, who brought a strong dose of Italian dynamism to the Italian operation, thanks also to his excellent relationship with Yuan Shikai. There was also Daniele Varè, who headed the diplomatic mission during the establishment and first acts of the Chiang Kai-shek government and during the difficult years at the start of Japanese aggression in the early 1930s, assisted, for a certain period, by the young Galeazzo Ciano. With the crisis between China and Japan in the second half of 1931 and the beginning of 1932, the greater part of the Italian diplomatic representation transferred to Shanghai, returning to Peking in the mid-thirties, when Vincenzo Lojacono was appointed as the first Italian Ambassador and oversaw the Legation until late 1936/early 1937. Lojacono was succeeded by Giuliano Cora, considered one of Italy's most brilliant career diplomats, who had already worked in Tokyo and had played an important role at the Washington Conference. He had to deal with the serious crisis in 1937 and then in 1938 was relieved of his post in China, accused of obstructing fascist policy in the Far East. His successor was the Marquis Francesco Maria Taliani, who soon left Peking to set up in Shanghai following the onset of war and also in conjunction with the Italian objective of moving towards a collaboration with Wang Jingwei. Taliani would remain in China until the end of the war and, after the 8th of December 1943, was interned at Shanghai for having affirmed his loyalty to the king rather than to the regime of Salò.

In charge of the important consular districts of Tianjin and Shanghai, we find several prominent figures of the Italian diplomatic service, whose role was sometimes particularly significant. For instance, in Tian-

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jin the first Consul was Cesare Poma, from Biella, son of a cotton manufacturer, who graduated in law and set off himself up for a diplomatic career. After Poma, there were nine other Royal Consuls at Tianjin, the last being Ferruccio Stefenelli who was overtaken, like all the other Italians, by the events following 8 September 1943, when Japanese troops surrounded the Italian area, occupied it and interned all those unwilling to swear allegiance to the new Mussolini government.

Francesco Maria Taliani: from Ambassador to Prisoner-of-war

Francesco Maria Taliani, Marquis of Marchio, was born in Ascoli Piceno in 1887 and died in Rome in 1968. His diplomatic career started in 1912: he first served as an attaché to the Italian Embassy in Berlin and later in Constantinople. Between 1916 and 1917 he worked in St. Petersburg, then in London, Ankara, The Hague. He was appointed ambassador in 1937.

In 1938 he was sent to China, where he remained throughout the war. In 1943, he vowed obedience to the Badoglio government and, for this reason, the Japanese interned him in some concentration camps in the Shanghai area. He would leave the camps only towards the end of 1945, after the American troops set him free. Nevertheless, as already stated, he remained in China, fulfilling his new unofficial task: protecting Italian interests as much as he could. In mid-1946 he went back to Italy and for some years worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His latest appointment was as ambassador in Madrid from 1951 to 1952.

The period during which Taliani arrived in China (September 1938) was marked by the explosive Japanese advance and increasingly difficult Chinese situation: after the fall of Shanghai and Nanjing, in October 1938 the city of Wuhan was occupied by Japanese troops.

In his memoirs (~~Francesco Maria~~ Taliani 1949; ~~Francesco Maria~~ Taliani 1958), Taliani recalls arriving in Shanghai in autumn 1938, on the Italian ship *Biancamano*. He had good credentials and Minister Ciano's strong support. Ciano, who still had in his memory the years spent in China, told Taliani that Italy was actually expecting the Japanese to win over China before the end of 1938. When Taliani arrived in China not only were relations between China and Italy going through a very

Commento [UW1]: (Taliani 1949; Taliani 1958)

difficult phase, but he did not have the opportunity to officially present his credentials to Chiang Kai-shek's government and, technically speaking, he was not accredited to it. Even after Chiang's government had moved to Chongqing in 1938, Taliani remained in Shanghai. Relations with Chiang were handled by an Italian legation secretary in Chongqing. To further complicate the situation, there was the Italian diplomatic presence in Manzhouguo. In July 1941, Chongqing broke off diplomatic relations with Rome after the Italian government recognized the Wang Jingwei regime, and Italy quickly saw to the formal accreditation of Taliani to Nanjing by presenting his credentials. With this done, Taliani returned to Shanghai, which remained his main residence until the Italian armistice of September 1943, when he was arrested.

Ambassador Taliani played a very important role between 1938 and 1943, especially through his connections with Wang Jingwei, as well as Japanese officers in China. In Shanghai, he had often met Wang Jingwei: in his reports to Rome, he tended to stress that the ideological base of the new Chinese government was and would remain anti-Bolshevik, and pointed out that Wang Jingwei had obtained a declaration from Tokyo confirming that Japan would not enter into any political *entente* with Soviet Russia. To summarize the Chinese situation in the spring of 1940, Taliani emphasized Chiang Kai-shek's determination not to surrender and stressed that the Nationalist Chinese would continue the fight, staking everything on Tokyo's presumed war-weariness. After the establishment of Wang Jingwei's regime on March 30th, 1940, the hopes of the Italian government and press for a last-minute '*entente cordiale*' between Chiang Kai-shek and Wang Jingwei began to fade. On June 10th, 1940 Italy declared war on France and Great Britain, thus linking its fortunes in Europe with those of Germany and later on with those of Japan. On November 30th, 1940 Japan extended official recognition to Wang Jingwei's government, thus opening an avenue for more direct Italian support of the Nanjing-Tokyo relationship. Italy was thus brought steadily closer to tilting fully towards Japan by conferring recognition to the Wang Jingwei government in September 1943 (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, IX Series, ~~various volumes~~).

In his memoirs, Taliani narrates being arrested on the eve of September 9, 1943, the day after the armistice was signed by the Badoglio government. After spending a hectic day, destroying documents and ciphers, Taliani was brought to a house, where he was kept under strict surveillance. He was alone there, except for a very brief period, when he was

Commento [UW2]: To be canceled: various volumes

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assisted by a sailor of the Battaglione San Marco, who had temporarily escaped the Japanese round-ups. Of those early days of imprisonment, Taliani especially recalls some of the conversations he had had with Chinese officers who came to visit him, asking him to side with the new Italian regime (Salò Republic, September 23rd, 1943–April 25, 1945) and cooperate with the Japanese (Taliani 1949, 11-37).

However, Taliani once again confirmed his loyalty and obedience to the king.

Japanese officers regularly visited the Italian ambassador: they exerted an increasing pressure on him, as they hoped he would support Mussolini. He was later on joined by his wife who, up to that time, had been in Beidahe, a resort area situated in Hebei province, in Northern China.

After spending a period of time in that house, Taliani received a telegram from Rome and learnt that he had been exempted from his duties. It was then that his real imprisonment began. With his wife and other foreigners, he was put on a truck and taken to a concentration camp very near the airport (very likely the Hongqiao camp), where he remained until the end of February 1944. He was then moved to a new camp in Rubicon Road.

Most of Taliani's memoirs report regards simple details about daily life of his experience of internment (Taliani 1949).

Taliani ironically recalls how the food arrived at the camp only after it had been distributed to the British and the Americans. The day started at eight o'clock with the *roll call* and on it went: shifts in the kitchen, cleaning, hoeing those few inches of soil, trying to add something to the scarce food ration. The evening *roll call* concluded the day. This is how he remembers those days (Taliani 1949, 264):

Solita vita. Immobile, ho veduto le stagioni sfilare dinanzi alla mia finestra sul quadro verde o bruciato della campagna; e te le annunziano la preveggenza dei contadini e il cangiar del cielo e dei venti e i cenci appesi al sole e gli amori della cagna gialla e il fetore delle concimazioni

With Taliani were also some of his more faithful assistants within the embassy, while those who had sided with the Salò Republic had, generally speaking, been left outside the camp. However, some of the Italians who had promised obedience to Mussolini, but whom the Japanese con-

sidered untrustworthy, were also in his camp, which he defined as a political camp. They were not allowed to receive parcels, or to seek the comfort of a priest or a visit from the Red Cross. However, during the last phase of internment, corresponding to the final phases of the war, Taliani recorded partial but decisive changes. He was allowed to take guarded walks with his wife around the adjacent countryside and, when Chinese peasants would approach them to sell their products, the guards did not react as readily and roughly as they used to do in the past.

A meaningful moment in the diary tells of the arrival of the Swedish consul at the camp on the eve of Germany's downfall. Sweden had been chosen by the new Italian government as the country that would care for Italian interests and protect Italian citizens during the weeks immediately preceding Japan's surrender and in the early post-war period.

In Taliani's narration, the end of the war seems no less humiliating and tragic. He recalls how on August 15th 1945, the Japanese and the Swedish consuls came to announce the liberation. The guards had disappeared and the gate was opened. Huge amounts of food, underwear, blankets, tobacco, soap, and medicines were parachuted into the Anglo-Saxon camps, but the Italians received nothing. They felt ignored, left to themselves, wandering around. The Italian sailors were starving. Taliani tells us that even the former secretary of the Fascist Party and his first assistant had hidden their black shirts. Although he did so to a limited extent, Taliani took care of the serious situation of the colony. A large number of Italians died during those terrible days in China.

In June 1946, Taliani left Shanghai on the ship *Eritrea*, together with many others who were leaving the tormented city. The ship arrived in Hong Kong and then headed for Singapore, where Taliani was made to get off. He stayed in a hotel while waiting to find a way to reach Europe. All the other passengers remained on board, as it was absolutely forbidden for anybody to disembark. Taliani's adventurous trip then continued with stops in Colombo, Karachi, a military base near Bassora, and then Cairo. Finally, he managed to sail to Naples.

Sergio Fenoaltea: working for new friendly relations between Liberated Italy and Chiang Kai-shek's China

Even if it had achieved the status of a co-belligerent nation, Italy was however perceived by the major victorious powers as a defeated enemy

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country. During the negotiations that would lead to the drafting of the Italian peace treaty, a punitive approach had prevailed and in February 1947 (the signing of the Paris treaty) the Italian Government had been compelled to accept a sort of diktat: territorial losses (Dalmatian territories and the Istria peninsula, African colonies, Dodecanese islands), heavy reparations to pay, severe limitations especially in the military field (Lorenzini 2007, 169). From the end of the war and for more than two years, Italy was thus subject to the armistice terms and to foreign occupation, and foreign troops (basically American) would leave the country only at the end of 1947.

Italy's international status sharply contrasted with the aspirations nurtured by the Italian antifascist political class, by the diplomatic corps and by many Italian opinion makers: in their opinion, Italy had to recover the role of a middle-rank power which would exert its influence in the two traditional areas of Italy's foreign policy: the European continent and the Mediterranean. Thus, the recognition of the nation's international status and the revision of the most severe clauses of the peace treaty became the main goal of Italy's foreign policy after the end of the second world war and especially after the signing of the Paris peace treaty in early 1947.

In liberated Italy it was the first De Gasperi government (10th December of 1945 – 12th July of 1946) that began the process of normalizing relations with Nationalist China, even if first preliminary steps were taken by the Parri government (21st June of 1945 – 9th December of 1945) in which De Gasperi was the Foreign Minister.

First negotiations toward reestablishing diplomatic relations were conducted through Moscow, but these proved less fruitful than expected. Consequently, Rome in late 1945 began direct talks with the Chinese government. The first step would be the appointment of a diplomatic mission to China charged with this task. A normalization of relations was soon attained, with the accreditation in early 1946 of Enrico Anzilotti to Chongqing as interim *chargé d'affaires*; he moved then to Nanjing when the Nationalist government returned to its prewar capital. Finally, in summer 1946 the new Italian ambassador, Sergio Fenoaltea, arrived. At the same time China accredited a new ambassador to Rome.

Sergio Fenoaltea (1908-1995), a leading political man, discussed with the Chinese foreign minister Wang Shijie and Chinese diplomats problems related to the future of China-Italy relations. Two main problems

were raised and discussed during the last months of the war and the first post-war period: first, Italy's possible entry into the war against Japan; second, the contents of the Italy-China treaty peace within the Paris Peace Conference scheduled for 1947 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Fondo "Sergio Fenoaltea", envelope 110).

During the last months of the war, before Japan's surrender, the problem of Italy's possible entry into the war against Japan was raised: a participation which was seen basically as symbolical by many countries, including the United States (which in any case seemed to support almost in theory such a choice), but which was regarded as rather important by Italy in order to demonstrate its complete break with its past and confirm its firm stand to the democratic and antifascist front. Various sources maintain that the US Department of State clearly indicated to the Italian ambassador in Washington, Tarchiani, that Italy's declaration of war against Japan will surely enhance Italy's international profile and facilitate Italy's passage as a co-belligerent country to an ally. It must be also said that such a choice would surely have been welcomed by China, as a further strengthening of the anti-Japanese front ((Borzoni 2004, 455-469; Ministero degli Affari, Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* 1992, X Series, volume 2, document 304 and document 332; Ministero degli Affari, Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* 1994, X Series, volume 4, document 85 and document 93). At the end this option did not become concrete.

As for the contents of the peace treaty between the two countries within the larger context of the Paris peace treaty (Italian colonial legacy in China, repatriation of the Italians, Italian properties, etc), after many meetings and talks, within the above-mentioned Paris Peace Treaties of February 1947, a special section (Section V), articles 24, 25 and 26 concerned "Italy's Special Interests in China". Article 24, indicated that "Italy renounces in favour of China all benefits and privileges resulting from the provisions of the final Protocol signed at Peking on September 7th of 1901 and all annexes, notes and documents supplementary thereto, and agrees to the abrogation in respect of Italy of the said protocol, annexes, notes and documents. Italy likewise renounces any claim thereunder to an indemnity". Article 25 stressed that "Italy agrees to the cancellation of the lease from the Chinese Government under which the Italian Concession at Tientsin [Tianjin] was granted, and to transfer to the Chinese Government of any property and archives belonging to the municipality of the said Concession"; and Article 26 maintained that "Italy renounces in favor of China the rights accorded to Italy in relation to the

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International Settlement at Shanghai and Amoy [Xiamen], and agrees to the reversion of the said Settlements to the administration and control of the Chinese Government” (Lorenzini 2007, p. 169; Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* 1993, X Series, volume 3, document ~~document~~ 372 and document 610).

Commento [UW3]: To be canceled

Conclusions

The history of the Italian presence in China during the first half of the 20th century was always modest, especially if compared to that of the European powers such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany. It is, however, important to try to fill such an historical gap not only because the story of those Italians who lived and worked in China is part of the political, economic, cultural and human events that marked the lives of the foreign communities in China in that historical period but also and in particular because of the relevance of their experiences in term of contact zones in a general Chinese context marked by colonialism and by a great difference in cultural visions and approaches between foreigners (Italians) and the Chinese people. My contribution aimed at analysing main reports and memoirs by some selected Italian diplomats during the periods they spent in Republican China, focusing on their experience of work and life and on their views of China and the Chinese. In particular, this paper has dealt with two diplomatic experiences: that of Ambassador Taliani, who was in China during the Japanese aggression to China in the late 1930s and of the changing in Italian foreign policy towards the Far East and who lived in his last years there experiencing the hell of internment by the Japanese; and that of Ambassador Fenoaltea, who lived and worked in China in the post-war (Second World War) years, trying to renew China-Italy friendship in the midst of the civil war and the crisis of Chinese political and territorial unity.

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