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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF  
EAST ASIAN STUDIES 23 (2024) 119–153

European Journal  
of  
East Asian Studies  
brill.com/ejea

# Sino-Italian Relations after the Belt and Road Initiative

*China's Quest for Reputational Security and the Response of a Strategic Italian Public*

Giovanni B. Andornino | ORCID: 0000-0003-3759-1177

Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Turin, Italy  
[giovanni.andornino@unito.it](mailto:giovanni.andornino@unito.it)

Received 9 July 2024 | Accepted 2 September 2024 |

Published online 30 September 2024

## Abstract

The fluctuations of Italy's China policy have been attracting attention. The only G7 country to join Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, Italy was also the first European participant to withdraw in 2023. While scholars have investigated the rationales and implications of Rome's actions, no satisfactory explanation has been provided as to why the Chinese government chose not to escalate tensions over Italy's exit decision. This article argues that, faced with a degradation of trust in relations with the West, China has been attempting to balance its more assertive foreign policy with the need to strengthen its reputational security. Results from an original survey on the opinions about China held by Italian university students are then used to empirically assess China's reputation among a strategically attentive public. Research findings from the 1,072-strong sample show that reputational capital resides with Chinese society more than with the PRC state, and that while the PRC is widely expected to match the US in economic might and global influence, Beijing's policies in key realms such as the Ukraine war and the Covid-19 pandemic have been counterproductive for the preservation of China's reputational security among individuals who are likely to play a key role in future Sino-Italian relations.

## Keywords

reputation – public opinion – China – Italy – Belt and Road Initiative

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/15700615-02302004

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## 1 Introduction

In December 2023 the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation formally notified the Chinese authorities that the Italian government would opt out of the automatic renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding for collaboration on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ministry of Economic Development of the Italian Republic 2019). This decision terminated the involvement of the sole G7 country to have adhered to Chinese president Xi Jinping's most high-profile foreign policy initiative to date (Andornino 2017). Whereas only sporadic explorations of Italy's China policy had been undertaken by International Relations (IR) scholars in the previous decade (Coraluzzo 2008; Andornino 2012; Marinelli and Andornino 2014), Rome's controversial association with the BRI has recently emerged as a fertile case study across a variety of research agendas.

Given the unprecedented populist-sovereignist nature of the parliamentary majority supporting Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte at the time of the signing of the BRI MoU in March 2019, a number of scholars have integrated the burgeoning literature on the impact of populist parties on Italian foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Basile and Mazzoleni 2020; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020; Coticchia 2021) with an analysis of Italy's deepening engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC). For some, Italy's adherence to the BRI represented a major departure from Rome's traditional foreign policy posture (Cladi and Locatelli 2020; Giurlando 2020), while others pointed to the underlying continuity with the trade and investment agendas pursued by previous, more mainstream Italian governments (Pugliese 2020), that had for over a decade cultivated a 'strategic partnership' with Beijing (Boni 2023; Andornino 2015). The implications of tighter Sino-Italian relations on the internal dynamics of the European Union (EU) and on Brussels' own international outlook have also received significant attention, both in Europe (Jakimów et al. 2024) and in China (Men and Jiang 2021), with European research focusing in particular on the implications of economic interdependence with the PRC—especially in sensitive sectors—on European (dis)integration (Petrillo 2020; Farrajota Ramos 2021; Guroi and Rodríguez 2022).

As the political landscape in Italy began to shift in 2020, along with a generalised deterioration of parliamentary attitudes towards the PRC during the course of the 18th Legislature (2018–2022) (Andornino 2023), scholars—especially in China—were confronted with a different challenge: making sense of the very public unravelling of Rome's participation in the BRI, an uncommonly idiosyncratic development for a country, Italy, that is as much known for the unpredictability of its domestic politics as it is for its preference for

unassertive foreign policy behaviour. Joining a controversial forum like the Belt and Road Initiative with much fanfare in 2019 only to formally leave it less than five years later is not standard diplomatic practice in Rome. Typically, legally non-binding agreements, such as the BRI MoU, that become politically undesirable are relegated to obscurity, since explicit denunciation, however diplomatically handled, entails costs. External agency has, unsurprisingly, emerged as a key explanatory variable: as acute concern with Italy's BRI involvement had been registered in Washington and Brussels from the start (Dossi 2020), pushback from the USA (Alekseenkova 2021) and pressure within the European Union (Zhong and Wei 2024) have been widely credited with limiting the political viability of hedging strategies by Western middle powers such as Italy (Zhong 2022), especially towards the country that some would now qualify as the leader of an emerging 'Global East' bent on disrupting the American hegemonic order (Ikenberry 2024, 129).

The ascension to power of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's right-wing coalition in 2022 led both Chinese and international observers to expect a further, and possibly severe, deterioration of the relationship (Liu and Li 2023), with the Italian economy at risk of facing the sharper edge of China's economic influence (Ferchen and Mattlin 2023) or even full-fledged retaliatory measures (Lai 2017). This did not happen. Instead of resulting in any visible abrasive repercussion, as 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy would have suggested (Duan 2023), Sino-Italian relations transitioned virtually seamlessly from the logics of BRI connectivity (Gallelli and Ghiretti 2023) to the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Global Strategic Partnership between the two countries in April 2024 (Zoppo 2024). Why was this the case? Why would the Chinese government not tangibly show its displeasure and escalate tensions with Rome over its confusing handling of the BRI, a component so critical to Beijing's policy of international status enhancement (Andornino 2023) as to be incorporated into the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at its 19th national congress in 2017? The low-profile, matter-of-fact approach of the Italian government and diplomats—as well as of the national media, by and large—in the run-up and in the immediate aftermath of Rome's decision to leave the BRI certainly helped, but ultimately China's reaction had to be calibrated taking into account that acquiescence towards such a noticeable 'BRIexit' precedent might invite disengagement by other signatories that are themselves more and more exposed to the competing pressures propagated by the intensifying US-China rivalry (Brands and Gaddis 2021).

The argument advanced here is that, faced with a marked degradation of trust in its relations with the West (Jiang and Wang 2019), especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has been

careful to keep balancing its generally more assertive foreign policy posture (Yan 2014; Yan 2021) with efforts to strengthen its reputational security (Cull 2022).<sup>1</sup> Italy had long been a natural target of such efforts, and for good reasons. First, in the all-important EU context, where China's strategic objective is to encourage the emergence of more 'independent' foreign policy orientations vis-à-vis Washington's preferences,<sup>2</sup> Italy carries weight, especially after Brexit.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, although Atlanticism has consistently been one of the lodestars of Rome's foreign policy, different Italian governments have traditionally cherished a particular degree of autonomy towards non-Western powers, including during the Cold War (Carati et al. 2021), an inclination that could prove valuable to Beijing in an increasingly polarised international system. Finally, Italy is home to one of Europe's least China-friendly public opinions. Given that high politics decision-making takes place against a background of public sentiment, especially in democracies (Osgood 2002; Baum and Potter 2015), it is significant that, according to the widely respected surveys of the PEW research centre, Italy is an outlier in Europe, being one of only two countries (the other being Germany) reporting a majority of respondents holding a negative view of China every year during the first decade of Xi Jinping's leadership (2012–2021) (Silver et al. 2022b).

Italy's involvement in the BRI was meant, in Beijing's intentions, *inter alia*, to help address this state of affairs, by facilitating exchanges across the board and showcasing the material benefits for Italian society that would stem from a closer partnership with the PRC.<sup>4</sup> Engaging in punitive behaviour against Italian interests while Rome was signalling a pragmatic approach to post-BRI rela-

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1 This argument has been validated through extensive interviews conducted by the author with twelve senior Italian and Chinese diplomats directly involved in the negotiations surrounding Italy's withdrawal from the BRI. These interviews took place in Rome (March, May, July, October, and November, 2023) and in Beijing (June, October 2023, and April, 2024). On the methodological challenges of interpretative research based on fieldwork inside foreign policy bureaucracies, see Kuus (2012).

2 It is telling that Chinese President Xi Jinping's first trip to Europe since the Covid pandemic, in May 2024, included one stop in Paris and two in countries that Beijing has commended for taking exception with the European consensus on Ukraine: Hungary and Serbia. See Xi Jinping's words in Xi (2024).

3 As we now know, Rome's influence may well expand further as the 'flexible Euroscepticism' of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party (Wang Hongyi and Tan 2023) adapts to the conservative and far-right surge in the 2024 European elections.

4 Significant economic gains had been anticipated by the government led by Giuseppe Conte ahead of joining the BRI in 2019. While such material benefits have largely failed to materialise, it would be wrong to gloss over the special support offered by Beijing to Italy in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic.

tions with China would have severely undermined China's long-term agenda of reputation 'shaping' (Lin 2013) in an especially relevant European context and at a critical juncture, just when the risk of sliding into a new Cold War needs to be mitigated with particular care (Y. Zheng 2024).

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, the concept of reputational security will be explored, highlighting its salience within China's overarching strategy of security maximisation under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The status of China's reputation in Italy will then be assessed using data from an original survey of the opinions of Italian students pursuing degrees in Chinese language or International Studies, who form one of the most strategic attentive publics in the country. Research findings show how reputational capital resides with Chinese society more than with the PRC as a state, which tends to be regarded with some degree of scepticism by a plurality of respondents, even though a majority of them hold a generally optimistic view of the trajectory of Italy-China relations. They also mostly regard the PRC as either having already risen to the rank of the world's leading economic power, or being on track to do so by 2040, thereby developing a global influence comparable to that of the United States.

These results parallel findings from other recent public opinion surveys that have explored the attitude of the Italian public towards China. This study, however, goes one step further, investigating how the variations in the perceptions held by respondents can be associated with pivotal phenomena in international politics such as the Ukraine war and the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as with individual-level variables such as direct personal experience of China, expectations of material benefit from relations with China, and personal right-wing political preferences. Among the policy-relevant observations that can be inferred from the available data is a clear indication that benign neutrality vis-à-vis Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and the years-long 'zero-Covid' policy of isolation of the country are counterproductive for the preservation of China's reputational security among individuals who can be expected to play an especially salient role in the future of Sino-Italian relations.

## 2 Conceptualising Reputational Security

Since antiquity, reputation has been considered a salient attribute in world politics (Mercer 1996), 'one of the few things worth fighting over' (Schelling 1966, 124). Accordingly, IR scholars have been investigating the subject extensively, from a variety of perspectives. A conspicuous body of literature has been devoted to the importance of reputation for resolve in pursuit of deterrence

(Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015; Zhang 2019). Researchers have explored a range of issues: the value of a reputation for honesty in government negotiations (Sartori 2002); the role of leaders in reputation formation (Renshon et al. 2018); the conditions in which players invest more in reputation building (Tingley and Walter 2011); and how reputation matters in the realm of audience costs for governments (Guisinger and Smith 2002).

What all scholars agree on is that reputation is conferred by others: political actors can care about reputation and work on it, but ultimately reputation cannot be manufactured, as it is in the eye of the beholder. In this sense, reputation shares the same social nature as international status and prestige (Wohlforth et al. 2018). However, whereas international status and prestige are positional goods which entail competition within a hierarchical context, reputation is not. Reputation revolves around contents, not quantity: states do not seek 'more' reputation, they seek a good and useful one. That is because, grounded as it is in other states' perceptions, reputation influences, for better or worse, their behaviour. It is therefore imprudent, for decision-makers, not to prioritise reputation management in their two-level games: on the one hand, positive reputation is a valuable intangible asset that functions as a multiplier of political and social influence internationally (Anholt 2020; Cull 2022); on the other, citizens are deeply sensitive to damage inflicted to their country's international reputation, including by their own governments (Li and Chen 2020).

Conventional approaches that define reputation as a belief that others hold based on persistent characteristics or the past behavioural tendencies of an actor (Dafoe et al. 2014, 372) have been criticised for generating problems of psychological reductionism of reputational beliefs. Recent constructivist scholarship (Sundaram 2020) suggests that focusing on the practices of international relations may offer a more heuristically fruitful path. This approach acknowledges that gaining and losing the desired reputation depends on social recognition, cultural norms, and community ideals in politics, all of which are historically contingent. Thus, securing the kind of reputation which generates social influence in the international domain requires that a country presents itself as a 'credible moral agent', that is to say one that is situated—and can be relied upon to remain—within the scope of generally recognised proper conduct (Hall 2010, 71). In the international arena, what constitutes proper conduct is always contested, albeit with different levels of intensity. In more homogeneous international systems (Aron 1966), this contestation is less pronounced, as major powers converge on a 'normative barycentre' that defines the logics of appropriateness for states' conduct. In historical phases when the heterogeneity of the international system becomes more striking and consequential, as is currently the case (Casey and Dolan 2023), building or defending reputa-

tion requires a lot more work, both on the social construction of ‘morality’ and on the recognition of credibility. No country is more exposed to this challenge than a rising power facing—and itself determining—a post-unipolar transition against an incumbent hegemon whose normative preferences are ontologically incompatible with the rising power’s own domestic political regime. This is precisely China’s predicament today.

As the ‘global liberal moment’ of the 1990s gives way to seemingly irreducible political and ideological pluralism, the struggle among different conceptions of modernity and alternative logics of world order is intensifying. While this competition has not solidified into blocs, ‘informal, constructed and evolving global factions’ (Ikenberry 2024, 122) increasingly and fluidly coalesce to promote contending political ideas about what is just, appropriate, and desirable in international politics. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza are but the most high-profile instances of this trend, and China’s ambivalent conduct in both circumstances reflects the delicate balancing act Beijing must navigate. Insofar as Chinese authorities need to preserve their country’s reputation across multiple audiences that are becoming intrinsically fractious (i.e. the Global South) and adversarial among themselves (i.e. the US-led West vs. the rest), contradictions between ‘morality’ and credibility become more apparent. Beijing’s stance on the inviolability of the principle of sovereignty in international relations is a case in point. After having long positioned itself as the global standard bearer of socio-economic and sovereign rights, a principled position that has paid rich reputational dividends for China among countries emerging from colonial rule, it is hard for Beijing to justify its ambivalence towards Russia’s encroachment on Ukrainian territorial integrity without jeopardising its credibility. On the other hand, condemning Russia’s invasion would have more roundly preserved China’s credibility claim on this specific issue, but it would have broken Sino-Russian solidarity at a time when Moscow’s support for China’s agenda of multipolarisation and ‘democratisation of international relations’ is considered vital in Beijing (Ni and Wang 2016).

It is this contextual pressure perceived by leaders in Zhongnanhai (the supreme leadership compound of the CCP) that suggests that the practices of reputation too have been captured by the comprehensive security paradigm promoted by the CCP under Xi Jinping’s leadership (Chestnut Greitens 2023). Chinese observers and policymakers have long suspected that Washington’s openness to Chinese development, which underpinned the more homogeneous international system of the 1990s and early 2000s, was ultimately strategic in nature, and contingent on both regime change in Beijing and on China’s acceptance of an undeclared but nonetheless effective ‘Wolfowitz doctrine.’<sup>5</sup> In

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5 The Wolfowitz Doctrine refers to a controversial set of guidelines for US foreign policy devel-

official Chinese political lexicon, the perceived temporariness of US hospitality towards China's 'peaceful rise' (B. Zheng 2005) is well captured by the frequent reference to a 'window of opportunity' for China's development, that can only remain open until Washington loses confidence in its approach of engagement. According to this view, fundamental differences inherent in the two countries' political and value systems make the US wary of the competitiveness of China's identity (Zhu 2003, 20). Thus, only when China engages in the type of domestic reforms that make it 'more like America' does the United States consider China trustworthy (Gan and Mao 2007). Conversely, the more it pursues its own peculiar 'political technology' (*zhengzhi jishu*) of Party-State organisation (Wang Huning 1986) to modernise the country and build China's international reputation according to its own conceptions of 'moral' conduct, Washington shifts to zero-sum containment policies.

To the extent that Chinese leaders believe that they only have two choices—forego CCP monopoly over political power in China, or seek support for their own proposition of normative order (Yan 2009)—reputation ultimately becomes one component of the wider strategy to secure the Party-State survival, and China's rise, against the headwinds of a heterogeneous international system. It is in this sense that this article incorporates the concept of reputational security. Building on Cull's (2019, 29) original minimalist definition of reputational security as 'a place on the high ground of the global imagination' that ensures that a state or society is sufficiently relevant to an international audience for its preservation or continued integrity to be considered a priority, this study extends its analytical scope into the domestic political domain. With reputation having become even more important than in the past (Nye 2008, 100), the stakes for China's leaders could not be higher: their efforts to break Western normative hegemony (Oud 2024) must at once preserve China's credibility and avoid reinforcing a zero-sum game mentality, especially across non-US Western audiences, that are critically important to prevent a new Cold War. The costs of failure would not be measured only in terms of China's loss of global influence: albeit authoritarian, the Chinese government too faces public opinion costs akin to audience costs in democracies, and such costs have been found to be primarily invoked by citizens out of concern for potential damage to China's international reputation (Li and Chen 2020). It is in this context that

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oped in 1992 by then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz to provide a strategic framework for the US following the end of the Cold War. One particular section often quoted by Chinese scholars to decry US 'hegemonism' states that the US should 'preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests [...] These regions include Europe, East Asia, the Middle East/Persian Gulf, and Latin America' (NSC 1992, 2).



the attitude of Italian authorities and public after Rome's withdrawal from the BRI impacts on China's reputational security.

### 3 Assessing China's Reputation in Italy: Empirical Research Design

Chinese policy-makers and scholars alike are acutely aware of the existing gap between the desirable state for China's international reputation and the current public perception of China abroad (Guo 2021, 13). For the reasons discussed in the Introduction, the Italian case is especially worth exploring. Has China's quest for reputational security been advanced by Italy being part of the Belt and Road Initiative? Against what reputational backdrop will China now have to navigate post-BRI Sino-Italian relations?

The latest empirical evidence offers Beijing little ground for complacency. In a survey of public opinion on China conducted across 13 European countries some 18 months after Italy joined the BRI, and half a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, Gallelli et al. (2020) found that the largest number (42%) of their sample of the Italian population leaned towards a negative view of China, with twice as many respondents reporting a decline in their image of China vis-à-vis those who saw an improvement. The 2022 edition of the 'Italians and foreign policy' survey (Angelucci et al. 2022), conducted by the Laboratory for Political and Social Analysis (LAPS) of the University of Siena on behalf of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), registered growing concern over excessive Chinese influence in Italy in both the political (59%) and economic (63%) domains, a marked shift in public sentiment compared with data from just two years prior, when the distribution among those who felt China's influence to be disproportionate and those who did not was practically even. These results are coherent with findings from the 2022 Transatlantic Trends report (Weber et al. 2022), in which 44% of Italian respondents were found to anticipate China becoming the most influential actor in global affairs by 2027, against an average of 25% across the 14 surveyed countries, with the majority (51%) of the Italian sample expressing feelings of concern for China's global influence. Finally, in the most recent cross-national survey available (Silver et al. 2022a), conducted by the PEW research centre while the government in Rome was deliberating on withdrawal from the BRI, Italy was singled out as the most likely country to see China interfering in the affairs of other countries, with 82% of the surveyed public reflecting this preoccupation.

The qualitative study discussed below<sup>6</sup> aims to add to the body of available empirical evidence and contribute to our understanding of China's reputation

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<sup>6</sup> The survey conducted for this study, titled 'Future stakeholders project: charting perceptions

among the Italian population by means of an original survey of a strategic ‘attentive public’. An ‘attentive’ or ‘informed’ public is composed of individuals interested in a particular issue, whose willingness to become and remain knowledgeable about that issue distinguishes them from the nonattentive general public (Almond 1956; Adler 1984; Miller 1983). The attentive public investigated for this research is composed of Italian students enrolled in a Chinese language or International Studies degree program, at the bachelor or master’s level, at Italian universities. Besides being self-evidently ‘attentive’, this particular cluster of the Italian public opinion can be considered ‘strategic’ since, given the very limited availability of knowledge about China within Italian society—in the face of burgeoning demand from businesses, institutions, the media, NGOs, and the population at large, who urgently need to more responsibly handle their interactions with Chinese counterparts—those who acquire China-related competences will have a higher than average probability of playing a significant role in Sino-Italian relations in the future. This is clearly the case for students who develop linguistic skills, which remain essential for robust interactions in the Chinese context. Students of International Studies form the second most cohesive group in terms of exposure to China competence. While a variety of other degree programs will, of course, offer occasional training on contemporary China—including economics, history, and law degrees—students enrolled in these programs can, and often do, complete their studies without ever having discussed China. This is impossible in any bachelor or master’s degree in International Studies: its unique role in the post-unipolar international system makes China an unavoidable feature in the curriculum. This is not to mean that the opinions on China held by other university students are less relevant: to the contrary, as indicated by the recent ‘Council Recommendation on enhancing research security’ (Council of the European Union 2024), it is important that we develop a better awareness of how higher learning institutions and students across our entire research and innovation space (especially in STEM disciplines) interact with third countries, notably China. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus has been restricted to the two pools of students from which members of the next generation of specialists tasked with securing Italy’s ‘long term and independent expertise on contemporary China’ (European Union 2021) are likely to be primarily drawn.

The preliminary questionnaire design for this survey was finalised by the author in collaboration with the other members of the Italy-China Compe-

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in Italy-China Relations among university students’, was authorised by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Turin on 26 October, 2021, Prot. No. 0623858.

tence and Sentiment Observatory (ICCSO) research group in September 2021. One question on the Ukraine war was added in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion. Following revisions stimulated by a focus group session and a preliminary in-house pilot session, the survey was conducted between 28 October, 2021 and 16 December, 2022. As aggregate data determining the total number and distribution of university students enrolled in a Chinese language or International Studies degree program at Italian universities are not available, a purposeful sampling strategy was adopted (Conti and Marella 2012, 19; Caselli 2005, 155), in pursuit of information richness (Guetterman 2015, 2). Relying on the expert judgement of the author, a political scientist, and of the ICCSO co-coordinator, a sinologist, the research was guided by a reflexive approach, which involved continuously reexamining the adequacy of the sample and taking every possible precaution to ensure it accurately reflected the target attentive public.<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire was administered across 14 universities in 12 Italian regions, with careful consideration of the role of some specific universities as national centres of excellence for the disciplines pertinent to the research.<sup>8</sup> For each selected university, a comprehensive list of reference lecturers and professors for the relevant bachelor and master's degree programs was compiled, and a detailed presentation of the research project shared with them. The questionnaire was administered by the author and two especially trained ICCSO researchers through in-person or hybrid 45-minute sessions held during regular classes, in the presence of the local host lecturer/professor. To mitigate potential bias, it was confirmed with all host lecturers/professors that the respondents in each session reflected the typical class composition on a standard teaching day. The questionnaire first presented an ethical consent form, assuring participants that no identifying data would be collected and that all results and responses would remain strictly anonymised and confidential. At the end of the survey, ICCSO researchers engaged respondents in a debriefing session to discuss the purpose and methodology of the study.

The survey yielded 1,225 effective participants: to ensure the validity of the responses the survey was engineered so as to prevent responses from duplicate

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7 Should the Ministry of University and Research publish data with the granularity required to identify the scope and distribution of the population under investigation, future iterations of this pilot study could pursue representative sampling and aim for full generalisability of results.

8 The questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in the following Italian universities: University of Bologna, University of Cagliari, University of Catania, University of Insubria (Como), Sapienza University of Rome, University of Naples 'L'Orientale', University of Padua, University of Palermo, University of Perugia, University of Siena, University of Turin, University of Trento, University of Trieste, and 'Ca' Foscari' University of Venice.

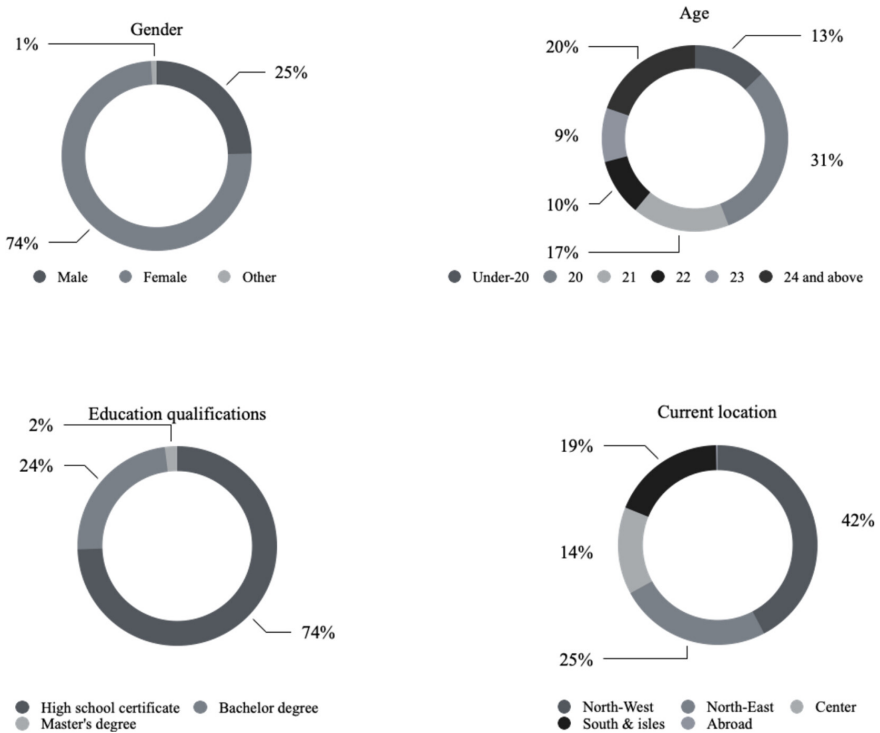


FIGURE 1 Demographic profile of the sample

IP addresses and to allow participation solely to individuals actually present during administration sessions. Incomplete questionnaires, as well as questionnaires compiled by participants who completed the survey more than 50 per cent faster than the average time taken, were dropped. The ensuing data set consists of 1,072 questionnaires ( $N=1072$ ). Of these, 640 refer to International Studies (henceforth 'IS') students and 432 refer to Chinese language (henceforth 'CL') students.<sup>9</sup>

The questionnaire was structured in six sections, respectively devoted to: (1) the profile of the respondents, through a series of standard demographical questions such as age, gender, and location of current domicile (see Figure 1); (2) the respondents' expectations regarding China's role in their professional

9 At the time of participating in the survey all respondents were enrolled in one of the following Ministerially accredited degree programs: for Chinese language majors, L-11 (36.34%), L-12 (33.80%), L-20 (1.39%), LM-36 (15.74%), LM-37 (2.55%), LM-38 (10.18%); for International Studies students, L-36 (76.09%), L-37 (3.59%), LM-52 (19.69%), LM-62 (0.47%), LM/DS (0.16%).

future; (3) the respondents' direct personal experience of China; (4) the respondents' knowledge of China; (5) the respondents' opinions on Italy-China relations; and finally (6) the respondents' opinions on international issues. For most questions, the respondents' orientations were measured using a 4-point Likert scale to force the indication of a prevailing orientation, but with a 'don't know' option also provided. In a few cases a 0–10 scale was used to measure the perceived affinity towards countries, where 0 implies maximum perceived distance and 10 maximum affinity.

The next section will discuss the results from key questions contained in the survey that help reconstruct China's reputation in the eyes of the sample Italian attentive public engaged by this study. The distribution of responses will be presented in Tables 1 to 18 in aggregate form and across three variables: (1) the disciplinary profile of the degree program in which respondents are enrolled (either IS or CL); (2) the respondents' prior direct exposure to China; and (3) the possession of at least basic China literacy, ascertained through four simple verification questions.<sup>10</sup> The descriptive component of the analysis will be complemented with the empirical testing of five hypotheses to reach policy-relevant inferences regarding whether pivotal phenomena in international politics and specific individual-level variables may impact on China's reputation among respondents, and how:

(H<sub>1</sub>) in keeping with literature on study abroad programs and place attachment (X. Wang et al. 2021), students who have been personally exposed to China through a stay in the country are expected to have a more favourable opinion towards the country;

(H<sub>2</sub>) in keeping with recent findings in research on political attitudes in Italy-China relations (Andornino 2023), students whose personal political beliefs reflect nationalistic attitudes are expected to have a less favourable opinion towards China;

(H<sub>3</sub>) in keeping with literature on the effects of self-interest on information processing and attitude change (Darke and Chaiken 2005), students who perceive China to be a source of career opportunities are expected to have a more favourable opinion towards China;

(H<sub>4</sub>) in keeping with literature on values and foreign policy postures (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), on account of their professed feeling of affin-

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10 The multiple-choice questions probe the respondents' knowledge of: (1) the name of the President of the People's Republic of China; (2) the geographical location of the most economically prosperous provinces of China; (3) the name of the Chinese currency; and (4) the name of the capital city of the People's Republic of China.

ity to the EU, students who took the survey after the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 are expected to have a less favourable opinion towards China;

(H<sub>5</sub>) in keeping with literature on Chinese public diplomacy (d'Hooghe 2021), students who have been more exposed to Chinese public diplomacy by displaying knowledge of the Belt and Road Initiative are expected to have a more favourable opinion towards China.

## 4 Results and Discussion

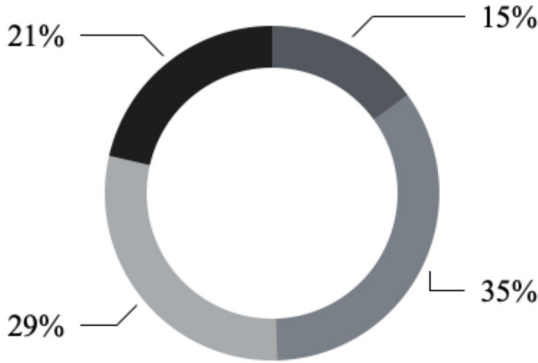
### 4.1 *Opinions on the PRC and the Chinese People*

A cluster analysis conducted to profile respondents on the basis of their perceived affinity towards different countries (Figure 2) reveals that the sample consists of individuals who, besides manifesting a universal sense of affinity with the European Union (>6 on a 0–10 scale), distribute themselves across four distinct camps: 21% may be described as 'Global Europhiles', as they report a similar degree of affinity with all the countries indicated in the questionnaire;<sup>11</sup> conversely some 15% are 'Diffident Europhiles' who report a perceived affinity above 4 for no country, except the European Union (>6). The remaining 64% of the sample is divided between Europhiles who feel close only to East Asia (35% report >6 only for the EU, China and Japan), and those who feel close only to the Anglo-Saxon West (29% report >6 only for the EU, Australia, the UK, and the USA).

Among respondents, CL students unsurprisingly report the highest degree of affinity with China, with an average level of 7 on a 0–10 scale, on par with the European Union, compared to an average of 4.5 among IS students. Similarly, with regards to the imagery related to China (Figure 3),<sup>12</sup> CL students more frequently mention the richness and peculiarity of Chinese culture, the country's economic prowess, and its extensive geographical and demographic scope; IS students, on the other hand, focus on the autocratic nature of China's political

11 The full list is the following: Australia, China, the EU, India, Japan, Russia, the UK, and the USA.

12 'When you think of China, which adjectives come to mind first?'. Since the questionnaire allowed for both pre-defined and open responses, answers were aggregated by the author. The ICCSO research group collaborated for inter-rater reliability. In the tag cloud presented here (Figure 3), the size of the adjectives accurately reflects their frequency in the data set. Responses with a positive connotation are shown in green; responses with a negative connotation are shown in red.



- Diffident Europhiles
- Europhiles who feel close to East Asia
- Europhiles who feel close to the Anglo-Saxon West
- Global Europhiles

FIGURE 2 Clusters of perceived affinity to Europe and select major countries



FIGURE 3 Expressions identified as reflecting the respondents' image of China

regime with the same frequency as they mention its economic prowess before citing the richness and peculiarity of Chinese culture.

This differentiation reappears when respondents are asked for their opinion on the People's Republic of China (Table 1):<sup>13</sup> exactly half of all CL students

13 'What is your opinion of the People's Republic of China?'. The use of the official name of the Chinese state was intended to encourage respondents to express opinions regarding China as a political entity.

TABLE 1 Opinion on the People's Republic of China

	Positive	Quite positive	Quite negative	Negative	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	3.73%	32.28%	38.99%	9.05%	15.95%
Respondents who have been to China	7.35%	56.62%	20.59%	2.94%	12.50%
Respondents who have never been to China	3.21%	28.74%	41.67%	9.94%	16.45%
Chinese language students	6.02%	43.98%	27.78%	3.94%	18.28%
International Studies students	2.19%	24.38%	46.56%	12.50%	14.37%
All literacy questions answered correctly	5.59%	41.30%	32.92%	8.70%	11.49%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	2.93%	28.40%	41.60%	9.20%	17.87%

express a positive or somewhat positive opinion, and less than a third a somewhat negative or negative opinion. Conversely, just over a quarter of IS students express a positive or somewhat positive opinion, while almost 60% report a somewhat negative or negative opinion. Overall, only 36% of the sample report a positive or quite positive opinion of the PRC; of these, less than 4% have a squarely positive opinion of the country.

The questionnaire then offered respondents an opportunity to distinguish between their opinion on the People's Republic of China and the degree of trust felt towards Chinese people (Table 2). Data suggest that Chinese society enjoys much more substantial reputational capital: over 80% of the sample register some trust or a lot of trust in Chinese people.

As expected, in keeping with literature on study abroad programs and place attachment, respondents who have personally experienced life in China hold a significantly better opinion of China than average, and almost universally report to have at least some trust in Chinese people. Since these findings might be intrinsically biased by the fact that those who have been directly exposed to China tend to be mainly CL students, who have been found to generally show a warmer attitude towards China, further analysis was conducted to ascertain whether a similarly different distribution in the opinion on the PRC based on having been in the country would emerge within this specific cluster of CL students too. As shown in Figure 4, almost two-thirds of CL students who have directly experienced life in China express a positive opinion about the country, compared to less than half of CL students who have never visited the country. These findings corroborate  $H_1$ : personal experience of China exerts a statistically significant effect on opinion about China ( $\chi^2 = 62.948$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Although the qualitative nature of this research makes it impossible to gener-



TABLE 2 Degree of trust felt towards Chinese people

	Much trust	Some trust	Little trust	No trust
All respondents ( <i>N</i> =1072)	12.41 %	68.94 %	16.51 %	2.15 %
Respondents who have been to China	23.53 %	70.59 %	5.88 %	0.00 %
Respondents who have never been to China	10.79 %	68.70 %	18.06 %	2.46 %
Chinese language students	18.98 %	72.45 %	7.64 %	0.93 %
International Studies students	7.97 %	66.56 %	22.50 %	2.97 %
All literacy questions answered correctly	15.53 %	71.12 %	12.73 %	0.62 %
At least one mistake in literacy questions	11.07 %	68.00 %	18.13 %	2.80 %

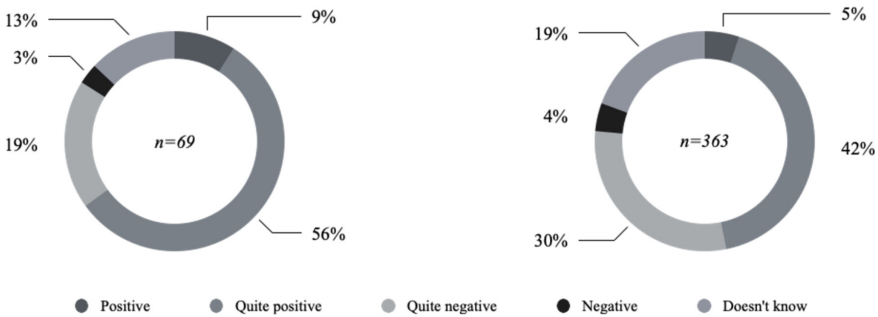


FIGURE 4 Opinion on the PRC among CL students who have (left, *n*=69) and have not (right, *n*=363) directly experienced life in China

alise results across the entire population of Italian CL and IS students, let alone the general public, a policy-relevant comment is warranted: this finding cautions against policies that hamper students' freedom to travel to China, such as during the 3-year period of isolation implemented by Chinese authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it can be self-defeating in terms of reputation enhancement.

Contrary to *H*<sub>1</sub>, instead, data do not support the expectation that respondents displaying a more nationalistic orientation would be associated with a less favourable opinion towards China. The questionnaire did not ask respondents to express specific preferences regarding political parties; in line with a common practice in the literature, this variable was operationalised through two proxy questions probing the respondents' willingness to (a) uncritically support the government and (b) approve the use of force to defend national interests. Though the sample proved broadly skeptical of nationalist proposi-

TABLE 3 Opinion on China's economic influence

	China will become the world's N. 1 economy by 2040	China already is the world's N. 1 economy	China will not overtake the US economy in the medium term	China will never overtake the US economy	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	58.40 %	15.95 %	8.86 %	2.52 %	14.27 %
Respondents who have been to China	62.50 %	17.65 %	10.29 %	1.47 %	8.09 %
Respondents who have never been to China	57.80 %	15.71 %	8.65 %	2.67 %	15.71 %
Chinese language students	59.72 %	17.59 %	6.48 %	1.62 %	14.58 %
International Studies students	57.50 %	14.84 %	10.47 %	3.13 %	14.06 %
All literacy questions answered correctly	68.01 %	13.04 %	7.14 %	2.17 %	9.63 %
At least one mistake in literacy questions	54.27 %	17.20 %	9.60 %	2.67 %	16.27 %

tions, it was possible to pursue statistical correlations (Pearson's coefficient,  $r$ ) between nationalistic orientation and opinion about China, which, however, were not significant ( $r = -0.04$ ;  $p = 0.206$  and  $r = 0.116$ ;  $p < 0.001$  respectively for the two proxy questions), thereby leading to the rejection of the hypothesis.

#### 4.2 Opinions on China's Economic Prospects

Consistent with the findings from the recent international surveys discussed in the previous section, the students who participated in this study exhibit high expectations for the Chinese economy (Table 3). While only 16% of respondents believe that the PRC has already risen to the rank of the world's leading economic power, 58% believe it will do so by 2040. Less than 9% of the sample think that the United States will maintain its economic primacy in the medium term and just 2.5% trust that it will manage to keep such status vis-à-vis China indefinitely. Optimism on China's economic future prevails across the board (Table 4).

In the context of the confidence displayed by respondents on the future of China's economy, it is significant that a large majority of them confide that China can benefit the social and economic development of its international partners in general (Table 5) and of Italy in particular (Table 6), as well as carry opportunities for the building of a good personal future to those who acquire expertise on the country (Table 7). On average, over 70% believe that the PRC offers development opportunities to its partners, a figure that increases perceptibly among those who have been to the country and among the more China-literate respondents. These data are mirrored in the respondents' opini-

TABLE 4 Attitude towards China's economic future

	Optimistic	Quite optimistic	Quite pessimistic	Pessimistic	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	20.43 %	55.69 %	11.57 %	1.40 %	10.91 %
Respondents who have been to China	30.15 %	53.68 %	9.56 %	0.74 %	5.88 %
Respondents who have never been to China	19.02 %	55.98 %	11.86 %	1.50 %	11.65 %
Chinese language students	25.23 %	54.63 %	9.26 %	0.69 %	10.19 %
International Studies students	17.19 %	56.41 %	13.13 %	1.88 %	11.41 %
All literacy questions answered correctly	25.78 %	55.28 %	11.49 %	2.17 %	5.28 %
At least one mistake in literacy questions	18.13 %	55.87 %	11.60 %	1.07 %	13.33 %

TABLE 5 Opportunities for the social and economic development of other countries offered by the Chinese economy

	Many	Some	Few	None	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	21.36 %	49.44 %	14.74 %	2.52 %	11.94 %
Respondents who have been to China	28.68 %	59.56 %	8.82 %	0.00 %	2.94 %
Respondents who have never been to China	20.30 %	47.97 %	15.60 %	2.88 %	13.25 %
Chinese language students	24.54 %	51.16 %	11.81 %	0.93 %	11.57 %
International Studies students	19.22 %	48.28 %	16.72 %	3.59 %	12.19 %
All literacy questions answered correctly	30.12 %	48.76 %	12.11 %	1.86 %	7.15 %
At least one mistake in literacy questions	17.60 %	49.73 %	15.87 %	2.80 %	14.00 %

TABLE 6 Opportunities for the social and economic development of Italy offered by the Chinese economy

	Many	Some	Few	None	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	20.56 %	48.36 %	16.09 %	2.61 %	12.38 %
Respondents who have been to China	29.01 %	58.78 %	9.16 %	0.00 %	3.05 %
Respondents who have never been to China	19.51 %	47.06 %	16.95 %	2.94 %	13.54 %
Chinese language students	24.54 %	51.16 %	11.81 %	0.92 %	11.57 %
International Studies students	18.60 %	48.29 %	17.13 %	3.75 %	12.23 %
All literacy questions answered correctly	29.82 %	48.19 %	12.95 %	1.81 %	7.23 %
At least one mistake in literacy questions	20.35 %	53.39 %	13.57 %	1.77 %	10.92 %

TABLE 7 Usefulness of studying China for building a good personal future

	Studying China brings many opportu- nities	Studying China brings opportunities, but studying other countries brings more	Studying China brings few opportu- nities	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	74.72%	8.96%	2.99%	13.34%
Respondents who have been to China	88.24%	5.15%	1.47%	5.15%
Respondents who have never been to China	72.76%	9.51%	3.21%	14.53%
Chinese language students	85.19%	6.71%	0.69%	7.41%
International Studies students	67.66%	10.47%	4.53%	17.34%
All literacy questions answered correctly	82.30%	9.32%	2.48%	5.90%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	71.47%	8.80%	3.20%	16.53%

ion on China's positive potential impact on Italy's socio-economic development (Table 6). Finally, an average of 75% of the sample is confident that studying China brings opportunities to build a good personal future, a finding that applies not only to CL students (85%), but also to a robust majority of IS students (68%).

Statistical analysis shows that while only 24% of respondents who do not perceive the acquisition of knowledge on China as generating opportunities have a positive or somewhat positive opinion about the country, the percentage rises to 58% among those who think that studying China can pay off on a personal level. The association between the two variables—perception of potential personal returns from studying the country and opinion about it—is found to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 141.701$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and validates  $H_3$ . A moderately positive correlation is also identified between the perception that China offers opportunities for Italy's socio-economic development and the opinion about China ( $r = 0.353$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Regression analysis further confirms that the perception that China offers opportunities for Italy's socio-economic development is a precursor to a positive opinion about China itself ( $R^2 = 0.123$ ;  $F = 124.342$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The mobilisation of China's economic prowess thus remains a key vehicle for the country's reputation on multiple levels.

TABLE 8 Confidence in China's ability to exert a global influence comparable to that of the USA in the near future

	High confidence	Fairly high confidence	Low confidence	No confidence
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	28.17%	47.57%	20.71%	3.54%
Respondents who have been to China	27.94%	44.12%	27.21%	0.74%
Respondents who have never been to China	28.21%	48.08%	19.76%	3.95%
Chinese language students	33.10%	49.31%	14.58%	3.01%
International Studies students	24.84%	46.41%	24.84%	3.91%
All literacy questions answered correctly	31.06%	41.93%	24.84%	2.17%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	26.93%	50.00%	18.93%	4.13%

### 4.3 *China's International Role and China-Italy Relations*

In keeping with expectations about China's economic primacy, three-quarters of the participants to the survey also anticipate that China will develop a global influence comparable to that of the United States in the near future (Table 8).

Respondents were offered a set of questions designed to assess their views on China's reputation in connection with key international events. Almost half of the sample believe that Beijing's pandemic control policies, while effective in maintaining economic growth, have imposed too high a cost on the Chinese population in terms of restricting personal freedoms (Table 9). Contextually, more than two-thirds of the respondents foresee a deterioration in China's global image or increased sinophobia against Chinese people abroad (Table 10) as an outcome of the pandemic.

Drawing on the European Union's nuanced approach towards China, which Brussels characterises as being simultaneously a partner, a competitor, and a systemic rival, two questions were posed investigating China's posture on key issues in the international economic (Table 11) and geopolitical domains (Table 12). With regards to the first question, tackling the long-standing charge levelled against Beijing to be engaging in unfair trade competition, it is noteworthy that only a small percentage of respondents (8%) clearly refute the suggestion that China engages in unfair practices. However, while acknowledging the problem, over half of the sample temper their criticism of Beijing by citing mitigating factors such as their persuasion that China is still a developing country or the belief that the PRC is not the sole actor engaged in unfair competition in global trade.

TABLE 9 Opinions on China's economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic

	<b>It proves the efficacy of China's autocratic-market socialism</b>	<b>It is a natural recovery after crisis</b>	<b>It shows China is overtaking the West</b>	<b>China's economic success has weighted too much on personal freedoms</b>	<b>China's economic recovery is more fragile than it seems</b>	<b>Doesn't know</b>
All respondents ( <i>N</i> =1072)	11.19%	7.74%	9.98%	47.11%	15.30%	8.68%
Respondents who have been to China	16.91%	8.82%	15.44%	35.29%	19.12%	4.41%
Respondents who have never been to China	10.37%	7.59%	9.19%	48.82%	14.74%	9.29%
Chinese language students	13.66%	12.04%	9.95%	43.29%	10.42%	10.65%
International Studies students	9.53%	4.84%	10.00%	49.69%	18.59%	7.34%
All literacy questions answered correctly	12.74%	6.52%	11.80%	43.17%	20.81%	4.97%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	10.54%	8.27%	9.20%	48.80%	12.93%	10.27%

TABLE 10 Expected effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on China's international reputation

	<b>More respect for China</b>	<b>Decline of China's reputation</b>	<b>More sinophobia towards Chinese people</b>	<b>No effects in the medium term</b>	<b>Doesn't know</b>
All respondents ( <i>N</i> =1072)	4.76%	32.56%	39.55%	12.41%	10.73%
Respondents who have been to China	8.09%	40.44%	37.50%	8.09%	5.88%
Respondents who have never been to China	4.27%	31.41%	39.85%	13.03%	11.43%
Chinese language students	4.17%	27.55%	45.83%	11.11%	11.34%
International Studies students	5.16%	35.94%	35.31%	13.28%	10.31%
All literacy questions answered correctly	5.90%	35.09%	36.96%	14.60%	7.45%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	4.27%	31.47%	40.67%	11.47%	12.13%

TABLE 11 Opinions on China's alleged unfair behaviour in the trade realm

	China does not compete unfairly	As a developing country China is justified in its behavior	It is a problem to which China must remedy	China is not the only country competing unfairly	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	8.12%	24.25%	13.15%	33.68%	20.80%
Respondents who have been to China	13.24%	26.47%	15.44%	8.82%	36.03%
Respondents who have never been to China	7.37%	23.93%	12.82%	33.33%	22.54%
Chinese language students	8.10%	29.17%	8.10%	31.48%	23.15%
International Studies students	8.13%	20.94%	16.56%	35.16%	19.22%
All literacy questions answered correctly	10.25%	22.98%	15.53%	39.13%	10.25%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	7.20%	24.80%	12.13%	31.33%	24.53%

TABLE 12 Expected impact of the war in Ukraine on China's international reputation

	Significant improvement	Partial improvement	Partial worsening	Significant worsening	No impact	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $n=546$ )	0.92%	6.80%	25.37%	4.04%	41.54%	21.32%
Respondents who have been to China	2.63%	7.89%	26.32%	0.00%	44.74%	18.42%
Respondents who have never been to China	0.79%	6.72%	25.30%	4.35%	41.30%	21.54%
Chinese language students	0.00%	5.00%	26.50%	3.00%	42.50%	23.00%
International Studies students	1.45%	7.85%	24.71%	4.65%	40.99%	20.35%
All literacy questions answered correctly	2.16%	6.47%	24.46%	2.88%	49.64%	14.39%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	0.49%	6.91%	25.68%	4.44%	38.77%	23.70%

As for the geopolitical domain, since the Russian war in Ukraine occurred during the questionnaire administration period, the research group deemed it necessary to urgently integrate the questionnaire with a question on the expected impact of the war on China's international image. The question was posed to all respondents after 24 February, 2022 (Table 12,  $n = 546$ ). In this case, a plurality of respondents (41.5%) believe that Beijing's benign neutrality vis-à-vis Moscow's illegal invasion will not have significant effects on China's international reputation. Among those who foresee some kind of impact the most widespread conviction is that this will be in the direction of a partial deterioration of China's reputation (25% of respondents).

TABLE 13 Opinion on the state of Italy-China economic relations

	Positive	Quite positive	Quite negative	Negative	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	12.13 %	63.34 %	6.90 %	0.65 %	16.98 %
Respondents who have been to China	17.65 %	69.12 %	5.88 %	0.00 %	7.35 %
Respondents who have never been to China	11.32 %	62.50 %	7.05 %	0.75 %	18.38 %
Chinese language students	15.97 %	61.34 %	5.09 %	0.93 %	16.67 %
International Studies students	9.53 %	64.69 %	8.13 %	0.47 %	17.19 %
All literacy questions answered correctly	17.08 %	68.32 %	7.76 %	0.62 %	6.21 %
At least one mistake in literacy questions	10.00 %	61.20 %	6.53 %	0.67 %	21.60 %

Since the administration of the survey was at mid-point at the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the sample ultimately happened to be almost evenly split between respondents interviewed before the conflict began ( $n = 526$ ) and those interviewed after the hostilities started ( $n = 546$ ). This has allowed for the testing of  $H_4$ . The analysis reveals a statistically significant association ( $\chi^2 = 29.794, p < 0.001$ ) between the timing of the respondents' answers (i.e. before or after the onset of the war) and their opinions on China. Although the  $\chi^2$  test does not inherently indicate causality, it is clear in this context that there is only one possible direction of influence. While 41 % of those who participated in the survey before the war reported a positive or somewhat positive opinion of the PRC, this percentage dropped to 29 % among those who answered after 24 February, 2022, pointing to the negative impact of Beijing's policy of benign neutrality towards Russia's war on European soil on China's reputation among a sample composed of Europhile students.

A final set of questions solicited the sample's opinions on the state of Italy-China relations. A generally optimistic picture emerges, especially regarding trade relations (Table 13), which are considered positive or somewhat positive by three-quarters of respondents, a percentage that rises further among the most China-literate components of the sample. A more cautious attitude can be noticed with regards to political relations (Table 14): here too, however, the majority consider the relations to be rather positive (though only 3 % view them as fully positive), compared to 23 % who consider them somewhat negative and a quarter who do not take a position.

Looking into the future (Table 15), few respondents foresee that the defining characteristic of the Sino-Italian relationship will be that of a close political partnership (2.5 %), full-fledged political antagonism (3.5 %), or even economic



TABLE 14 Opinion on the state of Italy-China political relations

	Positive	Quite positive	Quite negative	Negative	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	3.08%	48.88%	20.06%	2.33%	25.65%
Respondents who have been to China	5.15%	61.76%	16.91%	0.00%	16.18%
Respondents who have never been to China	2.78%	47.01%	20.51%	2.67%	27.03%
Chinese language students	4.86%	53.47%	11.57%	1.85%	28.24%
International Studies students	1.88%	45.78%	25.78%	2.66%	23.91%
All literacy questions answered correctly	4.35%	61.80%	19.25%	2.48%	12.11%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	2.53%	43.33%	20.40%	2.27%	31.47%

TABLE 15 Expected role of China in its future relations with Italy

	Political ally	Economic partner	Economic competitor	Political antagonist	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	2.43%	63.15%	11.29%	3.54%	19.59%
Respondents who have been to China	4.41%	77.21%	9.56%	0.00%	8.82%
Respondents who have never been to China	2.14%	61.11%	11.54%	4.06%	21.15%
Chinese language students	2.78%	67.36%	9.26%	1.62%	18.98%
International Studies students	2.19%	60.31%	12.66%	4.84%	20.00%
All literacy questions answered correctly	1.86%	77.02%	10.56%	3.42%	7.14%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	2.67%	57.20%	11.60%	3.60%	24.93%

competition (11%). For the vast majority (63%), the PRC will primarily be an economic partner for Italy.

#### 4.4 *Opinions on the Belt and Road Initiative*

The last hypothesis tested for this research ( $H_5$ ) posits that students who have been more exposed to Chinese public diplomacy can be expected to have a more favourable opinion towards China. Exposure to public diplomacy was operationalised by asking respondents to self-evaluate their knowledge level about the Belt and Road Initiative, given its centrality in China's discourse—

TABLE 16 Self-assessment of knowledge level about the 'Belt and Road Initiative'

	Respondent is aware and staying informed on BRI developments	Respondent is only superficially aware of the BRI	Respondent does not know about the BRI
All respondents ( $N=1072$ )	26.12%	22.11%	51.77%
Respondents who have been to China	64.71%	22.79%	12.50%
Respondents who have never been to China	20.51%	22.01%	57.48%
Chinese language students	24.31%	26.85%	48.84%
International Studies students	27.34%	18.91%	53.75%
All literacy questions answered correctly	60.25%	22.36%	17.39%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	11.47%	22.00%	66.53%

and in Beijing's specific engagement with Italy—over several years immediately prior to conducting the survey. Results were surprising: despite the intensity of the conversation about the BRI, including on Italian media, the majority (52%) of respondents report no knowledge of the BRI, while 22% indicate only superficial knowledge (Table 16). Greater awareness is recorded only among the most China-literate respondents and those who have stayed in China.

While a statistically significant association can be observed between awareness about the BRI and a better opinion of China ( $\chi^2 = 19.983$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), such an association is ambiguous and could be read both ways. Attempts at probing a subset of more detailed questions through correlations did not yield meaningful results, making it impossible to sustain the hypothesis. This uncertainty is confirmed by the responses to follow-up questions that were sought from the sub-set of the sample who reported at least superficial knowledge of the BRI ( $n = 517$ ). Even among these respondents, between 25.5% and 32.5% were unable to form an opinion on the impact of the BRI on China's reputation. Only some (45.5%) have a perception that the BRI has been a success for China internationally (Table 17), while the majority perceive the BRI to be evidence of the Chinese government's commitment to transforming the international order (Table 18).

TABLE 17 Perception of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' as a success for China internationally

	Very strong	Quite strong	Quite weak	None	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $n=517$ )	6.38%	39.26%	18.96%	2.90%	32.50%
Respondents who have been to China	7.56%	40.34%	23.53%	5.88%	22.69%
Respondents who have never been to China	6.03%	38.94%	17.59%	2.01%	35.43%
Chinese language students	8.60%	38.46%	15.84%	1.36%	35.75%
International Studies students	4.73%	39.86%	21.28%	4.05%	30.07%
All literacy questions answered correctly	6.77%	43.23%	24.06%	3.76%	22.18%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	5.98%	35.06%	13.55%	1.99%	43.43%

TABLE 18 Perception of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' as evidence of the Chinese government's commitment to transforming the international order

	Very strong	Quite strong	Quite weak	None	Doesn't know
All respondents ( $n=517$ )	20.12%	35.98%	14.31%	4.06%	25.53%
Respondents who have been to China	16.81%	42.86%	18.49%	7.56%	14.29%
Respondents who have never been to China	21.11%	33.92%	13.07%	3.02%	28.89%
Chinese language students	15.38%	37.56%	14.93%	1.36%	30.77%
International Studies students	23.65%	34.80%	13.85%	6.08%	21.62%
All literacy questions answered correctly	23.31%	40.98%	15.79%	4.51%	15.41%
At least one mistake in literacy questions	16.73%	30.68%	12.75%	3.59%	36.25%

## 5 Conclusion

This article has sought to contribute to a growing body of IR literature on Italy-China relations by investigating the logic whereby the Chinese government has chosen not to escalate tensions with Italy over Rome's decision to withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative in December 2023, despite the BRI being a high-profile component of Beijing's foreign policy under Xi Jinping and notwithstanding the risk that an acquiescent reaction on China's part might invite disengagement by other signatories. It is argued that, faced with a marked degradation of trust in its relations with the West, especially in the wake of

the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has been careful to keep balancing its generally more assertive foreign policy with efforts to strengthen its reputational security. In the case of Italy, Beijing's preoccupation with the reputation of the PRC is rendered particularly compelling, on the one hand, by Italy's salience within the EU and by its valuable tradition of operating with a degree of autonomy at times of severe polarisation of the international system, and, on the other, by the entrenched challenge faced by China's reputation in the eyes of a consistently China-sceptical Italian public opinion.

By means of an original survey of a strategic attentive public, constructed through a purposeful sampling strategy and composed of 1,072 Italian students enrolled in a Chinese language or International Studies degree program, at the bachelor or master's level, this qualitative study integrates the empirical evidence gathered by a number of recent international public opinion surveys that have explored the attitude of the Italian public towards China. Besides offering a descriptive account of how respondents view a rising China, including in its relations with Italy, this research has empirically tested five hypotheses to investigate whether and how the variations in the perceptions held by respondents can be associated with pivotal phenomena in international politics such as the Ukraine war and the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as with individual-level variables influenced by Beijing's policies, such as direct personal experience of China, and expectations of material benefit from relations with China. Results show that, even though the PRC is widely expected to match the US in economic might and global influence, reputational capital resides with Chinese society more than with the PRC state.

Among the policy-relevant observations that can be inferred from the available data is a clear indication that benign neutrality vis-à-vis Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and the years-long 'zero-Covid' policy of isolation pursued by Chinese authorities are self-defeating for the preservation—let alone advancement—of China's reputational security among individuals who can be expected to play an especially salient role in the future of Sino-Italian relations and provide the kind of long-term and independent expertise on contemporary China urged by the European Commission.

### Acknowledgments

This study is part of the research agenda promoted by the Italy-China Competence and Sentiment Observatory (ICCSO), a joint initiative of the TOChina Centre of the Department of Cultures, Politics, and Society of the University

of Turin and the Research Center on Minorities (CERM) of the University of Insubria. The author is grateful to Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, Martina Poletti, Virginia Mariano, Cecilia Pennati, Francesco Fattori, Zhao Meirong, and Anna Caffarena; to the colleagues who facilitated the administration of the questionnaire across Italian universities; and to participants in the 'China and the change of world politics' panel at the 2023 Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) for their constructive criticism and suggestions. This research received partial financial support from the project 'Italy-China 2030: meeting the "upgrading China knowledge in Europe" challenge' (PRIN 2022, grant n. 2022M7LMS8) funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR).

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