

**IMAGINED CHINA. ITALIAN IDEAS AND
VISIONS OF THE “CELESTIAL EMPIRE” IN
THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH
CENTURY (1766-1867)¹**

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Sommario

L’articolo studia l’evoluzione dei giudizi maturati sulla Cina all’interno della cultura italiana tra seconda metà del Settecento e fine Ottocento: dall’eredità della storiografia gesuitica al mito della semplicità e autenticità della cultura cinese (Verri, Foscolo, Leopardi); dai primi tentativi di indagine comparata (Giuseppe La Farina) alla percezione, nelle pionieristiche analisi di Carlo Cattaneo e di Giuseppe Ferrari, di una Cina quale paese moderno, potenzialmente concorrenziale nei confronti dell’occidente.

*To the memory of Nelia Saxby (1945-2010),
fine scholar and dear friend*

¹ Part of the contents of this article has been presented in a public lecture given at University of Hong Kong on November 18th, 2009. This is the first published outcome of a long-term research project devoted to the presence of China in Italian culture, society, economy and politics, from the early eighteenth century to the outbreak of World War I, and to the presence of Italian merchants and diplomats in China in that period. Although some scholarly work, which I mention in this essay, has been done on this topic, a comprehensive monograph has still to appear. I wish to thank Professor Kam H. Louie, Dean of the School of Arts, University of Hong Kong, Professors Wayne Cristaudo and Dixon Wong, and the students of the Modern European section of the School for their criticism and comments. My thanks also go to Ms Alice Fogliata, currently at the SOAS, London, for her invaluable help during the course of this long-term project.

1. European evolution and Italian decline in the appreciation of China (1770s-1899)

During the period, which goes from the mid 1770s to the intervention of Italy in the Boxer rebellion, knowledge of China, in many respects, suffered a notable decline in Italy, while in the rest of Europe notion of China and attitudes towards it underwent a profound transformation.

The reasons of this decline are manifold². They are, however, mainly linked to the lack of available current sources and narrative accounts of China, a lack that increased with the progressive decline and eventual suppression of the Jesuits (1773). This event was intricately related to the lasting influence of what was called “Chinese rites controversy”; it brought to an end both the credibility and the diffusion of the Jesuits’ accounts of China, and ultimately the *Societas Jesu* itself³; furthermore, the increasingly difficult situation faced by all the Christian missionaries in China after the 1720s contributed to the lack of reputable sources being available, given that the most important and influential ones were those provided by the Jesuits⁴.

² See G. Bertuccioli, “Gli studi sinologici in Italia dal 1650 al 1950”, *Mondo cinese*, 81 (1993), 9-22; Id., “Per una storia della sinologia italiana”, *Mondo cinese*, 74 (1991), 9-39; B. Csongor, “Sinology in Italy 1600-1950”, in W. Ming & J. Cayley (eds.), *Europe studies China*, London: Han-Shan Tang Books, 1992:78-90; G. Bertuccioli, G. & F. Masini, *Italia e Cina*, Bari-Roma: Laterza, 1996, 320ff, passim; L. Lanciotti, “La Cina nella cultura italiana dal XVII al XX secolo”, *Cina*, 3, 1957:56f; G. Tucci, *Italia e Oriente*, Rome: ISIAO, 2005, passim. A still useful survey is also S. Zoli, *La Cina e la cultura italiana dal '500 al '700*, Bologna: Patron, 1973 and Id., *La Cina e l'età dell'Illuminismo in Italia*, Bologna: Patron, 1974.

³ On the so-called “Chinese rites controversy” see B.J. Butcher, *Chinese and Chinese American Veneration in the Catholic Church 635 A.D. to the Present*, Lewinston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010, in particular chapters VI and VII. As a general introduction see also G. Mijamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy. From the Its Beginning to Modern Times*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985; D.E. Mungello (ed.), *The Chinese Rites Controversy. Its History and Meaning*, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994.

⁴ This is confirmed by a study of the most comprehensive bibliography of pre-1850 books on China published in Europe, J. Lust, *Western Books on China Published up to 1850*, London: Bamboo Books, 1987, based primarily on the extraordinarily collections held at the SOAS.

At the end of the seventeenth, beginning of the eighteenth century, the Jesuits were accused, from within the Catholic Church as well as by lay intellectuals, of betraying the tenets of Catholicism by adopting Confucianism and other principles and practices of traditional Chinese religions, an accusation fiercely rebutted by the Jesuits themselves⁵.

The Jesuits' strategy of survival, adaptation and conversion of the Chinese, well rooted in Ricci's and Aleni's missionary tradition (Ricci died in 1610, the same year Aleni landed in China) was deliberately misinterpreted by their adversaries, first by the Dominicans and subsequently by the Jansenists⁶. A myriad of pamphlets, defending or accusing the Jesuits, appeared from the 1680s to 1745, when the practices and opinions held by the Jesuits in China were definitively condemned by the Pope. The "Chinese rites controversy", as it later became known, on the one hand can be seen in a positive light as it raised awareness about China itself; but on the other hand, this crisis – along with the closure of the "encomiendas" in Paraguay, the Jesuits' famous communitarian experiment, and their first expulsion from Portugal – can be seen as the beginning of the end of the Jesuits themselves. On July 21st, 1773, Clemens XIV signed the Papal Brief *Dominus ac redemptor*, formally suppressing the *Society of Jesus* thus sealing the destiny of all European Jesuits by condemning them to a clandestine life, until the *Society* was reinstated by Pious VII in 1814⁷.

The decline of the Jesuits brought about a parallel lack of trust in the credibility of their accounts of China, which became objects of

⁵ See C. von Collani, P. Rule & E. Menegon, "The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long Lasting Controversy in Sino-Western Cultural History", *Pacific Rim Report*, I (32) 2004:1-8.

⁶ See D. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France 1757-1675*, New-Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975.

⁷ Historians of the suppression of the Jesuits agreed, from the very beginning, on the fact that one of the reasons for their suppression was the Chinese rites controversy. See for instance G.C. Cordara, *De suppressione Societatis Iesu commentarii* (1780 ca), English edition by J.P. Murphy, SJ, *On the Suppression of the Society of Jesus. A Contemporary Account*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999:166ff, passim.

mockery by intellectuals of the Enlightenment, Voltaire foremost among them; their writings were said to lack any sort of scientific approach, thus their accounts of China were regarded as the visions of mere merchants (not those of authentic missionaries), which disseminated false images of that world and were no less imaginary and unreliable than those of Marco Polo's *Il milione*, a travelogue of the thirteenth century. At the same time, it was clear even to Voltaire and others within the circles of the French Enlightenment that, apart from those provided by the Jesuits, at the time no other direct sources of information about China were available⁸.

Only later on, when the first lay scholars of China occupied the first chairs of Far Eastern Languages in France, Germany, Britain and then Italy, was it made clear that the Jesuits had been an extremely reliable first hand source, apart from being in many cases the only ones available (Remusat, Klaproth, Renard). While in Britain, before and after the McCartney expedition, France, Germany, the Netherlands and in other countries, Oriental studies began to take root in the second half of the eighteenth century, and occasionally even earlier, in Italy there was a blank period as far as China is concerned until the early twentieth century⁹.

Certainly, second or third hand notions of China were present well before the nineteenth-century boom of Oriental Studies, as exemplified by the fact that Chinese motifs were largely used in Italian pottery and other minor arts and crafts¹⁰.

⁸ There is a growing literature on China in eighteenth century France and Europe in general. A standard reference work is still S.C. Song, *Voltaire et la Chine*, Aix-En-Provence: Univ. de Provence, 1989. Georg Lehner, professor at the University of Vienna, in his work *China in European Encyclopedias* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, forthcoming 2011) has explored in great depth the European encyclopedic entries on China from around 1750 to 1850, noting how the Jesuits' sources were predominant until the middle of the nineteenth century.

⁹ In Italy the first chairs of Oriental Studies, including those of Chinese, were actually created under Fascism (1922-1943). In that period the first institutes of Oriental Studies were also founded: they later developed into two major schools, one in Venice and the other in Naples. At the same time, Mussolini tried, in vain, to foster political links and alliance with China. See G. Borsa, "Tentativi di penetrazione dell'Italia fascista in Cina 1932-1937", *Il Politico*, 1 (44) 1979:381-419.

¹⁰ As demonstrated by F. Morena, *Cineseria. Il gusto per l'Oriente dal XIV al XIX secolo*, Firenze: Centro D, 2009, each of the several Italian courts of the old Regime, from the time

The trade and the manufacture of glass constituted a major area of (mediated) exchange between China and Europe, with a fundamental role being played by Venice and the Papal Court in Rome until the end of the eighteenth century. (Chinese imitations of Murano glass found today in Venetian shops are the most recent result of a long history of productive exchanges between Venice and China, dating back to the late Renaissance period¹¹.)

Remarkably, Italian cartographers, relying on foreign colleagues, were able to map the Chinese empire with increasing accuracy during the Baroque era and the Age of Enlightenment¹².

Obviously there existed more factual knowledge about China in Venice and other seaports than in the Roman academies where scholars, with an interest in Chinese subjects, to a greater or lesser extent adhered to the Baroque imagination of Athanasius Kircher¹³.

In Italian theatre, interest in Chinese subjects was kept alive until the 1770s¹⁴ by a number of authors, some of them minor others leading literary figures, but were always dealt with in a completely imaginary manner.

of the Renaissance, had adopted Chinese motifs, furniture, landscaped gardens, pottery and “lacca”. However, there is no corresponding phenomenon for this, in the literary sphere. What literature there was on China was produced by the Jesuits until the beginning of the eighteenth century and what was being read was largely imported from Germany, France, and England.

¹¹ See E.B. Curtis, *Glass Exchange between Europe and China 1550-1800: Diplomatic, Mercantile and Technological Interactions*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.

¹² See M. Quaini, *Visions of the Celestial Empire: China's Image in Western Cartography*, Genova: Il Portolano, 2007.

¹³ On Kircher and China see D. Pastine, *L'oriente religioso di Athanasius Kircher*, Milano: Angeli, 1978:546-566, and passim. Among the most recent literature, see G. Joscelyn, *Athanasius Kircher e il teatro del mondo*, Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 2010, passim.

¹⁴ See the most recent A. Ward, *Pagodas in Play: China on the Eighteenth-Century Opera Stage*, Lewisburgh: Bucknell University Press, 2010, which deals with such authors as Pietro Metastasio (*L'eroe cinese*, 1752); Carlo Goldoni (*L'isola disabitata*, 1757); Giambattista Lorenzi, (*L'idolo cinese*, 1567); Giovanni Bertati (*L'inimico delle donne*, 1771).

The present article addresses some of the views of philosophers and political thinkers who dealt with China, or better, who applied their vivid imagination to China, between 1766 and 1867. The reasons for these dates *terminus post* and *ante quem* are the following: in 1766 Pietro Verri, one of the most important Italian writers of the Enlightenment, a politician and patriot, friend and mentor of Cesare Beccaria (promoter of the abolition of death penalty) wrote a short dialogue, in which one of the interlocutors is a Chinese Mandarin¹⁵. This was one of first, and certainly the most notable attempt to introduce Chinese topics and characters, and thus reflections on Chinese culture, in a political discourse not related to nor primarily concerned with the Jesuits or the Chinese rites controversy, since Count Lorenzo Magalotti's well-known and highly informative seventeenth century book on China¹⁶.

One century after Verri's paper, the newly created Kingdom of Italy, recently expanded to include Venetia (1866), signed a commercial treaty with China, thus opening the way for a new, and initially very limited, direct line of contacts between the two countries¹⁷. Before that date and especially after the disgrace of the Jesuits, in the period taken into account in this essay, all accounts and narratives of China published in Italy were based on second-hand materials, often dating back to the late seventeenth century.

¹⁵ On Verri see C. Capra, *I progressi della ragione. Vita di Pietro Verri*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002.

¹⁶ On Magalotti see G. Guenter, *Un poeta scienziato del Seicento: Lorenzo Magalotti*, Florence: Olschki, 1966. Magalotti never travelled to China, but, on the basis once again of Jesuits sources, published in 1687 his *Notizie varie dell'Imperio della Cina* in Florence. Until the middle of the eighteenth century it was the most well known account of China, apart from those by the Jesuit Daniello Bartoli. See D. Lach, & E. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol.III, *A Century of Advance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993:386, 486.

¹⁷ See G. Borsa, *Italia e Cina nel diciannovesimo secolo*, Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1961. In spite of the title, Borsa's book deals only with diplomatic history, from the earlier attempt to create commercial relations, all of which failed miserably, to the 1899 disastrous attempt by the Italian government to be granted a commercial outpost, on the model of those granted by China to Britain, France, Germany, Portugal. This failed attempt, while the 1866 treaty remained valid, caused the fall of the first Pelloux government and consequently sparked a new wave of interest for China in Italy.

Unaware of this treaty, in spite of the fact that he was a deputy of Italian Parliament, the philosopher Giuseppe Ferrari in 1867 (one year after the treaty was signed) published, in French, a lengthy book comparing China and Europe; interesting fantasy though it was, it also constituted a pioneering work of world history as we conceive it today¹⁸.

Thanks to this ground-breaking political treatise, soon after original and more scientific works began to appear which encouraged merchants and scholars alike to visit and reside in China awhile. Consequently a few travel accounts, such as that by the naturalist Enrico Hillier Giglioli (1845-1909) published in 1875, shed new and more precise light on China, for the first time in almost two centuries, as they were based on first-hand knowledge of that immense empire, or at least of some significant portion of it¹⁹.

2. China as a “distant realm of simplicity”: Verri, Foscolo, Leopardi (1766-1821)

As mentioned above, China attracted the interest of scholars such as Pietro Verri (1728-1797) and also of writers and poets like Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) and Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827). In spite of the lack of direct, contemporary sources (at least in Italian), China had an appeal for the best Italian minds and the most important intellectuals of two generations. This shows the combined influence that the relatively old Jesuit-accounts and the renewed interest in China, in particular by French and British lay writers, had on Italian thinkers.

¹⁸ See *infra* in this essay for a full treatment of Ferrari’s work. The scholar that first brought international attention to Ferrari as a writer of global history and to his deep insight was H. Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2001:98-102. I wish to thank Professor Saussy for the fruitful exchange of letters we had on the subject of Ferrari.

¹⁹ On Enrico Hillier Giglioli see S. Puccini, *Andare lontano. Viaggi ed etnografia nel secondo Ottocento*, Roma: Carocci, 1999. Giglioli’s long and detailed accounts of China and Japan literally disclosed new views to the Italian public. His major work is *Viaggio intorno al globo della Regia Pirocorvetta “Magenta”*, Milano: Maisner, 1875. Only the parts dealing with Japan have recently been re-published in an annotated edition: E. Giglioli Hillier, *Giappone perduto. Viaggio di un italiano nell’ultimo Giappone feudale*, edited by R. Tresoldi, Milano: Luni, 2005.

The first generation – that of Pietro Verri – is strongly imbued with the ideals of the Enlightenment, still evident in the materialism and the solitary genius of Leopardi. Ugo Foscolo, instead, is more of a romantic and belongs to the historicist school. He is considered one of the first patriots striving for a new unified Italian state²⁰.

In 1766, Verri published in *Il Caffè*, the most important journal of the Italian Enlightenment, the aforementioned dialogue between a “mandarin” and a “solicitor” (“*sollecitatore*”), the latter term to be understood as sort of legal advisor. Its structure is exactly that of Montesquieu’s *Persan Letters* (1721), in their turn derived from Gian Paolo Marana’s *Espion Turc*, a work of the late seventeenth century²¹.

The Mandarin is simply and bluntly criticizing the sophistry and complexity of the European laws and legal procedures. In so doing, he presents a positive image of Chinese law as it is based on natural laws and is indisputable, not subject to casuistry, straightforward and equal for everybody. It is worth noting that this literary Mandarin also accuses the European world of producing goods that have no use, at least in the intellectual sense, while China, on the contrary, produces very concrete and solid commodities: tea, pottery, spices, silk, and so on, which are largely imported by the Europeans, including the Italians. While in the case of the European “goods”, such as its complex law system, they cannot be imported into China, for they would be, always according to this fictitious character, completely valueless in his country.

China is used as a mirror to show up the limits of European laws, not yet codified in most cases (certainly not in most parts of Italy), confusing, too numerous and too contradictory. To this confused and confusing world of jurisprudence, Verri’s mandarin opposes a world where human and divine laws coincide, and where attorneys and crafty lawyers are neither welcome nor useful. However, both Verri and his Chinese character, as well as the figure of the Christian

²⁰ Among the most recent introductory works on these authors see M.A. Bazzocchi, *Leopardi*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008; G. Nicoletti, *Foscolo*, Roma: Salerno, 2006.

²¹ See S. Rotta, “Gian Paolo Marana”, *La letteratura ligure. La Repubblica aristocratica (1528-1797)*, vol. II, Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1992:153-87.

“Western man” in the dialogue agree on the existence of a Supreme Being.

Thus, China enters the Italian lay, literary world of the Enlightenment with traits of absolute wisdom, and with constant reference to its legal system²². Certainly aware of Verri, but writing half a century later, Ugo Foscolo, a Jacobin and fervent admirer of Napoleon in his youth, is attracted by this interpretation of Chinese laws. For this reason, he edited and translated almost in its entirety a long article by Francis Jeffrey, which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1810²³.

Foscolo is attracted more specifically by the Chinese criminal law system. Foscolo and Jeffrey rely heavily, as much of learned Europe did, on George Staunton’s edition of the “Ta-Tsing-Leu-Lee”²⁴. For the first time in Italy it is made clear that De Pauw’s works, the other commonly used source of knowledge about China, was to be considered outdated; and that new, sound knowledge concerning this country could be derived only from the scientific writings that appeared in the aftermath of the McCartney expedition.

Foscolo, who was living in London at the time, probably became the most notable (if not the only) Italian intellectual to make the new ideas and accounts of China circulate among Italian learned public²⁵.

Contrary to Verri, Jeffrey praises the Chinese laws inasmuch they possessed the clarity of European laws; however, Jeffrey is implicitly referring only to the new Napoleonic codes and to the British tradition

²² See P. Verri, “Dialogo tra un mandarino cinese e un sollecitatore”, in P. Verri, *Scritti vari*, edited by G. Carcano, vol. II, Firenze: Le Monnier, 1854:119-122.

²³ See U. Foscolo, “Sul codice penale della Cina”, in U. Foscolo, *Saggi di critica storico-letteraria*, edited by F.S. Orlandini & E. Mayer, Firenze: Le Monnier, 1859, vol. I:145-149.

²⁴ This being the fundamental laws and a selection from the supplementary statutes, of the penal code of China, originally printed and published in Peking and translated by G.T. Staunton (London: Printed for T. Cadell & W. Davies, in the Strand, 1810).

²⁵ For a long time, this work was considered to have been written by Foscolo himself. Finally, it was identified as a translation by E.R.P. Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953:220.

of Common Law, whereas Verri was referring, critically, to the continental legal tradition. This is the reason why Foscolo translated Jeffrey.

What was appealing to Foscolo is the fact that Jeffrey makes a distinction between China and other Oriental despotic states, in particular, Persia and India. Basically, Jeffrey outlines a hierarchy of despotisms, in which the Chinese is considered to be the best, i.e. the less cruel and tyrannical. This idea prevailed, as we shall see, in Italian visions of China throughout the nineteenth century. Though in Chinese law there are no references to individual rights and freedom, it was clear to Foscolo, as much as it was to Staunton, that individual liberty in the Western sense, and as adopted by the French revolutionaries, is not part of the Chinese identity. Foscolo be partial to this presentation of China also for another reason: Jeffrey, like Staunton, endorses the idea that the writings provided by the Jesuits and other missionaries were unreliable. At the same time, he criticizes the Enlightenment's views of China, which had culminated in De Pauw's work. It never had a positive reception in Italy, on account of its contemptuous depiction of China in all its aspects²⁶. Foscolo's relativist views allow him to appreciate Chinese laws: they are in his opinion, also shared by Montesquieu, the best laws for that country considering the particular nature of China, from its population to its climate.

Clearly, the McCartney 1793-expedition set new standards and new points of reference for all discourse on China after the turn of the century, as in the case of our third author, Giacomo Leopardi²⁷.

Leopardi, unlike Verri and Foscolo, is less interested in the legal and political systems of China. Science, and chiefly Chinese

²⁶ De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Egyptiens et les Chinois*, published anonymously in Berlin in 1773, was never translated into Italian, and generally its reception in Italy was rather cold. It was translated into English in 1795, by P. Thompson.

²⁷ G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, edited by R. Damiani, Milano: Mondadori, 3 vols, 1997:923, 939, and *passim*.

linguistics and astronomy, is what appeals to him. Once again, it's Staunton's seminal work that is used as a primary source²⁸.

Leopardi endorses Staunton's view of Chinese immobility or immutability (debunked much later by Ferrari in Italy) and speculating on Staunton's ideas, he connects this immobility to the Chinese system of writing that lacks an alphabet. However, the brief comments Leopardi makes on Chinese astronomy reveal his critical stance towards some recent sources; on this topic, he supports the views of the Jesuits, notably Verbiest, Schall and Father Martino Martini from Trent (1614-1661)²⁹.

As a critique of available sources, Leopardi's notes on Chinese astronomy reveal the contradictions which were commonly found in European sources. For example, writers like the Spanish Diego Pantoja S.J. (1571-1617), an associate of Matteo Ricci's, went to the point of stating that the Chinese had no philosophy and science at all, while many others, normally missionaries like Father Gaubil, praised the advancements of Chinese sciences. Leopardi's notes depict lack of certainty evident in the writings of many authors who realize they have no consistent, univocal sources to rely on. Others instead simply chose to diminish or overrate Chinese intellectual achievements³⁰.

The first lengthy Chinese studies published in Italian appear in the 1840s. Before that, the only broad survey of China available in Italian was Daniello Bartoli's (1608-1685) history of the Jesuit missionaries in China. This seventeenth century text was reprinted so many times that it became the mirror through which the learned public became saw China, while all Bartoli wanted to do was make readers aware of the Jesuits who had operated there³¹.

²⁸ See M.C. Pisciotta, "Leopardi e la Cina", *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 32, 1972:111-126.

²⁹ On Martini's fundamental contribution to the understanding of China in Italy see G.O. Longo, *Il Gesuita che disegnò la Cina. La vita e le opera di Martino Martini*, New York: Heidelberg, Springer, 2010.

³⁰ Most of the sources quoted by Leopardi are now in I. Vissiere, & J.L. Vissiere, (eds.), *Lettere edificanti e curiose di missionari gesuiti dalla Cina (1702-1776)*, Milano: Guanda, 2008. Most of the Jesuits writing in the second half of the eighteenth century were French.

Until the outbreak of the first Opium War (1839), the Italian public seems to have been even less interested than elsewhere in Chinese matters. Furthermore, the general economic decline of Italy, affecting all the smaller States of the peninsula, as well as Sicily and Sardinia, the emergence of other forms of Orientalism (such as the fashionable attraction to everything pertaining to ancient Egypt, thanks to Napoleon's 1798 expedition), and widespread political instability, did not constitute a favorable environment for interest in China to flourish.

3. Giuseppe La Farina: From Sicily to Torino, via Peking (1843-1850)

We owe to the prolific pen of La Farina³² the first comprehensive work on China to appear in Italy in more than a century³³. Before this, as we saw with Verri, Foscolo and Leopardi, publications on China, are not works of this scope, but articles in journals, not unlike those

³¹ Daniello Bartoli's *Istoria della Compagnia di Gesù*, first published in six volumes from 1650 to 1673, includes a section on China (vol. IV, 1663), which was reprinted several times, including a most recent edition (D. Bartoli, *La Cina*, edited by B. Mortara Garavelli, Milano: Bompiani, 1997). There are also a number of editions in the nineteenth century. This demonstrates a growing interest (and the objective need for reliable books on the subject) among the Italian public. Among those nineteenth-century editions of Bartoli's Asian narratives, there is a very popular Venetian 8-volume set, D. Bartoli, *Dell'Istoria della Compagnia di Gesù [sic]. L'Asia*, Venice: Tasso, 1830-1833. In pre-unification Naples, just one year before the end of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Italian unification, a Pontifical Institute, the "Uffizio de' Libri Ascetici e Predicabili", published Bartoli's Asian work in 9 volumes, as part of the complete works edition. Bartoli became well known also among American Catholics thanks to the translation of his life of Francis Xavier (D. Bartoli, *The Life of Saint Francis Xavier, Apostles of the Indies and Japan*, Baltimore: Murphy, 1859, to which was added a laudatory preface by Rev. Faber). On Bartoli see J. Renaldo, *Daniello Bartoli. A Letterato of the Seicento*, Naples: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici, 1979.

³² Giuseppe La Farina (1815-1863) was one of the founding fathers of unified Italy. On La Farina see G. Marrone, *Giuseppe La Farina. Storico e pubblicista*, Caltanissetta: Sciascia, 1991.

³³ G. La Farina, *La China considerata nella sua storia, ne' suoi riti, ne' suoi costumi, nella sua industria, nelle sue arti e ne' più memorevoli avvenimenti della guerra attuale*, Firenze: Bardi, 1843-1849.

published in the *Biblioteca italiana* and the *Annali di Scienze e Lettere* or translations normally from English or French, excepting for the book by Bartoli.

Unlike his contemporary Cattaneo, who also dealt extensively with China, and Giuseppe Ferrari, another amateur sinologist, La Farina was a strong defender of central government for a united Italy, a fierce enemy of federalism, and, as has recently been discovered, an opponent of the bellicose means used by Garibaldi to invade and later annex Sicily (La Farina's native land) to the Kingdom of the Savoia. In 1861 he was appointed to the House of Deputies in the new Kingdom of Italy, but died in 1863 at the age of 47, without having accomplished any major political ideals. Nevertheless La Farina wrote numerous books, ranging from an Italian history of the Middle-Ages to studies on Dante, and from a history of Sicily and its architecture to books on Swiss and German history. His correspondence sheds ambiguous light on the ways in which Italy was constructed, and invented as a unitary State, without any substantial "nation" core at the base³⁴.

Among his vast output, La Farina's four volumes on China are quite unique. Nowadays they are a rarity, to be found only in a handful of Italian and world libraries³⁵. Why he became involved with China is not clear, for his areas of expertise revolved mainly around European, Italian, and Sicilian history. It is likely that, while in exile in Paris, he got to know Giuseppe Ferrari; however, since the latter was a strong defender of federalism, and came from Lombardy, it is not probable that they forged any kind of friendship. It is also true that while in France La Farina was exposed to the resurgence of Orientalism and China studies³⁶. Yet his main work on China was

³⁴ G. La Farina, *Epistolario*, edited by A. Franchi, 2 vols., Milano: Treves, 1969.

³⁵ According to the official National Catalogue, there are only two complete sets to be found, one in Firenze (Biblioteca Marucelliana), and one in Padova (Biblioteca dell'Orto Botanico).

³⁶ See T. D'Huriel, (ed.), *La Chine vue par les écrivains français*, Paris: Barteillat, 2004, chapters 1, 5-8. From Chateaubriand to Gautier, from Père Huc to André Chénier, the French interest for China was quite strong in the first half of the nineteenth century, before Chinese studies chairs were established.

published before his 1849 exile, between 1843 (when he was just 28) and 1847.

This work is the fruit of La Farina's long-lasting association with Bardi, a major Florentine publisher, who made his name by publishing lavishly illustrated works of history and geography *in-quarto* with engravings and other visual materials. As a journalist and historian, the young La Farina made a living also by publishing encyclopedic works on countries to which he had never been (China) or where he had only occasionally sojourned (Switzerland, Germany). In spite of this, his four volumes on China are a valid, careful introduction to Chinese history, the present-day state, society, anthropology and religion, written in a positivist, encyclopedic manner.

The publication of the four volumes, interrupted by a flood of the Arno River, which destroyed the printing house and some of La Farina's proofs and manuscripts, took five years. Bardi, the publisher, was keen to exploit the rise in awareness of and heightened public interest about China, due to the Opium wars. While England, behind scenes, was supporting Italian patriots fighting for independence, and giving hospitality to few of them from Mazzini to Garibaldi in London, in the hope of aiding to create a new state in the centre of the Mediterranean that would prove to be an ally and make England a leading role-player in the Mediterranean, the two countries held divergent views about China. Italy, and much of continental Europe, saw this war as unbalanced, but it allowed for renewed interest in things Chinese³⁷.

La Farina shared with most of the authors of his age, including Cattaneo and Ferrari, a moderate atheism and a certain detachment from the Catholic Church, which Italians then called "liberalism", completely misusing and misinterpreting the concept and tradition that gave rise to it. His intellectual roots lie in the Enlightenment and the positivist theories of Auguste Comte and can be considered one of the most learned heirs of a typical, southern Italian, traditional secular mindset, in the wake of Genovesi, Cuoco, and Filangieri.

³⁷ Quite a few Italian newspapers, such as *La Gazzetta di Milano*, reported extensively and with keen interest about the Opium Wars.

His volumes on China are far from being a simple commercial product. Their first merit is that they offer a comprehensive, accurate bibliography of European works dealing with China and the Far East from at least the beginning of the eighteenth century. Being a scholar familiar with French, German and probably Russian, as well as Latin, La Farina provides a preliminary bibliography of extreme importance. No area of Chinese studies is omitted; it includes religion, anthropology, and obviously science, with reference to major sources, such as Klaproth on the compass and paper money, and more recent ones (Amiot, Rémusat, Renard). A significantly large portion is devoted to accounts written by Jesuits and other missionaries, in spite of La Farina's often proclaimed secularism and indifference to matters of religion. He probably did not read all the sources he quotes, simply because some of them already were very rare publications and difficult to find in any Italian library. It is clear, however, that the main sources he quotes, especially those in French, German and English, have been well digested and re-elaborated. Travel writings are quoted together with more learned articles; the final aim is to write a complete encyclopedic work on China, past and present. While La Farina tends to be rather neutral, one thing is clear from the start: the history and present state of a millennial Empire such as China has to be seen as a foil for the immensely smaller state-still-in-the-making, Italy³⁸.

When dealing with Switzerland, a much closer country, La Farina does more or less the same thing, with the advantage that Switzerland is on Italy's doorstep and its history is better understood and easier to contextualize. Comparisons with such a distant and mighty empire are far more difficult and risky. But La Farina undertakes his 4-volume work with a clear understanding of the contrast between East and West, and what "the West" means in terms of its spirit of conquest, arrogance, and will to subdue the entire world:

Lo Spirito dell'Occidente, con la sua sete inestinguibile
dell'infinito, col suo perpetuo bisogno di movimento

³⁸ After La Farina's pioneering work, most of the other Italian books dealing with China begin with this same assumption.

intellettuale e materiale, che assorbe il tempo e lo spazio
[...]

Gli Europei superbi di una civiltà di ieri credono che tutti i popoli della terra siano nati per ammirarli e servirli (*La Chine*, I:4).

Not surprisingly, La Farina launches a stern attack on the Jesuits and their idea of *missione civilizzatrice*, “civilizing mission”, with the keyword “civilization”, forged by the Jesuits and brought to conceptual perfection around 1734, and then resurrected in a completely secular context by Napoleon³⁹: “E quando la Storia [note the capital S] chiede loro che facciano di quei poveri stranieri ai quali più nulla rimane di proprio, essi rispondono: li civilizziamo” (I: 15). To the presumably ‘civilized’ West, haunted by the desire of conquest and perpetual movement, La Farina, following the *topos* of his and the previous century, juxtaposes a quiet, gigantic, static, and balanced “East”, absorbed in a realm of fantasy and fables, but essentially “wise”: “L’Asia è il dominio della favola, delle immagini fantastiche, la fonte inesaurita delle grandi verità, dei grandi errori” (I: 6).

Within Asia, China has maintained its stability for centuries and centuries thanks to its particular form of theocracy and religious tolerance or indifference that allows for the co-existence of various philosophies and religions, all under the supreme control of the Emperor:

La China, evitando un male per l’altro, si preservò lungo tempo dall’idolatria con l’indifferentismo: due religioni primarie e quattro o cinque sistemi filosofici insegnano dottrine opposte, e già la dividevano fin dai tempi di Confucio. Quivi la religione e la politica erano una cosa sola: l’Impero dicevasi cielo, il principe Dio, egli

³⁹ See S.J. Woolf, “French Civilization and Ethnicity in the Napoleonic Empire”, *Past and Present*, 124, 1989:96-120, and L. Febvre, “Civilization. Evolution of a Word and a Group of Ideas”, in P. Burke, (ed.), *A New Kind of History. From the Writings of Febvre*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973:219-257.

affidava ai suoi ministri la cura di illuminare, di riscaldare, di fertilizzare l'universo (I:7).

In this La Farina's main sources, which are also those of his entire work, are Giovanni Pietro Maffei's *La storia delle Indie Orientali*, once again Father Bartoli's constantly re-printed works on China and, among – the more recent works on China available in Europe, Rémusat's *Nouveaux mélanges asiatiques*, published in 1829⁴⁰.

Another important source, and probably the most up to date one used by La Farina, is the comprehensive text by Jules Picard, *La Chine*, published in Bruxelles in 1838. La Farina is well aware of the major shift that took place in China studies in the first half of the nineteenth century: while in previous decades secondary sources written by Europeans were still dominant, after the turn of the century scholars went directly to Chinese sources, books and other printed materials, in order to better understand China, to “attingere da essi notizie più estese e positive” (I:20). One outstanding example of this for La Farina is obviously Sir George Thomas Staunton's collection of Chinese books, but also Robert Morrison's *Dictionary*, published in 1815-1823, which is also a frequent point of reference for La Farina. In his early work, La Farina also provides a clear view of his understanding of history: based, in positivistic fashion, first on “reason”, then on the “authorities”, thus challenging the principle of “auctoritas” that he (erroneously) conceives as being specifically Catholic and Jesuit: “Prima la ragione e poi le autorità: è questo un assioma che in fatto di cose storiche ho curato di non mai dimenticare” (I: 24).

While La Farina would like to bring China and the West closer, he does not envisage any future migration, massive or even minimal, from the Orient to the West. According to him it is “not at all useful” for the Chinese to come to Europe; in particular, for upper class

⁴⁰ Giovanni Pietro Maffei SJ (1533-1603) wrote his book on India in 1589. It was translated into French in 1665 (from the original Latin). Though mainly dealing with India, and also with Japan, Maffei's work provides plenty of information on China as well. In the early nineteenth century the lack of sources on China urged publishers to rediscover, and republish, even those ancient books. Maffei's work was republished in 1806, in 3 volumes, by the Società Tipografica de' Classici Italiani, based in Milan, and run (indirectly) by officials of the new Napoleonic regime of the Repubblica Italiana.

people and intellectuals, who “occupano gli uffici e le magistrature, né abbandonano mai il loro paese” (I:28). On the other hand, he sees it as very likely that the Europeans would colonize, commercially as well as ideologically, the whole of China. With reference to the silk trade, he says: “tempo forse verrà in cui i Chinesi riceveranno le nostre seterie e le loro donne metteranno in capo i cappellini piumati delle crestaie di Parigi” (I:30). One can say he foresaw what would happen in the first decade of the third millennium, but only in part.

Writing at a time when Communism was close to establishing itself as an ideology, La Farina does not share Marx’s ideas about the prominence of economy in the history of mankind; on the contrary, more along the Hegel-Comte line, and still idealistically, La Farina affirms: “Sotto a questi mutamenti materiali avvengono altri mutamenti morali, giacché, vogliasi o no, è l’intelligenza quella che governerà il mondo” (I:31). Interestingly enough, La Farina uses the future tense: intelligence, the mind, “will rule the world”, making it an historical statement, rather than a metaphysical one. (Regrettably intelligence is still not governing the world.)

The rest of the first volume is devoted to lengthy descriptions of rituals of the Chinese “race” and the persistence of irrational elements, such as superstitions, in a people that La Farina labels as the “most skeptical in the world”:

È curioso vedere nel popolo il più scettico della terra cotanta superstizione: eppure è un fatto innegabile, l’uomo ha bisogno di credere in qualche cosa; e nel momento in cui manca in parte la credenza nel vero e nel bene, nella China si crede alle sorti, in Europa al lotto e al libro dei sogni. (I:437)

In the second volume, published in 1844, there are long sections devoted to the political and judicial system of China. While La Farina commends the severity, if not the cruelty of the Chinese penal system, and implies that it is something he would like to see introduced in a unified Italy, he also underlines a Chinese saying that he, as a liberal, sees as the core for any political system: the Emperor, as well as the common subject, are equally constrained by the laws and cannot

violate them: “L’Imperatore e il suddito che violano la legge sono ugualmente colpevoli” (II: 123). It is worth noting that this rule is said by La Farina to be a popular maxim, something therefore arising from the common conscience of the Chinese people, a feature of their mentality. Furthermore, in the line with Enlighten thinking, La Farina praises the “simplicity” and “rationality” of the system of the Chinese criminal laws: “L’ordine del codice penale Cinese è semplice e razionale” (*ibidem*).

One of the reasons for his dislike of the Bourbon dynasty ruling over his native Sicily was the fact that the laws prevailing in the Kingdom were a complicated collection of different legal traditions. His ideal with rational laws was the Napoleonic code. La Farina repeatedly praises the strong control the State has on every aspect of Chinese life. This approval does not include the fact that interest rates on a loan in China could exceed 30% per year, something he views as usury. At the same time, being a Sicilian first and foremost, La Farina considers the harsh laws governing adultery as something positive. It is worth remembering that the “delitto d’onore”, i.e. the very lenient treatment of the husband or wife who killed his/her partner caught in adultery, remained entrenched in Italian law until well into the twentieth century: “Se il marito che sorprende in adulterio la moglie uccide sul fatto la donna e l’adultero, o uno di entrambi, non va soggetto a pena alcuna” (II: 182). Along the same line of thought, La Farina praises the fact that gambling (today tolerated *cum bona pace* in Macao) is not allowed in China (II:196); furthermore, contrary to the warranty Beccaria advocated, La Farina is in favor of “preventive detention”, arrest and incarceration before the results of the trial are decided (II:201). The frequent use of violence (“le battiture sono l’anima della legislazione Chinese”) is only lightly condemned, when it comes to youngsters being subjected to caning.

The last part of the second volume is devoted to mourning. It is interesting to note that in line with the thinking of the Enlightenment, which was against any public display of suffering, and clearly in contrast with Catholic as well as Jewish traditions of public and loud mourning, La Farina criticizes the strident public mourning ceremonies of the Chinese, and labels them unworthy of such a civilized people:

Confucio disse ‘Rendete ai morti gli stessi onori che se essi fossero presenti e pieni di vita’. Questo era un consiglio pietoso; ma in China i consigli di Confucio si sono tutti mutati in precetti, e quindi è venuto il codice e ha dato ad essi forza di legge. Certo l’onorare i defunti è segno di pietà e di civiltà; ma il piangere e l’urlare e il condolarsi col maestro di cerimonie accanto e a tempo quasi diremmo di musica, è cosa più che strana, ridicola, e indegna di un popolo cotanto civile. (II:320)

La Farina is here applying to the mourning habits of the Chinese Renaissance and Enlightenment notions of “good manners”. In reality, he is attacking European practices, Catholic and Jewish alike, and, in an effort typical of Positivism, he is discrediting through anthropological the tenets of revealed religions. Again, the Chinese are not the real targets, nor the real object of his work. He is thinking constantly of Italy aspiring to be become a unified national State; a new State towards the creation of which he later will contribute decisively.

The third and the fourth volumes of his work are less interesting than the previous two. The third came out in 1846 and has long sections on Chinese science and Chinese sayings, famous quotes and proverbs that later became extremely popular as examples of “Chinese wisdom”. In nineteenth century Europe this wisdom was often seen as opposite and parallel to the “Chinese – or yellow – peril” it also envisaged. In the fourth and last volume, which precedes by one year the 1848 Italian political upheavals, once again La Farina praises the Chinese government. In this case, he praises its ability and prompt intervention in dealing with public welfare and charitable matters. This gives La Farina an opportunity to call “barbarian” (the way the Chinese themselves did particularly during the wars against Britain and France) the very European governments that thus labeled the Chinese:

Parecchi de’ nostri governi più civili sono troppo indietro del Chinese in fatto di pubblica beneficenza: e che il

titolo di *Barbaro* che molti de' nostri scrittori danno a quell'Impero, non serve che a sempre più mettere in chiara luce il nostro orgoglio, la nostra barbarie e la nostra ignoranza. (IV:43)

In the pages that follow, La Farina commends another aspect of Chinese society: its lack of major landowners and “capitalists”. In this sense, he is praising an aspect of Chinese society that is not completely clear to him, while intent on expressing his disgust with the “latifondisti”, the Sicilian aristocratic owners of his times who left great parcels of land, uncultivated, while the peasants starved.

Following Raynal⁴¹, one of his major sources, La Farina also praises the previously mentioned fact that the Chinese do not like to go outside of their own country, and that they regard it to be better than any other part of the world (IV:50). However, approaching the end of his work, and taking into account the situation after the Opium wars with the English, La Farina notes, to his surprise, that also in China something is moving, and fast. So he states that maybe the common assumption of his age, about China's immobility since time immemorial, is *ipso facto* challenged. Probably, on account of the violent and doomed-to-defeat encounter with the British, it must now be asked whether:

Non assistiamo noi a' mutamenti governativi che si succedono nel Celeste Impero e alla lotta quivi fervente tra i progressisti e i retrogradi, i protezionisti e i libero-scambisti, i conservatori e i riformisti, come si trattasse di un qualunque Stato d'Europa? (IV:122)

It is here that La Farina more than hints at an idea beginning to be wide spread all over Europe: the Opium wars had set the Chinese leviathan in motion, made history move up one gear, even in remote parts of the Empire surrounded by the Great Wall, sometimes seen as

⁴¹ Guillaume-Thomas Raynal: *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements & du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes* (first published in Amsterdam in 1770 and subsequently in La Hage, London and Genève in 1774, 1776, 1780 respectively).

a barrier not so much against enemies as against the advance of progress and the course of time. However, La Farina also shows his pro-West bias. The battle between China and Britain is described as the struggle of the “hawk” against the “turtle” (a poetic imagined probably borrowed from some British author) or the clash of the “Middle Ages” against “modernity”; ultimately, nothing less than a war between “civilization” and “barbarity”. This final statement contradicts what is said throughout the four volumes. In revealing last pages, the contradictions of a young provincial author, who based his interpretation of China entirely on available the secondary sources, become the contradictions of an entire epoch with regards to its relations and intellectual attitudes to China:

In Europa vi è una tendenza manifesta a rendere meno necessaria che sia possibile l'azione governativa, in China è il governo che fa tutto, provvede a tutto; in Europa la civiltà ha per guida la ragione individuale, in China la patria potestà; in Europa la proprietà è diritto del cittadino, in China dello Stato per una specie di Comunismo Teoretico, che risale a tempi antichissimi: che vi può essere dunque in comune tra la civiltà Inglese e la Chinese? Quale idea simpatica e accettabile trovava il popolo Chinese impressa sulla bandiera d'Inghilterra? (IV:186s)

La Farina cites Hong Kong as a “new Malta”, a “new Gibraltar”, but, more cogently, even in these pages he presents his theory, borrowed from his sources, about the contrast between immobility and progress, conservatism and movement, in Chinese history and mentality.

The basic idea is that the Chinese never made a Baconian or Leonardian use of science⁴². It does not mean that, from sailing to naval architecture, and from gunpowder to a number of other devices, they did not invent anything; they invented the compass, for instance, but ironically with it they were only to be able to identify the places

⁴² Leonardo da Vinci, even before Francis Bacon, strongly praised the utility of science and the superiority of technology over pure science.

where malignant spirits resided: “per sapere da che lato deve guardarsi dagli spiriti maligni” (IV:195). “Tutto ha trovato, e nulla perfezionato” (*ibidem*). China has discovered everything, but it has never brought anything to perfection.

The conclusion of the fourth volume, and thus of the entire work, is very revealing, for it alludes to current events both in China and in Europe, and especially in Italy, where the 1848 revolutions and first war of independence, the real political beginning of the unification process, were about to take place. It is worth noting that, while the frontispiece of this fourth volume gives the date of publication as 1847, on the final page it gives 1850 as the date of printing by the fairly important “Tipografia galileiana” of Florence. This shift of three perhaps indicates a more correct date of completion given the extremely turbulent and important nature of those years, both for China and for Europe. La Farina had begun his work in 1843, a free citizen of Bourbon Sicily, and saw the publication of the last volume as an exile in Paris, after having participated actively in the 1848 insurrections, on the side of the defeated.

Immensa piramide di granito, le onde del tempo l’aveano toccata, non scossa. Da ultimo una Nazione si levò nell’Occidente, e vinto l’esitare, posò la sua mano sul gigante e lo scosse, e lo trovò freddo come la pietra, come la pietra impotente. Or basta questo contatto perché l’elettricità morale d’Europa si comunichi a lui, e lo forzi ad alzarsi e camminare, o a cadere e disfarsi. Il secolo XIX ha veduto de’ grandi prodigi nel mondo delle idee e dei fatti, e vedrà la China scuotere la sua immobilità di 3000 anni, e cominciare a percorrere un nuovo periodo di civiltà! (IV:196)

So, not a lack of civilization, but the beginning of a new period of civilization, triggered by the “moral electric current” of the Royal Navy, is what La Farina envisages for China, in 1848. The conclusion of the work is an accolade to the Chinese revolts against the Tatar dynasty, something that La Farina imagines to be a Chinese “1848”:

“Pare che per i Chinesi sia cominciato l’anno di grazia 1848” (IV: 198).

4. “All like in the West”: The “progressive” China of Carlo Cattaneo (1861)

The first decisive ideological and historical move to see China set in motion, reversing a long tradition of “immobility”, if not stagnation, starts with La Farina and is developed further by Cattaneo.

Carlo Cattaneo (1801-1869) belongs to a group of Italian patriots defeated by the outcome of unification⁴³. Probably one of the most intelligent men who fought for Italian independence, Cattaneo, along with Giuseppe Ferrari and several others, believed in a “federal” Italy, and strongly opposed the type of unification that eventually took place, under the Savoy dynasty. He did not endorse a new State which was a mere extension of the Sardinian Kingdom, and envisaged, instead, a federal republic, following the Swiss or/and the American model. For this reason, he is considered the founding father not so much of Italy, but of the “federalist ideology” upon which the Lega Nord, one of the most important parties currently governing Italy, founds its credo⁴⁴.

Cattaneo, a Milanese writer and journalist, familiar with a number of classical and contemporary languages, thus a true son of the Lombardy of the Enlightenment, of the Verri brothers and Cesare Beccaria, and a fervent admirer of Britain, was one of the protagonists of the *Cinque giornate di Milano*, the “Five Days” riots that took place on 18-22 March 1848, during which the Milanese people temporarily got rid of the Habsburg and introduced a independent republic, a sort of future Italy, in which Cattaneo played the only substantial political role in his life. With the fall of Milano and the restoration of the Austrian domination in 1849, Cattaneo opted for

⁴³ For a general introduction to Cattaneo’s life and thought, see F. Sabetti, *Civilization and Self-Government. The Political Thought of Carlo Cattaneo*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010.

⁴⁴ See C. Gallicani, *Cattaneo e il federalismo*, Rome: Armando, 2010.

exile, settling in Castagnola, now a part of the city of Lugano, in the Italian speaking Canton of Ticino of Switzerland. He never accepted a seat in Parliament although it offered to him until his death, for he would never want to pay homage to the Piedmontese, and their new State, which in his view was a territorial expansion of their kingdom, subject to the same laws, the same “Charte octroyée”, the constitution of 1848 granted by Carlo Alberto to his subjects during a revolution in Piedmont. Cattaneo wrote several important works on political economy, history, urban studies. All of them are oriented towards practical aspects of the Enlightenment, decisively influenced by French positivism, and imbued with anti-Catholicism. These constants in the writings of Cattaneo made him the exact opposite of his orthodox contemporary and fellow Milanese, Alessandro Manzoni, who never actively participated in the wars of independence. Cattaneo’s ideological efforts to modernize Italy and open it to the mainstream of global history centre round a journal, *Il Politecnico*, which was probably the most important periodical published in Italy during the nineteenth century⁴⁵.

While in exile, after the creation of the Kingdom of Italy, in a way he could not endorse, and which he considered violent, treacherous and strongly anti-democratic state, Cattaneo devoted a lengthy essay to topic of China “old and new”, published in 1861. He had previously touched on Chinese and Oriental subjects in a 1845-essay on India, thus the one on China can be considered a far more dense historical and theoretical continuation that aims is to debunk once and for all the myth of an immobile, static, gigantic and inert continent⁴⁶.

This essay praises the historical and intellectual achievements of China, and attempts to identify her immense potential. But it is also a covert attack against the newborn State of Italy. Whatever Cattaneo says that is negative about the autocracy and the statism in China, can be read as a critique of what he saw beyond his windows, from the

⁴⁵ See the most recent anthological edition, C. Cattaneo, *Il Politecnico, 1839-1844*, edited by L. Ambrosoli, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989.

⁴⁶ See L. Loreto, “La Cina antica e moderna di Carlo Cattaneo”, *Cina* 3, 1957:57-65.

federal heaven of Switzerland whence he could literally see the shores of Italy.

In a China attacked by France and England, and forced to concede territories and sign treaties, Cattaneo sees the new State of Italy, where the Savoia dynasty had conquered and assumed power over territories to which historically it had no right, from Milan, Cattaneo's homeland, to central and southern Italy, from Venice (yet to be annexed) to the Papal States. In a way, the foreign Manchu dynasty ruling in China is the counterpart of the House of Savoy ruling in Italy⁴⁷.

What Cattaneo fears is that China may be facing a conquest by a foreign European power, much as in the case of India. He is, for self evident reasons, fiercely opposed to any form of colonialism and colonial rule. However, Cattaneo perceives in the Chinese people an "awareness of being a Nation" that was lacking in Italy. This may not have been historically correct, but it clearly underlines what Cattaneo believes: Italians do not form a nation, whereas the Chinese, *en gros*, are one⁴⁸.

As current proof of this, Cattaneo quotes the rebellions against the Mongols first and the Manchu of the time. Cattaneo emphasizes the constant movements, tensions, aspirations, ideals and contrasts present in Chinese history and civilization, far more than La Farina, who after all was a mere compiler of previous data, or even Ferrari, who composed a sort of teleological world history. Cattaneo, with a keen eye for science and especially technology, acknowledges that the Chinese had developed many skills and made many inventions, well before the Western world:

La civiltà cinese, iniziata splendidamente venti e piú secoli prima della fondazione di Roma, e quando la superba Europa era ancora tutta barbara e in gran parte selvaggia, fu sempre e assiduamente progressiva. E se non neghiamo i fatti piú evidenti e solenni, lo è ancora ai nostri giorni. I cinesi, senza noi, e prima di noi e a nostro

⁴⁷ C. Cattaneo, "La China antica e moderna", *Il Politecnico*, 10-56, 1861:198-223.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*:210.

ammaestramento e vantaggio, trovarono la cultura del riso e quella del cotone, dello zucchero, del té, del limone, dell'arancio, quella della canfora, del rabarbaro e d'altre piante salutari. Trovarono dal principio al fine tutta l'arte di raccogliere la seta, di filarla, di tesserla, di tingere in colori che sono ancora un segreto per la nostra chimica. Essi, già nei tempi di Marco Polo, or sono sei secoli, avevano scoperto l'uso del carbon fossile, che a quell'illustre viaggiatore parve una pietra. Essi trovarono pur da principio a fine tutta l'arte di comporre e colorare porcellane di mirabile delicatezza; e di fare carta di seta, di gelso, di bambú, d'aralia; di trarre tele e stuoie da specie a noi ignote di palme, d'ortiche, di canapi, di giunchi; e ricavare pur dal regno vegetale sevo, cera, sapone, vernici, lacche; di preparare finissimi inchiostri e acquerelli. Essi inventarono prima di noi la polvere da focolo, e la stampa; trasmisero per mezzo degli Arabi agli Italiani la prima invenzione della bussola. Essi, prima di noi, ridussero ad arte la concimazione, la piscicoltura, la selvicoltura, la costruzione dei giardini, non solo in terra, ma persino sopra zattere galleggianti; essi furono maestri agli Olandesi, agli Inglesi, ai Francesi nella piú gentile delle arti, la floricultura. Essi condussero le acque a irrigare, non solo i piani, ma il pendio delle colline; essi scavarono fin dai remoti tempi il piú largo e lungo di tutti i canali navigabili del mondo; costrussero sopra un braccio di mare un ponte di trecento pile; e con argini di fiumi e tagli di paludi, acquistarono all'agricoltura provincie che noi chiameremmo grandi regni⁴⁹.

What however strikes Cattaneo even more is that China wisely introduced the cultivation of "three American crops", tobacco, potatoes and corn, and accepted vaccination against smallpox; and that the only new bad formed by the Chinese was the use of opium,

⁴⁹ Ibidem:218.

but undoubtedly the English played a role in that. Being an opponent of Thomas Robert Malthus, the Anglican clergyman whose population theories were much discussed in Italy at the time, Cattaneo sees in the extraordinary growth of China's population a sign both of good governance, national vitality, and ultimately of economic wisdom⁵⁰.

The ability to assure the welfare of a population of half a billion people (Cattaneo gives the correct figure of 530 million for 1860), almost half of mankind and more than double the population of Europe, indicates that whoever thinks badly about the Chinese government and its people is mistaken: they are anything but a "lazy and decrepit people"⁵¹.

Cattaneo bases these views on the massive work, sponsored by Napoleon III in the late 1850s, "Travaux de la Commission Française sur l'Industries des Nations"⁵². The same text praises China as a country of "progrès continué", of constant progress, since the late seventeenth century. A very revealing intellectual position added by Cattaneo is that China grew so much without depriving any nation of its wealth and territory: progress can take place, contrary to what mainstream leaders of his century thought, through free trade and free market, not necessarily through the interventions of other states or as a result of conquests and invasions.

While Cattaneo on occasions praises China's government, as we saw above, he is nevertheless an assiduous defender of a civil society as opposed to any form of established or centralized regime. What was happening in China, as a consequence of the European wars, Cattaneo perceived as a revolt of civilians against the State⁵³. Apart from every other consideration, according to Cattaneo local rebels, pirates and missionaries who kindle rebellious sparks, were evidence

⁵⁰ Ibidem:212.

⁵¹ Ibidem:214.

⁵² See R. Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, passim.

⁵³ Ibidem:219.

of a dynamic scenario that certainly did not indicate an immobile and decadent society:

Codesto sanguinoso intreccio di tribù libere, di corsari che sfidano il cannone europeo, di profugi, di cospiratori, fra i quali uno spruzzo d'idee bibliche genera d'improvviso una nuova religione, un esercito, un regno, non è indizio per certo d'una gente esausta e decrepita, ma d'anime appassionate e d'immaginazioni accese come fra le più vigorose nazioni dell'Occidente. E come in Occidente, l'impotenza del popolo discende dalle regioni del potere; il quale, stringendo nella gelosa e incerta mano le forze e le ricchezze di cinquecento milioni d'uomini, non sa poi vincere o pacare sessantamila ribelli, né respingere alle loro navi ventimila stranieri⁵⁴.

Furthermore, the fact that the State, or rather the Empire, was controlled by a foreign dynasty is seen by Cattaneo as reasonable grounds to oppose it. Cattaneo views favorably the Chinese instability of the decades between 1840 and 1861, for a Manchu dynasty controlling China was not unlike the Savoy dynasty ruling over all of Italy. Even though Italy is so much smaller than China, like China, it comprises several distinct national identities, forced to live under the yoke of a single one⁵⁵.

Cattaneo is throwing light on parallel and intertwined myths: firstly, that China is historically frozen, and secondly that geographically and anthropologically China is a uniform, ethnic whole. In fact, China is made up of several regions, with various languages, religions, and ethnic groups: the entire Chinese empire is four times the size of what is China itself. He mentions the Turks, the Tibetans, the Manchu, as well as the Mongols, leaving aside quite a few other nationalities that constitute the Empire. It is worth noting that even today it is quite common for Italians to talk, at a popular

⁵⁴ Ibidem:220.

⁵⁵ Ibidem:221.

level, of China as a single immense entity, and perceive as the only difference among the Chinese living in Italy that some speak Cantonese, others Mandarin, therefore, they must be two distinct languages.

Cattaneo is quite subtle when describing a society and a political philosophy in which the concept of and thus a word for “rights” is absent, whereas its cognate but opposite concept, that of “duties”, is quite common. Yet it is not true to say that China has been closed to the rest of the world. According to Cattaneo, China has been able to “assimilate” and “integrate” into its social, political, and philosophical system, all the foreign elements that fitted its solid philosophy of life⁵⁶. What could be easily imported into the system and did not undermine the State, was readily accepted. The solidity of the State, in spite of occasionally foreign dominations, and the solidity of its underpinning ideology have made possible China’s millennial continuity:

Ciò fa parte d’un ampio sistema sociale e scientifico il quale ebbe la potenza d’assimilare e immedesimare tutte le idee che la ragione dei popoli nel corso di cinquemila anni venne trovando e deducendo: e di dominare tutte le sette indigene, anche armate e ribelli, e quante filosofie e teologie e teocrazie penetrarono colà dal Tibetto, dall’India, dalla Persia, dall’Arabia, dalla Palestina, dall’Europa: ed eziandio d’imporsi ai conquistatori, che sottomisero più volte la terra di quel popolo, ma non la sua legge e la sua mente⁵⁷.

After having seen his own beloved Lombardy fall under the yoke of a Piedmontese dynasty, it is not surprising that in this essay Cattaneo betrays the fear that China could eventually encounter the same destiny as India and become a European colony⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ Ibidem:222.

⁵⁷ Ibidem:220.

⁵⁸ Ibidem:221.

Cattaneo died in 1869, the same year as the Nanking peace treaty, while still writing this essay. He might have died with the same fear, eight years after the Nanking treaty, as three years after the first China-Italy commercial entente of 1866. Cattaneo makes another fairly sharp observation when he says that “all [is] like in the West” (and he does it three times in this relatively short essay), referring to certain traits of Chinese political ideology. The notion that an Emperor is something between a divine figure and a father to all his subjects is just as entrenched in the political thought of the European Middle-Ages as it is in Chinese political philosophy. Similarly, the key figure in biblical hierarchies is that of the father or patriarch. Compared with modern Aristotelianism, and rational / representative power, Biblical Patriarchalism played a major role in European political thought until well into the eighteenth century, when different and opposing political theories, from the social contract to the first modern democratic ideas, (already partially present in the Holy Scripture), challenged Biblical patriarchalism and brought it to its theoretical end⁵⁹ in Europe, but not in China, where it seems to be the traditional system upon which even peripheral power is based:

Tutto adunque nello Stato sembra a primo aspetto dipendere dai voleri del regnante. Dalla sua mano il lavoro e la vita dei poveri; dalla sua mano li uffici e le dovizie dei grandi. Ma la necessità di dar continuità e sicurezza a tale immensa azienda, condusse a stabilire un sistema generale di regole e d'osservanze. Le quali, siccome erano membra d'un ordine divino che doveva conformare la terra al cielo, così vennero considerate come cose sacre; ed ebbero nome di *riti*. I riti antichi sono tremila e trecento. Essendosi figurato nel principe il padre universale della nazione, si figurarono nei magistrati delle provincie i padri dei popoli. E per assicurare l'obediienza loro a codesti padri metaforici, si

⁵⁹ This interpretation has been recently offered by E. Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2010.

corroborò l'autorità dei veri padri sui figli, dei mariti sulle donne, dei fratelli maggiori sui minori, dei padroni sui servi; s'immedesimò lo Stato colla casa. Come il re fu padre dello Stato, così il padre fu re della famiglia. Si diede ai padri una vera giurisdizione di magistrato su i figli; e una sí esagerata responsabilità, che i delitti dei figli vennero puniti nei genitori; e insieme coi padri vennero mandati a morte i figli, benché minorenni⁶⁰.

Such a structure seems antithetical to the notion of having a widespread and common educational system. Yet, public education, even when aimed at spreading and consolidating these ideal, was the central objective of political action in China, since time immemorial:

Tutto ciò travolgeva e snaturava il concetto dell'educazione. Ma intanto l'educazione universale divenne oggetto supremo della legislazione. Quando si pensa, che, fin da secoli remoti, ogni villaggio cinese ebbe la sua scola, si vede perché, vedendo i soldati e marinai delle navi d'Europa quali sono pur troppo, i Chinesi giudicarono che venissero da una terra di barbari⁶¹.

Once again we see that Cattaneo's main focus is on Europe, and more especially on Italy. The high level of literary reached by China, unequalled anywhere in Europe apart from Britain, is something that needed to be introduced in newly constituted Italy. It is worth recalling that when Italy was unified in 1861 around 90% of its population was still illiterate. Cattaneo, a supporter of a secular state and until the very end an opponent of the Catholic Church, wanted secular education to be made available to the people. These positions, labeled "liberalism", were not very popular. In Italy, even today to be

⁶⁰ Cattaneo, "La China":219.

⁶¹ Ibidem:218.

“liberal” is still conceived as being anti-Church and possibly atheist. It is a fact that Cattaneo did not like the Jesuits, and that he liked the Dominicans, whom he always calls “inquisitors”, even less, but it is surprising that an enlightened man such as he should back up the old myth about the Jesuits being expelled from China for secretly meaning to become its new rulers. He summarized the “Chinese question” that animated discussions in Rome and Catholic Europe from the time Gregory XV became Pope in 1621 to the death of Cardinal Tournon in Macao in 1710, in the following curt manner:

Alcuni missionarii gesuiti, penetrando nella China, ove professavano d’essere geometri, astronomi e fonditori di cannoni, facevano colà sembante d’essere ascritti alle congregazioni dei Buddisti, mentre in Europa vantavano che fossero nuove chiese cristiane da loro fondate con certi riti piú conformi all’indole di quei popoli. Da ciò nacque tra essi e i missionarii capucini prima, e li inquisitori domenicali poi, il famoso *processo dei riti chinesi*; ebbe principio sotto papa Ludovisi (Gregorio XV), istitutore della Propaganda di Roma (1621- 1623); durò circa un secolo, e terminò colla missione del cardinale Tournon alla China (1701) e colla sua morte in una prigione a Macao (1710), ov’era stato chiuso per maneggio de’ Gesuiti. I quali infine vennero espulsi dal governo cinese, che aspiravano a *governare*⁶².

Up until the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, such ideas of a Jesuit plot to conquer first Rome, then the entire world, were spread in underhand ways by both the Jansenists and men of the Enlightenment⁶³.

⁶² Ibidem:217.

⁶³ See among others C.M. Northeast, *The Parisian Jesuits and the Enlightenment*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991:78-80, passim.

Before discussing at length Chinese arts and literature, Cattaneo, a man of extraordinary insight, mentions the first migratory waves of Chinese to leave the country in the aftermath of the European wars:

Dopo le guerre cogli Europei, cominciò nelle provincie marittime della China, e principalmente nelle montagne del *Fo-kien*, una grande emigrazione d'operai e d'agricoltori verso la California, le Antille, l'Australia, la Malesia. Pare che i Chinesi meridionali, per il loro temperamento, la sobrietà, la indefessa diligenza e la sagacia, siano i soli uomini del mondo che possano fondar colonie d'agricoltori liberi nella zona torrida. La concorrenza loro farà sí che la infame schiavitù dei Negri rimanga abolita in forza di quel medesimo interesse che l'ha fin qui promossa. Pare perciò che la stirpe cinese, ch'è già la più numerosa di tutte le stirpi umane, sia predestinata a popolare altre vaste regioni e fondar nuovi Stati; del che devono ben esser contenti li amici dell'umanità⁶⁴.

That Chinese workers, or “coolies” as they were called, worked in conditions of “semi slavery” and often replaced the African-Americans in the USA is undisputed fact. And also Cattaneo’s intuition about the future migrations of Chinese was correct; back in 1861 one could not easily predict the scale on which it eventually happened.

One final quotation will give the idea of the ways in which this image of China fitted Cattaneo’s modern socio-political aspirations:

La China ebbe molte guerre civili, e fughe e uccisioni di regnanti; ma le ribellioni furono solamente castigo ai principi malvagi, non furono occasione ai popoli di far valere i loro *diritti*. In compenso, dominò sempre nella China l'idea dell'*eguaglianza* degli uomini, ignota alle

⁶⁴ Cattaneo, “La China”:220.

caste dell'India, negata sempre, anche al cospetto dell'evangelio, in Europa. La China non ebbe mai *caste*; li alti officii, appunto come in una grande scola, si riputarono dovuti al merito, e soprattutto alla *dottrina*; non alla violenza, né alla ricchezza, né all'eredità, e nemmeno al voto sovente cieco della moltitudine⁶⁵.

China never had castes like in India, nor ideas about individual and national rights, but it did have a fundamental concept of equality, unfamiliar or not applied in the West. Cattaneo believed that public office should be awarded on one's merit, and not one's wealth, status, connections or affiliations. But more importantly, it should be noted that he does not praise democracy unconditionally; he is wary of what he calls the "often blind vote of the multitudes". Cattaneo is a defender of total democracy only in certain places like in Switzerland, where there are no 'multitudes of voters', where direct democracy can be implemented, and where the voters are all normally cultured or at least literate citizens.

Moving on to Ferrari's work on China, we will see how this close associate of Cattaneo's gives a view of China that integrates both Cattaneo's and La Farina's positions, while offering a sound perspective of world-history.

5. China and Europe (teleologically) compared: Giuseppe Ferrari's attempt at world history (1867)

Giuseppe Ferrari, born in Milano in 1811 and died in Rome in 1876, became a senator of the Italian Kingdom, after having served as a deputy in the lower chamber from 1860. He was a friend of Cattaneo, despite their disagreements and the fact that he had been living in France for political reasons, in self-imposed exile since 1839⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ Ibidem:222.

⁶⁶ On Ferrari see A. Bruch, *Italien auf den Weg zum Nationalstaat: Giuseppe Ferraris Vorstellungen einer föderaldemokratischen Ordnung*, Hamburg: Krämer, 2005.

As a professor of philosophy and editor of Giambattista Vico's work⁶⁷, he published many books both in Italian and French, but he was an isolated figure both as a scholar and as a politician: in Parliament, he spoke in favor of a federal Italy, when Italy had stubbornly taken a centralistic turn, which obstinately it holds until now. His philosophy conceives a secularized eschatology, speculates on historical cycles and expands on the "corsi-ricorsi" of Vico's *Scienza nuova* with a baffling mix of positivism, materialism, and socialism⁶⁸.

He was probably homosexual, and this did not help his fame in Catholic Italy. Ferrari today is studied almost exclusively by contemporary federalists, linked to the Lega Nord. His idea of federalism, however, is not clearly defined in his works and remains vague and unclear. Probably, he based his federal ideals on a notion of empire, drawn from the Holy Roman Empire, but applied also to the Chinese empires in certain moments of its millennial history⁶⁹.

His *La Chine et l'Europe comparées* was published in Paris in 1867⁷⁰. Many notes for this book, as well as a long essay on Japan, remain unpublished in the Museo del Risorgimento in Milan⁷¹. This work was published the year after the Sino-Italian treaty of 1866 was signed, but Ferrari seems not to be aware of it. In the prefaces, he addresses key-points fundamental to understanding the reception of China and its culture had on the European soil. The "discovery" of China was, from the point of view of intellectual and theological

⁶⁷ On Vico's nuanced treatment of China, between progress and immobility, see P. Daffinà, "La Cina vista da G.B. Vico", *Cina* (2) 1957:34-50.

⁶⁸ See M. Martirano, *Giuseppe Ferrari interprete di Vico*, Napoli: Guida, 2001.

⁶⁹ See C.M. Lovett, "Europa e Cina nell'opera di Giuseppe Ferrari", *Rassegna storica del Risorgimento*, 3, 1972:397-402.

⁷⁰ See L. Lanciotti, "La Chine et l'Europe di Giuseppe Ferrari", *Cina*, 2, 1957:2-24.

⁷¹ Museo Del Risorgimento, Milano, Archivio Ferrari, B:12-14. His unpublished study on contemporary Japan is of great interest for what he takes into account of Japanese politics and customs, once again in comparison with Europe.

history, less challenging than that of America, for Asia was well within the European theological-geographical, biblical horizon. However, the fact that Sem may have given his name to Asia does not mean that knowledge of Asia could not undermine the notion of Western (and Middle-Eastern) superiority since it was the cradle of Christianity. The brilliant *aperçu* of Ferrari's work is truly enlightening when it comes to explaining the long felt unease of Europeans confronting China and its culture:

Les premières études relatives à la Chine causèrent une vive impression sur le monde savant de l'Europe par la révélation de faits qui blessent profondément l'orgueil de la tradition chrétienne. On a eu tout à coup une autre tradition, avec des dates aussi anciennes que les nôtres, avec la prétention non moins exclusive de remonter seule aux origines de l'humanité, avec des fondateurs, des inventeurs, des réformateurs bien supérieurs aux patriarches et aux héros de la Bible, enfin avec une religion reproduisant tellement nos dogmes et nos cérémonies que nos missionnaires en ont été réduits à imaginer que le démon avait parodié notre religion dans l'intérêt de l'enfer⁷².

Ferrari completely discredits the old Staunton's myth of China depicted as an "isolated, static, and barbarian" land, along the lines partially introduced in Italy by La Farina and Cattaneo, and already highly developed in British and French oriental scholarship. His prose is pungent:

Mais la Chine est-elle barbare? [...] Demandons plutôt si l'Europe est civilisée en Angleterre, où l'aristocratie règne sur le sol; en Russie, où le peuple est esclave; à Constantinople, où il n'y a ni arts, ni philosophie, ni littérature; en France, en Espagne, en Italie, en Autriche,

⁷² G. Ferrari, *La Chine*:i.

où l'on adore un pontife inutilement combattu par tous
les hommes éclairés⁷³.

Ferrari then proceeds to argue against the other traditional accusation brought against China in Europe: that it is static (*stationnaire*), and isolated (*solitaire*). Ferrari admits that it was only under Louis XIV that China became better known in Europe, but he fiercely denies the China is static. Ferrari's arguments however differ from those of Cattaneo. While the latter based his ideas of a dynamic China on empirical, historical evidence, Ferrari offers the view that China, like the rest of the world and especially Europe, is in constant state of flux that brings about progress; although this motion towards progress is uneven, world history proceeds through many parallel phases towards its infinite betterment⁷⁴.

The entire book unfolds as an attempt to demonstrate that Europe and China, and all that lies between them, Persia and India, or beyond them, America and Africa, are moving in a contorted line of progress, and evolving through cyclical bouts of revolution, reaction and stasis, which repeat themselves over the millennia. His scheme goes so far as to identify in single years, both in Europe and China, watersheds or peaks of certain trends. Ferrari is obsessed with parallelism, with positivist views of history, and with strict accuracy even when reporting totally uncorroborated data: for example he states that in a precise year of antiquity, or the Middle Ages, the population in China was of precisely 54,320,678 souls⁷⁵.

⁷³ Ibidem:ii.

⁷⁴ Ibidem:v-vi.

⁷⁵ Ibidem:345. Unfortunately, Ferrari never mentions his sources. There was a growing interest in Chinese-Europe relations in France under Napoleon III, with a remarkable literary production, related to the Chinese rebellions of that period. See for instance J.M. Callery, *L'insurrection de la Chine* (Paris 1853); L. Hervey de Saint Denis, *La Chine devant l'Europe* (Paris 1859), but especially R.M.R. Courcy, *L'Empire du Milieu*, published in Paris the same year (1867) as Ferrari's *La Chine*. Ideas and data taken from Callery's and Saint Denis' works are present in Ferrari's treatise. China became a popular subjects both in literature, travel accounts (e.g. the famous one of the Garnier expedition), and personal memories. See, for instance, the poignant account of a French lady about her captivity in the hand of Chinese pirates in 1860, recently republished: F. Loviot, *Les Pirates chinois*,

Following Tocqueville and Custine respectively, he foresees in the USA and Russia the future of mankind, and a bright, prosperous, open society in China. This optimistic view of the prosperous future of China, and its emergence as a world power, became increasingly common all over Europe, once both in France and Germany, following in the wake of England, the immensity of the Chinese Empire, and more aspects of its history became known and were perceived as they indeed were⁷⁶.

This work, ignored for a while after publication, is full of echoes of the new positivist science, and a sort of social Darwinism. Ferrari is prone to having a racist view of the world, with some races being superior and some inferior; among the former he includes the Chinese and among the latter the “Negroes”, “une race évidemment inférieure”⁷⁷.

Ferrari, who only rarely quotes a single source for his narrative, relies heavily on travel accounts, but his descriptions of African peoples are invariably insulting for lack of any precise information⁷⁸. His Darwinism is manifested in the notion that there is a “guerre des races”, a war waged naturally rather than historically, by the white race against all the others. He devotes an entire chapter to this point⁷⁹,

Bruxelles: Versailles, 2010. For a general overview of the French-Chinese relations in the nineteenth century after the Whampoa treaty of 1844 see C.H. Lavollée, *La France et la Chine*, Paris: Plon, 1900; and the comprehensive history by N. Bensacq-Tixier, *Historie des diplomates et consul français in Chine, 1840-1911*, Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2008. For the literary and cultures sphere, see L. Bernier, *La Chine littéralisée*, New York-Bern: Lang, 2001. For the French mission in China, see C. de Ménonville, *Les aventuriers de Dieu et de la République. Consuls et missionnaires en Chine 1844-1937*, Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2007. One of the most beautiful among the French direct accounts on China in this period, by a missionary, is J. Gabet, *Lettres de Chine et d'ailleurs, 1835-1860*, edited by J. Thévenot, Paris: Les Indes Savants, 2005.

⁷⁶ In a popular work published in Britain in 1899, for instance, *China and Its Future*, by James Johnston (London: Stock), Johnston sees China metaphorically as half monkey, half elephant, then states: “but when the elephant does set on the march, its progress will be steady and persevering” (164 f).

⁷⁷ G. Ferrari, *La Chine*:234.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*:256.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*:474ff.

which also reveals Ferrari's antisemitism. He often compares the Chinese and the Jews, and he accuses the latter of being superstitious, while the former he praises for their superior culture and philosophical "sagesse"⁸⁰.

Ferrari is fiercely anti-Catholic as well; thus what he praises most in Chinese history, is the lack of a figure like that of the Pope, and the prevalence of philosophy over religion (he considers both Confucius and the Buddha philosophers). As an opponent of centralized States, he finds all over Chinese as well as European history, positive periods of "federalism" as opposed to generally negative periods of "centralism". All Chinese history is viewed as a war of centralized China against nomadic Tatar, and of the State against the federation of the nomadic peoples. He sees both China and Europe constantly torn in the war between "barbarism" and "civilization", but "civilization" is bound to triumph eventually, when the natural process of history will have eliminated every sort of superstition⁸¹.

Ferrari's work is an attempt to construct both a philosophy of history, (in the manner of those whom he regards as his mentors, namely Voltaire and Vico) and a coherent work of world history. He applies to Vico's historical cycles theory a mathematical spirit: his history was to be "la moins sympathique et la plus arithmétique qu'on puisse concevoir". In his view is necessary to discover "la précision de l'engranage qui lie l'Europe à la Chine"⁸².

While not a communist, Ferrari was certainly a moderate socialist; he based his ideas for a new society on the right to private property but regulated by the State in order to avoid the excesses of extreme wealth and extreme poverty. He speaks highly of all the periods in Chinese and European history when ideals of this kind were present. This work of world-history is at the same time a bold attempt to deconstruct such categories as "Renaissance" (which had recently been introduced into historiography first by Michelet, then by

⁸⁰ Ibidem:431.

⁸¹ Ibidem:598 and passim.

⁸² See the entire first chapter:1-25, passim.

Burckhardt) by applying them to Chinese history, in his constant effort to draw parallels, even when they are forced or purely hypothetical. In his view there was a parallel Renaissance in China and Italy, a parallel humanism and finally a parallel destiny of enlightened despots from the middle of the seventeenth century, culminating in “une ressemblance frappante entre Khang-hi et Louis XIV”⁸³.

Ferrari’s attempt at writing a world-history went largely unnoticed, but it is not without its importance: for it implies an extension to the historical dimension, on a global level, of the Enlightenment’s view of “mankind” as a whole. If all men are equal, why should they not share a common history, even in its details? This tentative marriage between Vico and Voltaire in a positivist-socialist guise, Ferrari tried to apply to all his other works, including those on Italian history and the history of the concept of reasons of State.

6. Conclusion: Italian views *vis-à-vis* European perceptions, evaluations, and interpretations of China

Italian presence in China, apart from that of the Franciscans, the (re-constituted) Jesuits and other missionaries that returned there from around 1850, was felt for the first time when the Italian government, under the reign of Umberto I, sent its troops to back the British in the Boxers rebellion⁸⁴. As a consequence of the suppression of the Boxers, Italy was offered commercial privileges and a commercial base in Tientsin (Tianjin) in 1901, which remained under Italian control until 1945. Up until 1901, the presence of merchants, consuls, and other Italian foreigners in coastal and mainland China had been quite negligible⁸⁵.

⁸³ Ibidem:577.

⁸⁴ See L. De Courten, *Le truppe regie in Estremo Oriente 1900-1901*, Rome: Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito-Ufficio Storico, 2005.

⁸⁵ See G. Borsa, *La Cina*:215 ff, passim.

Two years earlier the failure to establish an outpost in China, due to the mismanagement of all the diplomatic actions taken by Italy, had led Prime Minister Luigi Pelloux to resign from his office on May 3rd, 1899, only to be re-appointed ten days later. China, nevertheless, had entered Italian life, through the gates of international and domestic politics. Literature on China, from 1899 onwards, became far more articulate and definitely richer than in the previous period, examined in this essay⁸⁶.

The authors I discussed dealt with Chinese history and society without knowing any Chinese languages, without having been to China, and without realizing that the Jesuit sources were probably still the best first-hand accounts of China to be found.

All these authors projected on China their own philosophical ideas, while what they really had in mind was Italy, a state in the making. So what they praised and what they despised in Chinese history and its political system is what they wanted to apply or not apply to the newly created or about to be created Italian state. This is especially true of La Farina and Cattaneo, but also, in a more indirect way, of Ferrari because of his notion of federalism (but without the “barbarity” of the Tatars). These writers wrote when Orientalism was once again fashionable in Italian culture, so they too contributed to this fashion, instead of producing major scholarly works. Only later, and especially after 1945, did Chinese studies begin to flourish in Italy, albeit mainly at two universities, Venice and Naples.

All the works I have dealt with in this essay are extremely useful to understand Italy and the problems the country faced when it was being created. With regards to China, they speculate on unknown and uncharted territory. From many points of view, the Jesuits’ letters, or accounts of travels such as those of the Medicean Tuscan mission to China back in 1680, or those of Magalotti and Gherardini for instance, are far more precise and knowledgeable, as well as entertaining.

At the same time, one cannot discard the fact that these authors introduced new ideas, not so much on China – though they enhanced

⁸⁶ See F. D’Arelli, *La Cina in Italia. Una bibliografia dal 1899 al 1999*, Roma: Istituto per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2007.

knowledge of it among the increasingly literate Italian public – as on historical methodology, historiography and its political use. China provided a new and more nuanced counterpart, or at least an alternative, to the theories on Oriental despotism. There was, east of the Middle East, an Orient that was “extreme”, extremely more complicate, with a history as long, or even longer, than that of the West, and an Empire that defied univocal interpretations.

One important characteristic of Italian understanding of China in this period is that it was much less biased than that of Britain and France, and much less scientific than that of Germany and the Netherlands. After the McCartney mission, with the growing tensions between Britain and China leading to the outbreak of the first Opium war (1839), British writers on China became less and less sympathetic towards the Celestial Empire, for, in a Europe of nation-states competing with each other, China began to be considered as an immense rival nation and a potential competitor, and was thus analyzed accordingly. The old days of idyllic depictions based on hearsay, in which it was seen as a peaceful, distant, dormant giant, were definitely over by 1830. French and British writers began to stress in every possible way their nations’ superiority over China. At about this time, Chinese scholarship began to take root in Germany, with the creation of several chairs in Oriental literature, in the aftermath both of Friedrich Schlegel’s passion for India, and Alexander von Humboldt’s overhaul of geography.

Both these phenomena, competing with aggressive nationalism on the one side, and new scientific scholarship on the other, were not present in Italy. Thus, we see how the writers quoted in this essay wrote more freely, having far less constraints and restraints than political or academic authors. In a certain sense, their theoretical constructions, however imaginary, pave the way for a reappraisal of China, which was often thought-provoking and generally fascinating.

When Italian contacts with China became more direct, Italian nineteenth-century views on China became obsolete, and were never quoted again. However, they are part of the revival of Italian Orientalism that still need to be re-evaluated. Two cultural occurrences of the time are fairly revealing: Jules Verne’s *Les Tribulations d’un chinois en Chine* (1879), once translated into

Italian, became extremely popular and was read until the middle of the twentieth century, while Puccini's *Turandot*, though performed for the first time in 1926 after Puccini's death (1924), albeit that it was set in some unspecified part of Persia instead of China per se, immediately ranked among the most popular Italian operas. It was only during Mussolini's dictatorship, thus much later than in other parts of Europe, that China came to be regarded as a "peril" in Italy, and references to the "pericolo giallo" appeared everywhere, as much in popular magazines as in learned scholarly books. For Mussolini, the paltry Tientsin commercial base that China had conceded to Italy in 1901 was less than nothing, for he feared that China might become a major danger for Italy and Europe in general.

Though a relatively obscure period in Italian-Chinese relations, broadly speaking, the nineteenth century with its secular spirit, paved the way for how China, also in its Communist period, would be considered, and accepted by Italians, becoming more and more part of China a familiar landscape⁸⁷.

⁸⁷ From the time of the late Roman Empire, passing through the key episodes of those of Marco Polo in the thirteenth century and Matteo Ricci in the seventeenth, there is a rarely interrupted continuity in the history of Italian-Chinese relations. Today the Chinese are becoming a strong minority group in Italy (around 200,000 in 2010), while Italy is becoming a powerful economic presence in capitalist, global China. At the same time, scientific study of China has extended beyond its traditional strongholds (Naples and Venice), with Italian historians of China occupying prestigious chairs in the USA and elsewhere, from Nicola Di Cosmo at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study to Eugenio Menegon at Boston University, to name but two.