COVID-19 and China's Changing Soft Power in Italy

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Abstract

This article investigates how China's COVID-19 aid efforts affected its soft power in Italy through analyzing data on China's COVID-19-related aid from Italy's main national newspapers during the period March–April 2020. Previous research has focused on China's *mask diplomacy* in relation to its impact in Europe, primarily discussing the geopolitical nature of Chinese aid and arguing that China manipulated the pandemic to change COVID-19 narrative. While these scholars provided significant insights into China's aid in Europe, their research failed to provide country specific studies and lack inquiry into the domestic role played by China's public diplomacy overseas. This article finds that, while China's COVID-19-related aid have often been negatively portrayed in European media, this has not been the case for Italy, when analyzing the news reports on the arrival of China's aid in national newspapers during the period March–April 2020. Through assessing secondary data collected from newspapers, this article argues that China's aid allowed the country to increase its visibility in Italy, especially during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if there is no direct correlation between higher visibility and increased soft power, this paper finds that increasing visibility in national newspapers allowed Italians to see China more positively. The paper concludes that China's understanding of soft power is still undergoing enormous changes and that one should not simply understand China's aid as a way to increase its soft power globally, but its overseas aid are considered a powerful tool to boost its domestic conviction that it is global responsible leader helping the world.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · China · Italy · Sino-Italian relations · Soft power · Mask diplomacy

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1 Introduction

On 31 December 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) on the first cases of an unknown pneumonia detected in the city of Wuhan, which would be later known as a disease caused by a novel coronavirus, identified as COVID-19. The severity of the virus led the WHO to issue a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) declaration a month later, and on 11 March it was declared a global pandemic.¹ Covid-19 has drastically accelerated the changes in international political equilibria, placing China even more visibly in the global arena. When the disease first hit China in the beginning of 2020, the country adopted draconian measures to tackle the virus, including strict lockdowns, the building of makeshift hospitals, and other emergent measures. No one really thought that the virus would so rapidly affect Europe and other regions in the world, and certainly few would have predicted that the first country to be severely hit by COVID-19 would also become the first one to resume economic activities. On China's COVID-19-related aid to other countries, scholars have extensively written about China *mask diplomacy* in relation to its impact in Europe, primarily discussing about the geopolitical nature of China's aid. Verma (2020a, b), Le Corre and Brattberg (2020) argued that China manipulated the pandemic to change COVID-19 narrative and that, through its aid, China is showing its superiority in handling COVID-19. While they provided interesting insights into China's COVID-19-related aid in Europe in general, this article provides country specific studies and conducts inquiry into the domestic role played by China's public diplomacy.

This article looks at the role played by China's COVID-19 aid in Italy in order to assess its soft power impact. It is not apparent that China's aid will inevitably boost its soft power in Italy, however it is interesting to see that there was no particularly negative coverage of China's COVID-19 aid in Italy. Among other European nations, investigating the case of Italy appears to be unique at a political level for three reasons. First, Italy became the most severely hit country by COVID-19 after China during the initial stage of the pandemic in March 2020. Second, Italy was the first country in the Western world to receive COVID-19-related aid from China. Third, Italy is the only nation in Western Europe and among the G7 members to have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These three reasons make researching the Italian case particularly unique.

This paper contributes to the broader scholarly works on China's soft power overseas. It seeks to answer a core question, namely how does China's COVID-19 aid affect its soft power in Italy. Through collecting and analyzing data from Italian national newspapers over a period of two months (March–April 2020), the study finds that China's increasing positive visibility in Italian national newspapers has allowed the country to improve its image in Italy, however China's increasing COVID-19-related aid is also used as a tool to gain domestic consensus for internal

¹ WHO Timeline COVID-19, available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>

publicity as could be noticed from the reports from Chinese media. The first section of the article raised the research question. Section two reviews the theoretical framework and the development of the concept of soft power. Section three reviews the existing literature on China's *mask diplomacy* in Europe, with a focus on Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Section four collects the data concerning China's COVID-19-related aid in Italy from Italian national newspapers. The concluding section presents the main findings, summarizes the main arguments and briefly discusses the role played by China's global COVID-19-related aid for domestic consensus.

2 Theoretical Framework: Soft Power

The concept of soft power was first coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye more than thirty years ago. In his article "Soft Power" published by *Foreign Policy* in 1990, Nye wrote that the United States (US) is "likely to retain a broader range of power resources—military, economic, scientific, cultural, and ideological—than other countries" (Nye 1990: 155). If hard power is about the possession of resources, such as territory, natural resources, economic size, or military forces, Nye believes that proof of power is not only about these resources, but rather it is based "in the ability to change the behavior of states" (Nye 1990: 155). That is what Nye initially calls "co-optive power" which is "the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own" (Nye 1990: 168). Co-optive power is then complemented by "soft power resources" which are based on "cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions" (Nye 1990: 167). Nye believes that, even if not perfect, the US still is today the most attractive power because it has both soft and hard power. Nye also defines soft power as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2008: 94). Therefore, a country does not necessarily need to be economically prosperous or militarily superior to affect others. An example of this is Switzerland, small in size of population and military, yet enjoying a high level of international respect.

As an "ability to move people by argument [...] [and] to entice and attract" (Nye 2008: 95), soft power is supported by three main resources, namely culture, political values, and foreign policies. In order to gain and increase soft power, a country's culture must be attractive, its political values must apply both at home and abroad and its foreign policy must appear to be "legitimate and having moral authority" (Nye 2008: 96). In regards to culture, China's millenary civilization has certainly the natural potential of being a source of attraction which China has been also promoting more actively in recent years. In 2004, when the Confucius Institutes program was established, China was able to better promote the study of Chinese culture and language around the world, with not few criticisms however. Confucius Institutes are often seen as tools used by China "to communicate specific strategic narratives about China and its place in the world to foreign publics," therefore showing only what China wants the world to know (Hartig 2015: 249). The problem of China

having a lower global ranking in the soft power index² may also due to the fact Chinese civil society organizations do not have a stronger voice domestically and internationally. Rawnsly, for example, argued that China struggles to build credibility because its soft power and public diplomacy “are embedded largely in the state system” (Rawnsley 2012: 132).

How does a government measure and try to “impose” soft power overseas? According to Rawnsly, one of the biggest challenges is how to strategize soft power, namely how “soft power is best understood as a natural by-product of cultural and political appeal” (Rawnsley 2012: 123). Rawnsly believes that soft power is an attraction founded on principles and ideals “a government or a country values, stands for, projects and how it performs” (Rawnsley 2012: 123). Soft power therefore is intangible and “cannot and should not be turned on and off like a tap, but rather is a long-term process that should be barely noticeable” (Rawnsley 2012: 123). However, soft power is assuming less importance for two reasons. The first problem is that governments “have appropriated the term and make every effort to link all their (domestic and international) outreach programs to the idea of soft power” (Rawnsley 2012: 124). As Rawnsly argues, governments do not embrace the social and political values that make their soft power attractive. He continues to say that there is a “bandwagon effect” in the study of international relations and communications, “whereby soft power has become the latest fashionable catch-all term that all governments must claim to do otherwise they are out of step with the times” (Rawnsley 2012: 124).

Soft power is therefore becoming an outdated theoretical concept which governments have appropriated it in order to interpret it according to its own goals. If hard power is about “the use of coercion and payment,” and soft power is about “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction”, smart power is a combination of both powers (Nye 2009: 160) and can be defined as “the capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard power and soft power in ways that are mutually reinforcing such that the actor’s purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently” (Wilson III 2008: 155). When analyzing China’s soft power, it is true that China adopts some of the theoretical framework emphasized by Nye, however, China’s understanding of soft power is not consistent and has its own understanding of soft power that is somehow measured domestically rather than at a global level. Rather than Nye’s definition of soft power, China seems to understand soft power in much broader way. Kurlantzick argued that “China and many nations influenced by China enunciate a broader idea of soft power” (Kurlantzick 2007a, b: 6). Kurlantzick goes on to say that China understands soft power as everything outside the military and security domains, including not only public diplomacy and popular culture, but also “coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations” (Kurlantzick 2007a, b: 6). The boundaries between economic power and soft power is therefore blurred. Using Kurlantzick’s words, “Beijing offers the charm of a lion, not of a mouse: it can threaten other nations with

² China is ranked 27th place with a score of 51,25 in terms of soft power in 2019, whereas, the United States is ranked 5th place with a score of 77,40 (McClory, 2019).

these sticks if they do not help China achieve its goals, but it can offer sizable carrots if they do" (Kurlantzick 2007a, b: 6). It is also worth noting that China's understanding of soft power seems to be completely opposite to Nye's definition. According to Callahan, China's soft power is negative, that is it uses soft power as a way for generating national identity as well as legitimacy (Callahan 2015). For the purpose of this paper, the above-mentioned theories will be used as a reference, however, in order to properly understand China's soft power strategies, one must look at how soft power is understood domestically and what goals it aims to achieve. The next section reviews the literature on China's *mask diplomacy* in Europe during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 China's *Mask Diplomacy* in Europe

During a phone call between Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in March 2020, China promised to send medical equipment to help with the emergency situation in Italy ("Di Maio: 'Dalla Cina' 2020). That commitment was maintained. Two days later on March 12, a China Eastern humanitarian plane with a team of 9 medical experts as well as ventilators, face masks and other medical supplies arrived from China to Italy ("Coronavirus, Di Maio" 2020). These COVID-19-related aid were highly praised by Italian politicians. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio thanked China and praised China's solidarity in a live streaming on Facebook: "This is what we call solidarity and I am sure there will be more. We are not alone, there are people in the world who want to help Italy"³ ("Di Maio: «Aiuti dalla Cina" 2020). Moreover, in an interview with the Italian public television channel TG2 ("Coronavirus: Di Maio, ruolo Italia" 2020), Foreign Minister Di Maio also said that Italy's role as a bridge between East and West allowed the country to receive solidarity from countries around the world and that "those who laughed at the Silk Road,⁴ in this moment they must admit that investing in that friendship allowed us to save lives in Italy".⁵

Di Maio's remarks sent a strong message to Italy's European and American partners that Italy was right to sign an MoU on the Belt and Road with China in 2019. Furthermore, the political message was also evident, which is that the European Union (EU) was not helping, but rather a country thousand miles away, China, is here to help Italy. The feeling that the EU was not helping was strengthened also by an interview given by the Italian permanent representative to the EU Maurizio Massari to *Politico*. Massari asserted that when Italy requested the EU to activate the EU Mechanism of Civil Protection of supply of medical equipment, none of the EU

³ My translation. Original in Italian: "Questo è quello che noi definiamo solidarietà e sono sicuro che ne arriverà altra. Non siamo soli, ci sono persone nel mondo che vogliono aiutare l'Italia".

⁴ Referring to Italy and China's Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road signed in 2019.

⁵ My translation. Original in Italian: "Sicuramente il ruolo dell'Italia di ponte tra Oriente e Occidente ci ha permesso di ricevere solidarietà da tutto il mondo e chi ci ha deriso sulla via della Seta, in questo momento deve ammettere che investire in quell'amicizia ci ha permesso di salvare vite in Italia.

members responded to the call and that ‘only China responded bilaterally’ (Massari 2020). The Italian initial dissatisfaction with the EU was also related to EU’s lack of authority and power, which “deprives the EU of the opportunity to have a political production able to deploy quick and effective (re)distributive instruments designed to absorb internal and external shocks” (Salvati 2021). From the political point of view, China’s aid to Italy were highly successful not only due to the endorsement received by Italian politicians but also due to the mediatic impact it had on Italian society, especially judging from newspapers’ reports during the period March–April 2020, which will be analyzed in section four.

China’s COVID-19-related aid in Italy has created controversies in Europe. According to the Italian geopolitical magazine *Limes*, China’s aid in Italy, besides solidarity, are directed towards achieving political goals (Cuscito 2020). Cuscito goes on to affirm that China wants to improve its soft power through creating an image of not being the country where the virus originated. Second, China aims to strengthen ties with Italy, especially considering the political importance after the two countries signed an MoU on the Belt and Road in 2019. Moreover, according to *Limes*, Italy is politically relevant to China, not only because it became the first G7 member to support China’s Belt and Road Initiative, but also because Italy is confined within the US sphere of influence and hosts many NATO and American military bases. Through involving Chinese technological giants, such as Huawei, Zte, Alibaba and Xiaomi, in the COVID-19-related aid, China shows it has strong economic ambitions in Italy. According to Ferraresi the fact that Italy is led by the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement, revealed to be a “perfect environment to test Beijing’s strategy” (Ferraresi 2020). He further argues that China was not assisting Italy, but rather it was conducting information warfare aimed at pushing its soft-power strategy, thus “taking advantage of the relative absence of U.S. leadership as Washington struggles to get a grip on its own COVID-19 outbreak at home” (Ferraresi 2020). Others such as Fallon, also heavily criticized China, through arguing that “Chinese propaganda machine” seized the opportunities of the aid to post “videos of grateful Italians praising China for its generosity” (Fallon 2020). Fallon went on to say that China is using online propaganda “to dissociate the novel coronavirus from Wuhan, where it first emerged, and from China, and in Italy that effort has largely succeeded” (Fallon 2020).

Other scholars such as Raj Verma writes that China is using the pandemic to change the COVID-19 narrative in Europe (Verma 2020a, b). Furthermore, Verma goes on to say that China wants to depict itself as a Good Samaritan and an “essential global power” (Verma 2020a, b). Verma also argued that China is using COVID-19 to improve its global image, but also “to push President Xi’s rhetoric of a community of common destiny,” part of the country’s Belt and Road Initiative narrative (Verma 2020a, b: 255). China’s efforts to change COVID-19 narrative is, according to Verma, derived from “the need to maintain the CPC’s regime legitimacy” due to the fact that the outbreak has created discontent among Chinese citizens for central and local governments initial mishandling of the virus (Verma 2020a, b: 256). Furthermore, the Li Wenliang case created “outpouring of national grief, anger, mistrust, and criticism of the CPC and President Xi, even from executives, academics, and prominent officials” (Verma 2020a, b: 256). Verma views China’s COVID-19

aid as a victory declaration to show Xi's leadership abilities and superiority of China's economic and political system vis-à-vis that of democratic systems. Furthermore, China's narrative power during the pandemic not only helped to "reshape its international image and to strengthen its international legitimacy and status" (Chang 2021: 59).

Another worth-mentioning study on *mask diplomacy* is that provided by Chen and Molter. Through analyzing tweets by official Chinese state media outlets, Chen and Molter (2020) find that Chinese state media often "highlight China's outward shipment and downplays shipments China has received from other countries." Chen and Molter (2020) notice that Chinese donations/shipments "are framed in the context of Beijing's foreign policy goals in the recipient country, such as shipments to Canada mentioning Huawei." It is interesting to see that global negative coverage of China's *mask diplomacy* also significantly decreased Chinese state media coverage on donations. The authors highlight that China's *mask diplomacy* has been successful in some countries such as Serbia and Hungary but in others, Chinese aid "has served merely to strengthen suspicions about Beijing's strategic intentions."

Le Corre and Brattberg (2020) write that, through the pandemic, China has been portraying "itself as leading a massive international aid operation, assisting some seventy countries with advice and medical supplies." The authors also argued that, even if China's message may be that of showing others that "it is better at handling the pandemic, but the message has backfired, especially as some of its diplomatic missions started spreading offensive messages against European democracies, sometimes even directly criticizing their handling of the public health crisis" (Le Corre and Brattberg 2020).⁶ China's aid in eastern European countries, such as Serbia also created conflicts of interests between China and the EU. In March, when Chinese aid arrived in Belgrade, Serbian President Aleksander Vucic kissed the Chinese flag in the airport to show support and gratitude to the Chinese medical team arriving in his country ("Serbian president kisses" 2020). China's aid in Serbia has been seen also as a way for Beijing to use the pandemic to increase "its influence into the EU's backyard" (Vuksanovic 2020). It is interesting to note that China's support in Serbia achieved enormous public diplomacy and soft power victory in Serbia and this has been possible for China due to the fact that the EU "has shown a lack of interest in Serbia in recent years" (Vuksanovic 2020). However, such aid and especially the way China promoted its aid, were seen with suspicion in the EU. In fact, EU officials openly accused China of engaging in misinformation campaigns aimed at undermining Western democracies, "sowing internal divisions" as well as "projecting a distorted view of China's response to the global pandemic" (Rankin 2020; Scott, Kayali, & Cerulus 2020). Such strong accusations are directly addressed to China and reflects EU's increasing mistrust towards China. Already in the 2019

⁶ The latter refers to when the Chinese embassy in Paris posted an article arguing that care-workers in Western nursing homes had abandoned their jobs and left residents to die, the French Ministry summoned the Chinese ambassador to protest the comments made by the embassy ("France summons Chinese ambassador after coronavirus comments spark outrage". 15.04.2020. South China Morning Post, available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3079927/france-summons-chinese-ambassador-after-coronavirus-comments>).

Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council EU-China Strategic Outlook, China was described as a “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” (Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council—EU-China—A Strategic Outlook 2019: 1). With the global pandemic, the EU has more openly shown discontent towards China’s actions in Europe. In March 2020, The EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell argued that Europe has been too naïve with China and that the EU and China’s understanding of multilateralism is different (Guillot 2020). According to Borrell, EU’s concept of multilateralism has the United Nations (UN) as its center, while China has a selective form of multilateralism based on “a different understanding of the international order” (Guillot 2020). The pandemic has paved the way for a new Chinese role in Europe, thus also intensifying political rivalries between China and the EU.

Whether or not China is changing COVID-19 narrative and is depicting herself as a good Samaritan, one thing is certain, which is that the EU’s initial lack of coordination and mechanisms of immediate solidarity has contributed in creating political divisions within Europe, thus enabling China in gradually increasing its visibility and promoting soft power, especially in countries in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean area. As the result of the agreement signed by Italy and China in 2019, which was seen by many as an Italian political endorsement to China’s BRI Initiative, China’s aid to Italy was particularly put on the spotlight of international media. It is worth noting that a recent report compiled by the Italian Institute for International Affairs (IAI—Istituto Affari Internazionali) showed 70% of Italians believe that Italy has been treated unfairly by the EU during the coronavirus emergency, while 60% see China as an economic opportunity (Angelucci and Piccolino 2020). Furthermore, the report also highlights the fact that 52% of Italians believe that Beijing is not excessively exercising political influence in Italy. During the darkest months of Italy’s national emergency, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated that “China is ready to work with Italy to contribute to international cooperation on epidemic control and to the building of a Health Silk Road” (“President Xi Jinping Talked” 2020). Such statement embodies a strong political message and it also inevitably makes reference to Italy’s MoU with China in 2019. In order to better understand China’s aid and its visibility in Italy, the next section will collect and analyze the data on China’s COVID-19 from Italy’s national newspapers during the period March—April 2020.

4 Data Collection: Italy’s Newspaper Reports on China’s COVID-19-Related Aid

4.1 Methodology

This section analyzes Italy’s main national newspapers’ reports on China’s aid in Italy during the period of March–April 2020. In terms of publications (paper and

digital circulation), the following Table 1 shows the seven most popular national newspapers according to the monthly data of June 2020⁷:

The above-mentioned table includes seven main national Italian newspapers with data on their monthly circulation, establishment date and city of base. All these newspapers have close to and over 50,000 copies of monthly circulation. In order to gain a better understanding of Italy's perception of China's aid, and consequently trying to assess China's soft power in Italy, this research will look at the abovementioned seven newspapers to find the most relevant pieces written on China's aid to Italy. It will search keywords in Italian, such as *Cina* (China), *aiuti* (aid), *donazioni* (donations) *coronavirus* (coronavirus), *COVID-19* (COVID-19), *pandemia* (pandemic) in order to then provide a qualitative analysis. Due to the vastity of information, while gathering information on articles concerning China's aid in Italy during the period March–April, this essay may limit to look only at the most significant articles on the topic being researched. It may therefore not provide a complete list of all articles related to China's aid in Italy.

When typing in Italian “Cina” (China) on the search engine of la Repubblica, the word appeared 1628 times (981 times in March 2020 and 647 times in April 2020) compared to 1025 times of the same period during the previous year (616 times in March 2019 and 409 times in April 2019). The same pattern of increase of visibility could be noticed on the other Italian major national newspaper Corriere della Sera. During the period March–April 2020, the word “Cina” (China) appeared 1093 times (respectively 653 in March 2020 and 441 in April 2020) if compared to 467 times of the same period in 2019 (respectively 268 in March 2019 and 199 in April 2019).⁸ The next paragraphs collect the news reports on the arrival of China's aid to Italy and aid from Chinese companies, civil society organizations, and Chinese overseas.

4.2 Arrival of China's Aid to Italy

If the coronavirus pandemic is the global biggest challenge since World War II as echoed by leaders from German Chancellor Angela Merkel to UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres (“Merkel: Coronavirus” 2020; “Coronavirus: Greatest test” 2020), it is not exaggerated to say that March 2020 was the worst month since World War II for most European countries, and in particular for Italy. Not only was Italy the first country in the Western world to be severely hit by COVID-19, Italy witnessed also a dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases nationwide in March 2020, which led to an unprecedented national lockdown on March 9, first ever in a Western country and second in the world after Wuhan, Hubei Province in China (Tondo 2020). On 19 March, with 3405 deaths, Italy surpassed China as the country with most cases of COVID-19-related deaths, becoming the country most affected by Covid-19 in the world (“Coronavirus, l'Italia supera” 2020). When Italy was completely unprepared

⁷ Italian Newspapers Data. ADS Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa, available at: http://www.adsnotizie.it/_dati_DMS.asp

⁸ la Repubblica: <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/ricerca/repubblica?query=cina&fromdate=2020-01-01&todate=2020-06-01&sortby=score&author=&mode=any>

Table 1 Italian main national newspapers

Newspaper	Circulation	Est	Base	Political Alignment
Corriere della Sera	258,925	1876	Milan	Liberal
la Repubblica	169,002	1976	Rome	Progressive
Il Sole 24 Ore	146,178	1865	Milan	Liberal
La Stampa	113,248	1867	Turin	Social Liberal
Avvenire	100,905	1968	Milan	Christian Democratic
il Fatto Quotidiano	60,965	2009	Rome	Left Populist
il Giornale	48,359	1974	Milan	Conservative Liberal

and in an urgent need of medical equipment to face Covid-19, China became the first country to assist Italy in this emergency. During a phone call between Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Italy was able to gain China's immediate assistance. This was visibly reported by all Italian newspapers. On March 11, *Corriere della Sera* reported the event with a very a welcoming message:

China is ready to send massive aid to Italy to deal with the coronavirus emergency. Beijing said it is willing to donate to our country one hundred thousand high-tech face masks, twenty thousand protective suits, as well as fifty thousand swabs to carry out diagnostic tests. But [this is] not [the] only [support that China is sending]. The Italian government is preparing to purchase one thousand lung ventilators needed for intensive care units. These are ready-to-use machineries produced by Chinese companies, and of which Beijing, due to the drop in infections as a result of a strict containment policy, no longer needs. [This is] A useful surplus, however, for our hospitals (Buzzi 2020).⁹

Corriere della Sera uses a very friendly approach that denotes a politically-neutral tone. Besides reporting China's "massive aid" to Italy, it also acknowledges China's effective control of the pandemic because it adopted a "strict containment policy."

The same welcoming approach could be noticed in Italy's top financial newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*. In an article appeared on March 11 and titled "From face masks to respirators, China transfers its know-how to us," the financial newspaper reported that Italy is looking to "study with attention" the solutions adopted by China to fight COVID-19 ("Dalle mascherine ai respiratori" 2020). In the following days, almost all newspapers in Italy reported the arrival of China's COVID-19-related aid. An

⁹ My translation. Original in Italian: "La Cina è pronta a inviare aiuti massicci all' Italia per fronteggiare l'emergenza coronavirus. Pechino si è detta disposta a donare al nostro Paese centomila mascherine di massima tecnologia, ventimila tute protettive, oltre a cinquantamila tamponi per effettuare test diagnostici. Ma non solo. Il governo italiano si appresta ad acquistare mille ventilatori polmonari necessari per i reparti di terapia intensiva. Si tratta di macchinari già pronti all'uso, prodotti da aziende cinesi e di cui l'esecutivo di Pechino—visto il calo di contagi dovuto a una politica di stretto contenimento—non ha più necessità. Un surplus utile però per i nostri ospedali."

article worth mentioning is the one which appeared on the Christian and left leaning newspaper *Avvenire* on March 13. According to *Avvenire*:

China has not forgotten Italy's contribution to the fight against coronavirus, when the "perfect storm" broke out in Wuhan. Thus, ventilators, masks, medical devices and a team of experienced doctors arrived from Beijing, who have already fought the battle in the province of Hubei. These are nine specialized doctors, among them six men and three women, who arrived in Fiumicino last night with an Airbus A-350. With them the vice-president of the Chinese Red Cross, Yang Huichuan, and the professor of cardiopulmonary resuscitation, Liang Zongan ("Malati a quota 14.955" 2020).¹⁰

A similar welcoming approach could be seen in other newspapers. *Il Giornale* wrote on March 11 that China will help Italy "in the decisive battle against the novel coronavirus [and that] in addition to providing material aid, such as masks, protective suits, tests and lung ventilators, Beijing is ready to share health advice and recommendations with Italy through the witnesses of Chinese experts who were the first to face this health emergency ("La Cina aiuta l'Italia" 2020).¹¹

Il Fatto Quotidiano also reported the arrival of Chinese aid. In an article appeared on March 15, *il Fatto Quotidiano* reported the arrival of Chinese aid, which includes more than half million of face masks, 4 tons of medical materials, 1800 protective suits as well as 150,000 gloves ("Coronavirus, la Cina invia aiuti" 2020). Furthermore, it goes on to say that a team of experts from the Chinese Red Cross also arrived in Italy to "support the Italian specialists in the fight against COVID-19, sharing the experience and knowledge accumulated in recent months" ("Coronavirus, la Cina invia aiuti" 2020). The article appeared on *il Fatto Quotidiano* also went on to report the aid made by the Chinese company Alibaba to Italy:

The charity foundation linked to Alibaba, together with the Jack Ma Foundation, sent half a million masks to Europe: a cargo plane landed in Liege, Belgium, yesterday, and the final destination is Italy. Joey Tan, communication manager for the group's Globalization Office, said the half million masks will be checked and delivered by truck to Italy, where the local Red Cross will receive and manage them. On the packages [there are] posters with the text 'Nessun dorma', the aria from Puccini's opera *Turandot*: 'Dilegua, oh notte,

¹⁰ My translation. Original in Italian: "La Cina non ha dimenticato il contributo italiano alla lotta contro il coronavirus, quando a Wuhan era scoppiata la tempesta perfetta. Così da Pechino sono arrivati ventilatori, mascherine, dispositivi sanitari e un pool di medici esperti, che hanno già combattuto la battaglia nella provincia dell'Hubei. Si tratta di 9 medici specializzati, 6 uomini e 3 donne, giunti ieri sera a Fiumicino con un Airbus A-350. Con loro il vicepresidente della Croce Rossa cinese, Yang Huichuan, e il professore di rianimazione cardiopolmonare, Liang Zongan."

¹¹ My translation. Original in Italian: "La Cina è pronta a offrire all'Italia tutto l'aiuto possibile nella decisiva battaglia contro il nuovo coronavirus. Oltre a fornire aiuti materiali, come mascherine, tute protettive, tamponi per i test e ventilatori polmonari, Pechino è pronta a condividere con il Belpaese consigli e raccomandazioni sanitarie attraverso le testimonianze di esperti cinesi che per primi hanno fronteggiato l'emergenza sanitaria provocata."

all'alba vincerò!'. A message of hope, as well as a cultural link between the two countries ("Coronavirus, la Cina invia aiuti" 2020).¹²

Symbolic messages of cultural ties between the two countries were strongly emphasized in China's aid. For the aid made by the Chinese company Xiaomi to Italy, the company quoted a poem by the ancient Roman philosopher Seneca: "We are waves of the same sea, leaves of the same tree, flowers of the same garden" ("Poetic Moments" 2020). This was also the same "strategy" for China's aid to other countries. For example, Chinese aid that arrived in France used the famous quote "United we shall overcome" by the French writer Victor Hugo and those made by China to Belgium adopted the Belgian national motto "Unity is strength." As we can see from the paragraphs above, the arrival of China's aid to Italy was arranged in a way that conveyed symbolic messages. Furthermore, of all the seven main national newspapers, all of them positively depicted the arrival of China's aid. This is not to say that there was no negative or critical coverage of the arrival of China's aid. Minor newspapers such as *Il Foglio*, have criticized the way China promoted its aid in Italy by arguing that there are no good Samaritans during a pandemic and that Italy is not getting China's aid for free (Pompili 2020). However, overall, of all the seven main newspapers, without distinction of political alignments, none of them used a particularly negative or politically motivated language. The next paragraphs deal with aid from Chinese companies, civil society organizations and Chinese overseas.

4.3 Aid From Chinese Companies, Civil Society Organizations, and Chinese Overseas

Chinese companies, Chinese civil society organizations and overseas Chinese communities also played a relevant role in contributing, directly or indirectly, towards improving of China's image after the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. *la Repubblica*, for example, reported on March 6, the donations of facemasks made by the Chinese company Xiaomi ("Coronavirus, da Xiaomi a Esselunga", 2020). The role played by Chinese civil society organizations, such as foundations, have also been relevant. On March 6, *la Repubblica* reported the donations of face masks made by the Shanghai-based Fosun Foundation to the city of Milan, a move that symbolizes the longer relationship between Milan and Shanghai as sister cities ("Coronavirus, la fondazione" 2020). On April 5, *Corriere della Sera* reported the aid provided the Harmony Community Foundation of Guangdong to the Italian city of Brescia. "From China with love. Health materials donated by the Harmony Community

¹² My translation. Original in Italian: "La fondazione di beneficenza legata ad Alibaba, insieme alla Fondazione Jack Ma, ha inviato in Europa mezzo milione di mascherine: un aereo cargo è atterrato a Liegi, in Belgio, ieri, e la destinazione finale è l'Italia. Joey Tan, responsabile comunicazione dell'ufficio Globalizzazione del gruppo, ha dichiarato che il mezzo milione di mascherine sarà controllato e consegnato da camion in Italia, dove la Croce Rossa locale le riceverà e le gestirà. Sui pacchi manifesti con il testo di "Nessun dorma", l'aria dell'opera Turandot di Puccini: "Dilegua, oh notte, all'alba vincerò!". Un messaggio di speranza, oltre che un legame culturale tra i due Paesi."

Foundation [...] of Guangdong arrived in Brescia on Sunday morning', according to the newspapers, which goes on to say the initiative was a very substantial donation by private individuals which "was made possible by the excellent synergy between the Chinese promoters and the Italian focal points, among them the Prefecture of Brescia" ("Coronavirus a Brescia" 2020).¹³ More than 30,000 KN95 face masks, 64,000 surgical masks as well as 2000 protective goggles and other medical equipment for a value worth of 140,000 euros have been sent to Brescia and Bergamo in this occasion. Another article, again appeared on *Corriere della Sera*, reported the donations of 22,000 face masks made by the Chinese kids of Baggio¹⁴ fan club in China to city of Brescia (Bertelli 2020). As reported by the newspaper, the kids drew symbolic images of some national monuments of Italy and China, accompanied with a video where the kids saying 'if the virus can cross borders, so can love' (Alba 2020):

The gifts made by children are accompanied by drawings with symbolic images (the tower of Pisa and the pagoda in Beijing embracing each other) and by a video that tells the intentions of the kids and their school principal: ['If the virus can cross borders, love can do it too'. Even more emblematic, almost a stadium choir, is the message posted on the boxes ready to arrive at the ATS¹⁵: 'Forza Italia, Forza Brescia, don't give up and you will win.' In the name of Baggio (Alba 2020).¹⁶

Very important symbolically are also the donations and assistance provided to Italy by Zhejiang Province, the place where the majority of overseas Chinese in Italy come from. More than 31 tons of goods, including 1638 boxes of medical materials arrived to Italy from this province, as reported by *la Repubblica* (Dazzi 2020). "Dalla Cina con amore" or "From China with love," the title of the article reporting additional aid from China, already suggests a highly welcoming approach to Chinese aid. Zhejiang province's aid to Italy was also reported by *il Sole 24 Ore*:

In this pandemic caused by the coronavirus, Italy is following the fate of China, in particular regarding the limitation to people's mobility. And it is precisely from China that aid comes to the Italian health system, which is under abundant pressure to deal with this serious situation. From Zhejiang,

¹³ My translation. Original in Italian: "Dalla Cina con amore. Sono arrivati a Brescia domenica mattina i materiali sanitari donati dalla Harmony Community Foundation della città cinese di Guangdong. Si tratta di una delle più rilevanti e corpose donazioni da parte di privati, frutto della generosità di 66 privati cittadini sostenitori della fondazione. L'operazione, che scaturisce dalla collaborazione tra la Fondazione di Guangdong, la Beijing Design Week e l'Unesco, è stata resa possibile dall'ottima sinergia tra i promotori cinesi e i riferimenti italiani, in ultima istanza la Prefettura di Brescia.".

¹⁴ Former Italian football player.

¹⁵ Agenzia di Tutela della Salute di Brescia or Brescia Health Protection Agency.

¹⁶ My translation. Original in Italian: "Il dono dei bambini è accompagnato da disegni con immagini simboliche (la torre di Pisa e la pagoda di Pechino che si abbracciano) e da un video che racconta le intenzioni dei piccoli autori e del preside: «Se il virus può passare le frontiere, può farlo anche l'amore». Ancora più emblematico, quasi un coro da stadio, il messaggio affisso sugli scatoloni pronti ad arrivare alla Ats: «Forza Italia, Forza Brescia, non mollate e vincerete». Nel nome di Baggio.".

the region from where most of the first- and second-generation Chinese living in Milan originates, medical supplies for hundreds of thousands of euros are arriving (Lo Conte 2020).¹⁷

Aid from Zhejiang are symbolically strong because Zhejiang Province has unique relations with Italy due to the fact that the majority of Chinese in Italy come from this province and namely from the city of Wenzhou, situated in the south-eastern part of the province. While talking about the aid initiatives from China, *il Giornale* mentioned Wenzhou as the city where around 90% of Chinese who live in Italy are originally from (Elisi 2020). *Il Giornale*, besides talking about the aid arrived from Wenzhou to Italy, also make references to the mayor of the city of Turin Chiara Appendino who wrote on Facebook to thank the Chinese community which, according to the mayor, is integral part of the city that is “giving support where possible and showing great sensitivity and generosity, especially in this historical moment.”¹⁸

Overseas Chinese in Italy have played an important role in improving the image of China in Italy. *la Repubblica* reported about face masks donations made by a

Chinese family to their 30 neighbors in the same building. *la Repubblica* writes the following:

China's solidarity to Italy is not just that of institutions, hospitals and large companies. In Vigevano, in the province of Pavia, a family of Chinese restaurant owners surprised their neighbors with an envelope in their mailboxes. Each of the thirty families who live in the building [...] found [an envelope with] three medical face masks inside. And a message of hope [...] “Vanish, o night! At dawn, I will win!, from the aria Let No One Sleep of Giacomo Puccini (Vanni 2020).¹⁹

This section showed that whether it is China's state aid or those provided by Chinese companies and organizations or overseas Chinese community, it is evident that during the months of March and April 2020, Italian main national newspapers depicted the China's aid positively and that these aid may have also helped China to improve its soft power in Italy.

¹⁷ My translation. Original in Italian: “In questa pandemia causata dal coronavirus l'Italia sta seguendo il destino della Cina, in particolare per quanto riguarda il blocco della mobilità delle persone. E proprio dalla Cina arrivano gli aiuti al sistema sanitario italiano, abbondantemente sottoppressione per fronteggiare questa grave situazione. Da Zhejiang, regione da cui ha origine la gran parte dei cinesi di prima e seconda generazione residenti a Milano, sono in arrivo materiali sanitari per centinaia di migliaia di euro.”.

¹⁸ Chiara Appendino as quoted from *il Giornale*. Original and full statement in Italian: “Ancora una volta la comunità cinese si dimostra parte integrante della nostra comunità, dando supporto ove possibile e dimostrando grande sensibilità e generosità, in particolare in questo momento storico. A tutti loro, a nome mio e della Città di Torino che rimane unita, un sentito ringraziamento.”.

¹⁹ My translation. Original in Italian: “La solidarietà della Cina all'Italia non è solo quella delle istituzioni, degli ospedali e delle grandi aziende. A Vigevano, in provincia di Pavia, una famiglia di ristoratori cinesi ha fatto trovare a ognuno dei vicini di casa una busta nella casella della posta. Ciascuna delle trenta famiglie che abitano nel palazzo, a 200 metri da piazza Ducale, all'interno hanno trovato tre mascherine a uso medico. E un messaggio di speranza, scritto in penna sulla carta bianca: “Dilegua, oh notte. All'alba vincerò!”, dal testo del *Nessun Dorma* di Giacomo Puccini.”.

5 Conclusion

The arrival of Chinese aid was positively welcomed by Italian national newspapers. Overall, of the seven main national newspapers, all of them viewed the arrival of China's COVID-19-related aid positively. The main reason for the lack of significant negative news reports on China's aid from both right-wing and left-wing newspapers could be due to many reasons. One reason is that Italy was the first country outside China to experience a health disaster of such a large scale and therefore all forms of aid were much needed and well-accepted. The general narrative presented by Italian media and politics was that Europe closed its doors to Italy and that it was not helping the country when Italy was in a desperate need of help. As Wang notes, during the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, "medical nationalism" surged in Europe and European nations adopted a "my nation first" attitude "to compete against each other for essential health products and protective equipment, rather than working together to implement a Europe-wide coordinated strategy" (Wang 2021: 25). European medical nationalism also allowed China to find fertile ground for enhancing its soft power in Italy.

Moreover, even if there was help from other European countries, those from China, Cuba, Russia, or Albania, received much higher visibility in media. *la Repubblica* reported the aid from Cuba by writing that "the small, yet strong Cuba shows again its extraordinary international solidarity"²⁰ Help from Russia was also visibly publicized by Italian national newspapers. *la Repubblica* wrote of Russian help with an article titled "From Russia with love, Putin's aid on its way".²¹ It is very interesting to see that aid from, what we consider as "non liberal democratic systems," received higher visibility than those from European and Western countries. Luca Lovisolo brings to our attention two reasons why Italians generally have the impression that Europe is not helping. The first one, he says, is due to the fact that China and Russia have been using social media, such as Twitter and Facebook to send messages to change the public opinion in Italy and the second one is the problem derived from the "lack of a system of information based on the criteria of professional journalism in Italy"²² (Lovisolo 2020). It is difficult to fully understand the reasons why, in the case of Italy, European aid were not given its appropriate media coverage, however, a possible explanation could be that China and countries, such as Russia, have used a more proactive way to publicize their aid, especially in populist European nations where Euroscepticism is higher. Concerning media's role in publicizing foreign aid, future work could further explore the relations between media and promotion of foreign aid during a pandemic.

From the perspective of the Italian government, Chinese aid served to legitimize its policy of closer ties with China. In 2019 Italy became the first G7 country to

²⁰ My translation. Original in Italian: "La piccola, forte Cuba mostra ancora una volta la sua straordinaria solidarietà internazionale."

²¹ My translation. Original in Italian: "Dalla Russia con amore, in arrivo gli aiuti di Putin."

²² My translation. Original in Italian: "Mancanza, nella Penisola, di un sistema di informazione fondato sui criteri del giornalismo professionale."

sign an MoU on BRI with China, an initiative that Italy received criticisms from its Western allies. It is also this MoU that brought the two countries closer. Italy's current Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio has always defended his ties with China since the signing of the MoU in 2019. During many occasions he highlighted the role played by Italy as a bridge between East and West. Furthermore, during this pandemic, Di Maio emphasized that the friendship with China allowed Italy to save lives during the pandemic. From the Chinese perspective, the welcoming approach showed by the Italian government was essential for China's internal and external publicity/propaganda, but also served to increase its visibility in Italy, as we can see from the media coverage, and to strengthen China's soft power in Italy. According to Wang, China's external propaganda (*dui wai xuan chuan* 对外宣传) emphasizes on "advertising Chinese achievements and boosting the country's image overseas" (Wang 2008: 259). Wang (2008: 259) goes on to say that *xuan chuan* has two levels, namely internal propaganda (*nei xuan* 内宣) and external propaganda (*wai xuan* 外宣). China's COVID-19-related aid in Italy has successfully paved the way for a more positive attitude towards China in Italy, as can be seen in Italian newspapers during the period March–April 2020. As Gauttam, Singh and Kaur argued, China was able to successfully build a global health diplomacy and has expanded its geopolitical influence, especially when powers such as the USA and EU have been quite absent (Gauttam, Singh and Kaur 2020).

Through its COVID-19-related aid in Italy during the months of March and April 2020, China was able to not only show the world that it was contributing towards international solidarity, it was also able to display its success in dealing with COVID-19 in both Chinese state media and in Italian national newspapers, thus successfully achieving both *nei xuan* and *waixuan*. Today, with more than 175 million COVID-19 cases and more than 3 million global deaths²³ as of June 2021, the pandemic severely impacted the economies and societies of most countries. In the domain of international relations and politics, COVID-19 has radically shaped the global political agenda. Some argued that "the world will never be the same after the coronavirus" (Kissinger 2020) and others believe that the pandemic "will not change the global order" (Nye 2020). Certainly, Chinese foreign policy and public diplomacy are undergoing enormous changes which will also affect its relations with other countries. The pandemic has increased competition in ideology and political systems and has also further pushed China to attribute even more importance to the defense and the improvement of its national image overseas (Zhang 2020). China's public diplomacy and soft power are undergoing enormous changes and it would be very interesting to see how China's understanding of these concepts would evolve in the next years. At the current stage, using the words of d'Hooqhe, we can conclude that China's public diplomacy "has hardened" and "has become more assertive and more explicitly backed by hard power" (d'Hooqhe 2021: 304). In the Italian case, however, China's aid successfully allowed it to increase its visibility thus building a positive image of China in Italy, however more needs to be researched to see

²³ John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, available at: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

whether such increased visibility and positive image in Italy are temporary or have a long-term impact.

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