

China's Strategic Narratives in Italy

– A study on Online Promotions between Official and Unofficial Sources

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Abstract

Public diplomacy, public relations, propaganda, and strategic narratives are all under the ‘umbrella’ of soft-power and nowadays’ international relations. Strategic narratives currently represent one of the most essential tools that political actors use to increase their influence on local and foreign audiences, gain public support, and lastly achieve their foreign policy objectives.

This dissertation focuses on China’s strategic narratives and propaganda promoted by one Chinese official source, the Chinese embassy in Italy, and one non-official Italian source, former Undersecretary of the State Mr. Geraci, and the different and similar approaches used to influence the Italian audience on their websites and Facebook accounts. The major themes employed online were from the 1st of January 2020 to the 30th of June 2020, the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic, were used as empirical data and their meanings were analyzed in the theoretical framework of strategic narratives.

Although the two sources are of totally different nature, these narratives both promote the same Chinese narratives. However, the terms used are at times different, at other times similar. These findings show how China is portrayed and promoted online to Italians with the eyes of a Chinese official source and an Italian non-official source.

Keywords: China, Italy, Strategic Narratives, Public Diplomacy, Public Relations, Propaganda

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1. Introduction

Two of the world's most "ancient societies" are characterized by an "undying friendship" that is the pivot to achieve the 'utopian' concept of "a community with a shared future." The two actors are China and Italy, it is February 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; these narratives aimed at showing what "cooperation" and "support" by the two countries meant for the Chinese Party-state. It was using these themes and terms that the Chinese Embassy and Ambassador in Italy on their official accounts online and Former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Michele Geraci aimed at the same goal: promoting Chinese President Xi Jinping's coined narrative "tell China's stories well" to the world; in the case of this thesis, to the Italian audience.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's influence over the world has been under the lens of an increasing number of researchers due to its importance on the world's economic and political stage. Chinese influence has been seen and felt more and more since Xi Jinping took up the reins of the CCP and became president of the People's Republic of China in 2013. At that moment, he has since emphasized China's image in the world and how it influences the world.

On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party controls the image, reputation, and actions of the Chinese Embassy in Italy and its Ambassador Li Junhua. While on the other hand, when Mr. Geraci was part of the Italian Government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Five Star Movement in 2019, what and how Geraci posted online, including articles, pictures, interviews, and videos, had striking similarities as well as differences when promoting China's narrative and image in Italy.

Particularly, the presence of these analogous discourses often using the same terms or synonyms, posted within the same period, are the main focus of this work and will develop around the main research question:

- "How Chinese strategic narratives are channelled and promoted to the Italian audience through different official Chinese and unofficial non-Chinese sources?"

As the connection between the Chinese Embassy and the Ambassador with China's narratives is clear, Geraci's former position and past actions such as pushing Italy to join the One Belt One Road Initiative, identified him as a promoter and pioneer of China in Italy; however, he has been contested by Italian scholars such as Franceschini, Nesossi, Straffella (2019) on issues such internal migration

and public security as well as cyber security and other researchers such Barlett (2019), Soula and Ladner (2020).

Thus, this work will analyse how the two sources, the Chinese embassy official website and Facebook account, and the Undersecretary of State at the Minister of Economic Development unofficial source Mr. Geraci's website and Facebook account, promoted online China's narratives in Italy.

Based on public diplomacy and public relations concepts and ideas, the thesis starts with what has been studied and researched in the past on these concepts; continues exposing China's past and modern experiences in the field; it then explains the theoretical framework; it continues in showing the methods and strategies used to collect the data; it presents the main themes, narratives and 'codes' together with a comparison between the two sources in the key part of the thesis and it concludes by showing what are the discrepancies and similarities in promoting China's narrative in Italy toward the Italian audience by the Chinese Embassy and the Ambassador and former Undersecretary of State at the Minister of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci.

The next chapter will outline previous works on the topics that will be discussed in this thesis, such as public diplomacy (PD) and its related topics of public relations (PR), propaganda, and strategic narratives.

2. Literature review

To begin, this chapter will provide historical background about what has been discovered and written on these topics: public diplomacy, public relations, propaganda, and strategic narratives. It will also present other background data and evidence to support the present study, such as the main research question.

Therefore, this section will describe what historically is meant with public diplomacy, public relations, propaganda, and strategic narratives along with their developments until nowadays. It makes examples related to Europe, the US, and China. This task will be carried out by analyzing European and American literature written by scholars such as Lippman, Lee, Bernays, and others as well as more contemporary scholars such as Palmer, Bates, and Brady.

In the subsections, the author will analyze what has been researched and discovered in past works on the four main topics, posing particular attention to how arguments have developed particularly in Europe, Italy and China.

2.1. Historical background

2.1.1. The birth of Public Relations and Public Diplomacy

The beginning of the Public Relations and Public Diplomacy are when elites started to try influencing public opinions a long time ago. The earliest examples can be seen by examining how communication tactics were used by the Catholic Church in the 1500s to spread Christianity, or how kings and emperors in the Middle Ages and Renaissances expanded empires, built followers, and stabilized their leadership positions. Viewed through the lens of influencing public opinions, PR and PD elements at work can be seen in Norman Conquest, the Crusades, and both the French and American revolutions (Bates, 2006). In more modern years, in the late 1700s when America was a British colony, PR tactics like the Boston Tea Party “event” led by Sam Adams, called by some historians the “father of press agency”) built support for the American revolution by encouraging dissidents and disagreement with British rules and regulations. In the 18th century, with the expansion of America, PR and PD concepts and ‘usage’ moved to a more commercially focused enterprise. Newspapers expanded too and became particularly attractive to entrepreneurs eager to launch new businesses and promote them via PR. Press agents hyping companies, products, etc. became quickly popular and spread vastly. However, the tactics deployed were notably short on ethics and fully focused on achieving goals, leaving space for exaggeration and outright fabrications. In the late 19th century,

activists like Ida Wells and John Muir made significant contributions paving the way for the modern era of PR (Brady, 2002). The former fought discrimination as a speaker, editor, and founder of a newspaper while the latter had his focus and fought for preserving and protecting the nature by writing books and magazines articles and giving speeches, all this to engage and influence the U.S. citizens in conservation and the creation of parks across the country.

For most scholars, the three pioneers of the new, modern style of PR are Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, and Arthur Page. Ivy Lee is the originator of the *public relations counsel* concept who says that “public relations are the secret by which a civilization might be preserved” (Bates, 2006). Edward Bernays is often referred to as the *father of modern public relations*, stating that “the three elements of PR are practically as old as society: informing people, persuading people or integrating people with people”; surely, methods of accomplishing these ends have changed as society has changed (primitive societies ruled with through fear and intimidation, more advanced culture through discussion and debate) (Bates, 2006). Public relations and the created narratives, he continues, enable the elites or leading figures to preserve their social, economic, and political advantages against democratic expectations in society. Arthur Page, for his ground-breaking work as the first corporate PR officer at AT&T. These pioneers took PR into politics and governments.

Walter Lippman, another public relations pioneer, and innovator, formed on the work of French socialist scientist Gabriel Tarde, developed theories about the inherent malleability of the ‘public’ through mass media (García, 2010). According to Tarde, the ‘public’, linked by the media, can be manipulated by creating standardized thinking on varieties of thoughts and concepts. This, argues Brady (2002), brings about a new form of ‘social control’ in society. In Lippman’s words, PR work could manage public perceptions into a pre-factored consent’ for the governing elite’s continuous rule. One of the techniques Lippman endorsed was the creation of stories that incentivized them to take sides, with the latest goal of ‘manipulating public opinions’ (Palmer, 2021). This strategy has long been used and favored by CCP’s propagandists, but before them, political leaders in the US and European countries.

Other PR innovators who made significant contributions in the political and governmental communications arena were George Creel with his many accomplishments while traveling and speaking to the public about WW1 and supporting President Woodrow Wilson’s positions and views during the War; Warren Cowan whose firm ‘Rogers and Cowan’ remains one of the leaders in entertainment PR today with a stable of global celebrities as clients (former Lakers star Kobe Bryant

and Golden State Warriors player Stephen Curry, actors such Denzel Washington and singer Katy Perry to mention few); Amos Kendall for being the first White House press secretary; and Leone Baxter who founded the first political consulting firm in the United States developing strategies still used today (Brady, 2002).

Theoretically speaking, the concept of ‘publicity’ and ‘public’ arose from the belief that factual disclosure could aid in the creation of a ‘conversant democratic public’ (Ewen, 1996). In America, he says, publicizing the government’s activities and educating the populace has continuously been and will be an essential component of the central government’s influencing strategies. To him, educating the citizens has become one of the fundamental tools for many governments around the globe to hold on to power.

In the following chapter, the author focuses his attention on the history, developments, and experiences of China with Public Diplomacy.

2.1.2. China’s History and Experience of Public Diplomacy

Since at least the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 and now with the COVID-19 pandemic, Tibetans’ and Uighurs’ human rights issues have put China at the center of the discussion (Jerdén, et al., 2021). The emphasis that CCP leaders set on promoting their narratives dates back to 2002 when under the guidance of president Jiang Zemin, it was created the foundation of the recent days’ Chinese public diplomacy along with the goals of promoting the Chinese Communist Party’s ideas not only within its borders but also, especially with the advent of the 21st century, of foreign audiences (Brady, 2002). Along with China’s economic growth and a recently more influential and active role on the international stage, the COVID-19 pandemic has put China under the spotlight highlighting the importance of Chinese medical supplies to the outside world. This attention has reminded China of the importance of public diplomacy and international relations together with the efforts of the Chinese government to shape foreign views of the country (Jerdén, et al. 2021). The Chinese government’s efforts to shape foreign audiences and their perceptions of China – its public diplomacy – are one of the main factors influencing its global reputation. The propaganda system (*xuanchuan xitong* 宣传系统), firstly proposed in the 1980s but really took off, became fundamental and started to be widely used in the 1990s under President Jiang Zemin, nowadays is still greatly used in the Chinese political system and to achieve the goals of the CCP leaders (Lieberthal, 1995). In addition to the tried-and-true tactics of its propaganda practices such as targeted propaganda campaigns, new methodologies

derived from Western public relations and advertising techniques were introduced after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The use of public relations and propaganda in contemporary China bears striking similarities to the American one, where it originated; they both reflected a fear of chaos of 'mass rule' (Brady, 2002). In the US, particularly between the 1930s and the late 1940s, the public relations industry was closely associated with anti-communism, as big businesses engaged in public relations campaigns to oppose initiatives such as public health insurance and government-sponsored housing. In recent years, the CCP has been able to use the internet as a tool to favor its image rather than fearing it as a threat to government stability (Brady, 2002). The Chinese Government has also shown itself adept at adapting to change and challenging circumstances, absorbing new approaches, and taking on new directions when necessary. This chameleon-like strength is one of the CCP's features to succeed in retaining the power.

Scholar Hu Ningsheng in his book *A course of Study in Governmental PR (Zhengfu gonggong guanxi jiaocheng 政府公共关系教程)* advocates the use of PR and strategic narratives to mould (*suzao 塑造*) public attitudes toward the government (Brady, 2002). According to him, political PR helps to 'promote a good impression of the government, while pushing forward the government's own goals', citing the international success of Coca-Cola as 'if you have a good image, any problem can be solved.' The CCP, especially since the beginning of the 21st century has been using this type of political PR within public diplomacy together with appositely created and focused strategic narratives to gain the understanding, appreciation, and support of the public at home and abroad.

In recent years, it has been promoted more in the EU and African countries than in the US, as China sees them as 'weaker' and easier places to influence (Palmer, 2021).

In the following subchapter, the author will give a short introduction and overview of how China exercises its public diplomacy in Europe.

2.1.3. China's Public Diplomacy in Europe

In recent years, Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream,' 'Rejuvenation of China,' and 'New Silk Road' have received considerable attention. The fact that these slogans and ideas will be familiar to a growing number of Europeans are testimony to the spread of China's messaging and public diplomacy strategies across the continent (Godement & Vasselier, 2017). China, under President Xi, focuses more on promoting its narratives rather than demonstrating synchronization with global

values. Godement and Vasselier (2017) highlight the two ways Xi Jinping uses to expand its influence in Europe: “unabashedly providing new inspiring narratives of China to foreigners and Chinese alike, and using the reality or the suggestion of its financial firepower to nurture relationships.” China’s image, they keep arguing, is not uncontested in the ‘old continent’: in Europeans’ minds, the image of China as a prosperous economy clashes with its illustration as an autocratic dictatorship. According to a new 14-country Pew Research survey, views of China have grown more negative in recent years across many advanced economies, and unfavorable opinion has soared during 2020, the year the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world (Silver, et al., 2020). In the eyes of Europeans, the status of China is, however, more mixed than first appears. Negative views coexist with understanding and appreciation for opportunities related to China and its influence. Thus, while polls show that Italians hold the most unfavorable view of China in Europe, Italy stands out as the country with the widest range of Chinese activity, from small firms to major investments, cultural and scientific events, and closer cooperation under worldwide influential initiatives such the One Belt One Road (or ‘The New Silk Road’). Conversely, in Poland, where Chinese investment and influence on current government policy are quite limited, public attitudes toward China are least negative.

After the so-called ‘century of humiliation’ (Ogden, 2019), a period marked by the intervention and subjugation of the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China by Western powers and Japan from 1839 to 1949, China has been trying to recognize its role and position in the world (Mirza et al., 2021). It has been observed that since the beginning of the 21st century, China’s aims of public diplomacy have varied. Europe has been one of the main focuses of China’s public diplomacy and policies, and it has been at the center of many Chinese public relations strategies.

On the one hand, since Xi took up the reins of the CCP, Europe was ‘hit’ by the Party-state’s narratives promoting China’s ‘peaceful rise’ as a more suitable world leader; at the same time, Beijing required its Confucius Institutes located all over the world to further spread Chinese cultural values and focus on various mechanisms to attract foreign audiences. The role of the Institutes has been particularly important for China due to first, their locations within universities’ campuses, and second, their teaching materials only provided by the Beijing’s headquarter.

On the other hand, observers claim to have identified a new, more combative style in China’s official communication aimed at foreign audiences (Jerdén et al. 2021). These diplomatic developments can be seen by comparing former Chinese Leader Deng Xiaoping and current President Xi Jinping; Deng Xiaoping left a maxim (principle) that has underpinned China’s foreign strategy ever since: “taoguang yanghui”, meaning “keep a low profile and bide your time” (Daekwon, 2017). Deng also said, “by no means should China take the lead.” Nevertheless, today’s Chinese diplomats and their methods

are often both pushing controversial Chinese narratives and loudly countering foreign criticism, which is far from maintaining a low profile (Cheng, 2020). Strengthening Cheng's view, Yan Xuetong, dean of the school of international relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing, emphasizes that "China believes that its rise to great-power status entitles it to a new role in world affairs – one that cannot be reconciled with unquestioned US-dominance." In this context, Chinese public diplomacy and PR campaigns aimed at educating foreign audiences, European included, about a new multipolar world order (Rachman, 2022).

In the subchapter below, China's influence in Italy through public diplomacy will be briefly presented.

2.1.4. China's Public Diplomacy in Italy

China and Italy's relations date back to imperial China and ancient Rome, but ties between Italy and modern China officially started when the Italian Foreign Minister Pietro Nenni presented the proposal of recognizing China in January 1969, which was approved on the 6th of November 1970 (Casarini & Sanfilippo, 2015). Since 2013 under the Xi-Li administration, and according to President Xin Jinping's 2014 declaration that "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world" (Biswas & Tortajada, 2018), the CCP began to prioritize political and international relations to show more participation in the global affairs, as well as its recent involvement in enhancing the ability to influence the local and foreign public perceptions of China and its actions (Shambaugh, 2015). However, Beijing's strategy to increase its public engagement in Italy began with Italy's decision, strongly promoted by the former government's made up of the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) and the right-wing League party, and Minister of Economic Development Michele Geraci (from here the decision to analyze his Facebook account and official website) to join the 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in March 2019 (Bartlett, 2019). Italy per se has been the first G7 country to join the BRI, also called 'The New Silk Road' by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (Magistad, 2020).

Since that time, China has intensified its diplomatic 'tasks' in Italy, seeking to further expand its economic and diplomatic footprint. Therefore, under the agreement signed in the MoU (BRI) involving Chinese Xinhua News Agency and Ansa Italian News Agency, it has launched several initiatives to seek control of the public relations within the Italian audience (Zeneli & Santoro, 2020); also, as one the first countries to come to Italy's aid with medical equipment and medical team, overmagnified its assistance through public diplomacy and social media, giving rise to "mask diplomacy". During these days and the following weeks, China used widespread media coverage, particularly

social media but also mass-media channels, as a powerful weapon to increase its reputation, avoid the blame for spreading the virus while distorting the status of other factors and promote, at the same time, its own 'narrative'.

The role of Michele Geraci and the Chinese Ambassador in Italy Li Junhua, as well as all the firms that signed agreements under the BRI, have been fundamental as they have been sharing favorable views about China and Beijing daily, sometimes even twice or thrice per day.

Pushing toward the same direction are the often so-called 'state propaganda outlets' Confucius Institutes in Italy. All sixteen of them are committed to promoting the global agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (News, 2020).

2.1.5. China's Strategic Narratives

To build up and start understanding the concept of narratives and strategic narratives, history is where attention should be posed as "it is one of the words that encompass different meanings within different communities" (Foster, 2017). History and stories within strategic narratives are regarded as being one of the most tangible embodiments of soft power and public diplomacy in the 21st century.

The concept of strategic narrative gained traction in international politics and public relations initially to study war and conflict; subsequently, it has been used to investigate the role of persuasion in contemporary conflicts and countries' relations (Franco, 2012) and how a political community debates strategic issues (Krebs, 2015). Its meaning is linked to the idea of creating and promoting an effective narrative capable of advancing the goals of someone, whether that someone is a person, a group, a company, or even a nation (Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

The study of strategic narratives focuses mainly on analyzing the impact of public diplomacy efforts' effects on international relations with the latest goal to create consensus over 'stories' or narratives or views. The concept of 'including a narrative' into larger conceptual claims is to introduce and achieve a consensus within a foreign society over the construction of a new order in world politics (Roselle, O'Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014). In Schmitt's words, strategic narratives are crafted by political actors with only a specific intention in mind: influencing a specific audience (Schmitt, 2018).

The Chinese government has made increasing efforts at improving its influence through the tool of strategic narratives within the frame of soft power. In Europe, it has done so mainly through education and media, as the old continent has the highest number of Confucius Institutes in the world (Ekman & Esperanza Picardo, 2021), 187 in 2020.

In terms of education, the institutes are in principle harmless – teaching Chinese and some cultural content, rarely venturing directly into topical issues. However, unlike the Alliance Française, British Council, or Goethe Institutes, they are almost systematically embedded within universities, with teaching materials directly provided by China, and projects such as conferences are vetted by the head office in Beijing. Through the institutes, a Chinese agency can acquire and exercise leverage on other parts of the university – and particularly on all things Chinese, portraying and promoting the wished image of China within the host institution (Godement and Vasselier 2017).

In terms of media, as Godement and Vasselier say: “one growing trend is the number of agreements whereby Chinese news outlets provide content to the media.” (2017). In a nutshell, it involves hooking up with European print and online media through paid supplements. Therefore, the China Daily, the official English-language Chinese Communist Party newspaper gets its sayings and narratives on papers such: as *Le Soir* and *De Standaard* in Belgium, *Zemia* in Bulgaria, *Le Figaro* in France, *Handelsblatt* in Germany, *El Pais* in Spain, and the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK. China’s Xinhua news agency acts as a news provider for all. In Greece, the Athens Press Agency has a similar content agreement with Xinhua, while the Maltese National Broadcaster has one with CGTN (China Global Television Network, now CCTV). All news reported on these channels is confusing because “the origin of the concept is less visible if it is visible at all”. (Mirza, et al., 2021).

A study published in April 2020 by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) offers a first, partial look at China’s public diplomacy practices in Europe during the COVID-19 crisis. The research identifies variations in messaging across countries, differing from “low-key” to the more commonly related to China’s rise “charm offensive” to “provocative or aggressive” diplomacy (Jerdén et al. 2021).

2.1.6. China’s Strategic Narratives in Italy

During this specific lap of time between January 2020 and July 2020, China has initialized several new strategic narratives to obtain support from the Italian audience (and many others) that, under the leadership of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party has successfully defeated the COVID-19 flue and ultimately proved the world to be the rightful successor of the US as the new dominant power. Being the first European country hit by COVID-19, Italy has found itself face to face with one of the toughest challenges after WW2. The late and non-unified response from the EU gave China the space and time to ‘run’ over and exercise its ‘mask diplomacy’ as part of its diplomatic ‘tools’, a new term coined by scholars in a German Marshall Fund of the US’s policy paper (Soula, et al., 2020). During these early months of the pandemic in Italy, China’s prompt aid, a team of doctors, and 30 tons of donated equipment as well as millions of masks, gloves, and test kits from large Chinese corporations

such as Alibaba and Huawei, were there to show that the world's most reliable superpower now sat in Beijing, not Washington or Brussels. Simultaneously, say Soula and others, "the CCP was trying to shift the blame and rewrite the script by casting doubt on the origin of the virus." (2020). Here, the first COVID-19-related strategic narratives started arising. However, Beijing did not win over Italians that fast; questions about whether altruism was truly the main driver behind Chinese generosity soon arose. Thus, to confirm China's generosity and its mask diplomacy narrative strategy, it has been proved that the numbers and distribution of the donations of coronavirus-related paint a picture of Beijing's pre-meditated strategy in which the assistance countries received was not necessarily a reflection of their actual needs. This lastly suggests that Italy, receiving more help than other European countries, was given a 'reward' for signing a MoU under the BRI in 2019.

Recently, China has increased the usage of strategic narratives in Italy during the pandemic to reach a wider audience and promote its propaganda. The CCP's presence on Twitter and Facebook of Chinese official accounts skyrocketed; dozens of daily tweets appeared promoting Chinese donations via narratives together with interviews and online presentations describing the success of the Chinese model in combating, controlling, and winning over the pandemic (Jacob, 2020).

Another factor and feature of Chinese public diplomacy was Beijing's unprecedented assertiveness with Chinese officials trying to strong-arm European governments and leaders into spreading CCP's narratives. These narratives, keeps saying Le Corre, went far beyond the ostensibly benign proclamations on "humanity's shared oneness", "community of shared future" or "create mutual benefits allowing us to embrace win-win results" as Chinese diplomats at every level were pushing false information about the origin of the virus (Le Corre, 2020).

Therefore, the focus of this thesis is China's strategic narratives under the umbrella of public diplomacy and PR promoted by the two above-mentioned sources (the Chinese Embassy in Italy and the Ambassador, and Mr. Geraci) along with both different and similar approaches to promoting these narratives through propaganda. Hence, posts will be coded and analyzed. This will be the roadmap to lastly answer the following research question:

- "How Chinese strategic narratives are channelled and promoted to the Italian audience through different official Chinese and unofficial non-Chinese sources?"

Firstly, theoretically speaking, the formulation of the research question (RQ) is based on knowledge drawn from Alan Bryman's work on social research methods aiming at not having a too open-end main research question which can lead to "the collection of too much data and, when it comes to

writing up, to confusion about [your] focus” (Bryman, 2016, p.78). This will also make certain to collect the data with a clear sense and focus on what to observe and which are the final wanted outcomes. Finally, the research question “should be researchable, ..., have some connection(s) with established theory and research, ..., and should be able to make an original contribution - however small – to the topic” (Bryman, 2016, p. 83). These features will be explained more in-depth in the following chapter.

Secondly, it has been chosen because from the early 2000s Europe has seen an increased interest in Chinese propaganda, PR initiatives, and how Chinese public diplomacy has developed in the “old continent”. However, how Chinese strategic narratives have been disseminated through online channels and social media has not received the same attention. For this reason, the author has chosen to research how approaches from different official and unofficial accounts differ.

The aforementioned research question is supplemented by a series of sub-questions designed to expand on its implications connected to the primary data sources. These are the sub-questions:

- “How do the chosen portrayals of China fit into the framework of the three strategic narrative component categories?”
- “What are the distinctions and correlations in the usage of terminology between the two selected sources to achieve their goals?”

The software NVivo made easier to ‘code’ and analyze the posts’ main themes and narratives of the two chosen accounts (the Chinese Embassy in Italy and its ambassador Li Junhua, and the former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Michele Geraci). Their official websites and Facebook accounts were particularly active during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic, from January until July 2020, publishing posts, articles, interviews, pictures, and videos daily. This analysis will allow this thesis to answer the research question and shed more light on a topic that did not receive enough attention yet.

Together with mass media channels, online platforms have been relentlessly used by states and leaders to reach wider and foreign audiences to influence them and obtain their support to lastly achieve their goals. According to Statista and Haynes, the pandemic has largely affected citizens of many countries in their social media usage (Statista, 2022) (Haynes, 2020). Haynes says that “an increase in traffic to websites and government sources has significantly contributed to the overall increase in internet usage during this pandemic. People quarantined in homes have time at their

disposal, and many choose to spend it on social media. Facebook reported that messaging was up by more than 50% on its platforms (Instagram, Messenger, Whatsapp) as a result.

For these reasons, the choice of websites and Facebook accounts of the Chinese Embassy and Ambassador in Italy and Mr. Michele Geraci has been made.

In addition, these other factors have been prioritized before others: how active these accounts are; how much these profiles are connected with China and Italy and last but not least the number of followers, fans, and subscriptions; this showed how audiences are engaged.

To conclude, modern Chinese public diplomacy and PR have been increasingly promoting strategic narratives and propaganda through its embassies around the world; they have focused on influencing and attracting audiences rather than “keeping a low profile”, as Deng Xiaoping and other leaders before Xi emphasized (Daekwod, 2017).

Mr. Geraci, as a non-official account, has also been articulating China’s narratives since 2008 and has always been a pioneer and a strong supporter of China and its related initiatives and models. Thus, the focus of this work is to investigate which are the main differences and similarities in channeling and promoting China’s strategic narratives. A comparison of the two sources will hopefully give a little contribution to the Chinese-Italian PD, PR, strategic narrative, and propaganda field.

3. Theoretical Framework: Strategic Narratives

A narrative is a “framework that allows humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some casual transformation” with different ‘dimensions’ with the ultimate goal to assign a single definition to the four major components: actors, plot, time, and space (Miskimmon, et al., 2013):

- First, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle inspect the structure. A narrative is a complex concept that encompasses a wide range of aspects such as actors; events, plot, time; setting, and space; these will be addressed in the next subsection.

An effective narrative can link all of these factors in a storyline while stating the identification of a casual mechanism.

- Second, they analyze narrative types, distinguishing between system narratives (about the nature and future of the international system), identity narratives (about the identities of the actors), and issues narratives (about topical and contextual problems).
- Third, they discuss the strategic narrative formation, emphasizing the importance of political legitimacy for actors attempting to craft a strategic narrative.
- Fourth, they talk about how strategic narratives are projected and received in the new media environment (social media, mass media, etc.); the aspect that will be the adopted one in this work.
- Finally, they discuss the persuasive power of strategic narratives along with the linked strategies.

A narrative, they conclude, must contain informational content, better with images (Zeneli and Santoro 2020), that captures an audience’s attention and is easily understood to be convincing (Roselle, O’Loughlin and Miskimmon 2013). A narrative is effective and works in a specific environment because they appeal to the values, interests, and prejudices of the targeted audience (Gow & Wilkinson , 2017).

3.1. Components of the Strategic Narratives

The main components of a strategic narrative are four:

1. *Actors*, those who exercise soft power, are fundamental in the narrative (Roselle, et al., 2014). In this case, the main actors are respectively China and Italy, as well as Li Junhua, the Chinese

Ambassador in Italy and the main promoter of the narratives posted on the embassy's websites and Facebook's official account, and Mr. Michele Geraci, former Undersecretary of State at the Minister of Economic Development and author of several daily pro-China posts. The Chinese Government under the leadership of the Communist Party has also played an important role in shaping the behavior in online posts of the Chinese Embassy to promote China and dismantle negative views and thoughts about the Chinese leadership on the net. However, the influence the CCP has over online platforms will not be analyzed in this work.

2. *Setting, environment, and space*; refer to the 'place' where the facts and actions happen. In the field of international relations, it is concerned with the representation of the international system and how it works (Roselle, O'Loughlin, and Miskimmon 2014). In this case, the influence these strategic narratives have and is imposed through the posts are trying to impose specific ideas and facts to the Italian audience. In this online environment, there is and it can be felt that there is a 'strong bond' between the Central Chinese Government, the CCP, and these two accounts, in particular the Chinese Embassy in Italy and its ambassador. Especially with the advent of the internet, the presence online of Chinese accounts, not only on Facebook but also on Twitter and all the main western social media has more than triplicated, and the level of activity has doubled (Huang & Wang, 2019). Mr. Michele Geraci's posts and his website are (supposedly) less influenced by the CCP, however, with Geraci living in China, his online activity could sometimes be subject to the authorities' controls.
3. *Conflict or action*: this component refers to the present, past, and future of these strategic narratives within the context of public diplomacy, PR and related propaganda. This component is needed to acknowledge who acts, what it does and to who or what, as well as what comes next, the reactions and interactions enabled by them (Roselle, O'Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014). It also emphasizes how the actors perceive potential threats and how they would cope with them. The identified and analyzed narratives focus on how China (the CCP, or the Chinese Government) is trying to influence Italian citizens in Italy through specific and studied online posts for six months from January 2020 to July 2020. Starting from the beginning of the year 2020, which is also the time when the COVID-19 pandemic was starting, analyzing what strategic narratives were promoting and how they were structured, during the pandemic and at the end, highlighting the differences and the crucial changes and developments.

4. *Resolution or suggested resolution*: the final component, concerns the action needed to resolve the current problem, disruption, or/and conflict (Roselle, O'Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2014). In the case of the strategic narratives presented online by the Chinese Embassy in Italy and the ambassador as well as the former Italian Ministry of Economic Development Michele Geraci, actions of a 'peaceful-rising new China' as the new hegemonic power on the international stage replacing the US is pushed forward almost daily, together with narratives about how the Chinese 'zero-covid' model, under the strict leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping and his CCP, coped and defeated the pandemic. This is promoted hand-by-hand, in the later months of these six months, with the idea that the Chinese governance model is more successful than western democracies (Zeneli and Santoro, 2020). Mr. Michele Geraci is also constantly promoting the 'success' of China together with its prompt responses and transparency during the early period of the pandemic. He also puts particular efforts into trying to change thoughts of Italians not agreeing or answering negatively to his posts, always favoring China's version of the facts. Overall, these posts and publications are all pushing the Chinese strategic narrative to put under a negative light not only the US but Western democracies and actions taken by their leaders.

3.2. Levels of Strategic Narratives

These strategic narratives operate on different but interconnected levels, and they influence the current world of politics and international relations; therefore, they are divided into three categories:

- The system narratives are those that describe the world's order and its structure, which are the players and whose roles, and how relations work by giving specific roles to the stage's actors (Roselle, O'Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2014). The most prominent system narrative promoted by both accounts is that China's model of successfully handling the COVID-19 pandemic is the result of better governance than the West (the EU and the US) and, therefore, to be followed.
- The identity narratives describe what are the main stories or narratives promoted by the actors, in this case, the accounts, as well as their history, goals, and values (Roselle, O'Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014). All of these have a particular influence on the actions and behaviors of the actors. Here the Chinese Embassy in Italy and Mr. Geraci promote China as the new responsible and global leader as a replacement of the US. In Italy this is shown with exaggerated publicity of Chinese actions and help when COVID-19 firstly hit Italy hard; China, by sending masks and a team of doctors as a sign of long-standing friendship, put a

lot of effort into showing how it is more reliable not only of the US but also of Europe itself (Jacob, 2020).

- The issue narratives explain the reasons why certain policies are necessary, and how they will be enabled and accomplished (Roselle, O’Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014). In this case, the actions of the two analyzed accounts can solve China’s reputation and image of an unprepared actor and with not enough transparency toward the world and the WHO (World Health Organization) about the new pandemic. Showing empathy and helping other countries (in this case, Italy, having just earlier joined the BRI in 2019) have let the CCP hope it could fix its damaged reputation. However, says Barlett (2019), even if this strategy has brought initial positive results and seemed effective, it turned against China after some months, worsening Italians’ views toward China.

In the following chapter, the collected data and the methods used will be presented.

4. Data and Methods

This chapter aims to fulfill the purpose of outlining the main characteristics of the methodological approach chosen for the thesis by explaining what kind of data will be collected and how and, lastly, why the author has chosen the particular method. Therefore, this section will first summarize the main features of the collected data, then the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of the research. Afterward, the method of analysis will be introduced and discussed. Lastly, a reflection of the aspects of ethical considerations, limitations, and reflexivity will be presented.

4.1. The Analytical Data

Given that the thesis aims to analyze the narratives, themes and ideas promoted and pushed forward by the online accounts of the Chinese Embassy and Ambassador in Italy and the former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Minister of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci (Anon., 2022) on Facebook, and their websites, this study will mainly rely on an inductive qualitative research design whose primary method is a qualitative content analysis of social media's online posts and tweets using the topic modeling 'quantitative tool' (Nikolenko, et al., 2017). This analysis, based on Bryman's concepts, emphasizes letting the categories emerge from the data and recognizing the significance of understanding a context's meaning where a specific item appears and is then being analyzed (Bryman, 2016). In this specific research project, the posts and related articles analyzed will be divided and classified to identify the main themes used in constructing strategic narratives to promote China in different ways, under different circumstances, in different languages and platforms. This is material that in social sciences is not seen as specifically produced for research, says Bryman (2016), but they are online and preserved so that they are available for analysis and use by scholars.

This thesis analyses the posts of the Chinese Embassy in Italy and former Undersecretary of State at the Minister of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci which are linked to public diplomacy, PR, strategic narratives, and propaganda, and how they target the Italian audience, with differences and similarities, through their official websites and on the most important and followed social network: Facebook.

These two sources were chosen and the corpus of posts and articles prevailed due to their active social accounts with rules such as "One post per day" from Mr. Michele Geraci (Geraci, 2022) and active China's 'propaganda' promotion from the Chinese embassy and ambassador in Italy on their Facebook's profiles as well as the official websites (Anon., 2022). These posts and articles are going

to be in Italian or Mandarin Chinese, however, the author will translate them independently and one by one in English. Misinterpretation due to translation errors can be, in this way, successfully avoided.

Regarding the data sources, the two sources were chosen under the criterion of their identity and their political stance. The identities will lead this research to discover how different and similar narratives, themes, terms, and phrases are used in Italy on the two websites and on the social network Facebook to promote and strive to achieve the final goal: to “tell China’s stories well.”

Here there is the summary of the data gathered which will be analyzed more in detail in the following chapter.

A total of 275 files were read and analyzed, of which:

- 61 from the Chinese embassy and ambassador in Italy:
 1. 1 white paper,
 2. 26 posts on Facebook,
 3. 34 news on the official websites with 15 articles (interviews) included; and

Origin of the Data	Files
Official Website	34
Facebook Accounts	26
White Paper	1
Total	61

Table 1: Files from the Chinese Embassy & Ambassador on the Official Website and Facebook page. (source: Mazzola, 2022)

- 214 files from Mr. Michele Geraci:
 1. 9 files on his official website,
 2. 205 posts on Facebook with 18 articles (interviews) included.

Origin of the Data	Files
Official Website	9
Facebook	214

Table 2: Files from Mr. Michele Geraci’s Official Website and Facebook Page. (source: Mazzola, 2022)

The author faced challenges while writing, the main were the following:

- finding the correct terms that would allow the research of Chinese strategic narratives;
- selecting the most appropriate posts, articles, interviews, and videos among those attached and posts on the two sources' websites and Facebook accounts;
- recognizing the most important and widely used Chinese strategic narratives;
- building a strong discussion based on a 'blurred' definition of the meaning of public diplomacy, public relations, propaganda, and strategic narratives in such a different country and environment as China;

To overcome the above-mentioned challenges, the author has been analyzing several other past similar works and researches that used similar approaches and strategies to succeed. To be able to find and select the best themes and terms, online posts and articles were read to detect at the earliest time the main strategic narratives embedded.

To gather the needed data and find the suitable material related to the topics of interest between the timespan chosen, texts queries were created, containing phrases and words such as: "Thanks China", "China's help to Italy", "One Belt One Road Initiative", "The New Silk Road", "Agreement", "Cooperation", "Italy and China" and "Chinese Dream". These keywords and phrases were created after a preliminary overview of the most significant online posts during the end of December 2021 and the beginning of January 2022.

After preliminary reflections on several potential timespans, the time selected for the analysis of the data was from the 1st of January 2020 to the 30th of June 2020, six entire months, as it is a unique and particularly delicate time for the world, especially for China since everything started in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Therefore, China's public diplomacy, PR, strategic narratives and propaganda have been at the centre of everyone's attention.

Among the two 'platforms' chosen to gather the data, the websites were chosen due to their reliability and clearness in sharing and publishing propaganda material. In the case of Facebook, it has been chosen over other social platforms such as Twitter or Instagram because is the most used by Italian (Statista, 2021).

As for the start of the research process, some initial posts and articles were selected to undergo a process of coding to find the main themes and trajectories. To interpret the data, the software NVivo, as previously said, was selected.

All the data has been stored as 'screenshots' format to the computer's internal memory and PDFs.

4.2. Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

By employing an inductive approach as the research method using original theoretical aspects such as public diplomacy, strategic narratives, and soft-power, the research is based on and linked to the grand theory of constructivism applied to the field of international relations (University, 2017). As the main aim of the study is to explore and analyze how China constructs its role and 'reputation' in Italy through the slogan 'tell China's stories well – Jiang Hao Zhongguo Gushi (讲好中国故事)' (Huang & Wang, 2019), the topic itself can be classified as constructionist at its core; constructivism argues that the social world is of our making (Onuf, 1989) with actors, usually powerful ones, like leaders and influential citizens, continually shape – and sometimes reshape – the very nature of international relations through their actions and interactions (Theys, 2018). In other words, Bryman also observes and emphasizes social phenomena as something that is accomplished through social interactions and is in a constant state of revision, being an important underpinning to the hypotheses and approaches that this thesis builds on (Bryman, 2016). Under the lens of objectivism, points out Bryman (2016), the reality is understood as pre-given and independent of agency, but rather, realities are shaped and in constant mutation through social interaction. By contrast, the empirical data coming from online posts will not provide us with just one reality, as social constructivism argues that the social world is constantly shaped by outside forces and factors throughout ideas with its categories created through the interaction of various social actors to create subjective meanings socially and historically negotiated (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the empirical data collected is expected to depict different versions of promoting China in Italy as a single factual construct, each subjected to the agency of distinct actors, in this case, the Embassy and the ambassador, and the former Undersecretary of State Mr. Geraci, all serving for similar purposes.

From an epistemological point of view, the thesis will be based on interpretivism, as it does not view empirical data as a natural fact, but rather as ideas interpreted by human actors. Relying on an interpretive framework of analysis, the thesis's research method requires respect for differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences, thus implying the social researcher grasps the

subjective meaning of a particular social action (Bryman, 2016). In this case, the above-mentioned framework is compatible with the strategic narratives on which the main argument of the thesis focuses. From an interpretive viewpoint, the study's goal is to demonstrate that the Chinese central government, or the China Communist Party, stands behind and controls the Chinese Embassy and official account in Italy compared to how the former Undersecretary of State at the Minister of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci uses similar and different narratives to promote a constructed strategic discourse.

Online posts and strategic narratives are also going to be analyzed under the lens of the public diplomacy and strategic narratives concepts theory. Especially in the last two decades, the Chinese approach toward not just the EU but also the world has been analyzed by many scholars such Donato, Men, Geeraerts (Donato, 2020) (Men, 2008) (Geeraerts, 2019) and others, as well as international institutions, such The World Bank (Ruta, et al., 2019) and the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) (Turcsanyi, et al., 2021), making strategic narratives become an important part of the Chinese public diplomacy. Unfortunately, before and during the pandemic of Covid-19 and until nowadays there have been just a few surveys about Europeans' feelings and views toward these online posts made by Chinese official accounts on social media. One among the few is a survey made by CEIAS that shows how Europeans' view toward China has, unfortunately, worsened, especially in Sweden; here, 60% of the respondents hold very negatives of negative feelings about China (Turcsanyi, et al., 2021).

4.3. Ethical considerations, limitations, and reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process in which the researcher constantly reflects upon personal biases and values as well as the significance of these biases for generating knowledge through analysis (Bryman, 2016); in other words, it functions as a way of making sure that one's knowledge-claims are as close to being disinterested as they can be (Jackson, 2011). Under these 'advises' and what results from the belief that what we know about the world is a matter of interpretation rather than objective truths, it is necessary to reflect upon my positioning as a researcher in constructing knowledge about the analyzed data. My European background and exposure to most Western media, social networks, platforms, and newspapers may have created a prevailing influence from the Western states and concepts.

As the whole research process does not involve human participants, it can be guaranteed that the thesis will comply with the principles of not bringing harm to any participants, lack of consent, and the invasion of privacy and deception (Bryman, 2016).

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The section that follows outlines the empirical findings obtained from investigating and analyzing the online posts of the two chosen sources on Facebook and their websites. This was carried out with the main research question and the two sub-questions in mind, following the principles of the chosen theoretical framework with the latest goal to answer the research questions. The chosen body of data was subjected to coding through the employment of the software NVivo whose purpose is to identify and collect the multiple narratives, themes, and related/connected words of interest to ultimately be able to achieve the aims of this study. Thus, this chapter will begin by providing an overview of the main themes and codes gathered and that emerged during and after the coding process ended. It was especially noticeable that both ‘actors’, the *Chinese Embassy in Italy* and its *Chinese Ambassador’s* interviews and published articles, and the *former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Minister of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci* promoted China’s narratives with similar usage of words but different styles.

These will be laid out in the following sub-sections.

Afterward, the discovered themes and sub-themes will be discussed and analyzed through correlation with the three structural levels of ‘strategic narratives’ as the theoretical framework underpinning the current study.

5.1. The Chinese Embassy in Italy

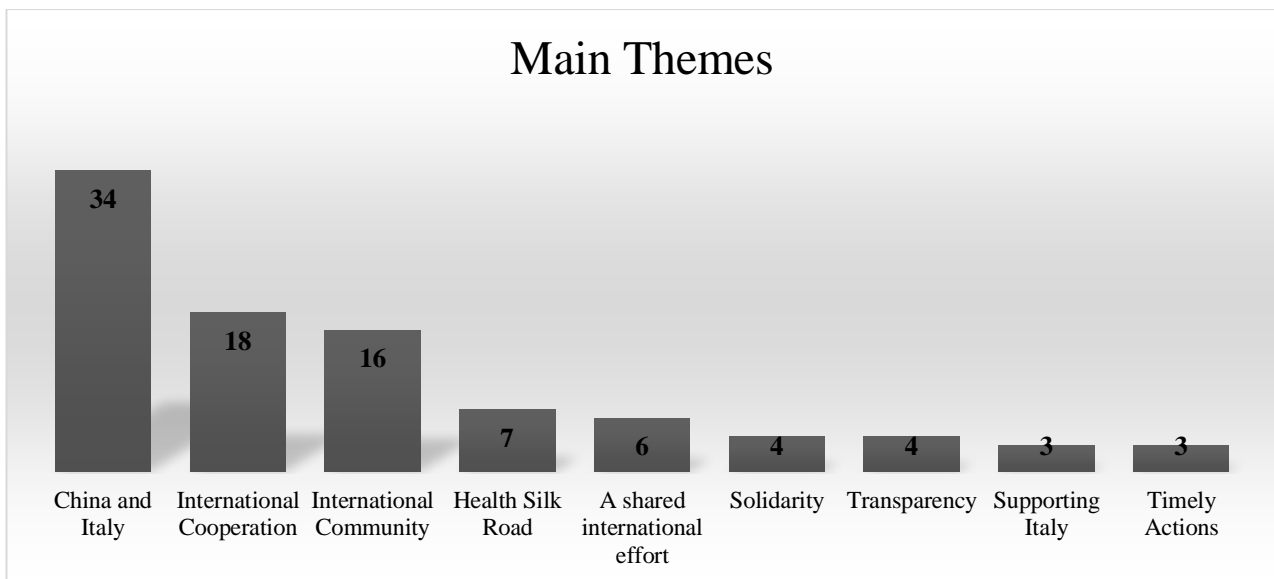
As one and the most important official account representing China and the Chinese Government (and the Chinese Communist Party) in Italy based in the capital city of Rome, since the beginning of the pandemic of COVID-19, Chinese activities and communications online have been relentless (Ghiretti, 2020). The account of the Embassy of the PRC has been posting videos, vignettes, slogans, and messages non-stop. The ambassador himself has been releasing interviews and personal messages of support to the Italian population, not only on their official website but also on Meta, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Furthermore, on both the official website page and the Meta page, a governmental white paper has been published to promote the Chinese narrative and the COVID-19 detailed descriptions and developments of the facts.

As most people already know, the Chinese Communist Party, as the only leading party and government in China, has been continuously and relentlessly promoting its narratives since the 2000s. Especially during this pandemic and after the inclusion of Italy in the ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’, the Italian audience has been subjected to a non-stop campaign and propaganda of China’s narratives promoted by Ansa (the Italian governmental news agency) as it collaborates closely with Xinhua

News Agency (CCP’s mouthpiece inside and outside China), mass-media and Western online social networks.

On the website and Facebook, a surge in posts promoting Chinese narratives and propaganda has been seen, coded, and analyzed by the author, with expected and unexpected outcomes that will be outlined below.

5.1.1. The Chinese Embassy in Italy – Official Website (here)



Graphic 2: Main narratives on the Chinese Embassy in Italy’s Official Website ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

The main narratives promoted by the Chinese Embassy in Italy on the official website are based on the following themes and words:

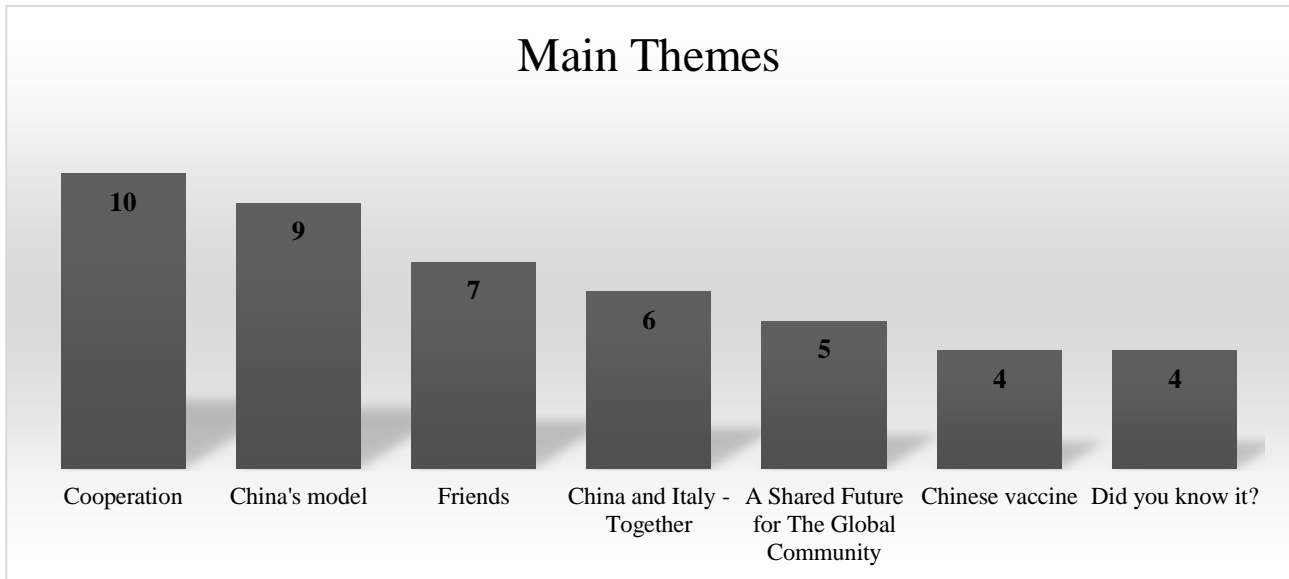
- “China and Italy” plus “cooperation”, “true friends or friendship”, “ancient societies”, and “undying friendship” (appeared 34 times). Here it is emphasized the historical and centennial friendship emphasizes how China came to ‘rescue’ Italy when in crisis. Actions that have been broadcasted widely to reach as many audiences as possible.
- “International Cooperation” (appeared 18 times). It relates to the win against the Coronavirus only achievable, from China’s perspective, by cooperating globally and as an international community with a shared future. Most of the time, phrases are followed by examples where China succeeded, thus promoting its narratives and the Chinese model of governance too.
- “International Community (or “Global Community”) with a Shared Future” (appeared 16 times) – the standard words also used several times and in many locations by General Secretary Xi Jinping to promote the main idea that China has become responsible and can be the ‘new’ global leader replacing the US.

- “Health Silk Road” (appeared 7 times) – a term new to the author, but understandably linked to The New Silk Road (BRI or OBOR). It is emphasized as part of the later and main initiative, the BRI, as a greater collaboration can be reached among member states.

Other words and themes identified are: “solidarity” (appeared 4 times), “a shared international effort” (appeared 6 times), “supporting Italy” (appeared 3 times), China’s “transparency” (appeared 4 times), and “timely actions” (appeared 3 times), etc. all to educate the Italian audience and inculcate these narratives and ideas.

Many of these narratives were further promoted on mass-media channels by the Chinese Ministries of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅) and his ‘wolf warriors’ and spokespersons Zhao Lijian (赵立坚) and Hua Chunying (华春莹), would also go as far as promoting the Chinese authoritarian regime over Western democracies to an already worried and easy-to-influence Italian audience (Corre, 2020). Le Corre argues that not only the Chinese Embassy’s official website was relentlessly boasting the Sino-Italian cooperation using the most commonly found narrative “true friendship...”, adding “... is revealed in crises”, (2020) but in particular Chinese spokesperson Zhao Lijian, very active on social media, even implied that Romans would have sung the Chinese national anthem as a thank you, in Italian “Grazie Cina” for sending the material (a theme often found after coding the Chinese Embassy official account on Facebook). Furthermore, not only did the Chinese Embassy and Chinese Officials caught this chance to boost China’s narrative, former Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, weakened since he lost the presidency of his Five Star Movement, seized the opportunity to promote himself by broadcasting the delivery of Chinese equipment on March 12 on social media. However, the reality is that all these are China’s and CCP’s narratives that make use of its diplomatic ties (Xinhua and Ansa, CCTV and Rai, etc.) to ameliorate one of Europe’s most negative views toward China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2020).

5.1.2. The Chinese Embassy in Italy – Facebook Official Account (here)



Graphic 3: Main narratives on the Chinese Embassy in Italy's Official Facebook account ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

Facebook is, as for [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), the social network with the higher penetration rate with 36 million users in Italy, followed by Instagram at 28.8 and LinkedIn at 20.7 (Statista, 2021).

The main narratives promoted by the Chinese Embassy in Italy on Facebook through its official page are based on the following themes and words:

- “Cooperation” (international and global) (appeared 10 times); same as above plus a wider reach.
- “China’s model” (appeared 9 times); as mentioned above in the theme “international cooperation”, here it is emphasized the strategies and methods used by China under the leadership of the CCP and Xi Jinping and aims at promoting them as the best global methods to govern a country and overcome future challenges and crises.
- “Friends” (appeared 7 times); again, as above, related to mainly China and Italy, while a few times it refers to China and Europe.
- “China and Italy” plus “together” (appeared 6 times);
- A “Shared Future for The Global Community” (appeared 5 times); a concept crafted by Xi Jinping in 2013 (Zongze, 2018) (ChinaDaily, 2021), promoted widely and especially during important events. During a global crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCP swiftly saw an opportunity to promote its narratives thanks to a slow EU answer and lack of unity. For this reason, Chinese ‘wolf-warriors’ diplomats did not appear on social media platforms, they performed on mass media channels only (Soula et al., 2020). On Facebook, solidarity and supporting messages, along with uncountable pictures of Chinese medical equipment and doctors, were the main objects representing how China sees the world. However, it did not portray the reality. As an example, China promoted the “China donated medical equipment to

Italy as Chinese and Italians are friends and societies are both ancients”. This was not entirely true, as equipment was bought by Italian governmental associations (Zeneli and Santoro, 2020).

- Promotions of the “Chinese vaccine” (appeared 4 times); another narrative that portrays China as a responsible leader and ready to cooperate and help other countries in providing incredibly fast vaccines.
- Did you know it (about China)? (in Italian: “Lo sapevate?”), (in Mandarin Chinese: “你们知道吗? ”) (appeared 4 times). Different narratives promoted China’s beauties, including sightseeing spots (mainly natural places) to soothe the pain of Italians, as it was the first and was hit hard by the Coronavirus.

Since the 21st century, citizens especially from developed countries have become increasingly active online and on social media, posting and reading daily.

Consequently, media specialists in the world have started focusing more and studying deeper the phenomenon of online PR and propaganda as this has been and is becoming the most effective way of influencing own and foreign citizens.

Under these new findings, China emphasizes and pays increasing attention to the posts of its ‘representatives’ abroad. One of them is the account of the Chinese embassy in Italy that has, expectedly, experienced a surge in posts during this specific initial period of the pandemic in 2020. The Chinese ambassador Li Junhua has relentlessly offered interviews and commented actively on Italian political figures to promote China’s narratives and blame who was to blame for the China party-state (Carrer, 2021).

5.1.3. The Chinese Embassy in Italy – The Case of the ‘White Paper’ (here)

The author was lucky enough to find a white paper shared both on the embassy’s official website and its Facebook page as a link.

There are dissimilarities between usual or standard strategic narratives and white papers. On the one hand, strategic narratives are written in a manner able to be clearly understood by all; they tell stories explaining how we got to a certain point, what is the vision of the future and how we will get to this point; worth noticing is the way the story is designed, as it frames issues and policies in a consistent conceptual framework providing an interpretive structure which people can use to make sense of historical facts, current problems and emerging issues. Lastly, a strategic narrative has both a strong logic chain that appeals to our rational side and an emotional component; to her, including this emotional ‘hook’ engages us (the audience) bringing life, meaning, and legitimacy to an otherwise

abstract logic chain. On the other hand, white papers, being official documents, are often impenetrable tomes written by specialists for specialists, without any emotional components and stories (Layton, 2013).

In contrast with the standards of strategic narratives and white papers, the official document coded in this thesis is clear and simple to read for any type of audience. This feature mirrors CCP's goals to promote its narratives to the widest audience possible.

Presented with simple words by Malone and on WriteMachine.com, a total of six different standard styles of white paper exists and will be briefly introduced below (Malone, 2011) (WritingMachine, 2019):

- The thought leadership: often involves picking an issue currently debated that will resonate with the audience and putting the wanted narrative spin on it. As they are the most versatile, are used for campaigns and promotions of any type. This document makes its author look authoritative, credible, and visionary and that he or she is leading the debate.
- The educational: here the author wants to share something useful that readers did not know before. Often, the author's wish is that readers will keep it and refer to it later on as a guide. This kind of paper is ideal as the 'hub' of a campaign. For example, it works well for inbound marketing as people searching online for answers may well find it and download it. Here it is usually highlighted 'how to do something' (best practices, samples processes), 'the right way to do something' (changing opinions about a process or practice), or 'an in-depth analysis of something' (a topical issue, a new technology or an industry).
- The market research: contains data and an in-depth analysis of it. However, here, data on its own is not the central point, but it is about what the data means that it is showing in a specific light and made it significant, fascinating, and newsworthy. The aim is to educate readers by demonstrating throughout data and research the 'leadership' or standing point of the author.
- The problem-solving: these papers are used to present to the readers the author's innovative approach to solving a particular problem. It focuses on showing the readers how to 'step-by-step' solve the presented problem. However, it can also subtly push, for example, a company's products or services or someone's story and points of view.
- The technical: with much technical information, it shows what something is for, how it works, and how to implement it. This is a deep dive into a concept, product, or solution with the latest goal to spread it and influence readers or listeners.
- The visionary: has to be credible, with innovative insights into the future of a concept or product and it has roots in grounded logic and credibility wherever possible. A key to

businesses and states nowadays, constant change, as Tom Peters once said that ‘the only constant in business is change’ (Peters, 1991). This aims at reassuring the readers that your vision or concept or story will not date or become obsolete; it is an all-in strive to prove that the author or institution can be trusted in the long term.

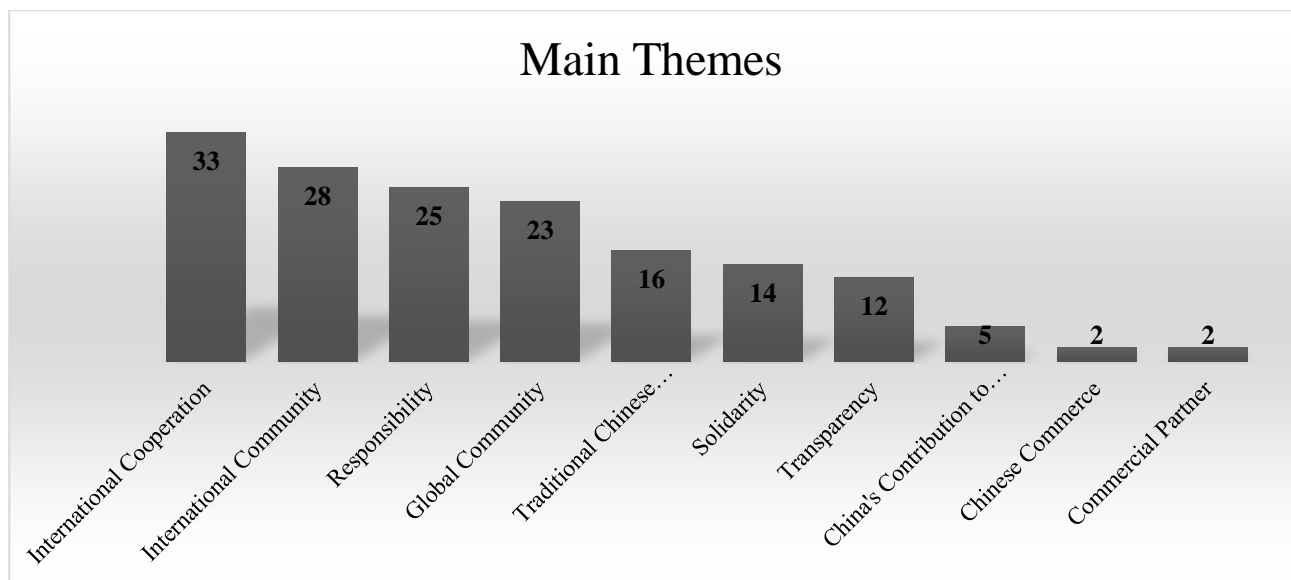
The Chinese white paper has elements and characteristics from a few of the above-mentioned styles. For instance, starting from the first style, it picks an issue, the COVID-19 pandemic, and adds a narrative to it, pushing and hoping it will win over those pushed and portrayed by Western media.

It can also be said that it tries to educate and be a paper guiding the Italian audience who is looking for answers now more than ever. It emphasizes specific words and narratives aiming at educating audiences about what is happening and how to overcome this challenge (Coronavirus).

It shows and promotes China’s problem-solving attitude and winnings, as it aims at ‘selling’ China’s narratives to Italians.

Since it is a white paper published, of course, by an official source, the Party-state through the Chinese Embassy in Italy, it is credible. However, the references used are very few, which makes it lacking in validity and credibility.

Below are shown the themes found and the words used in the narratives. It can be easily read and is designed in a clear and well-structured manner.



Graphic 4: Main narratives on the Chinese Embassy in Italy’s ‘White Paper’ ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

Here there is the list of the key themes:

- “international – (and global) cooperation” (appeared 33 times);
- “international community” (appeared 28 times);

- “responsibility” (appeared 25 times);
- “global community” (appeared 23 times);
- “Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)” (appeared 16 times);
- “solidarity” (appeared 14 times);
- “transparency” (appeared 12 times).

The other themes are: “China’s Contribution to the World” (appeared 5 times), “Chinese commerce” (appeared 2 times), “Commercial Partner” (appeared 2 times), and some more.

The Chinese strategy highlights what, according to the CCP’s narrative, have been the main tasks, steps, and developments of the whole COVID-19 pandemic. From the 27th of December 2019 until the 28th of May 2020, the document focuses on the decisions taken by Xi Jinping and the successful outcomes.

Trying to see the white paper under the lens of strategic narratives together with the words and themes used, it is clear that China promotes its narratives focusing on a possible ‘new’ global order under the leadership of the Chinese autocratic state. This Chinese model is the only correct example to follow during this pandemic crisis.

However, worth highlighting is that the document does not emphasize much how the West and its democracies have coped with the pandemic. However, by highlighting and promoting its narratives, the CCP wants to educate the Italian audience about how the Party-state adapts to the world’s changes and challenges.

As the most common theme, “international – global cooperation” connects with narratives and objectives emphasized by Xi Jinping since the date he started his mandate. Closely related is the second most-used theme: “international community”. Here a strategic narrative that connects several points of China’s recent years’ public diplomacy method can be seen. Initiatives such as the BRI, the Health Silk Road, etc. all came along together with an increasing presence of China and its investments in Italy, with a quick surge after the adherence of Italy to the One Belt One Road Initiative. This increased Chinese presence in Italy has come as one of its main goals was to obtain an easier ‘access point’ to Europe through the so-called weak door, Italy (Barlett, 2019).

While pushing and promoting these narratives during the pandemic, emotional words can just benefit China’s image as a future world global leader; and sometimes, even better than Brussel and the whole European Union. However, this has not been a successful move as Italians did not appreciate the hard words used by the Chinese wolf-warriors officials against the European leadership, especially during such a difficult time. Therefore, words such as “responsibility” and “solidarity” have been used

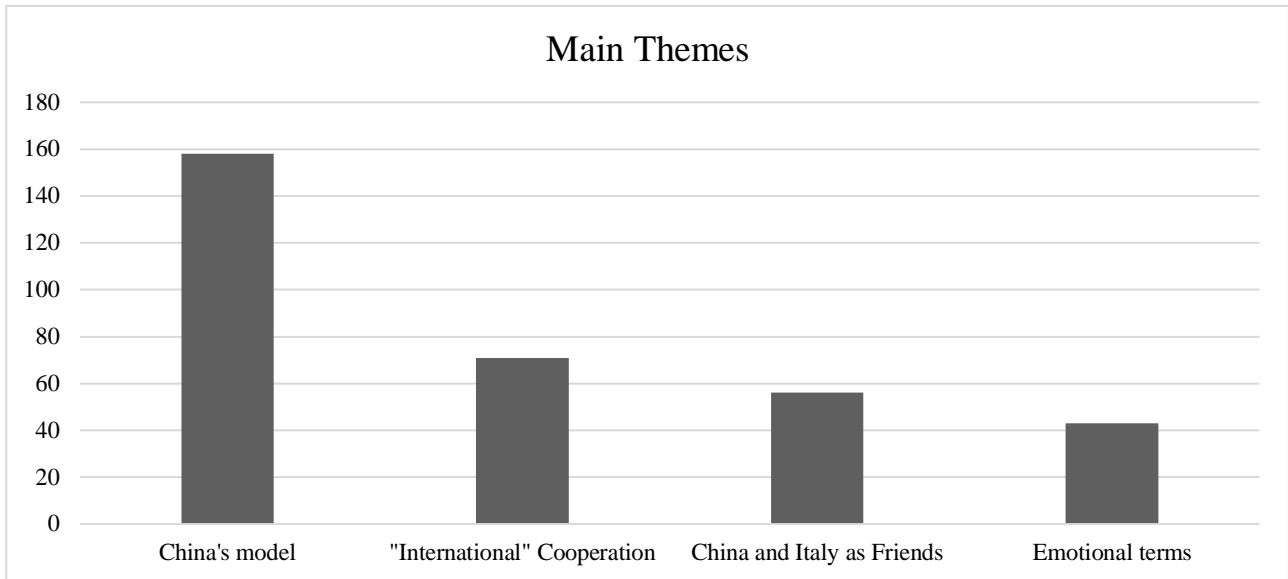
continuously to strengthen and improve China's image. Actions followed too, for example, the team of doctors and different medical types of equipment. Although these benevolent acts have been appreciated by all Italians and brought some good results to the Chinese party-state, meaning that the reputation of China improved just after the beginning of the pandemic, it soon took a negative turn when Chinese officials started to insult and blame Western leaders for the handling strategies and incomprehension among the Europeans state members.

While pushing forward China's model of governance in Europe during the crisis, the Chinese leader did not want to miss the opportunity-train to promote other Chinese 'concepts' and valuable things: the TMC, "Chinese Traditional Medicine". This was another term closely connected and that in recent years has become increasingly attractive in Europe and all over the world. It is, truly, a powerful tool that combined with Western medicine could have helped in unknown ways to combat the Coronavirus, however here it was relentlessly promoted as part of narratives that highlight how better Chinese things are; a feature that Italians did not appreciate much.

Lastly, "transparency" has been appearing several times. This is because Western countries, including the US, have been emphasized that China, as an authoritarian regime with tight control over everything that goes through its borders and gates, has not reported fast enough about the human-to-human transmission of the COVID-19 and that it has been hiding data and important information that could have prevented the virus spreading and saved countless lives (Soula et al., 2021).

To conclude, the white paper is a valuable document that if the same narratives were promoted differently and with a different attitude from Chinese officials, it could have influenced positively Italians and lastly meliorated China's image and reputation in Italy.

5.1.4. Summary of the Chinese Embassy and Ambassador's Main Themes



Graphic 5: Main narratives on the Chinese Embassy and Ambassador in Italy's ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

As the data has shown, the Chinese embassy and ambassador promote China's economic and governmental model to the Italian audience.

5.2. Former Italian Ministry of Economic Development Prof. Michele Geraci (here)

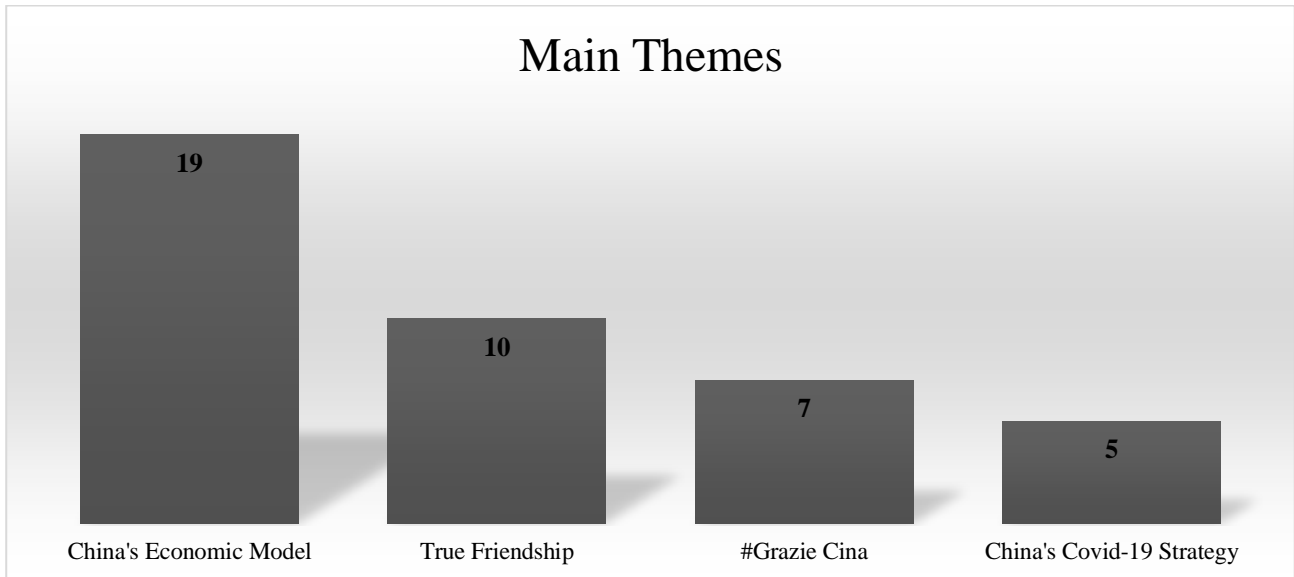
As one of the main promoters of Italy joining China's "One Belt One Road Initiative" in March 2019, Geraci has lived and taught in China for more than ten years. He has always been promoting and supporting China's views and narratives, including the world-famous BRI. It was under his strong advice that former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte agreed to sign the MoU in 2019; however, nowadays even Geraci himself acknowledges that the fruits of this agreement are still awaited (Corre 2020). What has come to light since then was that China's communication strategies aim at increasing its economic and diplomatic footprint in Italy through strategic narratives by several already launched initiatives to seek control of public relations and the media scene in Italy (Zeneli and Santoro 2020). Geraci used slightly different themes and words from the Chinese embassy to promote China's narratives.

The different approaches used by Geraci are easily noticeable: on his website, most of the articles are available in Italian, but very few are in English and Mandarin Chinese. This highlights that his targeted audience is in Italy. On the opposite, his posts on Facebook are mainly in English, sometimes in both languages, English and Italian.

In the next subchapter are listed the main themes and words found on Geraci's official website.

5.2.1. *Former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci – Official Website (here)*

On his website, Geraci is not very active. His posts are mainly reports and interviews, but videos can also be found. Most of his publications (articles and written interviews) are in Italian, with some in English, while in most of the videos he talks in English.



Graphic 6: Main narratives on former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development on his Official Website ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

The main themes and words found are the following:

- promoting “China’s economic model” (appeared 19 times);
- “true friendship” between China and Italy (appeared 10 times);
- the hashtag “Grazie Cina” (appeared 7 times);
- promoting “China’s COVID-19 strategy (appeared 5 times).

Before stepping up to the position of Minister of Economic Development under the Five Star Movement that became the leading party in Italy in 2018 until 2020, Geraci was a professor of finance and economics at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China and at the New York University Shanghai in Shanghai since 2008. Related to this, his narratives are finance-economic related, as, while ‘sitting at the desk’ at Palazzo Chigi (the government building located in Rome), he suggested several times that “Italy should adopt China’s economic model” (Gallelli & Mariani, 2021).

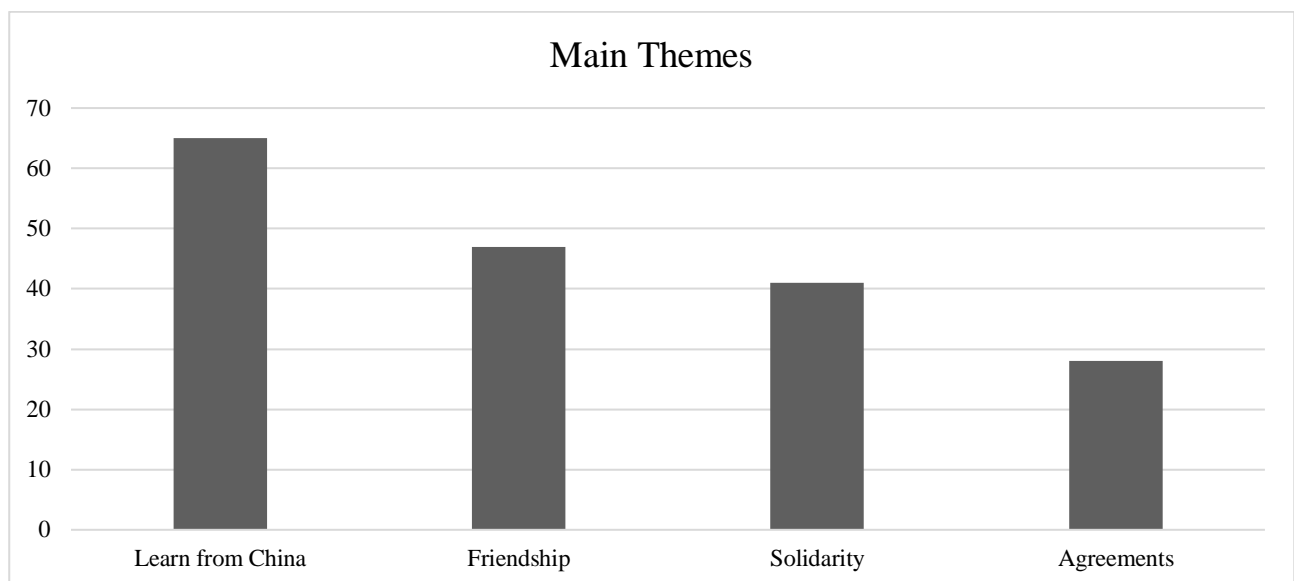
Apart from being mostly focused on the economic and financial side of China – Italy cooperation, he emphasizes the “friendship” narrative almost as much as the Chinese embassy.

He and former Ministry of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio put a lot of importance on thanking China with the hashtag “Grazie Cina” (literally: thanks China) even though when the team of Chinese doctors and medical equipment were not donated by China but were all bought by Italian associations

funded by the Italian government. These narratives promoted by the Chinese Embassy and Geraci are the same, aligning them toward the main goal: to promote China’s stories (in Italy) well. He not only promoted China’s economic model, but also China’s strategy in coping with the pandemic.

5.2.2. Former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development – Mr. Michele Geraci – Facebook Official Account (here)

Geraci is very active on Facebook and all his other media accounts, namely Twitter (with 15,231 followers) and YouTube (with 653 subscribers). His page name says: “Michele Geraci – Economia, Societa’ e Mondo, One post per day” and counts a total of 14,696 fans (up to the 18th of May 2022). During ‘normal’ times, he posts from one to two posts or articles online; while during ‘peak’ times, which means when something important is happening not only in China but in the world, he can even post four to six times in one single day. Below are listed the main themes found with NVivo.



Graphic 7: Main narratives on former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development on Facebook ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

The main themes and words found are the following:

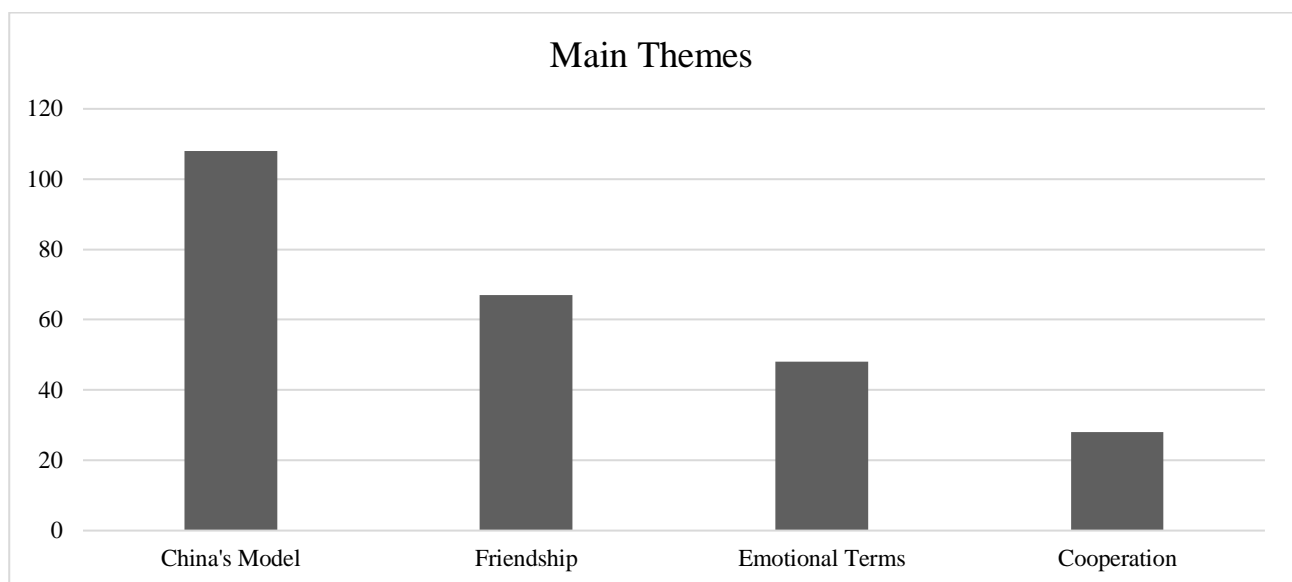
- “learn from China” (appeared 65 times);
- “friendship” between China and Italy (appeared 47 times);
- “solidarity” between China and Italy (appeared 41 times);
- “agreements” between China and Italy (appeared 29 times), mentioning the BRI more than once, specifically seven (17) times.

There are several similarities between how Geraci promoted Chinese narratives on his official website and through Facebook. A striking example is the most-appeared code on both platforms: he wishes Italy to follow China and to learn from it.

The narratives are easy to identify: China is doing better than China, we (China and Italy) are good (“undying”) friends and are both “ancient societies” and Italy should preferably move closer to China through “agreements” such as the BRI (The New Silk Road). He did achieve the latter task, however, switching to China’s governance model will not be an easy, if possible, task to achieve.

Another point to highlight is how excellently Geraci uses graphics to promote Chinese narratives.

5.2.3. Summary of Mr. Geraci’s Main Themes

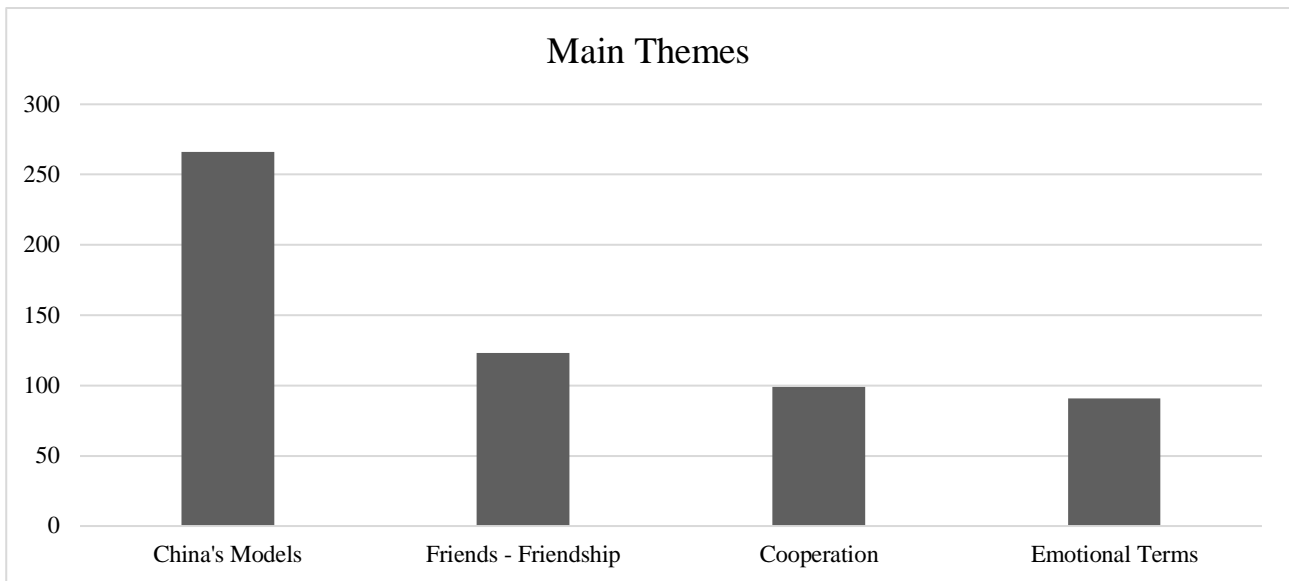


Graphic 8: Main narratives of the Undersecretary of State at the Italian Minister of Economic Development ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

As the data shows, Mr. Geraci promotes widely China not only as a model for the Italian government to follow, but also as a friend, more than promoting the EU and the US in this specific period.

5.3. Summary of the Main Themes and Keywords from both Sources

This summary helps the author and the readers to have a neater idea of which are the main narratives of the two analyzed accounts.



Graphic 9: Main narratives of the most appeared themes ordered by frequency (source: Mazzola, 2022)

As the data has shown, the key themes promoted online by the two sources have

1. “China’s Models” (“systems, economy, TCM, vaccine, and initiatives”): 266 times;
2. “Friends” or “friendship”: 123 times;
3. “‘International’ Cooperation”: 99 times;
4. “Emotional Terms” (“Solidarity, Responsibility,” and “Transparency”): 91 times;

Themes show that the main narratives circling the “tell China’s stories well” during the COVID-19 pandemic are mainly benevolent, emphasizing emotional terms and more cooperation among all countries. Although narratives are emotionally well linked, portrayed, and designed well, most often with attached graphics as well as images, the views, and opinions of the Italian audience in Italy have worsened during these last years, and it has dropped vertiginously during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jerdén et al., 2021).

However, before drawing unnecessary conclusions, the thesis will focus on the main levels of strategic narratives and how they related to the central and key theme of this work: how the narrative “tell China’s stories well” is promoted in Italy at the three ‘levels’.

5.4. The Employment of ‘Strategic Narratives’ targeting the Italian Audience used by the Chinese Embassy in Italy, the Chinese Ambassador Li Junhua, and Former Minister Michele Geraci

As noted previously, the structure of strategic narratives is composed of three main linked levels: the ‘System Narratives’ depict how the world order is structured and composed; the ‘Identity Narratives’ that outline the features and characteristics of a specific state; and ‘Issue Narratives’ explain government’s actions as well as the positive impact of certain policies. These will be analyzed in the subchapters below.

5.4.1. System Narratives

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, ‘system narratives’ are those that describe the world’s order and its structure, which are the players and who owns which roles, and how relations work by giving specific parts to the stage’s actors. These narratives portray the main features of the bigger framework in which identity narratives and issue narratives function. For instance, issue narratives are carefully crafted to fit perfectly into identity narratives that tell the story of a particular country, which are then incorporated into and respect the rigors of the existing international order (Roselle, O’Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014).

Therefore, standing steadily and commanding the Chinese Embassy in Italy and its Ambassador, the Chinese governance influences Italian officials too. Not only the Italian Former Minister Geraci along with his posts and online activities but also Italian President Sergio Mattarella and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio on more than one occasion; to mention a few examples: Mattarella felt obligated to organize events to formally thank China with concerts, exhibitions, etc. after China sent a team of doctors, masks and medical equipment in March 2020. It did not end there; they have copied Chinese narratives too, such as “China and Italy have an undying friendship”, “China and Italy’s cooperation” and “China’s solidarity”, along with other stories and keywords (Yaoyang & Carbonaro, 2020) (Perrino, 2020).

In this analysis where the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed, the Party-state promoted through all possible channels China’s model of governance as the perfect fit for any situation.

To conclude, these narratives portray a Chinese Communist Party promoting its way of governance and how it wishes and wants to see the world order in the future, preferably “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Xiaoping, 1984) with cooperation and support from all other countries. According to China, this is the best governmental system to rule a country and maintain a peaceful world order. It goes without saying that this is the only way the Party-state can survive and keep the power (Ghiretti, 2020).

The most prominent system narrative promoted by the accounts, is “China’s model”, which is based and has developed on principles of the CCP and current president Xi Jinping’s thoughts have successfully coped and won the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, China sees itself as a more suitable leader in the close-future global order.

5.4.2. Identity Narratives

“Identity narratives are about the identity of the actors of international affairs that are in a constant process of constant negotiation and contestation.” (Roselle, O’Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2013). These narratives and themes are promoted by the actors, the Chinese embassy in Italy together with the Chinese ambassador, and Mr. Geraci, to outline how they understand themselves and other actors as well as their history, goals, and values. All these circles around how China wants to be portrayed by the Italian audience, following Xi Jinping’s core narrative “tell China’s stories well.”

The Chinese Embassy in Italy, the Chinese ambassador Li Junhua and Mr. Geraci promote China’s narratives, defining how China tries to use and move its paws toward its latest goal: to show China is the most suitable model country to follow.

In Italy, Chinese actions and help when COVID-19 hit it hard were seen clearly. China sent masks and a team of doctors as a sign of long-standing friendship, followed by a lot of effort to show how the world has changed these last years; the main narrative is that China wants to change its status identity on the international stage: it wants to become the most reliable partner and leader, replacing both Europe (as Brussels) and the US, as nowadays’ hegemonic leader (Jacob, 2020).

5.4.3. Issue Narratives

The issue narratives explain the reasons why certain policies are necessary, and how they will be enabled and accomplished (Roselle, O’Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014). In this case, the actions of the two accounts have the power to improve or even solve China’s reputation and image. With a reputation as an unprepared actor and with not enough transparency toward the world and the WHO (World Health Organization) about the pandemic, by showing empathy, and helping other countries (in this case, Italy, having just earlier joined the BRI in 2019), the CCP can hope to fix its damaged

reputation. However, says Barlett (2019), even if this strategy has brought initial positive results and seemed effective, it turned against China after some months, worsening Italians' views toward China. This was influenced by the arrival of the 'wolf warrior' diplomacy', which is portraying China as a more assertive state whose will is to be respected and listened to more than in the past, as it has become a more important on the global stage (Baker & Emmott, 2020).

In this final subchapter below, a comparison between the promotion styles and the types of narratives promoted will be presented, highlighting differences and similarities.

5.5. Different Accounts – Similarities and Distinctions between the Chinese Embassy and Ambassador, and Mr. Geraci

After the in-depth analysis of the two main sources and how they promote China's strategic narratives have been presented in the previous chapter and subchapters, now the thesis will focus on what are the similarities and distinctions of the promotion style of the two sources.

As previously highlighted, the sources are different. The first one, the Chinese Embassy in Italy and its ambassador Li Junhua is official, led, commanded, and supported by the Chinese state. The second one, is Mr. Geraci, a non-official account whose goals have been and still are to share China's related news and advise Italy to promote and meliorate friendly relations and co-operations with other countries and Italy. In 2015, he has been awarded as 'Knight of the Order of the Star of Italy' for having contributed to the spread of knowledge of China in Italy (Spalletta, 2018).

However, they correlate in several areas and have similar features as well as differences.

On the one hand, the Chinese Embassy and the ambassador Li are official sources, and they, as standards, represent China abroad. These are also the accounts Italians were paying more attention to and started to follow at the beginning of the pandemic as they officially represent a country and therefore are accountable and news published reliable (Zeneli and Santoro, 2020). Despite these facts, the news reported in their posts were all leading to the same ideas, stories, and concepts: promoting China's strategic narratives through articles, videos, images, etc.; these further promote and emphasize improving and meliorating China's image in Italy. The majority of their posts published and shared on the Chinese Embassy's website and its official Facebook account, including interviews and articles of Chinese ambassador Li, lead to the same narrative: within a global – international community with a shared future, China and Italy's undying friendship is set to endure and bring benefits to both citizens. However, this will be possible with China as a new responsible global leader pivoting the international order based on Chinese concepts of solidarity, transparency, and cooperation among countries. The case of the 'white paper' which stretches to reach a wider audience,

is a blatant example that China has paid more attention to its public diplomacy and PR strategies and methods in Europe, especially in Italy after it joined the BRI.

On the other hand, Mr. Geraci has been sharing China's related news and stories since the beginning of the 21st century, becoming increasingly active on his websites after he moved to Shanghai in 2008 (Lei, 2019). Back then, as a finance professor, he was not a daily promoter of China's narratives. Nowadays, as themes codes in his posts between January 2020 and until the end of June 2020, he is. However, he uses a slightly different vocabulary, but the narratives are similar. As we have seen above, the Chinese embassy and the ambassador have been strongly promoting everything related to China since the pandemic started; from China's model of coping with the pandemic to then moving to a global – international community with a shared future. Here, Geraci focuses more on China's economy, wishes and pushes Italy to cooperate and sign more agreements with China (as the BRI in 2019), with his most shared narrative being “learn from China”, a clear statement to Italy. He also makes sure to add some ‘emotional words’ in many of his posts (pointing at China) so to make sure to be ‘on the same page’ with the Party-state. Geraci continues by thanking China for all its ‘doings’ and help given during hard times, without mentioning, on the Chinese side, the help that Italy gave during the 2008's Sichuan earthquake as well as German and American medical equipment donated to Italy in February and March 2020; worth reminding that Chinese equipment was advertised as a donation from China, but in reality, it was bought by Italian associations funded by the Italian government.

At last, data speaks for itself and shows how even though words and themes usage are not always the same, the two sources promote China in Italy and push for a stronger friendship, more cooperation, and more Chinese influence in Italy.

In the next chapter, the author will conclude by summarizing the data and concepts exposed in this work.

6. Conclusion

Before the COVID-19 crisis hit, relations with China had already grown more complex. As China's interest in Europe has grown considerably and China itself has become more competitive and more ambitious globally, relations between the 'old continent' and China have become more diverse, especially these last two decades (Seaman, 2020).

In March 2019, the European Commission and the External Action Service characterized China as a partner, a competitor, and a systematic rival (EEAS, 2022). At the same time, with China's will of becoming a more important world player, the Party-state started to give more importance to its public diplomacy objectives, public relations narratives and channels used, online and offline propaganda as well as soft-power methods of influence, upgrading and adapting them to the current environment (Jacob, 2020). Within this particular political framework, strategic narratives represent an essential, if not the more adaptable and suitable tool of persuasion for the achievement of a state's goals (Roselle, O'Loughlin, and Miskimmon, 2014).

Thus, the thesis focused on the strategic narratives constructed and promoted by two different sources, the Chinese embassy and ambassador in Italy, and former Undersecretary of State at the Minister of Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci that target the Italian audience on Facebook and through their websites. The most notable findings that allowed to answer the research question and sub-questions emerged through the comparison of the two sources' differences and similarities in promoting Chinese strategic narratives. On the websites, the actors are not as active as on Facebook; nevertheless, they both publish China's updates. On social network Facebook, used widely in Italy, allows to reach a wider audience than the websites. Moreover, some articles, interviews, and posts were published on both the social network accounts and websites. The terms and themes that appeared the most in both sources, even though not always with the same words, were promoting the same narrative: China's models are the most suitable, trustworthy, and transparent; China is a stable and 'open' country, a 'friend' who comes to help in case of need.

According to them, the case of China and Italy is the perfect example; Chinese narratives emphasized "friendship", "cooperation", "solidarity", etc. and focused on the concept of an "international - global community" with a "shared future" too, as China portrays itself as the 'new' global leader pioneering the concept that "the future of humanity has a shared future". This attitude is expected by the Chinese embassy, as it represents the Chinese party-state abroad, but it raises doubts and questions on the

political position and ideas of Mr. Geraci when he uses similar and same terms to promote these themes and echo the Chinese embassy's views.

A clear, simply written, and easily downloaded white paper published by the Chinese embassy on both its website and Facebook account highlights China's wish to share its ambitions and narratives with not only the highest number of Italian citizens but also with the global community. Concepts stated in the official document are also promoted by Mr. Geraci, such as the BRI and the Health Silk Road. However, as argues Franceschini, blindly providing China with such a meaningful endorsement is not only politically wrong, but also ethically, especially "considering the increasingly authoritarian tendencies demonstrated by the Chinese leadership in the past few years", further aggravating the authoritarian developments and advances around the globe (Franceschini, et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the data emerged were discussed within the framework of the strategic narratives distinct levels of organization, system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives.

The system narratives promoted by the Chinese embassy and ambassador in Italy focus on promoting China as the most suitable 'state-model' to follow and learn from, from the economy to the politics, and culturally attractive; all this is based on "international cooperation", "friendships" and "trust" among states, as the narratives emphasize. This is based on the successful Chinese example in coping with the Coronavirus and its peaceful rise along with increasing importance on the global stage. Geraci follows and promotes the same narratives highlighting more, as a current professor of finance, the Chinese economic example. Therefore, he promotes Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and China's investments, agreements, and decisions in the world economy. However, Italian scholars who have been studying contemporary Chinese politics and society for years, argue that hopes for a close and constant engagement with China has been and is a wish, but "without giving up that critical approach that should be the foundation to any effort of mutual understanding (Franceschini, et al., 2019).

The identity narratives discuss and portray China as a responsible global player ready to help those in need, as it did with Italy when COVID-19 arrived. It portrays itself as part of the global community and with only benign objectives which in the future will be a win-win for parties involved and improve the world's relationships and cooperation between countries. However, nowadays China, an authoritarian regime with little if no separation between the internal powers of the Party and those of the State, when endorsing 'the rule of law', investing in Africa, deporting Uighurs in 're-education' camps, the 'social credit system' still under experimentation, to mention a few examples, it lacks

transparency (Franceschini, et al., 2019). This relates directly to the next level of strategic narratives, the issue narratives.

These narratives outline how China has evolved and become a transparent, responsible, and reliable country that has been able to be an example to follow not only in times of crisis but also when cooperating, developing, and combining international partnerships. The embassy and Geraci relentlessly promote the Party-state with information on how it managed to successfully maintain the ‘zero-Covid’ policy with control but also high levels of collaboration among the population, along with the timely actions in advising and urging the world (including the WHO) about the virus; this quick Chinese response, says Rachman (2020), led to saving many lives around the globe. These narratives have been promoted with terms, pictures, and videos of medical equipment, masks, support, etc., along with interviews with some Italians. Geraci lastly highlighted how this ‘priority treatment’ from China is one of the advantages for Italy as it is involved in the BRI (Geraci, 2020).

In conclusion, the thesis answers the research question and sub-questions showing how Chinese strategic narratives are channeled through different sources and online platforms, both official and unofficial, Chinese and non-Chinese, highlighting differences and similarities in approaches and styles taken by the two chosen sources.

It also shed more light on the numerous future questions and points that need to be further researched to better understand how China's public diplomacy, PR, and propaganda influence Italy, Europe, and the whole world. As Italy is a G7 country, the decision to join the BRI can lead to a more present and powerful Chinese influence in the heart of Europe, along with a more “predatory approach to investments” in Italy and Europe (Barlett, 2019).

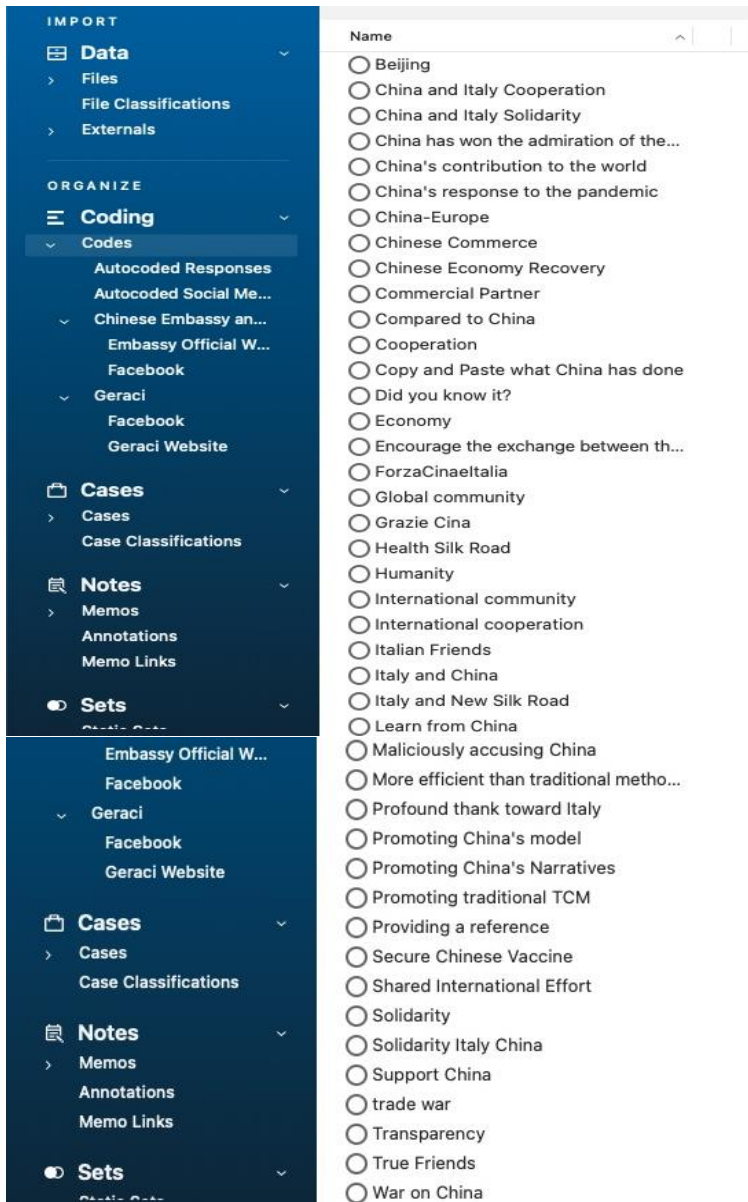
How do other former diplomatic figures, such as Geraci, portray or promote China in other European countries online? Which terms, images, and approaches do they use?

These topics are within the area of public diplomacy and Chinese propaganda, and as Soula et al. (2021) emphasize that online channels and social networks are going to be increasingly used by government representatives in the future to promote and achieve states’ objectives, the area needs further research.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – List of initial NVivo codes

Figure 1: Initial codes in the software NVivo



Note: the initial codes have been modified later and summarized into different groups such as: “promoting China’s models”, “emotional terms”, “cooperation”, “global community”, etc.

(Source: Mazzola, 2022)

Appendix 2:

Example 1: The two sources, the Chinese embassy in Italy (through its Facebook account and the Chinese ambassador), and Mr. Geraci are promoting the same Chinese narrative, in similar ways.

Figure 2: the Chinese embassy's official Facebook account promotes China's narrative about Chinese donations to Italy and the "undying friendship" between the two "ancient societies".



Note: Chinese Embassy in Italy promotes Chinese narratives regarding the Chinese donations of medical equipment blaming the US for publishing the “fake news”, from China’s eyes. Attached to the embassy’s post is a quote from the Chinese Deputy Director of the Information Department of the Chinese Foreign Minister Zhao Lijian.

Source: (Italia, 2020).

Figure 3: the Chinese embassy promotes the same narrative as above by publishing and spreading an interview of the Chinese ambassador in Italy Mr. Li Junhua.



adnkronos

UCRAINA RUSSIA VIDEO GUERRA COVID OGGI ITALIA PNR

ULTIM'ORA
BREAKING NEWS

CHIUDI

13:15 Ucraina, gen. Battisti: "No fly zone? Con mezzi inviati Zelensky se ne è creata una propria"

13:07 Operaio morto alla Farnesina, "funzionario sentì urla ma carabinieri non trovarono nessuno"

12:40 Ucraina, 2 guerra finirà qu

Ambasciatore cinese: "Gli aiuti? Siamo amici, vogliamo salvare vite"

05 aprile 2020 | 11.52
LETTURA: 6 minuti

f t ...

"Inaccettabili le accuse degli Stati Uniti sui dati falsificati, fango sul nostro impegno"



Note: Chinese Ambassador Mr. Li Junhua promotes China's narratives regarding the Chinese donations of medical equipment blaming the US for publishing the "fake news", from China's eyes, as the above one.

Source: (Italia, 2020)

Figure 4: former Undersecretary of State at the Italian Minister of the Economic Development Mr. Michele Geraci promotes the same above-mentioned China's narrative.



Note: Screenshot 4: former Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Economic Development promoting China's 'donations' through the narrative of "friendship" and "Belt and Road Initiative" as a result of Italy signing the MoU under the Chinese BRI on Facebook.

Source: (Geraci, 2020).

Example 2: “undying friendship” between China and Italy was promoted in different ways, but with the same themes.

Figure 5: Geraci promotes China’s narrative “friendship” with different words.



Note: Mr. Geraci promotes the China-Italy’s friendship using “solidarity” and “support” between the two countries as narratives.

Source: (Geraci, 2020).

Figure 6: Chinese Embassy in Italy promoting China-Italy's friendship through actions and "thanks".



Note: Screenshot 6: Chinese Embassy in Italy promoting China-Italy's friendship through actions and "thanks" from Italians who received help from the CCCC (the China Communications Construction Company) due to their partnership between them and the Trieste Port (an agreement under the BRI). Source: (Italia, 2020).

Example 3: Promoting China-Italy's cooperation, partnership, and agreements; in this case, the BRI.

Figure 7: the Chinese embassy promotes China and Italy's agreements and cooperation.



The screenshot shows a news article from Global Times. At the top left is the logo 'GT GLOBAL TIMES' with the tagline 'Discover China, Discover the World'. To the right is a 'Download App' button. The main headline is 'BRI extends new chapter for cooperation'. Below the headline, the author is listed as 'Li Junhua' and the date as '10:53 Jun 22 2020'. A central photograph shows Li Junhua, the Chinese Ambassador to Italy, wearing a dark suit and glasses, standing in front of a bookshelf and a Chinese flag. Below the photo is a caption: 'Li Junhua, Chinese Ambassador to Italy Photo: Courtesy of the Chinese Embassy in Italy'. The article text begins with: 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is of great significance and plays a special role in guiding China-Italy cooperation. In March 2019, in the presence of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, China and Italy signed a memorandum of understanding'.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is of great significance and plays a special role in guiding China-Italy cooperation.

In March 2019, in the presence of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, China and Italy signed a memorandum of understanding on jointly building the Belt and Road, which attracted widespread attention and had a far-reaching impact.

This year the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused global economic and social disruption in all countries, has created the most severe situation since World War II. It is more important than ever for all parties to strengthen multilateral cooperation, and it is more urgent and practical than ever to push forward the BRI.

Note: Screenshot 7: Chinese Ambassador Mr. Li Junhua, in an interview released at Global Times in June 2020, promotes the Chinese narrative regarding the Chinese 'One Belt One Road Initiative' as a boost to China-Italy's partnerships.

Source: (Italia, 2020)

Figure 8: Geraci, through an interview, promotes China and Italy's agreements and cooperation.

Economic development between China and the West

The West holds the view that economic development must be accompanied by an opening-up of the political system and perceives elections as being synonymous with democracy, while China's economic performance indicates that economic and political paths do not need to converge and that democracy is not to be measured simply, like the West believes, only by the electoral process. Rather, it should be measured by the results that the government offers to its citizens. The recent white paper on democracy released by the Chinese government lays **emphasis on the difference between process-oriented and result-oriented democracies.**

The MOU between Italy and China is intended to bridge these gaps and bring people from China, Europe and the West together. **Our vision of cooperation includes academic, scientific as well as commercial exchanges.** I myself may be one of the most vivid examples of such a vision, working for part of the year as a professor at the University of Nottingham in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, and spending the remaining months back in Italy to help the Italian and the broader European public understand the recent developments in China and inform corporations of any potential business opportunities.

Note: Mr. Michele Geraci in an interview released for the newspaper China Daily in 2020 and published on his website, promotes the Chinese narrative regarding the Chinese 'One Belt One Road Initiative' as a 'boost' to China-Italy's cooperation.

Source: (Geraci, 2020)

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