

# “In Beijing They Eat Snakes And Then Pig Out”: Xenophobia, Geopolitics, and the Role of the Italian Far-Right in Covid- 19 Constructions of China

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Well before the high rate of infections grew and lay citizens became affected by COVID-19 in Italy, fear, news from China, fake news, and the statements of some politicians, were already circulating. These circumstances lead to a growing wave of diffidence towards the Chinese communities in the country, culminating with acts of racial violence. As early as January, in Como and Cantù, the neo-fascist party *Forza Nuova* began to stick posters in Chinese shops and restaurant windows proclaiming: "Coronavirus? Buy Italian!"<sup>1</sup>.

This article will contribute to our reading of the events that took place in Italy during the first weeks of the pandemic, and in the phase that immediately preceded it, from the perspective of how China and the Chinese people's role in the crisis was judged, and furthermore what this might mean for the future of ethnic relationships within Italy.

In the days following the introduction of pro-Italian propaganda in Chinese-owned businesses, the initiatives of this small right-wing political group began spreading to other cities in northern Italy<sup>2</sup>. Supposedly, this was motivated by the fact that Chinese traders had continuous contacts with a distribution chain that passes through Wuhan. Although the provocation to boycott those activities did not contain overtly racist epithets, it was written that Italian-products had to be prioritised in order that people "enjoy absolute safety in terms of quality, monitoring and transparency of the production chain".

Beyond the *Forza Nuova* initiative, the psychosis produced by the virus had started to have certain effect in Italian public opinion as well. In fact, in February, and even before the establishment of the Northern Italian 'red zones', the largest 'Chinatowns' in the country (Milan & Prato, Tuscany) were seen to be completely deserted by the populace.

A short time after infections began to be reported, so too did acts of physical violence towards the Chinese community in Italy. Among the many cases of verbal harassment suffered by individuals of Chinese ethnicity we find: stone-throwing against Chinese students at the academy of fine arts in Frosinone<sup>3</sup>; a man denied entry to a bar in Veneto, with the barista reprimanding: "you have the coronavirus, you cannot enter", followed by a customer hitting him on the head with a bottle<sup>4</sup>; two Chinese-Italian men attacked with crushed bottles whilst being taunted "go away, you bring the coronavirus"<sup>5</sup>; a 40-year-old Chinese woman (resident in Italy since 1997) first insulted and then assaulted in full light of day whilst she was waiting at the traffic lights<sup>6</sup>; the tragicomic scene

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1 Primacomo.it, January 31, 2020

2 Corriere.it, February 2, 2020

3 Unionesarda.it, February 3, 2020

4 Open.online, February 26, 2020

5 Torinooggi.it, February 12, 2020

6 Lastampa.it, 22 February 2020

of a Filipino waiter who mistaken for Chinese and beaten in a bus in Cagliari<sup>7</sup>; and at the end of February, a sign asking the Chinese not to enter "as a precaution" was displayed at a bar in a village in Carnia<sup>8</sup>.

It is important to reflect upon the fact that this discrimination was perpetrated against the Chinese in Italy at the same time as the growing presence of an outbreak on Italian soil had begun to result in Italians abroad becoming targets of discriminatory behaviours themselves<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the fact that behind the perpetrators of these violent acts make no political affiliations, these manifestations of racism have nevertheless found their way into reckless statements by some politicians and national newspapers. In this regard, the words spoken by the president of the Veneto region, and a politician of 'The League' (a far-right, anti-migration nationalist party that previously fought for Northern Italy's independence from Rome), Luca Zaia, on February 27<sup>th</sup>, in an interview with a local broadcaster prove very interesting:

*"Do you know why we can [say we have] 116 positive cases after a week [...] and we only have 28 [people] in hospital? Do you know why? Because the hygiene that our people have, the Venetians, the Italian citizens, the 'cultural training' we have of taking a shower, of washing [our bodies], of washing our hands often, of a special cleaning regime that is particular to us. Also the food, the cleaning, the hygiene rules, the refrigerator, the expiry dates of the food [...] [All of this] has something to do with it because it is a cultural fact. I think China has paid a great deal for this epidemic that it has had, because we have all seen them eating live rats or other stuff anyway. [...] the virus must find cleanliness, we are a bit maniac about this eh! And in fact, we always say 'children no longer eat any stuff that falls on the ground'"<sup>10</sup>.*

Obviously, these declarations aroused scandal in national public opinion. His claims have been accused of racism, causing a sensation that resulted in Zaia sending a letter of apology to the Chinese embassy in Italy. However, this statement makes clear how some well-known, influential politicians read the situation a few days after the crisis outbreak. References to 'taking a shower', 'cleaning the refrigerator' and the expiry date of foods, serves to underline both a dangerous underestimation of the imminent danger as well as a strong prejudice towards the Chinese people and their so-called 'cultural practices'.

Prejudice and disinformation of this kind have also circulated on the web. At the end of February on various social networks, one could see a video of a Chinese boy eating the head of a dead and raw mouse. The caption read:

"if the Chinese continue with this diet there will always be these catastrophic epidemics".

Clearly the video was a fake, and only later it was discovered that the perpetrator is not new to creating these kind of spectacles and is already known in China for provocative videos, the aim of which is to become viral on the web (for example, he shoots videos such as one where people are encouraged drink detergent- not exactly a traditional Chinese drink)<sup>11</sup>.

Even more shocking is the viral video where small mice are served on a plate and eaten alive, taken from British sensationalist news outlet 'The Daily Mail' and broadcast in Italy by the MP of 'The League' Claudio Borghi. On the video, he commented that new-born, live mice are an historical Chinese dish that "today it seems prohibited, but are still consumed". A few days later an online newspaper made it clear that although this may have been a dish popular in the seventh and tenth centuries AD in the Chinese province of Guangdong (in the Canton area), there were doubts about the authenticity of the contemporary video and that, importantly, the dish is *absolutely not*

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7 Ilfattoquotidiano.it, February 7, 2020

8 Ilfriuli.it, February 24, 2020

9 Niusdiario.es, February 26, 2020

10 Ilfattoquotidiano.it, February 28, 2020

11 Open.online, March 1, 2020

widespread in Chinese cuisine<sup>12</sup>. But it is not only the web that fuels the fire, it is also the print media. For example, the 'Libero' newspaper, known for being close to the political position of Matteo Salvini, (former minister of the interior and current leader of 'The League') published an article in late January that framed snakes as a wild Covid-19 'reservoir'; headed with the scandalous title: *IN BEIJING THEY EAT SNAKES AND THEN PIG OUT*<sup>13</sup>.

As Italy increasingly became the 'patient of Europe', all corona-politics on Italian soil were focused on China, and this could not fail to enter the public debate, especially as medical aid was sent from Beijing. To be sure, the Italian right-wing were there on the front line. A few hours after medical supplies arrived from China came a statement from Giorgia Meloni, secretary of the 'Brothers of Italy' nationalist party:

"Now someone tries to make the Chinese like the saviours of the homeland because they are lending us their masks, well, I don't care because in any case they brought us the virus"<sup>14</sup>.

Soon after, Meloni's ally Matteo Salvini (the aforementioned bright star in the firmament of the European extreme right) expressed anti-China sentiments along the same lines.

Although Beijing has limited itself to sending doctors and medical equipment to Italy, Salvini even went so far as to warn the public about a baseless danger that the Chinese may violate the privacy of Italian citizens: "I would not like to hand over health data", he stated, and specified that there was a risk inherent in handing over "private Italian data to someone who does not respond to a democratic country"<sup>15</sup>. To make matters worse, a few days later a 2015 video from the Italian public television network 'Rai' became viral on the web. This programme had reported on an article from respected academic journal *Nature*, that spoke of a particular coronavirus (not Covid-19 specifically) that was capable of infecting its engineer in the Chinese laboratory of its birth. This video, which had already begun doing the rounds on WhatsApp chats, was republished with alarmist tones on Salvini's Facebook page, accompanied by the caption: "Crazy! 2015, the Chinese create super-coronavirus with bats and mice", with Salvini calling for 'urgent interpellation' from Foreign Minister Di Maio<sup>16</sup>.

The xenophobic, political storm had reached gigantic proportions. Although the national scientific community and the Rai news outlet itself specified that it was *not* the same type of coronavirus that caused the pandemic in Italy and the world in recent months, in mid-April 'The League' leader declared: "The virus has come from China all over the world, and today we read that the Chinese economy is the only one in the world to grow, and a lot." He concluded his thoughts by musing that "thinking wrong [things] is a sin, but ..."<sup>17</sup>.

Beijing's 'spectre' over Italy has today been completely cleared through customs by the national right. In the coming years, the role that China will play in the Italian public debate (and beyond) will be directly proportional to the increase in its political and economic weight on the world stage. We can bet that the pandemic crisis and the new version of the right-wing politics xenophobia-lead 'yellow peril', that sees the Chinese as the 'greaser', will remain in the collective imagination for a long time, conditioning the political rhetoric of the right for as long.

The Italian expert of Chinese affairs, Federico Rampini, argues that Beijing's responsibility for managing the contagion is 'enormous' and 'unforgivable', judging their behaviour as 'criminal' for in his opinion: "this epidemic

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12 Open.online, March 2, 2020

13 Libero, January 24, 2020

14 Giorgia Meloni interviewed at "Non è arena", La7 channel, March 15, 2020

15 Libero.it, March 18, 2020

16 Ansa.it, March 25, 2020; Ilsole24ore.com, March 25, 2020

17 Affaritaliani.it, April 14, 2020

would never have become a global pandemic if the Chinese authoritarian regime had not lied first of all to its citizens, and then to the whole world, for a month".<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, Beijing's mistakes in managing the emergency at its inception will have a significant impact on the perception of Chinese-Italian communities within Italy. All this, combined with the very heavy economic repercussions that will devastate the already weakened Italian economy, will likely influence national public opinion, giving space to the already notable growth of the consensus that the parties of the nationalist right have been enjoying for some years now. Now, more than ever, it will be important to monitor their hate-spreading and ensure that migrant communities are protected in the weeks and months to come.

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*Francesco holds a Masters in Contemporary History from the University of Pisa. His research interests include social and medical history, race, and the history of international relations.*

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<sup>18</sup> Federico Rampini interviewed in "L'aria che tira", La7 channel, 20 March 2020