



Studi e Ricerche

Ricerche sull'Oriente



Gli italiani in Cina nel periodo moderno e contemporaneo

Testimonianze, documenti, biografie

a cura di Davor Antonucci e Gao Changxu



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4. Cinematic Encounters. Perspectives on Sino-Italian Film Co-productions

Chiara Lepri

4.1 Introduction

The history of the contacts between Italy and China in the cinematic field can be traced back to the beginning of the XX century, when the entrepreneur Amerigo Enrico Lauro (1879-1937) moved from Naples to Shanghai to invest in the film sector¹. Formally recognised co-productions, however, become feasible only much later – after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on November 6, 1970 and, crucially, the signing of the ‘Agreement on Film Co-production Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People’s Republic of China’ (hereinafter ‘Agreement’) on December 4, 2004, brought into force through ratification in the late 2012 and early 2013². Despite earlier collaborative ventures – marked by varying degrees of institutional and creative cooperation – such as *China* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1972)³, *Marco Polo* (Giuliano Montaldo, 1982), and *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987), the corpus of works officially recognised under this framework remains strikingly small: *Coffee* (2016) and *The Italian Recipe* (2022), directed by Cristiano Bortone (b. 1968).

¹ Bernardini 1982, Fu 2023.

² As per art.1 of the Agreement (2004), “a ‘co-production film’ refers to a film that is co-financed and produced by producers of the two countries in and out the territories of the Italian Republic and the People’s Republic of China [...]”.

³ See Note to the Filmography.

This empirical puzzle – robust diplomatic and regulatory scaffolding but only two officially acknowledged outcomes – makes the Italian case analytically relevant and timely. It matters for at least three reasons. First, co-production is a central instrument of contemporary film policy and cultural diplomacy; analysing when it fails to scale is as revealing as charting success. Second, European and Chinese audiovisual policies have been in flux, with implications for bilateral agreements and for the strategic positioning of a medium-sized industry such as Italy's. Third, post-pandemic production and platform ecologies have shifted risk, financing, and development logics in ways that reconfigure what counts as a viable "Sino-Italian" project. Beyond the scarcity of officially recognised outcomes, the case is empirically salient because co-production acts as a gatekeeping mechanism for market access and risk-sharing: for a medium-sized industry, the Chinese theatrical and platform market is structurally important, while the 2021 expiry of the 2004 Agreement and post-COVID financing realignments make the question of "why only two" both industrially urgent and academically relevant.

This chapter examines Sino-Italian film co-productions from a diachronic perspective. First, it situates them within the longer history of the cultural relations between Italy and China⁴, reconstructing key diplomatic and industrial interactions and the collaborative projects that punctuated them. Second, it inscribes in a prosopographic approach aligned with the 'Biographical Database of Italians in China' (DBIC; Antonucci 2021, Sapienza University of Rome)⁵ to analyse how co-production initiatives have been enabled or constrained by diplomatic milestones, regulatory frameworks including the 2004 Agreement and its interpretative instruments – and industrial practices. The chapter then offers a discussion of recent collaborative

⁴ See Borsa 1961, Bertuccioli, Masini 1996, Samarani, De Giorgi 2011, Pini 2011, Beltrame 2019, Brezzi 2020.

⁵ Principal investigator: Prof. Davor Antonucci (Italian Institute of Oriental Studies – ISO, Sapienza University of Rome). Members of the project: Prof. Alessandra Brezzi (ISO Department), Prof. Federica Casalin (ISO Department), Prof. Maurizio Marinelli (University of Sussex), PhD Silvia Nico (ISO Department), PhD Gao Changxu (ISO Department), PhD Chiara Lepri (ISO Department).

projects led by Cristiano Bortone – *Coffee* (2016) and *The Italian Recipe* (2022) – informed by an original interview with the filmmaker⁶.

The contribution is twofold. First, it systematizes Film Studies and Sinological scholarship on Italy-China cultural relations and on Italian filmmakers' engagements with China (including *Orienting Italy. China through the Lens of Italian Filmmakers*⁷ and a recent works in the *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*⁸), moving beyond descriptive chronicle. Second, it advances a mechanism-based explanation for the low yield of officially recognised co-productions by combining a bilingual reading of policy instruments with a DBIC-aligned mapping of practitioner networks. Moving from early encounters through the consolidation of a policy architecture to close analysis of recent co-productions, the chapter foregrounds production choices (genre, content adaptation, partnership models) and the institutional conditions that shape them. Accordingly, content governance (approvals, "sensitive topics") and discursive priorities are treated not as background noise but as constitutive parameters of co-production design. In so doing, it sets the stage for further inquiry into the legal, organisational, and creative factors that could enable sustainable transnational production between Italy and China.

4.2 Early cinematic encounters

The history of contacts between Italy and China is long, though not without interruptions and contingencies. Ancient Latin and Chinese sources offer divergent accounts regarding legations reportedly dispatched during the time of the Roman Empire and the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), none of which, however, appear to have been successfully completed⁹. It was rather along the routes of the Silk Roads that more concrete, if intermittent, exchanges gradually emerged over the centuries – most notably through the travels of

⁶ Lepri 2023c. The interview (semi-structured) was conducted by Chiara Lepri via Zoom on June 23, 2023. Duration 1 hour, Italian language.

⁷ McDonald 2022.

⁸ Bona 2014, 2015, Di Chiara 2014, Liu 2014.

⁹ Bertuccioli, Masini 1996.

merchants such as Marco Polo (1254-1324) and missionaries including Matteo Ricci (1552-1610).

As far as Sino-Italian cinematic contacts are concerned, their history can be dated to the first decades of the XX century, after the so-called “cinema of the origins”¹⁰ arrived in China. During the regency of Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908), the Neapolitan native entrepreneur Amerigo Enrico Lauro (1879-1937) moved to Shanghai to start a new business in film production and exhibition¹¹.

Since the 1900s, China-Italy cinematic relations have experienced up and downs, determined by historical and political conditions. Nonetheless, Sino-Italian contacts developed progressively during the XX century.

The first institutional Sino-Italian cooperation projects in the cinematic field saw the light in the 1930s. During the so-called “golden period” that originated from the signing of the ‘Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation’ (1928) between the Republic of China and the Kingdom of Italy¹², bilateral exchanges became more frequent and so did cinematic relations. In this framework, the mission of the director of the Italian film propaganda institute “Istituto L.U.C.E”. Baron Alessandro Sardi (1889-1965), sent by the League of Nations (1931-1932), promoted in China a genre then referred to as “educational cinematography” and to some extent fostered China-Italy cinematic interactions¹³. However, the Italian aggression to Ethiopia (1935-1936) was meant to freeze soon the relations with China, which had an interest in defending its position regarding the attack of Japan on Manchuria (1931) in the international debate¹⁴.

In the 1940s, Sino-Italian cinematic contacts proceeded, even though there were relevant changes in the institutional and political forms of both Italy and China. On the one hand, on June 2, 1946, the Italian Republic was founded. The elections were won by the Christian Democracy party and the Italian Fascist government was replaced. On

¹⁰ Gaudreault, Gunning 1989, Casetti 2003.

¹¹ Bernardini 1982, Fu, Indelicato, 2017, Fu, 2023.

¹² Samarani, De Giorgi 2011.

¹³ Johnson 2008, Johnson 2012, Li 2019, pp. 85-92. The Italian national archive Istituto Luce holds original audiovisual material of Sardi’s mission, filmed by Mario Craveri (1902-1990). See Lepri 2023a, 2024.

¹⁴ Borsa 1979, pp. 406-409.

the other hand, on October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong announced in Tiananmen Square the institution of the People's Republic of China, and the Nationalist government relocated to Taiwan. Nevertheless, the cinematic connections between Italy and China progressed. To quote an example, in 1950 a Chinese film was screened for the first time in an Italian film festival¹⁵. As diplomatic relations had not been established yet with the People's Republic of China, the mainland Nationalist China produced *Tianzi di yi hao* 天字第一号 (title translation, "The number one of the celestial host", Dir. Tu Guangqi 屠光启, 1946) was selected for the 11th edition's out-of-competition section of the Venice Film Festival¹⁶.

In the second half of the XX century, some Italian filmmakers visited China and filmed newsreels, documentaries, and travelogues. Among these, *Behind the Great Wall* (1958) by Carlo Lizzani (1922-2013) was the first documentary to be shot around the country by foreigners after the founding of the People's Republic of China¹⁷. Moreover, within the framework of the dialogues between the Italian Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party¹⁸, abundant material was produced on the occasions of the visits of the Italian Communist Party representatives in China (e.g., *PCI Delegation to China*, 1959; *The Visit to China of Comrade Enrico Berlinguer*, 1980). The footage is stored at the Audiovisual Archive of the Democratic and Labour Movement (AAMOD) in Rome. While this section focuses on Italian initiatives, the broader ecology also includes Sino-American ventures and PRC partnerships with other European and Asian industries; these comparators are mobilised later to contextualize Italy's distinct trajectory.

¹⁵ Bertuccioli 1956, p. 87.

¹⁶ Venice International Film Festival was created in 1932 on the initiative of Giuseppe Volpi (former Minister of Finance, 1877-1947), Antonio Maraini (politician, sculptor, and art critique, 1886-1963) and Luciano De Feo (director of the L.U.C.E. Institute, 1894-1974), and had connections with Mussolini's government. On the participation of Chinese films to the festival see Pollacchi 2018, 2021.

¹⁷ Bonzi 1959, Lavagnino 2003, Lizzani 2007, McDonald Carolan 2022.

¹⁸ Bordone 1983, Pini 2011.

4.3 The development of cinematic contacts

On November 6, 1970, the Italian Republic, and the People's Republic of China formally instituted diplomatic relations, and Sino-Italian cinematic contacts became more intense. The circulation of Chinese films in Italy and Italian films in China rose. As far as Italian cinema is concerned, films such as *Zorro* (1975) by Duccio Tessari (1926-1994) and the melodramatic *The Last Snows of Spring* (1973) by Raimondo del Balzo (1939-1995) were highly successful in China¹⁹. While in Italy popular interest in Chinese cinema started to grow in the late Seventies with the distribution of Hong Kong kung-fu films (*gongfupian* 功夫片), which are to be considered 'cultural symbols of Chinese cinematography', as Li stated²⁰. A relevant boost for the diffusion of Chinese cinema in the Italian peninsula was linked to the first European retrospective, organized in Turin in 1981. "Ombre elettriche" (translation: electric shadows) carried the sign of Marco Müller (b. 1959), then director of a series of film festivals (e.g. Pesaro, Rotterdam, Locarno, Venice, and Rome) and nicknamed "the Marco Polo of Chinese cinema" for his ability to bring Chinese films in major international cinematic venues²¹.

Since the institution of diplomatic relations, cinema has been a possible path to enhance Sino-Italian contacts.

To this extent, a state-supported cinematic project was ideated. Namely, *China* (1972) by Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007). The documentary filmed scenes of everyday life in some of China's largest cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Suzhou. However, *China* had a cold reception in both Italy and PRC, for its representation and depiction of traditional Chinese culture²².

While PRC completed international film co-productions, such as with Japan (*Tenpyō no iraka* 天平之甍, Kumai Kei 熊井啓, 1980; *Mikan no taikyoku* 未完の対局, Satō Junya 佐藤純彌 and Duan Jishun 段吉順,

¹⁹ See Müller in Caprara 2017.

²⁰ Li 2016, p. 186.

²¹ Tsai 2018, p. 184. The nickname to Müller was given by the former director of Taiwan Film Archive (now Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, *Guojia dianying ji shetng wenhua zhongxin* 國家電影及視聽文化中心) Edmond Wong 黃建業 (b. 1954), Tsai 2018, p. 184.

²² Brezzi 2010, Liu 2014.

1982), a turning point in the history of China-Italy cinematic contacts was marked by Giuliano Montaldo's TV series *Marco Polo* (1982). It resulted from the collaborative production between the Italian National Radio and Television network RAI and the Chinese Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC, *Zhongguo dianying hezuo zhipian gongsi* 中国电影合作制片公司)²³. *Marco Polo* was based on the renowned travels of the Venetian merchant to China and was distributed as an eight-episode and four-episode TV series respectively in Italy and China²⁴.

Being a benchmark for the implementation of multiple mediation strategies to overcome cultural and linguistic differences in film production, *Marco Polo* prepared the scene for new cinematic projects²⁵.

The second relevant collaborative film project was Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987). The movie shared many practical elements with the previous production, including some members of the teams and the shooting material left on site in 1982²⁶. At the Oscars in 1988 *The Last Emperor* was awarded nine categories, representing a fruitful example of Sino-Italian cinema. A further structural shift in this period was the post-1997 integration of Hong Kong's industry into the Mainland regulatory and industrial field (e.g. CEPA arrangements), which altered talent flows, financing channels, and the treatment of "domestic" versus "imported" titles; these changes fed into quota and approval practices and indirectly conditioned how non-Hong Kong partners – including Italy – could position prospective collaborations.

Worth mentioning is the fact that *The Last Emperor* was also a turning point for the mobility of Chinese filmmakers to and from Italy. While the flux of Italian filmmakers to China is highly studied²⁷, the one of Chinese film professionals still represents a topic to be further investigated. Here is recalled the experience of the Beijing-born film director Ning Ying 宁瀛 (b. 1959). Formally considered part of the "Fifth Generation" (*di wu dai* 第五代) of Chinese filmmakers, she studied in Rome at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC)

²³ Di Chiara 2014.

²⁴ Lepri 2023b, pp. 110-111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁷ Bona 2016, 2018, Fu and Indelicato 2017, McDonald Carolan 2022.

since 1982. As explained in an interview for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while studying at the CSC, Ning was a volunteer in the troupe of *Ginger and Fred* (1986) by Federico Fellini (1920-1993)²⁸, and before signing the so-called “Beijing Trilogy” (*Beijing sanbuqu* 北京三部曲: *For Fun*, 1993, *On the Beat*, 1995, *I Love Beijing*, 2001) she was assistant director to Bernardo Bertolucci for *The Last Emperor* (1987). Ning can thus be framed as one of the first Chinese filmmakers to move between Italy and China and still stands as a relevant voice within the dimension of Sino-Italian cinema²⁹.

The legacy of collaborative film projects realized during the second half of the XX century brought to the formalization of Sino-Italian co-productions. In 2004 the “Agreement on Film Co-production Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People’s Republic of China” was officially signed. Later, activities to enhance film collaborations were organized.

4.4 Sino-Italian co-productions: agreements, regulations, projects and events

Since China and Italy established diplomatic relations in 1970, cinema was seen as a channel to implement connections between the two countries. To this extent, after the documentary *China* by Antonioni, state-supported cinematic projects that involved Sino-Italian collaboration were activated, such as *Marco Polo* (1982) and *The Last Emperor* (1987)³⁰. It was not until December 4, 2004, that the “Agreement on Film Co-production Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People’s Republic of China” was signed.

²⁸ Farnesina 2018.

²⁹ With reference to the young Chinese artists residing in Italy in the 2020s, there is Zheng Ningyuan 郑宁远 (b. 1989). Member of the WUXU art collective (*Wuxu* 务虚), founded in Bologna in 2017, he filmed the documentary *Racism is a Virus* (2021), which received the Canada-Italy Innovation Award in 2021 within the framework of the project “Vulnerability and Care During Covid-19-Induced Anti-Asian Racism and Violence in Italy and Canada” (VulCa2021), coordinated by Professor Valentina Pedone (University of Florence) together with Professor Zhang Gaoheng (University of British Columbia) (Wuxu n.d.). On the Wuxu collective, see Picerni (2018).

³⁰ Lepri 2023b.

Here, a note is required on the PRC's internationalization strategies of the cinema sector. Jiang Zemin's leadership (1993-2003) launched the so-called "Going-Out Policy" (*zouchuqu zhanlüe* 走出去战略), to foster the Chinese presence abroad. As Yang (2016, pp. 85-86) observed, in 2001 the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, *Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju* 国家广播电视总局) identified three areas where to implement the policy: "the organization of Chinese film exhibitions; participation in film festivals; and the global export of Chinese films based on encouraging international releases at film theatres, on DVD, on TV and the Internet". As of the "Film Regulations" (*Dianying guanli tiaoli* 电影管理条例) approved by the PRC State Council on December 25, 2001, a new international policy for the promotion of Sino-Foreign co-production was put in the agenda. On July 6, 2004, the Film Bureau of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) issued the "Regulations on the Management of Sino-Foreign Film Co-productions" (*Zhongwai hezuo shezhi dianying guanli guiding* 中外合作摄制电影管理规定) and in December 2004 the Agreement was signed.

According to the Agreement, film co-productions consist of feature films, animated films, scientific films, and documentaries (TV films and digital films included) (art. 1). Co-productions must be funded by registered legal entities (Italy), or have received a permit, or "have good professional ability and strong financial backing" (PRC) (art. 3). Concerning the percentage of the financial contribution of each party, the amount can be discussed but for the minimum quota of the 20% (art. 4). The proportion of the technical and artistic cast of each part is negotiated between the two producers according to the script (art. 5), while post-production is based where the location shooting takes place (art. 9)³¹.

The Agreement marked a pivotal step for the establishment of Sino-Italian cinematic official relations and concretized the international cultural policies of Italy and China. A practical example is the execution of art. 4, which states that the co-production films are acknowledged with Italian and Chinese dual nationality. To this extent,

³¹ With reference to the composition of the cast, there seem to be the non-written rule that one third of the actors should be Chinese, as stated by the filmmaker Cristiano Bortone in an interview, Lepri 2023c.

co-productions are not included in the PRC's foreign film limitation quota³².

However, the process of the enactment of the Agreement followed a slow path, which characterized the development of co-productions during the 2000s. To quote an example, in 2006 Gianni Amelio's *The Missing Star* was the first Italian movie to be filmed in China after *The Last Emperor* (1987), with funding from France, Switzerland, and Italy³³. Being approved by Chinese Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC – *Zhongguo dianying hezuo zhipian gongsi* 中国电影合作制片公司, the competent authority for co-production formalities management, as per the Agreement, art. 2), it received technical and logistical support from Shanghai Film Group (*Shanghai dianying jituan gongsi* 上海电影集团公司). Nonetheless, the film was recognized as “assisted production” instead of “co-production”³⁴, underlining a lack in the execution of the Agreement.

The enforcement of the 2004 Agreement was not immediate. It took effect only nine years later (2013), while different interpretation documents were issued (Table 1).

Year	Document	Place of the signature	Date of the signature	Party
2004	Agreement on Film Co-production Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China 《中华人民共和国政府与意大利共和国政府关于合作摄制电影的协议》	Beijing	December 4	For the Government of the Italian Republic Giuliano Urbani For the Government of the People's Republic of China Zhao Shi
2008	Explanatory Note to Article 10 of the Agreement on Film Co-production Between the	Rome	March 19	Director General of Department of Cinema, Ministry of

³² Gagliardi in CRI 2016.

³³ Bona 2014, McDonald Carolan 2022.

³⁴ Bona 2018, p. 191.

	Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China 《对中华人民共和国政府与意大利共和国政府关于合作摄制电影的协议的第十条释义》			Cultural Heritage, and Activities Gaetano Blandini (Italy)
		Beijing	April 10	Director General of Film Bureau, State Administration of Radio, Film & Television Tong Gang (China)
2014	Procedural Rules of the Agreement on Film Co-production Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China 《中华人民共和国政府与意大利共和国政府关于合作摄制电影的协议》附件 《合拍影片程序》	Beijing	June 18	For the Government of the Italian Republic Ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of the Italian Republic in China Alberto Bradanini For the People's Republic of China Government Director General of Film Bureau, State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television Zhang Hongsen

Table 1. Official documents related to film co-productions signed by the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China.

As shown in Table 1, the “Explanatory Note to Article 10” (hereinafter Explanatory Note) was issued in 2008 to provide details on the application of the Agreement. Article 10 stated that the co-financed and jointly produced films were to be examined and approved by the competent authorities of the parties. The Explanatory

Note further specified that the script and the project of the film must be provisionally approved by the Authority of each country, according to internal rules and regulations. The provisional approval is to be followed by the definitive approval. The latter is granted to the completed film whether the product is consistent with the values of the previous inspection and works. A permit for public release at the national or international level is then issued. To a certain extent, the Explanatory Note strengthened the control over the film by the competent institutions of the two countries. *Stricto sensu*, emphasized the importance of content selection in the field of Sino-Italian co-productions, as sensitive topics are to be avoided³⁵.

Even though the 2008 Explanatory Note fostered the implementation of Sino-Italian official exchanges and the launch of a series of initiatives both in China and in Italy, co-production projects did not see the light soon.

On September 25, 2012, the President of the Italian Republic promulgated Law No. 173, authorizing the enactment and enforcement of the Agreement (Official Gazette no. 237, October 10, 2012). Italy and China then signed the “Ratification and Execution of the Agreement”, respectively on December 12, 2012, and on April 16, 2013. The ratification became effective on April 17, 2013 (Ministry of Culture, 2021).

The signing of the “Ratification and Execution of the Agreement” between 2012 and 2013 marked a sort of ‘new era’ of Sino-Italian film co-productions, as the first projects were sponsored, and a series of activities were launched to implement the sector. The projects and the

³⁵ According to Article 16 of the Film Industry Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China (*Zhonghua renmin Gongheguo dianying chanye cujinfa* 中华人民共和国电影产业促进法, Guowuyuan, 2016), films are prohibited from containing content that: (1) violates the Constitution or incites resistance to its implementation, laws, or administrative regulations; (2) endangers national unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, state secrets, national security, or the country’s dignity and interests, or promotes terrorism or extremism; (3) denigrates ethnic cultural traditions, incites ethnic hatred or discrimination, distorts history or historical figures, or undermines ethnic unity; (4) undermines state religious policies or promotes cults or superstition; (5) harms public morality, disrupts social order or stability, promotes obscenity, gambling, drugs, violence, terror, or criminal activity; (6) infringes on minors’ rights or harms their physical or mental health; (7) insults, defames, or violates the privacy or legal rights of others; and (8) includes any other content prohibited by laws or administrative regulations. On the practices of how contents are censored or included in the Chinese propaganda agenda see Roberts 2018 and Edney 2014.

activities are investigated in the following paragraphs, in terms of present and future perspectives on Sino-Italian co-productions.

Firstly, as far as cinematic projects are concerned, the following titles were announced after the ratification of the Agreement. Namely, *Everlasting Moments* by Maurizio Sciarra (b. 1955) (co-written with Ni Zhen 倪震, screenwriter of *Raise the Red Lantern* by Zhang Yimou), *Hibiscus* by Paolo Logli (b. 1960) and Alessandro Pondi (b. 1972) (produced by Italian EMME and Tianjin TV *Tianjin dianshitai* 天津电视台), the documentary *China Loves Italy* by Ignazio Agosta (1948-2021)³⁶, and *There is Always a Reason* (Chinese title, *Shichu you yin* 事出有姻) by Dario Baldi (b. 1976)³⁷. However, most of the projects did not reach the big screen, or the information on the distribution was lacking. To quote an example, as Bona noted³⁸, *There is Always a Reason* was filmed in 2012 between Favignana (Sicily) and Chengdu (Sichuan). The film was supposed to be the first joint co-production between private Chinese and Italian companies, as the bilateral collaboration was enacted through different stages of the production, from screenwriting to multinational cast management. However, the comedy co-produced and starred by the actress Maria Grazia Cucinotta (b. 1968) has never been distributed.

The difficulties that occurred in the realization of the co-productions showed that procedural rules and standards were needed to foster the efficacy of the Agreement, as reported by the representative of ANICA (Italian Cinema Industry Association) in Beijing Andrea Cicini³⁹. On June 18, 2014, the “Procedural Rules of the Agreement” were subscribed, clearing the way for the enhancement of Sino-Italian co-productions. In particular, the document provided details about the identification and activation of co-productions (art. 1, art. 2), post-production and language (art. 5), layout and contents of co-production contracts (art. 3), as well as co-production (art. 4) and export quotas (art. 6), and the participation to film festivals (art. 6).

Here, an additional comment on the “Procedural rules of the Agreement” is needed. While in the Chinese version of the text, the

³⁶ ANICA 2013.

³⁷ Bona 2016, pp. 54-55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁹ Bona 2015, p. 392. The ANICA China Desk was opened in Beijing in 2013 to promote Italian cinema in the PRC.

expressions “Sino-Italian co-productions” (*Yi Zhong hezuo shezhi* 意中合作摄制) and “Italo-Chinese co-productions” (*Zhong Yi hezuo shezhi* 中意合作摄制) are used to define co-production projects, in the Italian version there is a different formula. The expression “Cino-Italian co-production” is used, which was frequent in official texts in the early XX century to indicate Sino-Italian relations. The lexical choice of the Italian version emphasises a sort of distance of the Italian institutions towards collaborations with China. It is therefore a cultural gap that the Italian side should overcome in order to enhance Sino-Italian film co-productions. Read as policy evidence, these lexical asymmetries signal policy translation and institutional distance: when administrative categories (credits, nationality status, approvals) are imperfectly aligned across languages, frictions emerge at precisely the contracting and attribution junctures on which co-productions depend, helping to explain why a formally valid framework may still yield few recognised outcomes.

The first co-production to abide by the terms of the Agreement and be distributed on cinematic screens was *Coffee* (2016) by Cristiano Bortone. The film paved the way for the second Sino-Italian co-production. *The Italian Recipe* (2022), directed by the pop star Hou Zuxin and produced by Bortone himself. The two films are presented in the next paragraph.

Secondly, the ratification of the Agreement was followed by a series of official events to foster cultural exchanges and cinematic contacts between China and Italy.

In 2013 the Italian Association of Film, Audiovisual, and Digital Industries (ANICA) founded an office in Beijing, with the support of the Italian Embassy and the Italian Trade Agency (ITA), and the “Project China” was launched⁴⁰. In November 2013, the first “China Day” was held at the Rome Film Festival and fourteen Chinese productions were announced to be filmed in Italy⁴¹.

Since 2014, “Focus China” (*Juji Zhongguo* 聚焦中国) and “Focus Italy” (*Juji Yidali* 聚焦意大利) specular activities have been organized in international venues. Namely, film festivals such as Venice, Rome, and Beijing⁴². Moreover, in addition to a special projection of Sino-

⁴⁰ Buzzetti 2013.

⁴¹ Bona 2015, p. 393.

⁴² Bona 2018, pp. 13-14.

International co-productions at the Casa del Cinema in Rome on June 9-11, 2017 (Casa del Cinema 2017), the director Paolo Genovese held a masterclass at the Shanghai Normal University (*Shanghai shifang daxue* 上海师范大学) on June 23, 2019, when he was member of the jury of the 22nd edition of the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF, *Shanghai guoji dianyingjie* 上海国际电影节, June 15-24, 2019)⁴³.

However, besides the above-mentioned state supported events, Sino-Italian co-productions seem bound to film markets and professional workshops. Among the most active environments, is Udine's Far East Film Festival (founded in 1999). The film market "Focus Asia", which is linked to the International Audiovisual Market – MIA (organized in Rome by ANICA and the Audiovisual Producers Association – APA), and the workshop "Ties That Bind" are intended to promote connections between Asia and Europe. Within cinematic relations between East and West, there is also "Bridging the Dragon". In the senior board, the producers Marc Baschet, Cristiano Bortone, Franck Priot, and Rikke Ennis. The association is based in Berlin and Beijing, and aims at linking European and Chinese film professionals through workshops and film markets. After backing the first two official Sino-Italian co-productions (*Coffee* 2016, *The Italian Recipe* 2022), in 2023 Bridging the Dragon partnered with the European Film Market of the Berlinale (February 2023) and the Marché du Film at Cannes Film Festival (May 2023)⁴⁴.

In comparative perspective, Sino-American ventures and PRC agreements with other European and Asian partners reveal similar coordination challenges (approvals, nationality points, recoupment, market access) but often operate at larger scales or under different incentive structures. Situating the Italian case against these patterns clarifies which constraints are systemic and which are specific to Italy's industrial size, funding ecology, and treaty implementation⁴⁵.

⁴³ ANICA 2019.

⁴⁴ Bridging the Dragon 2023.

⁴⁵ Richeri 2016, Yang, Higbee 2024.

4.5 The first Sino-Italian co-productions. *Coffee* (2016) and *The Italian Recipe* (2022)

Coffee (*Kafei fengbao* 咖啡风暴, 2016) was directed by Cristiano Bortone and is acknowledged as the first Sino-Italian co-production. The film was co-funded by Italy (Orisa Produzioni), China (Road Pictures, China Blues), and Belgium (Savage Films) and was produced with the support of MIBACT, Rai Cinema, IDM Südtirol Film Commission, Screen Flanders, and the D-HIVE Film Fund. The international composition of the production is seen to be connected with Bortone's background. Italian by origin, he has frequent contacts with China through the Bridging the Dragon association. As per Laviosa (2017, p. 95), the Belgian production was involved as Bortone had already worked in the Flanders for the film *Marina* (2013).

Coffee focuses on social themes and issues of the globalized world: multiculturalism, racism, environmentalism, pollution, and youth unemployment. As per the title, coffee acts as the common thread of the narration. The storytelling is deconstructed into three separate stories set in different countries, but intertwined by the editing:

- Belgium – Hamed owns a pawnshop, which is devastated during a street riot. On that occasion, he is stolen a coffee pot and tries to have it back from the burglar risking his own life.
- Italy – Renzo is an underpaid barista. After finding out that his girlfriend Gaia is pregnant, he decides to find a better future for his family. Renzo gets involved in a robbery. The police intervene, but Renzo and Gaia are given a chance to change their lives.
- China – Ren Fei is a young manager in a chemical company, who is getting married to the daughter of his boss. He is asked to go to his hometown in Yunnan to deal with an emergency. A factory is under surveillance because of the danger of polluting the coffee cultivation of the area. A local young artist will help him to find a solution.

As well as the screenplay, the production of *Coffee* was tripartite too, with three crews and three casts, one for each section of the story⁴⁶. The film was presented in the Venice Days (Giornate degli Autori) section at the 73rd edition of the Venice Film Festival (August 2016), and then distributed in Italy (October 2016) and in China (December 2017).

⁴⁶ Laviosa 2017, p. 95.

As director Bortone stated⁴⁷, adjustments were made to the scenario to adapt part of the story to the indicators checked by competent Authorities.

Originally, the ecological disaster was to have already happened, and the dilemma of Ren Fei should have been whether to denounce the company or sweep the scandal under the rug. Instead, in the film, the catastrophe has not taken place yet, but the protagonist strives to preserve environmentalism and protect the local rural community. To this extent, Ren's character abides by the traditional Confucian values of the gentlemen, who realizes his aspirations in a peaceful and harmonious society.

Coffee paved the way for the second Sino-Italian film co-production project, for which Bortone served as one of the main producers.

The Italian Recipe (2022) was directed by Hou Zuxin and produced by Italy (Orisa Produzioni, Dauphine Film Company), China (Beijing WD Pictures *Beijing Wudi Yingye* 北京无敌影业, Fun Age Pictures *Kaixin mahua Yingye* 开心麻花影业) and Germany (Lightburst Pictures). The film was supported by Lazio Region and co-financed by the European Union.

Adapted from a scenario by Alberto Simone (b. 1957), *The Italian Recipe* was distributed on PRC streaming platforms from July 14, 2022, with the title *Yu jian ni zhihou* 遇见你之后 (After I Met You), after the world premiere at the Udine Far East Film Festival on April 22, 2022⁴⁸.

As for *Coffee*, the co-production involved several reflections on content selection.

It is a teenage romantic comedy inspired by *Roman Holiday* (1953) by William Wyler (1902-1981), with Audrey Hepburn (1929-1993) and Gregory Peck (1916-2003). Set in Rome, the love story is between the Chinese pop star Peng (Liu Xun 刘迅, b. 1995), who is having his music tour in Italy, and Mandy (Huang Yao 黄尧, b. 1994), a Chinese girl who works in the family laundry shop and dreams to become a famous chef.

The film was ideated for the Chinese public, bringing to the big screen a postcard of Italy. It includes famous views of Rome such as the Imperial Forums, but also lesser-known places of the Italian cultural tradition. For example, the Conservatorio di Musica "Santa Cecilia" serves as an astonishing background for a dialogue between

⁴⁷ Lepri 2023c.

⁴⁸ Barbieri 2022.

the protagonists, in which the composer Ennio Morricone (1928-2020) and his work are mentioned.

The Italian Recipe condensed some of the new trends of Sino-Italian co-productions. Besides confirming the efficacy of comedies for telling stories of transnational relevance, it also showed the importance of the digital dimension for film distribution and promotion in the Chinese market. The publication of the teaser of *The Italian Recipe* on TikTok was a successful marketing strategy, as the video went viral, providing the film with the interest and support of the online audience (Orisa Produzioni 2022). *The Italian Recipe* was uploaded on Video On Demand (VOD) platforms like Tencent Video (*Tengxun shipin* 腾讯视频), iQiyi (*Aiqiyi* 爱奇艺), Youku 优酷, Bilibili 哔哩哔哩, where it had a consistent response. Due to cinema closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the film has not yet reached cinematic release in the PRC.

Together with *Coffee*, *The Italian Recipe* represents a productive chapter in Sino-Italian cinematic collaboration. Nonetheless, both films also reveal the structural weaknesses and latent potential of the China-Italy co-production sector, issues that are further discussed in the conclusion.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter explains why, despite diplomatic milestones and a formal treaty framework, only *Coffee* (2016) and *The Italian Recipe* (2022) have so far been officially recognized as Sino-Italian co-productions. The evidence shows that feasibility is never the product of a single factor but of a configuration of mutually reinforcing conditions. First, policies and procedures must line up – timely ratifications, clear approvals, stable points of contact – so that producers can plan with some certainty. Second, the financing and corporate architecture must reach the relevant thresholds: minimum national shares, workable participation by European partners, and recognizable nationality benefits that unlock funds or points. Third, the project's narrative and genre have to be calibrated to the review regime, not as an afterthought but as a design constraint that shapes treatment, character arcs, and even marketing strategy. Fourth, projects depend on brokerage: producers and teams with the relational capital to translate across

institutions and languages, hold the chain of approvals together, and solve problems as they arise. When these four conditions converge, as the two case studies illustrate, projects cross the line; when even one remains sub-critical, the many announced but unrealized ventures tend to stall.

From the analysis presented, a methodological and analytical framework can be inferred – one that may serve as a basis for future studies on Sino-Italian co-productions. The preceding sections laid out the empirical pieces – early encounters, the consolidation of contacts through *Marco Polo* (1982) and *The Last Emperor* (1987), and the subsequent policy architecture culminating in the 2004 Agreement and its 2012-2013 ratification, so that the underlying mechanism could be deduced rather than presupposed. Naming it here shows how the parts interlock: delayed implementation and “assisted production” classifications expose gaps in policy fit; the flurry of post-2013 announcements that failed to reach screens signals fragile finance and uncertain nationality benefits; the rewriting of *Coffee*’s Chinese storyline exemplifies content calibration under approval constraints; and Bortone’s recurring role across projects illustrates the brokerage capacity that can offset structural frictions. Industry initiatives – “Focus China/Italy”, ANICA’s Beijing office, festival markets such as Udine’s Focus Asia and Bridging the Dragon’s platforms – expand opportunity structures but do not, on their own, substitute for alignment across the four dimensions.

The framework also helps to interpret more recent dynamics. Genre preferences identified by practitioners – comedies, animation, remakes – map onto content suitability under current review regimes. The prominence of independent ventures and the recurrent involvement of a third European partner reflect the finance-and-structure logic of medium-sized industries seeking risk-sharing and nationality points. The pivot to digital promotion and platform distribution for *The Italian Recipe* underscores how approval, financing, and marketing are increasingly co-designed. Finally, policy horizons matter: the 2004 Agreement’s expiry in April 2021 reintroduces uncertainty; Italy’s signaling of a co-production accord with Japan⁴⁹ and China’s parallel

⁴⁹ ANSA 2023.

emphasis on BRI (*Yi dai yi lu* 一帶一路)/BRICS cultural partnerships⁵⁰ reshape incentives and benchmarks for future Italo-Chinese collaboration.

Conceptually, treating co-production as a policy-mediated coordination problem refines transnational production accounts that would otherwise read these outcomes as purely industrial choices. The bilingual reading of the Agreement and the Procedural Rules demonstrates how translation and semantic asymmetries generate frictions precisely at contracting, crediting, and approval junctures – where medium-sized industries pay the highest coordination costs. Methodologically, aligning case analysis with the DBIC’s collective-biographical mapping clarifies how a small set of practitioners with specific network capital act as pivots that make rare successes possible.

Nonetheless, this chapter also points to several research paths that merit further development. Specifically, it has focused on the Italian production side and does not address reception or long-run cultural impact; it privileges depth over breadth in its selection of cases; and some institutional inferences rely on public documentation and interviews rather than internal archives. These limits, however, point to a program of further work: comparative tests of the mechanism across Sino-US and other European or Asian regimes; granular audits of financing stacks and risk allocation (from public funds and TV presales to platform participation and completion bonds); ethnographic study of approval workflows and legal/translation practices; and longitudinal analysis of evolving content priorities (including “main-melody”/soft-power logics) and their implications for co-production design.

Practically, the analysis suggests through diachronic study an actionable path forward. Increasing the yield of recognized projects will require reducing semantic and institutional frictions through harmonized templates, aligned timelines, and stable contact points; de-risking finance via triangulated European participation with clear nationality benefits; and codifying genre and cultural format

⁵⁰ Liu 2020. Among the partners of the latest co-production agreements signed by China, are Kazakhstan (June 2017), Russia (July 2017), Brazil (September 2017), and Tajikistan (June 2019) (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Waijiaobu* n.d.), Japan (May 2018) (MOFA 2018). It is evident that the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Chinese BRI by Italy as the first G7 country in March 2019 did not generate fruitful implications for co-productions and showed the need for Italy to elaborate a long-term vision to manage the relations with the PRC. See Dossi 2020.

pathways already shown to be approval-compatible. Against this background, the newly announced authorial project *A Good for Nothing* (*Weixiao de dahuli* 微笑的大狐狸, 2023)⁵¹ offers a near-term test case: its development trajectory will indicate whether alignment across policy fit, finance and structure, content suitability, and network capacity can be routinised rather than achieved ad hoc. Above all, shifting attention from isolated outcomes to the mechanism that enables them clarifies how policy instruments, industrial practices, and professional networks jointly determine the frontier of feasible Italian collaboration with China.

⁵¹ The film will be directed by the Chinese superstar Yu Ailei 余皑磊 (b. 1977) and co-produced by Shanghai Rising Wind (*Shanghai youtian yingye gongsi* 上海有天影业公司) and Jean Vigo Italia (Diotaiuti 2023).

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Filmography

Note to the filmography: Film titles are given in their English version whenever available; otherwise, the original distribution title is used. In the filmography, all titles relevant to the present chapter – namely in Italian, Chinese, and Japanese – are listed as employed in the films' various distributions.

- Behind the Great Wall/La muraglia cinese*, 1958, Dir. Carlo Lizzani, Italy.
- China/Chung Kuo, Cina*, 1972, Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy.
- Coffee/Caffè/Kafei fengbao* 咖啡风暴, 2016, Dir. Cristiano Bortone, Italy, Belgium, China.
- For Fun/Zhao le* 找乐, 1992, Dir. Ning Ying 宁瀛, China.
- Ginger and Fred/Ginger e Fred*, 1986, Dir. Federico Fellini, Italy, France, West Germany.
- I Love Beijing/Xiari nuanyangyang* 夏日暖洋洋, 2001, Dir. Ning Ying 宁瀛, China.
- Marco Polo*, 1982, Giuliano Montaldo, Italy, USA, China, Japan.
- Mikan no taikyoku* 未完の対局/*Yi pan mei you xia wan de qi* 一盘没有下完的棋, 1982, Dir. Satō Junya 佐藤純彌 and Duan Jishun 段吉順, Japan, China.
- On the Beat/Minjing gushi* 民警故事, 1995, Dir. Ning Ying 宁瀛, China.
- PCI Delegation to China/ Viaggio in Cina della delegazione del PCI*, 1959, Stored at AAMOD Archive, Italy.
- Raise the Red Lantern*, Dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, China.
- Racism is A Virus*, 2021, Dir. Zheng Ningyuan 郑宁远, Italy, Canada.
- Roman Holiday/Vacanze romane*, 1953, Dir. William Wyler, USA.
- Tenpyō no iraka* 天平の薨/*Tianping zhi meng* 天平之薨, 1980, Dir. Kumai Kei 熊井啓, Japan, China.
- The Italian Recipe/Yujian ni zhi hou* 遇见你之后, 2022, Dir. Hou Zuxin 侯祖辛, Italy, China, Germany.
- The Last Emperor/L'ultimo imperatore*, 1987, Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, Italy.
- The Last Snows of Spring/L'ultima neve di primavera*, 1973, Dir. Raimondo Del Balzo, Italy.
- The Missing Star/La stella che non c'è*, 2006, Dir. Gianni Amelio, Italy.
- The Visit to China of Comrade Enrico Berlinguer/La visita in Cina del compagno Enrico Berlinguer*, 1980, Stored at AAMOD Archive, Italy.
- Tianzi di yi hao* 天字第一号, 1946, Dir. Tu Guangqi 屠光启, China.
- Zorro*, 1975, Dir. Duccio Tessari, Italy, France.