

Finding the Imagined Motherland in China: the Italian experience in Tianjin

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Nearly one hundred years ago, from 25 to 27 September, 1910 a Conference of ‘Orientalist-Geographers’ was held to commemorate the ‘apostle and geographer of China’, the Jesuit Father Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). This event took place three hundred years after his death, in his native town, Macerata (Anonymous, 1911, 1). On that occasion, two of the invited speakers, Mr E. A. Perogio and Mr L. Sborlino, chose as the focus of their speeches ‘Italians and Government in China’ (*Italiani e Governo in Cina*) and ‘The Royal Italian Concession of Tien-Tsin’, respectively. By this stage, nearly fifty years had passed since the complex and problematic creation of the newly unified Italian State, and significantly, only nine years had elapsed after the official acquisition from the Qing Government of the territory destined to become the Italian concession (*yizujie*), that has been re-baptised today as Italian-style scenic neighbourhood (*yishi fengqingqu*). The cession of this small plot of land was the outcome of the Italian troops’ participation in the Eight-Power Allied Expeditionary Force’s repression of the Boxer uprising, which led to the forced signature, by the Qing Government, of the ‘Final Protocol for the Settlement of the Disturbances of 1900’ (Xinchou Treaty, dated 7 September 1901).¹

Italy received an allotment of 5.91% of the Boxer indemnity [26,617,005 *haiguan* taels – equal to 99,713,769 gold lire].² The country also received extraterritoriality privileges in the Legation Quarter in Beijing. But the most important practical achievement was the cession, in

¹ The Boxer uprising was directed against foreign influence in areas such as trade, politics, religion and technology. The uprising crumbled on 14 August, 1900 when 20,000 foreign troops entered Beijing (Esherick, 1987; Cohen, 1997; Preston, 1999).

² The total amount of the indemnity requested by the foreign powers was 450 million *taels*/gold, and it was approved with imperial edict on 12 May, 1901. The correspondence between the *tael* and the other currency is indicated in the Protocol: for example, one *tael* was equal to 3,75 French francs, and 0,30 pound sterling (*Documenti Diplomatici sugli avvenimenti di Cina presentati al Parlamento dal Ministero Prinetti*, 1902).

perpetuity, of a small area of 447,647 square metres on the northern bank of the Hai River (*Hai he*) in Tianjin, situated at 38° 56' latitude north and 117° 58' longitude east, on which to develop an Italian concession. The Italian area was set between the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian concessions, the left bank of the *Hai he*, the Beijing-Mukden (today's Shenyang) railway track and the Chinese territory.

The area ceded to the Italian Government consisted of four parts:

1. The higher rising area (100,000 sqm.) of the salt mines;
2. The so-called Chinese village (200,000 sqm.), in the centre of the concession area; approximately 1,000 dwellings, mainly huts built by the salt workers, with 13,704 inhabitants, according to the 1902 census;
3. North of the village, the worst area: wetland, where the water could be as deep as 3-4 metres, frozen in the winter;
4. On the emerging parts of this wetland the dwellers used to bury their dead: 'vast abandoned and flooded cemetery' (Fileti, 1922, 14).

This paper will examine the various representations of the former Italian concession and the construction of a success story for the newly-unified Italian nation in Tianjin.

Two antagonistic representations: wishful thinking?

Sborlino began his presentation at the 1901 'Orientalists-Geographers' Conference, with a significant statement:

The Royal Italian Concession of Tien-Tsin is a minuscule effect of age-old attempts made by Europe to open the doors of China. The Chinese aversion against the Western strangers, their civilisation and trade, was confronted, more than once, by wild massacres and destruction. Even though the European cannons on occasions won, they still failed to tame (China), because every defeat cost the country a shred of itself. This added resentment to the natural aversion, and ultimately led to the organisation of new reprisals (Sborlino, 1911, 109).

Sborlino contextualised his analysis, mentioning that the origin of the 'scramble for concessions' was the outcome of the first Opium War, with the signature of the Treaty of Nanjing (1842). He pointed out that: 'The claimed ease of conquest of that immense and

extremely wealthy empire awakened the greed and competitiveness of many states and led to the opening of treaty ports such a Tianjin' (Sborlino, 1911, 109). Sborlino emphasised that, after the acquisition of the territory, little had been done for a number of years. But in 1910, when he was delivering his speech, Sborlino sounded extremely optimistic. Giving expression to a dream-like imagery, that reveals a projection of the aspirations of the homeland directly onto the far-away settlement, he anticipated that:

In a few months our concession should be comfortably and beautifully provided with numerous european-style houses. We can imagine these houses --on two storeys, some of them facing large boulevards with pavements, others surrounded by pretty gardens and small vegetable plots, decorated with verandas-- populated by our countrymen, who are actively occupied in running industrial and commercial enterprises, both locally and internationally; in such a way that to the train's passengers, to the dwellers of the other concessions, and to the Chinese people living in Tien-tsin, our concession would appear as an enviable example of prosperity and a model of what the Italians are able to do when they want to (Sborlino, 1911, 110).

One could be tempted to quickly draw the conclusion that this is, more or less, what happened during the two following decades (Discepolo, 2006; Anonymous, 2006; Anonymous, 2005). But the history of the Italian concession's acquisition and its aftermath is more nuanced and somehow problematic.

Sborlino's early optimism derived from the fact that, after the expropriation of the salt mines, the expropriation or demolition of the 'inhabitable or inhabited' dwellings of the Chinese village, the removal of the graves from the cemetery, the reclaiming of the wetland, eventually the new building regulatory code, the police code and the code of hygiene were approved and introduced in 1908.³ This legislative effort followed the sale by auction (5 July, 1908) of 41 lots of land (equal to 10 hectares).

Mr E. A. Perogio had been invited to participate in the same Conference of 'Orientalist-Geographers', to speak more broadly about the Italian Government's relations with China. He offered quite a different perspective:

Our insipience is revealed in an *éclatante* manner looking at the (Italian) concession of Tientsin. The city is the commercial *entrepôt* of the Chinese capital on the Pei-ho, where all the other nations have given

³ According to the 1902 census 13,704 people were living in this area. Around 17,000 people according to Consul Representative Vincenzo Fileti (Fileti, 1921, 15).

triumphal evidence of their vigour. Compared with the other nations' real 'boulevards', typical of the European capitals, we display a desert space, where only the Government has built its own Consulate; and far away, on the margins, one can see a few huts let to the Chinese: nothing else! At the Hotel de la Paix, they were all laughing in (my face) for this admirable proof given by the Italians. The Italian concession? ... Go, go and have a look at it! (Perogio, 1911, 48).

Analysing both 1910 reports it is evident that the first one contains a dream-like, highly positive, encomiastic, and ultimately self-reflective, representation of the Italian prowess, projected into the near future. The second report is extremely negative: it reflects the embarrassment due to the derision of Italy by the other imperialistic nations, and the long-term desire to revive Italy and see it become part, not a pawn, of Europe. Nevertheless, the two descriptions also reveal a common trait: the central element is the uncanny paradox originated by the dream of the newly created Italian nation to position itself on the world stage, at the same level of the other powers. This paradox was projected onto the Italian presence in China. Fundamentally, on an international level, the acquisition of the concession represented the opportunity for historical nemesis: after the repeated failures, which had characterised both the Italian colonial policy in Africa and the unproductive diplomatic relations between Italy and China from the 1866 bilateral Treaty onwards (Borsa, 1961), Tianjin was seen as the way forward, a pedagogical laboratory that offered the possibility to demonstrate, both to the Italian citizens and the foreigners alike, 'what the Italians are able to do when they want to' (Sborlino, 1910, 110). The conundrum of Italy's ability to position itself as an assertive late comer on the imperialistic scene, which had to make up for lost time, was projected onto the Italian presence in China.

The Italian foreign policy and China

A distinctive feature of the foreign policy of the newly unified Italian state was the dichotomy between the frustrated desire for self-assertion on the international scene on the one hand, and the problematic localisation of the national interests on the other. This paradox had become particularly clear during the first government led by Francesco Crispi (29 July,

1887-16 February, 1891). Foreign policy was characterised by the uncertain tension between a more active interventionism and the considerable economic costs of colonial policy.

Crispi's successor Antonio di Rudini, in a famous speech to the President of the Senate, Domenico Farini, stressed the impossibility of conducting business in Africa: he emphasised the enormous costs of the operation ('fifty million a year or more') and poignantly concluded 'Let someone else spend it, not me. I will end up bringing everybody home, come what may' (Farini, 1961, 13). But Farini replied that withdrawal would be impossible, since it would produce a terrible blow for Italian prestige. During the second Crispi government, when the Abyssinian campaigns resumed, the Italian troops suffered a devastating defeat in the climactic battle of the first Italo-Ethiopian war, which was fought near Adwa (1 March, 1896) against Ethiopia's Negus Menelik II (Henze, 2000, 170). This defeat prompted Crispi's resignation and the fall of his second Government (10 March, 1896) amidst a profound disenchantment with 'foreign adventures' (Vandervort, 1998, 164). In the spring of 1899, the Italian attempt to obtain the official Chinese Government's recognition of Sanmen Bay, in what is today Zhejiang province, as a naval station and Italian influence zone, miserably failed. The five times Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti (between 1892 and 1921), referring specifically to the Italian experience in China, defined the unsuccessful Italian attempt with Sanmen Bay as 'a waste of a few million (Lire) and a national humiliation' (Giolitti, 1922, 154). The rejection by the Chinese Government in accepting the 1899 Italian request, and the ensuing ultimatum, caused a serious wound in the imagined community of the newly created Italian nation; especially since the rejection occurred in a historical moment when all the other foreign powers (Great Britain, France, and Germany, but also Japan and Russia) were obtaining concessions and settlements in locations strategically important for their political presence and economic penetration in the Chinese territory. The wound was even more profound because the 1899 Italian request and ultimatum was not supported by Great Britain.

(Borsa 1961, 157-188; Pistolese 1935, 305-306) Thus, revealing that other foreign powers were not keen for Italy to exert its influence in China. The decision to send a military expedition to China in 1900, and the consequent acquisition of the Italian concession in Tianjin should be interpreted within a historical context characterised by three crucial elements, namely: thirst for prestige, sense of shame and, ultimately, search for an historical nemesis to affirm the highly praised ‘Italian essence’ or ‘Italian spirit’ (*Italianità*, translated in English as Italianness).

Sborlino’s speech at the 1910 Conference reflects the wishful thinking of a new-born Italy to marvel and to be marvelled at, while Perogio’s disillusionment also de-mystifies the expectation to do better and seize the economic opportunity offered by the Chinese market. Perogio recognises that: ‘The Italian market in China is such a small thing that, in comparison, the market for the products of the smallest European powers, appears extremely relevant. The “Made in Italy” is a myth all over Asia’, while he also acknowledges that ‘Once reaffirmed the foundations of its independence, China is moving towards an economic exclusivity, which will obscure the classical Japanese one; today’s tributary hints at becoming tomorrow’s enslaver’ (Perogio, 1911, 47).⁴

These two descriptions encompass both a sense of distance and a sense of liminality: this tension is a crucial component of the literature on Tianjin’s foreign concessions. The concessions were interstitial spaces that existed inter and intra competing cultural traditions, between the limits of national boundaries and within the overlapping layers of historical periods; ultimately, they lend themselves to critical methodologies of seeing and understanding visions of alterity.⁵ The concessions area could be defined as a ‘third space’. Homi Bhabha defines ‘third space’ as: ‘The non-synchronous temporality of global and

⁴ He refers to China, due to the huge indemnities.

⁵ I intend to use ‘inter’ etymologically as in-between, and more precisely, in this case, as ‘between the limits’. I intend to use ‘intra’ etymologically as: within, and therefore between the layers.

national cultures opens up a cultural space –a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences (...)’ (Bhabha, 1994, 218). But it is Edward Soja’s elaboration on the representational strategies of the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ that is particularly suitable when one analyzes the production of space in modern Tianjin, since the foreign concessions area reveal the juxtaposition of ‘subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.’ This is Soja’s definition of ‘third space’: ‘an-other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality’ (Soja 1996, 57).

The concessions area was a particular kind of ‘third space’, which was meant to guarantee the authority of the hegemonic discourse of the colonial rulers, through the reproduction of a particular kind of discursive and social practice. As Henri Lefebvre poignantly pointed out: ‘(Social) space is a (social) product: the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action. In addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it’ (Lefebvre, 1991, 26). The study of the concessions area as a multi-layered pedagogical project to create a ‘modern’ and ‘beautiful’ city can offer insights on how the social construction of space affected the foreigners’ practices and perceptions of their presence in China.

Hyper-colonial Tianjin: ‘Home’ for the foreigners?

Tianjin was one of the most politically complex treaty ports. Its hyper-colonial nature was reflected in its cityscape characterised by a multilateral presence of foreign powers with

their respective colonial agents. The singularity of Tianjin was determined by its multi-layered identity domestically and internationally, since multiple concessions coexisted in a single real place, and were linked globally to economic and political centres throughout Europe and Asia.

After the conclusion of the Boxer's month-long siege of the foreign concessions and the battle for the walled city, Tianjin was occupied by an allied army and administered by an allied military government, known as Tianjin Provisional Government (TPG). This multi-national Government ran the city for almost two years (July, 1900-August, 1902) and drastically transformed the cityscape. This was the crucial time when the blueprint of Tianjin as a 'modern city' emerged from the Western minds. As Lewis Bernstein points out: even though 'The history of the TPG was played out against the backdrop of the Great Power rivalry in China', this was a unique time that 'showed the Chinese Government how cities could be transformed in money machines using modern administrative methods' (Bernstein, 1988, 213-215).

A precise pedagogical designing of space took place in those two years, so that Tianjin's built form was transmogrified, a new transport system was implemented, electrical lighting and water supply systems were created, and radical public health work was undertaken. All this was done to guarantee the TPG's top priority: the maintenance of public security and order through the standardisation of administrative practices and regulatory discourses which required first the annihilation of the Chinese 'alterity' of forms, and later its replacement with an uncanny replica of the 'homely'. This process claimed to be based on a more or less plausible justification.

On 5 April, 1902 the editorial 'Aesthetics in Tientsin', in the *Peking and Tientsin Times* raised a vehement criticism against the 'artistic desert' which, in western eyes, characterized China at the time.⁶



Figure 1. Interior of Gordon Hall prior to the opening banquet (1889). Collection Otto Franke, Berlin. Courtesy of Dr. Renata Fu-sheng Franke, Otto Franke's granddaughter.

Allegedly, two dichotomous views dominated amongst the foreign residents: some deemed it important to 'Bring beauty to the Tientsin streets and architecture', while others dismissed this as 'Rubbish! We are here not for cultural beauty, but to make our pile in the least possible time, then to clear out' (Italian Parliament, 1911).

The editorial rejected the second 'ultra-utilitarian attitude', claiming that Tianjin had become home to 'many of us who are not here to make a pile and leave early, but to live and die.' Foreigners were a minority compared to the Chinese population (Rasmussen, 1925, 263). Forty-two years after the creation of the first concessions, however, and seven months after the signature of the Boxer Final Protocol, with nine foreign flags waving in the hyper-colonial space of Tianjin, some had demonstrated their intention to come and stay.⁷

Nevertheless, the reasons were less ethical than the editorial claimed, since a derogatory

⁶ The English newspaper *Peking and Tientsin Times* was the voice of the foreign powers during that period (1900-1902).

⁷ Ruth Rogaski argues that Tianjin's distinctiveness deserves the appellation 'hyper-colony' (Rogaski 2004, 11). This useful definition contrasts with the traditional dominant Chinese historiography based on Sun Yatsen's claim that China was a 'hypo-colony', due to its 'semi-colonial' and 'semi-feudal' condition.

representation of the Chinese Tianjiners clearly emerges from the colonial literature of the time.

The 5 April, 1902 editorial combines the derogatory language with a patronizing justification for the lack of aesthetic sense, due to widespread poverty:

We are in the midst of the most prosaic people on the face of the earth. The merits of the Chinese as a social aggregate are manifold and manifest, but their outward and visible life is to us sordid in the extreme: such huge multitudes of them live on the narrow edge that divides poverty from famine that it cannot be otherwise (Peking and Tientsin Times 5 Apr, 1902).

Ultimately the condemnation prevails: ‘The result is an artistic desert, and many of us are in a chronic state of aesthetic starvation’ (Peking and Tientsin Times 5 Apr, 1902). The fact that thousands of Chinese people were starving was subordinate to the aesthetic needs of the foreign residents, who were starving for visual pleasure. A hegemonic discourse of ‘beauty’, ‘morality’, and ‘hygiene’ is deeply embedded in the colonial ideology of conquering urban space: it legitimizes the superimposition of foreign architectures, constructing an image of Tianjin as ‘home’ for the foreign residents. The colonial subjects in hyper-colonial Tianjin were trying to map a liminal space, both foreign-foreign and Chinese-foreign, and inhabit that double hyphen. The rationale of the aesthetics’ discourse indicates that the ancestral impulse of taking their ‘home’ with them, became the driving force for the foreign residents’ appeal to reconstruct ‘home’ on Chinese soil and overcome the unsettling feelings of nostalgia and uncanniness.⁸

Nevertheless, there is an element which undermines the logic of the ‘diasporic’ colonial subjects’ operational legitimacy, and ultimately constitutes its premise: the self-assessed legitimization of the destruction of indigenous homes. After the formal acquisition of the Italian concession in September 1901, it became clear that every unilateral action was legitimate: Ambassador Giovanni Gallina justified the immediate expropriation of what he

⁸ In Freud’s words: ‘The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (Freud, 1995, 135).

referred to as the ‘filthy Chinese village,’ since ‘all the other powers proceeded to the expropriation as soon as they occupied the area of their concession’ (ASMAE, 1912-1914).⁹

The superimposition of foreign spatial forms in the concessions area occurred after annihilating the indigenous homes. It was a case of *domicide*: the deliberate murder of home with physical and psychological implications (Porteous and Smith, 2001, 10-23).

‘Early foreign construction in China displayed many eclectic European styles, but the most popular was a brand of Classical revivalism which was christened by Western expatriates in China the Comprador style’ (AlSayyad, 2001, 159). After 1902 the purists complained:

The municipality has some control over the houses to be erected, and we feel confident if they made a stand for a superior type of exterior they could do something to relieve us from the still too prevalent comprador style.¹⁰ Architects would react to their veto at once, and in a few years re-visitors should hardly recognize foreign Tientsin. Our cause, we know, is like beauty itself, somehow vague and indefinable, and its acceptance lies more in the region of feeling than of intellect, but in this it harmonises with all the best motives that influence men (Italian Parliament, 1902).

The claim to superiority of those who could appreciate beauty was substantiated by their ability to unmask the profit-driven mentality of those inferior creatures that were not properly endowed to understand art:

There is the matter of building ignoring the question of colour which, if we look at two fine buildings on Meadows Road, is by no means a hopeless one; there is still beauty of outline and proportion. Material plays a great part in architecture and we know that Pentelic marble cannot be got in this parish, but there are still the charms of rectitude and temperance, as Ruskin calls them (Italian Parliament, 1902).

The deepest motivation, which legitimized the appropriation of space, was disguised as primarily ethical. ‘Rectitude and temperance’ are virtues which resonate with Confucian philosophy, but here they were associated with practical concerns. ‘Architecture is the art that infuses into arid geometry the spirit of poetry and spiritualises even the straight line and the

⁹ Count Giovanni Gallina signed the agreement regarding the Italian concession, together with the Director of the Chinese Maritime Customs Tang Shaoyi.

¹⁰ Comprador refers to the frequent use of Neo-classical architecture (with the typical Doric columns) by foreign architects in China.

right angle. A pretty house is a delight as much as a picture: nor is its prettiness incompatible with comfort and usefulness' (Italian Parliament, 1902).

The combination of moral and aesthetic concerns was sufficient to justify the expropriation of indigenous homes and the cultural superimposition of the foreign, through the reproduction of the motherland's original architectures in Tianjin. Each colonial power annihilated the previous spatial organisation of the site and reinvented the physical space under its control. Chinese historians have denounced foreign powers for land expropriation and forced removal of thousands of former residents without compensation (Zhang, 1993, 240-243). The official documents reveal how officials emphasised that, in the middle of the wars, Tianjin residents suffered immensely, to the extent that their 'family businesses were swept away (*jiayedangran*)'; therefore the officials asked the 'civilized countries' (*wenmingguo*) to avoid the 'extreme sacrifice of their land' (*xishengzhidi*) (Liu, 1936, 4).¹¹

The Italians, as well as others, are accused of having appropriated public land, contravening the treaties (Wang, 1982, 162); an entire cemetery was removed and graves destroyed for reasons of public sanitation (Fileti, 1921, 22). There was a specific case of land expropriation, where the salt mines were located (115 *mu*), and promises of full compensation to the merchants were not maintained (Fei, 1991, 262-263).¹²

The uncanny mimesis of the motherland

The concessions' area in Tianjin was eight times larger than the pre-existing Chinese built-up area. As a collective social space, it was a paradigmatic juxtaposition of the 'absolutely real' with the 'absolutely unreal' (Foucault, 1984, 46). Foucault's concept of *heterotopias* (Foucault, 1984) seems to be an appropriate interpretive paradigm, since the concessions area resulted from the juxtaposition of apparently antithetic elements, in a way which allowed the projective dimensions of near and far to coexist, both discursively an

¹¹ *Xisheng* is usually associated with the ideas of 'laying down one's own life' and martyrdom.

¹² 1 *mu* corresponds to 0.0667 hectares.

materially, side by side.¹³ The concessions were ‘effectively enacted utopias’ embodying the ideal of hygienic modernity and sanitisation both in the built forms and the operative practices: they were sites where bio-politics were articulated and specific ideals of social ordering were physically performed through the space and its inclusion-exclusion mechanisms.¹⁴ In Tianjin the colonial powers invoked the Enlightenment’s understanding of modernity to legitimise the ‘civilising mission’, which started with the transformation of the external space. In other words, the colonial powers used political and emotional discourses to articulate their agency and advance modernising agendas. By employing imported urban planning criteria, together with imported building regulations and architectural styles, they reflected the individual tradition of each individual country and produced miniature replicas of the imagined motherland. Although at times they revealed a partial absorption of influences that derived from neighbouring concessions.

David Harvey highlighted how the intervention on the cityscape in terms of tangible architectural influence is strictly connected to the intangible social production of space (Harvey, 1973). Even though from an administrative, juridical, police, and fiscal perspective, the concessions were ‘states within the state’ (*guozhongzhiguo*) (Shan and Liu, 1996, 1), in Tianjin, the foreign affirmation of the altering alterity of the ‘power of place’ was both invasive and pervasive.

Physical foreignness emerged and spatial appropriation determined the dissolution of the ‘hierarchical ensemble of places’ (Foucault, 1984, 48). The ordered, almost geometrical form, which characterises the walled configuration of traditional Chinese cities disappeared. Tianjin’s once-massive city walls (Guo, 1989) paved the way for the emergence of hyper-hybrid ‘neighbourhood’ enclaves. These displayed spatial forms that were reminiscent of

¹³ The term ‘heterotopia’ refers to the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory elements, for example the projective dimensions of near and far, side-by-side. (Foucault, 1984, 754).

¹⁴ Foucault’s idea of bio-politics emphasises the State’s concern for the population’s well-being, which is enacted through various forms of control and prevention of disease, hygienic education and sanitisation of the environment, including adequate food and water supply. (Foucault 1979, 170).

Brooklyn brownstones, Bavarian castles, neo-gothic British town halls, Italian squares with fountains, and Parisian cafes.

The European-style buildings in Tianjin became known as *xiaoyanglou* ('small' foreign buildings). This compound word echoes *xiyanglong* (western buildings); the term used to refer to the marble 'Western Pavilions', designed by Jesuit missionaries in the north-eastern corner of the Changchun Yuan gardens, one of the five parts of the 'The Garden of Perfect Brightness' known in English as the Summer Palace (*yuanmingyuan*) during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736-1795).

But in Tianjin's case, there was a substantial difference. The strategic commitment of the colonial elites to create the 'real' within the *other* space resulted in the intertwining with the unreal, in forms and processes that were dominated by uncanny mimicry and hyper simulation (Baudrillard, 1988, 166-184). Each concession was a place of simulation: it pivoted around a residential area, which responded exclusively to objective requirements, subjective expectations and the projective desires of expatriates of individual colonial powers. Thus each concession became a lifestyle showcase of the respective colonial power. Furthermore, each colonial power avowedly used its concession site to organise, promote and expand the commercial activities of its national vested interests.

For the foreigners inhabiting Tianjin during the concessions' era (1860-1945), the city assumed a paradoxical hyper-real and hyper-global dimension: it was a microcosm of the world, a space 'in between' where multiple, foreign-foreign and foreign-indigenous, dialectics of socio-spatial power coexisted.

The following recollection confirms this uncanny paradox. American writer and journalist John Hersey (1914-1993) was born in Tianjin to missionary parents and returned to the United States when he was only ten years old. In his 1982 report, Hersey's memory at

work offers an emblematic representation of the sheer, uncanny emotional mixture of incredulity, surprise and excitement, which dominated his childhood:

What a weird city I grew up in. For three or four Chinese coppers, I could ride in a rickshaw from my home, in England, to Italy, Germany, Japan, or Belgium. I walked to France for violin lessons; I had to cross the river to get to Russia, and often did, because the Russians had a beautiful wooded park with a lake in it. I hold in my nostrils to this day the strange odour of tadpoles captured in Russian waters and taken back to England (Hersey, 1982, 54).

The subjective experience of growing up in the multi-layered reality of hyper-colonial Tianjin followed Hersey through his life until 1939, when he could go back to China as reporter for the *Time* magazine. His 1982 report clearly reflects Hersey's perception of juxtaposed spaces: these 'micro-countries' are physically adjacent but characterised by heterogeneous identitary forms. Tianjin's foreign concessions area appears to Hersey like a colonial map of colours, which relies on spectacle and is made from projected fantasies and fragmented pastiches of reality.

The countries mentioned here do not embody the physicality of nationally defined geographical spaces, they indicate instead the adolescent Hersey's subjective vision of the miniature reproduction of the imperialistic geopolitical scenario within the enclosed space of Tianjin's concessions area. Hersey identifies and mirrors the close association between external and internal spaces: the multi-layered physical space is transfigured into a multi-layered emotional space. It is the embodiment of what Bachelard lyrically called 'a topography of our intimate being': Hersey's description demonstrates that 'inhabited space transcends geometrical space' (Bachelard, 1994, 47). The action of crossing the Hai River to get to the Russian concession evokes a psychological journey, which tests the limit of a synesthetic experience: all his senses intermingle in a sort of Proustian awakening, upon tasting the *petit madeleine*, through his childhood's memory. Growing up in Tianjin signified living first-hand the physical and intrinsically emotional juxtaposition of coexisting but contradictory spaces.

The production of ‘Italianness’ in the Chinese space

The production of hyper-colonial Tianjin was associated with the hegemonic ideology of spatial appropriation, sanitisation, and modernisation agendas, which were meant to legitimise the actions of the ruling powers. After the forced cession of this small territorial zone on the left bank of the Haihe, this microcosm immediately assumed a highly symbolic value both domestically, in terms of national acquisition and prestige in Italy itself, and globally, as recognition of Italy’s newly acquired international status. The symbolic capital of the Italian concession, which was the only one in China, went far beyond the modest territorial conquest. As for Tianjin, the Sino-Italian agreement clearly stated that: ‘The Italian Government will exercise *full jurisdiction* in the same way established for the concessions obtained by the other foreign powers’ (ASDMAE, 1891-1916). This confirmed the long awaited equal treatment of Italy, on the same level of the other colonial powers in China.

Sources reveal different re-presentations of the area destined to be the Italian concession. The Royal Minister in Beijing in 1901, Giuseppe Salvago Raggi, thought that was the best area, with prospects for rapid and successful development. The Italian Consul in Tianjin, Cavalier Poma, thought the opposite, since the area consisted of a populous Chinese quarter, a cemetery, and wetlands. These characteristics were not promising. Apparently, Vessel Lieutenant Valli, commander of the Tianjin garrison, and responsible for the military operations, chose the best of what was left, probably the only one left behind by the other colonial powers. Italian sources indicate that the British would have reserved the best area for themselves (Bertinelli, 1983, 218). After the annihilation of the former site (1902-1904) and the reclamation of the wetland (1905-1906), the Italian colonial government firmly appropriated and thoroughly reinvented the space under its control.

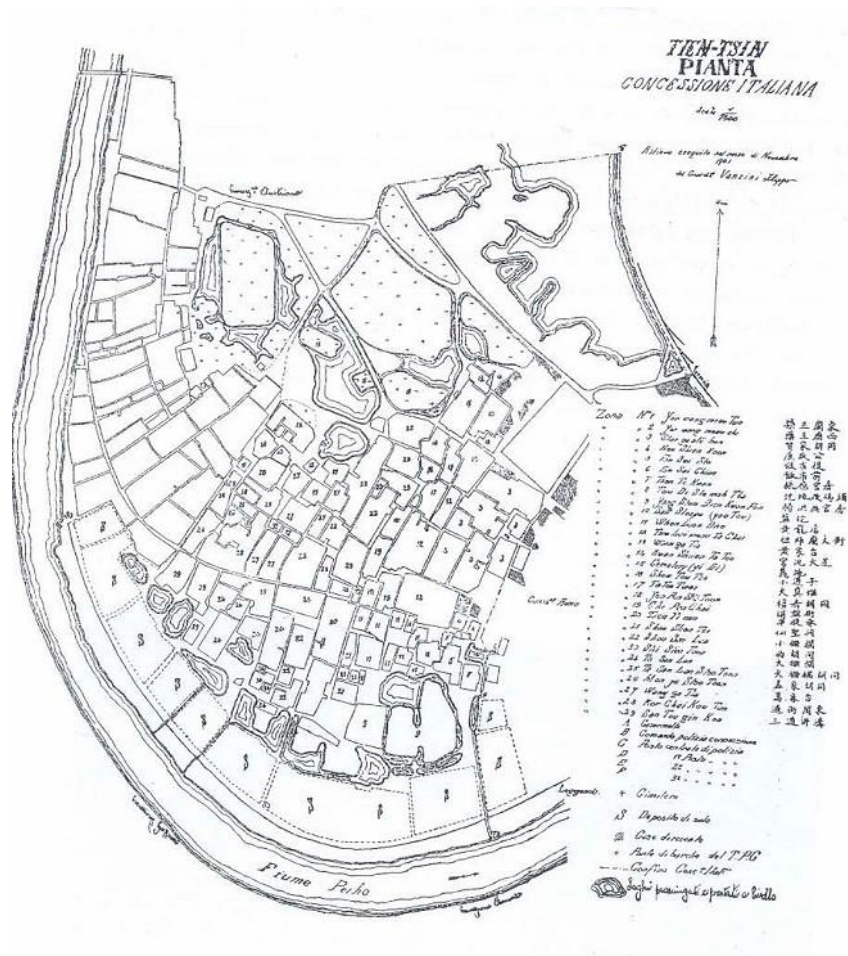


Figure 2. Map drawn in November 1901 by the coastguard Filippo Vanzini (Fileti, 1921, 13).

The reinvention of the built environment in the Italian concession during the colonial period contributed to generate a collective symbolic capital which had two fundamental functions: to sustain the Italian government's claim to legitimise the newly constructed national identity of the recently unified Italian Kingdom (1861-1946), and to gain the international recognition of Italy as a legitimate imperial power on the same level of the other imperialistic nations.

The operative mechanisms of colonial governmentality chose spatial reproduction to regulate the body politic and create a collective symbolic capital. This strategy revealed an intrinsic character of ethnic displacement and class exclusivity: in Tianjin the Italian planners reinforced the separation between the foreigners and the indigenous residents, unless the

Chinese were able to live up to the foreigners' status and contribute to the 'aristocratic' flavour instilled on the concession's built form.¹⁵ The creation of Piazza Regina Elena and Piazza Dante, Via Roma, Via Principe d'Udine, Via Marco Polo, Via Matteo Ricci, Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, christened the *other* space and occupied it with beautiful neo-renaissance and romanesque Italian villas. What emerged in the Italian concession was a new 'reality' claimed as 'home', in a similar way to what had happened with the creation of Victoria Road and Victoria Park with its Gordon Hall in the British concession, for example.¹⁶

The construction of a collective identitary capital

The existing literature has emphasised Ricci's adoption of a strategy of 'cultural accommodation', namely adaptation, as a way to diminish the cultural differences and build on the common traits and therefore, adopting a top-down strategy, convince the top officials of the Chinese imperial court to accept his knowledge (Waley-Cohen, 1999, 128). A certain tradition in the Italian sinological studies, to this very day, has recognised the value and the legacy of Matteo Ricci, and led us to search, in the following phases of Italian relations with China, for a Ricci's alter-ego, and not only in the religious sphere. In the case of the Italian concession in Tianjin, it is possible to identify in the character and work of Ludovico Nicola di Giura (1868-1947) a few elements which ascribe him to this tradition. Di Giura spent thirty years (1900-1930) in China. He worked as military doctor in Beijing and Tianjin (until 1913, then as a civil doctor), he trained Chinese students of medicine, and he also translated a medical treaty into Chinese. His fascination with calligraphy and classical literature led him to translate, for first time from classical Chinese into Italian, *The Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (Liaozhai Zhiyi)*, which had been written by Pu Songling (1640-1715) at the turn of the XVIII century (Pu, 1955). Di Giura also translated Tang poet Li Bai's poetry and

¹⁵ Journalist H.G. Woodhead stated: 'The Italian concession (...) was becoming the most popular centre for the palatial residences of retired Chinese militaries and politicians' (Woodhead 1934, 65).

¹⁶ Built in 1889 in the northern side of the park to commemorate the British General Charles George Gordon who helped the Qing dynasty to repress the Taiping rebellion.

wrote a sort of autobiographical novel. But Di Giura was quite an exceptional case among the Italians living in Tianjin.

‘Cultural accommodation’ does not seem to be the predominant feature of the Italian presence in China at the time. At the end of the complex unification process in Italy (1848-1860), as Massimo D’Azeglio reputedly epitomised: ‘Now we have made Italy, we must make Italians’. This implied a progressive acculturation and domestication of particularism; in other words the necessity to downplay the heterogeneous elements and imagine the ‘Italian nation’ as a collectivity sharing common elements. The challenge of finding a collective unified identitary form, both in terms of national culture and national identity, *vis-à-vis* the other European great powers, was transferred on the Chinese ground. The literature on Tianjin reflects the intention to promote the ‘Italianness’ or ‘Italian spirit’ (*Italianita*) as a super-sign, aimed at imposing equivalence between two worlds: the ‘real’ Italy and the Italy transposed (but also exposed and imposed) in China.

The real craftsman of the Italian concession was Vincenzo Fileti, who was the Consul General of the concession between 1909 and 1919 and the key promoter of its development and transformation into the so-called ‘aristocratic concession’ (Borgnino, 1936, 363-366; Pistolese, 1935, 306; Woodhead, 1934, 65). In his 1921 report, Fileti portrays the Chinese people as unwilling to abandon their rigid obstinacy, insensitive to any western innovation, and even ignorant and superstitious; since they belonged to ‘a closed civilisation jealous of its own ideology which they consider much superior to the western one’ (Fileti, 1921, 8). The colonial agent’s lexicon contributes to building the collective symbolic capital necessary to deconstruct the alleged Chinese superiority complex and proclaim instead the superiority of his own civilisation. This is the *sine qua non* used to justify the legitimacy of colonial actions, practices, and the relevant representations. Fileti’s agenda is finally unveiled when he insists

in his portrayal of China as ‘a virgin land’ ready for exploitation, and infers the seemingly logical necessity for Italy not to miss the opportunity to be there and draw great benefits:¹⁷

Today the European and American capitals, and for the most part Italian labour, have succeeded in building there about 3,500 miles of railways, a very small amount considering the total surface of China (...) It is therefore a vast virgin land for economic exploitation that can be opened to human activity and the effort to overcome the difficulties is well justified (...) all the nations that feel strength, due to their commercial and industrial development, have always looked with active and growing interest to the vast and virgin Chinese market and seized every favourable opportunity to breach the wall enclosing such a treasure, to avoid being second or overpowered in the exploitation of that vast new market (Fileti, 1921, 8-9).

The idea of catching up and accelerating the process of conquest and exploitation – to compensate for Italy’s late arrival on the global imperialistic arena – is a constant leitmotiv in Italian colonial literature. However, it is carefully and strategically concealed under the claimed *mission civilisatrice* of Italian benign colonialism (Aruffo, 2003, 23-46; Del Boca, 2005; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005). This rhetorical trope was based on the 1890s claim that Italy’s was a ‘proletarian’ colonialism and therefore less pernicious than the others, since it would have been aimed to secure better land and greater prosperity for its indigenous citizens (Andall and Duncan, 2005, 11).

Fileti’s report accurately describes the concession area while revealing the juxtaposition of external and internal space: the external indicates the self-positioning of Italy as a colonial nation, both within Tianjin and, more significantly, within the international community, while the internal space is the subject-position of the State representative as Consul General in Tianjin. The external space is also imbued with quantitative elements. These allude to the various possibilities of economic exploitation, with regard to the vastness of the indigenous territory, and in comparison with other foreign powers. The internal space is tinged with qualities such as pride, greed, and arrogance, which became even more prominent with the transition from the liberal state to the fascist regime.

¹⁷ Fileti’s masculine-connotated language seems to allude to the deflowering of China, portrayed as a feminine colonial object.

One of the most significant examples is the historical reconstruction of the Italian concession offered by Consul General Vincenzo Fileti in 1921 (Fileti, 1921, 8-9), which reveals how the hegemonic discourse crafted by the Italian state in colonial times, through its agents, contributed to the projective construction of an 'imagined motherland' in this 'eye of the faraway Orient' (Cesari, 1937, 2). Imagining an entity like a united modern nation in Tianjin's 'little Italy' is a way of building a successful story up around the colonial subjects. Italians and other foreigners, together with a majority of Chinese citizens, were living in this small area which was legally defined as a permanent possession, yet it was a community imagined by the Italians according to a unilateral scheme of self-reflexive perception.

Fileti, the representative of the colonial state, becomes the embodiment of the alleged success story for the whole Italian nation. This story is substantiated by a significant collective symbolic capital, which is expressed with the progressive emphasis on shaping the Italian concession as an 'aristocratic' neighbourhood, a miniature Disneyland-style venue of 'Italian spirit' and a showcase of artistic excellence. The projective affirmation of these rhetoric tropes is an integral part of colonial practices of cultural super-imposition (as opposed to transculturation), and ultimately contributed to the creation of a space which was both physical and emotional. Therefore, the strenuous search of a common and homogenous Italian identity at home was projected overseas in this 'extremely advanced sentry of Italian civilization' (Cesari, 1937, 2). The identity construction process manifested itself in a space in which the emotive representation of the self, in the mirror of the other/s (i.e. Italian-Chinese but mainly Italian-foreign relationships), found a unique form of expression. The representation offered by Fileti, among others, contain a lexicon which ultimately can be associated with powerful emotions. It contributed to build a common collective symbolic capital that played a crucial role in the construction of the colonial regime of truth and power at the time and still influences the Italian vision of the other today.

On 26 April, 1927 Professor Ugo Bassi, in a lecture given at the Fascist University of Bologna declared that ‘Even Italy! The most civilized and famous people throughout Europe’ was tempted by ‘the same propulsion of greed’ that was a characteristic of other nations. But greed appears to be excusable and ultimately succumbing to national pride since Bassi first remembered the most famous Italian intermediaries with the Chinese Empire, namely Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1245-1247), Marco Polo (1261-1295), and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), and concluded: ‘Magnificent progeny this our Italian one, that has offered to the whole world vast continents and new knowledge, affirming herself always and in every field, first among all the others’ (Bassi, 1929, 10). Bassi also reiterates the mantra of Italian benign colonialism when he affirms: ‘The Italians proud as usual of the humanist tradition of their motherland and the roman civilisation brought to the indigenous people, where they could, aid and rescue’ (Bassi, 1929, 16).

The alleged magnanimous behaviour of the Italian ‘liberators’ is contradicted by the first-hand account of Medical Lieutenant Giuseppe Messerotti Benvenuti. In fifty-eight letters and 400 photographs to his mother (taken between September 1900 and September 1901) he documented the relations between the different military troops, mentioning the killing, the looting and other atrocious excesses, and in the end he sadly concluded: ‘If our soldiers did less harm than the other armies it is due to the fact that, even though they (the Italians) always went everywhere, they always got there late, when the villages had already been burned and plundered. The few times they arrived on time, they behaved like the others’ (Messerotti, 1900, 17).

But the Italian colonial literature prefers to embrace and firmly uphold Fileti’s argument that Italy could not miss the opportunity to mark off China ‘as an actor and observer in that world where probably new global destinies were developing’ (Fileti, 1921,

20-21). Fileti's hagiographic description of the sanitisation process and urban modernisation of the site reveals a symbiotic relationship between national and individual pride. This contributes to construct the metanarrative of salvation of the Chinese space, and allegedly the Chinese people, from misery, poverty and indigence (Fileti, 1921, 14-15).¹⁸ No doubt thanks to the forced removal of the undesired Chinese dwellers, the total annihilation of the former space and its replacement with the insignia of progress and modernity is characteristic of colonial discourse.

In 1936, in line with the fascist dream of Empire-building, engineer Rinaldo Luigi Borgnino wrote an enthusiastic article, arguing against the possibility of ceding the territory back to China (Borgnino, 1936, 363-366).¹⁹ The alleged legitimacy of keeping the concession was based on the highly civilizing motivations demonstrated by the Italians, as revealed by the progressive 'evolution' of that 'small territory.' Before the Italian intervention the area was 'miserable', 'noxious', 'desolated' and 'sad'. After the Italian acquisition, the area had become a stage display of 'Italianness': a model of modernity and hygiene. With a clear self-congratulatory tone Borgnino boasted that among the most impressive achievements there were advanced civil engineering and infrastructural projects, such as wide roads, elegant buildings, a modern hospital, electricity and potable water in all the houses, an advanced sewage system, and public landscaping. In his own words: 'Vittorio Emanuele III Boulevard, 24 metres wide, was the main arterial street of our concession. This boulevard, crossed through by a tram line managed by a local company, absorbs all the traffic from the Chinese city to the Tianjin east railway station and the other concessions. Obviously, the public buildings should have been erected on this Boulevard (Borgnino, 1936, 363).

¹⁸ In the sense of a totalising cultural narrative schema which explains both the claimed knowledge and its relevant experience.

¹⁹ On 9 May 1936, Benito Mussolini proclaimed the foundation of the Empire. This event occurred three days after the Italian troops, commanded by Marshall Badoglio, had entered Adis Abāba after the eight-month long military occupation campaign of Ethiopia.

Italy would have spearheaded the modernisation of the bordering concessions, since they were allegedly stimulated to implement similar measures to improve their overall aspect and conditions. A local British newspaper, mentioned by Borgnino, defined the Italian concession as ‘the most pleasant residential neighbourhood among all the concessions’ (Borgnino, 1936, 365). The representation of the concession as a ‘neighbourhood’ of exquisite ‘Italian spirit’ became a recurrent colonial rhetorical trope, indicating pride in the motherland. This reached its climax with military general Cesare Cesari’s 1937 description:

(This) small territorial entity it is an eye in the faraway Orient, on which should converge both the attention of all the Italians, and the appreciative thanks for those who held high the name of the homeland. No matter what events unfold in the Chinese social or political compages, the Tien Tsin concession will remain, as Il Duce (Mussolini) defined it, an extremely advanced sentry of Italian civilization (Cesari, 1937, 2).

Conclusions

The ‘production of space’ (Lefebvre, 1991) in Tianjin had physical and socio-cultural implications, and the concessions’ area became a living showcase of foreign concepts of ‘modernity’. The concessions’ overall process of socio-spatial transformation was strictly connected to nationally-connotated discourses of power, operating via mechanisms of image and knowledge construction. The re-presentation of ‘reality’ was crucial in defining the transmogrifying identity of Tianjin into a hyper-colony. I defined hyper-colonial Tianjin as a heterotopia, since the construction of space in the former concessions reveals a juxtaposition of apparently contradictory elements, which coexisted, both discursively and materially side by side. More specifically, the Italian concession is progressively constructed as a sheer, uncanny mimesis of an Italian-style neighbourhood. It is an emotionally charged symbolic space, inhabited by the Italian colonial agents whose accounts demonstrate pride, greed and embody a sense of superiority and ‘progress’. These emotions are forms of capital that, like the ‘real’ capital, can be exchanged, commodified, and used to purchase various goods, services, social statuses, etc. In fact these emotions and states of mind are reproduced locally and reflected globally, to reach the Italian audience at home. This collective capital is

materially expressed in the reproduction of the ‘homely’ in the ‘un-homely’ terrain of the ‘faraway Orient’, thus trying to overcome the paradox of uncanny mimesis.

The imagined community of the Italian concession in Tianjin became an imagined zone of dominance with a precise symbolic and symbolic capital. It represented a triple historical nemesis for the Italian Government with regard to: 1. the Italian colonial policy, after the devastating 1896 military defeat near Adwa, 2. the Sino-Italian relations, after the unsuccessful attempt to obtain the Bay of Sanmun in 1899; and 3. the international recognition of the Italian prestige among the other foreign powers involved in the scramble for concessions.

In the last decade, the urban planning strategy of Tianjin’s former concessions area has demonstrated an extreme concern with combining the ordering and design of the previous foreign space with Tianjin’s ambition of promoting its globalising identity. This discourse can be applied to the colonial landscape of the former Italian concession, engineered today to satisfy the fantasy of Italianness in the ‘World’s Museum’ (*shijie bowuguan*) of globalising Tianjin (Marinelli, 2009a, 2009b). The symbolic capital, which works in a temporal and spatial system of exchange, has reached its climax with the completion of the hyper-real ‘Italian-style scenic neighbourhood’. This process responds to the Bourdesian principle (Bourdieu, 1979) that the convertibility of capital is the condition for its reproduction: the ‘new’ teleologies of modernity, progress and cleanliness have appropriated the encomiastic discourse of the nation, which had characterised the former colonial powers. Today, the former concessions are still pedagogic spaces, but with a different mission: as they were meant to inform and transform residents and observers, making them accept the colonial prescriptions by the ways they presented, packaged, marketed and designed the foreign space, today they are meant to use the reinvented foreign architecture as socio-economic, cultural and symbolic capital.

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