

ITALIAN COLONIALISM IN CHINA: THE CONCESSION OF TIANJIN (1901-1947)

di Orazio Coco

The city of *Tiānjīn* (天津, port of heaven) was at the end of the 19th century one of the main locations for commercial trade between Europe and China. For its geographical position at the end of the Grand Canal on the Pei-ho river, *Tiānjīn* was considered the Beijing port (about 120 km from the capital) and was open to the trade with the West, as treaty port, in 1860. The British, the French and the American settlements were the first to be established in the city. *Tiānjīn* soon became the place witnessing the deepest process of westernization and socio-cultural transformation of urban and social life in China. At the same time, the foreign presence allowed the port to develop and become one of the most important in Asia. Between 1895 and 1902, new settlements within the territory of the treaty port were also assigned to Japan, Germany and Russia, and finally to Belgium, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

The permanent presence of foreigners in China was granted and exploited through the legal institution named “concession”.¹ The establishment of the concessions was the main consequence of the signing of the unequal treaties (*bù píngděng tiáoyuē*, 不平等 条约), which constituted the legitimate basis for the colonial Powers, in order to obtain exclusive rights, to build and operate infrastructures, new urban settlements, ports, railways, exploit mineral resources and to exercise territorial jurisdiction in strategic areas, without any reciprocity being extended to the hosting country. The bilateral agreements were often drafted and signed in a condition of coercion, almost always with the implicit threat of the use of military force. From the presence of all those elements derived the expression, used by politics and adopted by the historiography, “unequal treaties”.

Overall, in *Tiānjīn* the foreign concessions reached an area of about 15.5 square kilometers, approximately eight times larger than the original settlement (British, French and American) and the entire front along the river Pei-ho became territory administrated by foreign Powers. *Tiānjīn* so became in few years also the most sophisticated, multicultural and economic environment built by the foreign communities in China. It is difficult to verify the accuracy of the available statistics, but it is believed that at the time of the first international settlements the population of *Tiānjīn* was close to 300,000 people and reached a million inhabitants around 1920, of which about 10,000 were foreigners of different origin.² The

¹ «Concession is an area (remained under Chinese jurisdiction and considered neutral), for which China has granted either expressly or tacitly to one or to a group of Powers, rule of sovereign powers, to unlimited time and in order to protect economic and commercial interests » in E. Balossini, *Concessioni in Cina*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1934 p. 24. See also O. Coco, *Colonialismo europeo in Estremo Oriente. L'esperienza delle concessioni territoriali in Cina*, Roma, Nuova Cultura & Sapienza Università di Roma, 2017, p. 82-92.

² M. Marinelli, *Italian production of space in Tianjin*, Brady A.M. e Brown Douglas (edited by) in *Foreigners and foreign institutions in Republican China*, New York, Routledge, 2013 p.27.

stable foreign presence in the early 1900s transformed the city into a dynamic and ambitious multinational project, involving citizens of different nations, living within a few square miles of territory. John Hersey so described the multicultural life in *Tiānjīn* at that time:³

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, Belgium. I walked to France for a violin lesson; I had to cross the river to get to Russia.

Each concession became in few years the architectural and social representation of the different cultural origins, meanwhile the international community used the territory to promote and organize activities of different nature and purpose. Among them, the Italian concession of *Tiānjīn* was the only Italian territorial presence in China.⁴ It was the selected ground of the government ambitions to elevate Italy's political and military rank at the same level as other European Powers on the continent. After having suffered the humiliating experience of the first Ethiopian War in 1896, the Italian government considered the establishment of a concession in China as an opportunity to return to the leading path of the international geopolitics.

The Italian concession was formally instituted with the signing of the Protocol dated 7 September 1901.⁵ Italy acquired the concession with the same extraterritoriality privileges granted to the other Powers. The merit of the political and the diplomatic success was attributed to the marquis Salvago Raggi, who ordered on 21 January 1901, before the signing of the Protocol, to the lieutenant Mario Valli, commander of the Italian troops under the command of marshal Alfred von Waldersee, to occupy the suburb along the Pei-ho river, in an area bordering the territory already occupied by Russia and Austria-Hungary.⁶ The final agreement about the concession was later signed by count Giovanni Gallina, who succeeded Raggi, on 7 June 1902. The text of the agreement contained 14 articles, which recognized the boundaries, the Italian jurisdiction and the right of ownership of properties for the Italian citizens. The Chinese community could reside in the territory. The concession was awarded perpetually and no lease payment was asked.⁷

The concession did not have an easy beginning. The project started with the expropriation of the territory that was in a part of the city that was unfavourable, indeed not suitable for the

³ J.R. Hersey, (1914-1993) was famous journalist, winner of Pulitzer award, born in Tianjin, wrote acclaimed publications, such as *White Lotus* (1963), *Under the eye of the storm* (1967), *the Wall* (1988).

⁴ About the Italian concession in *Tiānjīn* see also G. Altana, *L'Italia fascista e la Cina. Un breve idillio*. Roma, Aracne, 2017 p.36.

⁵ Concluding act of the Boxers uprising and consequence of the siege of the Legations in Beijing with the intervention of the armies of the eight nations at the command of British general Alfred Gaselee. Beijing was then occupied by the same armies for about a year under the guidance of the German field marshal Alfred Ludwig Heinrich Karl Graf von Waldersee (1832-1904). The Protocol signed on September 7, 1901 in Beijing forced imperial China to pay heavy sanctions, including the settlement of indemnities recognized to each foreign nation represented in the Legations. About the Boxers' uprising and the signing of the Protocol see C. Tan, *The Boxer Catastrophe*, Columbia University, New York, 1955; V. Purcell, *The Boxer uprising: a background study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1963 and among the most recent publications P. Cohen, *History in Three Keys. The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997 and X. Lanxin, *The Origin of the Boxer War*, London, Routledge, 2003.

⁶ F. Vincenzo, *La concessione italiana di Tien-tsin*, Genova, Barabino e Graeve, 1921 p.14. Vincenzo Fileti was the Italian consul in Tianjin from 1912 to 1920. He came to China for the first time in 1902 as one of the San Marco battalion officers. He completed his mission in China and then he was appointed financial advisor at the Washington Conference (1921).

⁷ Art. 3 of the convention between Italy and China «All government land of the concession will be given by the government of China to the Italian government, which will become the legitimate owner, without payment ». About the Italian concession see, *La concessione italiana di Tien-tsin*, Istituto coloniale fascista, Roma, 1937 and E. Balossini, *Concessioni in Cina*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1934.

residence of a western community, because it was in an unhealthy location, which had to be reclaimed. It included an abandoned area that was used as a salt deposit and a village inhabited by the saline workers. The population counted about 17,000 souls, living in a state of absolute poverty.⁸ The immediate advantage of the location was, instead, the proximity to the train station, which was an important crossroad for routes of commercial trade towards northern China.

Italian politics favoured the intervention and the acquisition of the concession in China, but the Italian government did not contribute to the initiative with the necessary financial resources. Initially, the concession did not receive any financial support and had to cope with its own resources to expropriate the properties. The expropriation costs were added to those necessary for the reclamation that the Italian consular administration gained through the ongoing search for the financial support of individuals and private institutions. The foundation works started with the budget surplus obtained from the sale of the private properties of the concessions, to which also the tax revenue streams locally applied was added.

Adjacent to the nearby concessions (Russian and Austro-Hungarian), the Italian area was comprised within a half-million-square meters territory, enclosed in a rectangle of about five hundred by thousand meters. The Italian authorities sought to ensure the legal status of the residents in the concession by approving a system of civil and administrative codes (1908). Then they carried out an ambitious agenda of civil engineering works, designing houses with typical Italian roofs and architectural models.⁹ Despite the initial economic and organizational difficulties, civil works, assigned to the military engineers, laid the foundation for a project of great visibility and national pride.¹⁰ Lieutenant Osvaldo Cecchetti examined the territorial plan, coordinated the first leveling work of the land, raising the ground at the level of the highest peak of the Pei-Ho river. Removal of villages and construction of a sewerage network also began. At the same time, the cemeteries were also relocated to territories outside the concession, while, with some modest financial resources, finally granted by the Italian government, through a loan of about 60,000 lire, important civil works could be accomplished.

To facilitate the mobility within the concession area, an agreement with the Belgian tram company (*Compagnie des Tramways et d'Eclairage de Tientsin*) facilitated the transfer to other locations of the city and to the railway station. Lighting system in the roads were installed by the same company. Proudly, the consul general Vincenzo Fileti, so wrote about the concession:

For the connection of the line, we contributed to the construction of an iron bridge across the river and we built a great road on the reclaimed land, avenue Vittorio Emanuele III, which was to become the most beautiful road in Tianjin.¹¹

The road Prince of Udine (the first representative of the royal house of Savoia to visit *Tiānjīn*) was built to connect the main road in the concession to the quay on the river Pei-Ho, in the meantime adapted to be the river port. At the beginning, the construction and

⁸ F.Vincenzo, *La concessione italiana di Tien-tsin*, p.14.

⁹ See M. Marinelli, *Italian production of space in Tianjin*, A.M. Brady and D. Brown (edited by) in *Foreigners and foreign institutions in Republican China*, New York, Routledge, 2013 and M. Marinelli, *Projecting Italianità on the Chinese space: The construction of the 'aristocratic' concession in Tianjin (1901-1947)*, G.Andomino, M. Marinelli (edited by) in *Italy's encounters with modern China. Civilizational exchanges, imperial dreams, strategic ambitions*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 117-146. ISBN-13: 978-1137290922

¹⁰ F.Vincenzo, *Concessione italiana*, p.19.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p.24.

reclamation work did not guarantee the expected turnout of European residents, who, instead, preferred the English and French quarters, which were already served by modern infrastructures and the Italian community was still not able to support the financial expenses of the concession. It was then attempted to reduce land sales prices, to stimulate the arrival of new residents and new civil works were planned.

The Italian Consulate was among the first buildings to be built in avenue Vittorio Emanuele III. Originally located in the British concession, the Italian Consulate was first established in a civilian home (from 1902 to 1912), then in a military barrack, before, finally, being transferred in the building designed by the engineer Daniele Ruffinoni in 1915, which finally became the permanent place of the diplomatic delegation. The building was then handed over by the municipality of *Tiānjīn* to the Italian government, in return for the previous debt contracted by the administration of 60,000 lire. Later, the construction of the elegant City Hall, recalling the architectural style of Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, was executed by engineer Luigi Borgnino in 1921.

A loan from the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti of 400,000¹² lire was finally granted for the infrastructure works and thus began the pavement work of Marco Polo Road. New roads were built named after the missionary Matteo Ricci, count Gallina, the marquis Raggi, and the central artery of Roma road, which became the connection between the concession boundary roads, Trento road and Trieste road. Queen Helen Square was decorated with a fountain (among the first examples in China) and the main roads were paved in asphalt to facilitate civil and commercial traffic.

The concession was provided with a public garden and an Italian social circle, which allowed residents to practice sports activities, in addition to the service of a well-provided library. The most popular work of citizenship was, however, the hospital, built by the National Association of Missionaries, which provided humanitarian assistance for the entire *Tiānjīn* community. It was built in avenue Vittorio Emanuele III. At the end of the main settlement jobs, Fileti estimated the total investment of private and government funding close to USD 800,000, used for expropriations, removal of the cemeteries, land reclamation and road works. Much of those works, as said, were self-financed by the administration of the concession.¹³ The management of the concession was initially assigned to the consular authority and subsequently entrusted to the Italian municipality of *Tiānjīn*, established in November 1923 in the presence of the ambassador, Vittorio Cerruti, also author of the statute and the municipal regulations. The City Council was assisted by an advisory committee, including three important Chinese owners.¹⁴

Among the significant events of the first years of the concession was the accommodation, just after the war, of the former Austrian captives (about 1,500 from the later annexed by the Italy region of Trentino) of the concentration camps in Siberia.¹⁵ Some of them were enlisted among the military corps and settled permanently in the territory of the concession. The army presence, composed, in 1925, by three San Marco (marines) companies, remained detached in *Tiānjīn* and was supported by the naval vessels, San Giorgio, Libia, and Caboto. During the first Japanese invasion in Manchuria in 1931, the Italian government decided to expand the military presence in China by also sending the cruiser Trento and the destroyer Espero, in support of the international community's rescue mission. The census indicated that the concession at that time included about 400 Italians and about 6,000 Chinese, protected by a

¹² Authorised by the general commission of the Italian Parliament on 30 May 1912.

¹³ F. Vincenzo, *Concessione italiana*, p.64.

¹⁴ U. Bassi, *Italia e Cina*, Modena, Bassi e Nipoti, 1929 p.25.

¹⁵ F. Vincenzo, *Concessione italiana*, p.60.

garrison consisting of a regiment battalion located in two barracks (Savoia and Carlotto)¹⁶ and by the corps of the local police forces.

The total number of Italian residents in China remained modest in comparison with other international communities, such as the British (about 9,200 residents in 1921), French (about 2,500 in 1921) and German (about 2,000 in 1913).¹⁷ China was not a source of interest for the contemporary Italian social classes and for the young people it was a place far away and without particular attractions, with great disappointment for the national political establishment that instead looked proudly at the distant *Tiānjīn*, as the Italian farther outpost of Italianism.¹⁸

Our youth, the new generations, do not seem to want to decide to leave the shadow of the bell tower and still prefer the lotto bet office, the cup of chicory, the political hope, rather than the risk of the unknown; they continue to be absent from the places where the fight for life is more intense. I quote few examples: At Tianjin, several international contests have been banned in the last few years, for posts of engineers, doctors and directors: yes, while enquiry and applications have come from all over the world, not even one Italian competitor, propose his qualifications before the Commission [...] It is clear, and we must say without hesitation that it is not in this way that we can achieve our economic expansion neither in China nor in the World and that it is not by waiting for those nations to search for us, that we can take on that executive leadership we aspire to.

In the Italian concession, the streets were called after Italian high-profile personalities, as Italian was the urban code,¹⁹ drafted to ensure the rules of construction and maintenance of the streets in Western style. According to the same code, the buildings had to keep Western architectural design and decor. Only the consulate had full jurisdiction to allow alterations, including the demolition of any building that did not comply with the prescribed regulations. The code was compiled by associating aspects of coexistence of different ethnicities to strict hygienic rules, thus representing a model of civic coexistence.

The architectural style used in the Italian quarter recalled the neo-Renaissance style of the 19th century European palaces. The Italian art and decoration models found peculiar expression and representation in squares and fountains starting from Queen Helen (*Regina Elena*) Square. The Italian concession was well regarded by the international community, and if the German concession was probably the one favored by the Westerners, among the international concessions, the Italian one was particularly successful in attracting wealthy Chinese:

In many of the treaty ports, foreigners lived outside concessions areas altogether or at least outside their own country's concession. In Tientsin: The German concession [...] was the most favoured residential area for foreigners of all nationalities [...]. The British concession and extension contained the most important foreign banks, offices and shop, and a

¹⁶ The census conducted through the Italian Consulate in Tianjin in 1931 reported the number of 392 Italians, of whom 331 soldiers at the concession in Tianjin, at the time of the highest density of Italian citizens in China. Altogether about 800 Italians were counted in the entire territory of China. Historical archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) *China archive* (1931-1945), envelope 3, document signed by the consul Luigi Neyrone dated 24 April 1931.

¹⁷ Statistics in J.K. Fairbank, T. D. Crispin, *The Cambridge History of China* Vol.12, J. Fairbank (edited by), Cambridge University Press, 1978 p. 148.

¹⁸ R. Suster, *La Cina Repubblica*, Alpes Casa Editrice, Milano 1928, p.197.

¹⁹ Mentioned in the Local Land Regulation and General Rules, Building Regulations, see M. Marinelli, *Italian production of space in Tianjin, in Foreigners and foreign institutions in Republican China*, p. 34.

considerable Chinese population [...]. The Italian concession [...] was becoming the most popular centre for the palatial residences of retired Chinese soldiers and politicians.²⁰

Chinese authors stressed that many personalities representing the local, wealthy Chinese people returning from abroad, wanted to reside in the Italian concession, among them high-ranking military and political persons, such as Liang Qichao,²¹ and merchants and journalists like Liu Rangong. At the same time, the most important among the guests of the Chinese community resided in the Japanese delegation and was the emperor Puyi (from 1925 to 1934).

The concession and the Italians in *Tiānjīn* became during the fascist period a source of propaganda and symbol of national pride. *Tiānjīn* became the image of Italianism established abroad and used by the media as a means to exalt the regime, legitimizing and promoting the spirit of the new Italy, capable of successfully reaching new frontiers:

We see today that the appearance of our concession is more than flattering and that beautiful paved, clean, well-lit roads cut it with a well-arranged topographic map, recalling with their names the memory of distant cities; we see that villas, palaces, and quaint quarters adorned with gardens, all built with taste and style following the provisions issued by our authorities, we see that a magnificent public garden, an elegant monumental fountain, a municipal building in Renaissance style with marble and stucco, with lavishly furnished rooms and colored italic windows, a model hospital with its own pharmacy, magnificent barracks for our troops, are the fundamental structure of this model of the Italian town transplanted to China.²²

Ugo Bassi, in a lesson at the fascist University of Bologna in 1927, recalled the courageous Italian soldiers who, unlike the colonial forces of other countries, did not commit cruelty during repression after the Boxers' uprising. Instead, they adopted the canons of Roman civilization, commensurate with the mission of the salvation of peoples.²³ In his writings Bassi also did not neglect to point out the unique opportunity for the country to have a settlement in an area where progress would certainly have brought success and economic prosperity. Also, Fileti exalted the role of the concession and the historic occasion for Italy, anticipating far-reaching opportunities:

Today, European and American capitals, and for the most part Italian work, have been able to build about three hundred and fifteen miles of railroads, a figure that is also very modest in comparison to the surface of China [...] Today Americans hope to provide a great outlet for their automotive industry, urging the Chinese, with advisory and loans, to reinstate their neglected rail roads. Our flourishing automotive industries should consider this. China is predominantly agricultural country; but the land is worked with old-fashioned and unprofitable systems and tools. It is also rich in all sorts of minerals: iron, copper, lead, silver, gold, nickel; it has coal mines more than there are in Europe [...] It is therefore a vast and virgin field of economic exploitation that can be opened to human activity and it is well justified the effort to overcome the difficulties that we face.²⁴

²⁰ F. Wood, *Not dogs and no many Chinese: Treaty Ports life in China 1843 -1943*, John Murray, London, 1998, p.185.

²¹ Q. Liang (1873-1929) is still today considered one of the greatest Chinese patriot and academic personality devoted to China's political transformation aimed at modernizing the country. The residence, restored and now converted into a museum, can be visited within the old Italian district.

²² R. Suster, *La Cina Repubblica*, Alpes Casa Editrice, Milano 1928, p.189. Suster was editor of the newspaper Popolo d'Italia and a scholar of Oriental politics, having studied in Asia (in Japan in particular) for several years and worked as a special envoy of the newspaper in China.

²³ U.Bassi, *Italia e Cina*, p.16.

²⁴ F.Vincenzo, *Concessione italiana*, p.8.

This economic opportunity was only partly captured by the Italian business class when, in the early 1920s, relations between Italy and China²⁵ improved thanks to a better economic cycle that favored the development of trade. However, *Tiānjīn* was always considered to be less cosmopolitan and vibrant than Shanghai, and in the territory of the Italian concession mainly found establishment the activities of commercial services (particularly import-export companies and banks²⁶) and the military corps, rather than the industrial initiatives. The latter found instead a more suitable and organized environment in Shanghai.

In those years, the first financial institutions, funded with Italian capital, were also founded in Asia. Historical archives²⁷ reveal the presence of two Italian-owned banks, carrying out financial intermediation, both with permanent operation in *Tiānjīn*. On 8 November 1919, a financial convention, signed in Milan by Credito Italiano, Banca Unione, Credito Varesino and some private investors,²⁸ was the preliminary agreement, which gave birth in *Tiānjīn* to a joint-venture, with equal capital shared with the Chinese investors, called Banca Italo-Chinese (Sino Italian Bank). The bank, officially established on 18 February 1920, was set up to finance the import of Italian products and facilitate the export of agricultural products, animal skins and silk from China. It was joined by another financial initiative, created mainly with Chinese capital, the Sino-Italian Banking Corporation,²⁹ whose founding act was signed on 12 February 1920 in Tientsin. On 23 June 1924, the Sino Italian Bank was first liquidated and then re-established with the new denomination *Banca Italiana per la Cina* (Italian Bank for China), this time with Head Quarter in Shanghai and branches in *Tiānjīn*, Beijing and Hankow. The entire capital endowment (one million gold dollars) was fully paid by Credito Italiano, which also reimbursed the participations of the previous shareholders.³⁰ The Italian institute's mission gradually became more important, with an active role in intermediating also international interest, as in the Skoda funds case.³¹ In that situation, the Italian bank

²⁵ About the economic aspects of the relation between Italy and China see F. Tamagna, *Italy's Interests and Policies in the Far East*, Institute for Pacific Relations, New York, 1941.

²⁶ The list is contained in a report dated 2 May 1921 at the Bank of Italy's Historical Archive (ASBI), *Foreign Relations*, pratt.6, file 1, p.198.

²⁷ Historical Archive of Bank of Italy (from now ASBI), Archivio Stringher, *Miscellanea*, folder 33, file 8 (Corporazione bancaria Cino Italiana) and Historical Archive UniCredit (form now UNIC), *Direzione Centrale ed Affari*, Folder 53, registration by Italian Consulate in *Tiānjīn* (Sino Italian Bank).

²⁸ Including Lionello Scelsi, Giuseppe Balzarotti and Riccardo Borghetti, all eminent personalities of the financial and trade Italian business environment.

²⁹ Information about the *Corporazione Bancaria Sino Italiana* are kept at ASBI, Archivio Stringher, *Miscellanea*, folder 33, file 8. The *Corporazione Bancaria Sino Italiana* (also known with the original name *Banca Cino-Italiana per l'industria*), locally named *Chen Yi Bank*, also had the authorization granted by the Chinese authorities to issue coin paper (dated 11 September 1920). Several were the Chinese partners, who participated at the financial initiative, encouraged by the fact that, according to the extraterritoriality principle, capital invested in the foreign companies was only subject to foreign law, which excluded them from any expropriation according to local law. The bank, despite the majority of Chinese capital, was co-managed by Italian and Chinese representatives and was initially chaired by the Marquis of Capolattaro, who also handled the subscription of the Italian capital.

³⁰ The documents concerning the Chinese shareholders of the Sino Italian Bank are at the UNIC, *Sino Italian Bank (shareholders book)*, libro soci, doc.01. Among the reasons stated in the bank's assembly report, dated 23 June 1924, it was stated the domestic political conflicts, which made the trade business in raw material uncertain and unprofitable.

³¹ From the name of the industrial company, contractor of the Chinese government, which commissioned an important contract involving the armament of the Chinese military fleet. Contractual obligations were signed between 1912 and 1914. The events of the Skoda's financial loans involved financial institutions in six countries (Italy, France, Switzerland, Great Britain, Belgium and Czechoslovakia). The facts concerned the imperial Habsburg government and Trieste's shipyards (at that time in the territory of the Austria-Hungary empire) in connection with an international loan issued from 1911 to 1916 for the construction of four cruisers for the

played the role of mediator and representative of the European interests. The Italian bank was also involved in the issue of the payment of Boxers' indemnities. The participation in the First World War against the Empires of Austria and Germany allowed China to obtain temporary suspension of the payments of interests for five years starting from 1917. The remaining debt to be paid to Italy amounted to 91,146,704 French gold francs. Starting in 1925, the Italian bank agreed to repay the remaining debt, financially discounting at a 9% interest rate, the amount due from China to the Italian government.³² The latter, in turn, allowed the repayment of the residual exposure to be made in paper currency, received by the Italian bank in *Tiānjīn*, while the Chinese government agreed to repay the financial exposure with a structured monthly amortization, denominated in US dollar (instead of gold francs), to be credited to the Italian bank. It was also decided that the entire credited amount would later be made available for philanthropic, educational and civil engineering projects (construction of roads and bridges, infrastructure improvements, etc.) to be completed in China, with material purchased in Italy and the works would be commissioned to a consortium of Italian-Chinese companies. The subsequent political events, with the change of government in China, which took place in 1927,³³ left latter point of the agreement without material consequences and the issue of indemnities was resolved only by a subsequent agreement between the two governments signed in London on 1 July 1933. In the end the outstanding financial debt repayment was mostly used through purchase orders, assigned to Italian companies, for the military projects³⁴ and the supply of ammunition.

Statistics of 1925³⁵ reported by journalist Roberto Suster indicated trade volumes equal to about 16 million silver taels, of which 10 million concerned the Italian exports. At the same time, the presence of Italian residents in China reached the number of 783 citizens and 47 companies, much less than the German business (318 companies) or British (718 companies) communities, although all the Italian firms were well-established and dominant in some industrial sectors, including the silk trade (raw material and manufactured products) and marble commercialization. Economic relations between Italy and China reached the peak in 1929, when the volume of trade reached 1.53 per cent of the total of Italian foreign trade and 2.84 per cent of the total Chinese trade. In the economic study of Charles Remer, concerning the international investment in China,³⁶ the economist estimated the Italian financial exposure (investments and financial debt) towards China in 1931 an equivalent of a total value of USD 46 million (excluding the amount related to the Boxers' indemnity), of which 42 million was

Chinese Navy. The total loan amounted to 5 million British pounds at the interest rate of 8%. At the end of the first World War, the first negotiation (lead by Mr. Cosulich and Mr. Rosenthal, 1920-1925) reached an agreement for a first loan restructuring that extended China's debt to 10 years, but this agreement proved itself as inconclusive, for the chronic lack of capital, and the reimbursement was never finalized. Extensive documentation on this topic can be found at the UNIC, *Classified files*, Special cases ex-Austria loans, folder 01.

³² R. Suster, *La Cina Repubblica*, publisher Alpes, Milano, 1928 p.194 and F.Tamagna, *Italy's interest*, p.13.

³³ The nationalist government ruled China since 1927, under the leadership of general Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石, *Jiǎng Jièshí*, 1887-1975). Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) began his military career as supporter of Sun Yat-sen political plan. He was commander of the Whampoa military academy and at the death of Sun, he became the leader of the Guómíndǎng party. About the political life of the Generalissimo, also see A. Young, *China's Nation Building Effort (1927-1937)*, Stanford University Press, 1971, and E. E. Lloyd, *The Abortive Revolution*, Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1990.

³⁴ Including the military airport of Nanchang in Jiangxi province, unconditioned supported by Chiang Kai-shek and Mussolini, built by the Sino Italian National Aircraft Works, which is also considered the most important infrastructure built by Italians in China before the WWII.

³⁵ R. Suster, *La Cina Repubblica*, publisher Alpes, Milano, 1928 p.199

³⁶ C. F. Remer, *Foreign Investment in China*, McMillian company, 1933. The economic commitment of the main international Powers was analysed, also with a brief analysis of Italy (pp.658-661).

invested in government bonds. The industrial and financial investments were mainly related to companies established in Shanghai and *Tiānjīn*, among them the main initiatives were represented by the capital invested through the *Banca Italiana per la Cina* and the industrial plant (considered the only Italian production facility at that time in the city) for marble processing in *Tiānjīn*. In that same year the Italian community in the city reached the number of about 400 residents and the foreign community in the concession was about 550 of over 6,300 residents.³⁷

The district of the former Italian concession has been in recent years renovated. The facade has maintained the original style. The buildings have been refurbished and transformed, as other areas of the old concessions, into a permanent, open architecture museum. Examining the modern urban topographic map and comparing it with that one of the city before WWII, the territory of the old Italian concession is today comprised between *Bo'ai dao* (Fraternity Road, formerly marquis of San Giuliano Road), *Jiànguó dao* (Fatherland Foundation Road, former avenue King Vittorio Emanuele III) *Wujing Lu* (Five Elements Road, formerly Trento Road) and *Shènglì lu* (Victory Road). All the streets and buildings after the 1949 reoccupation have been renamed in line with the principles and models of modern China, transformed in many cases by proposing the themes of political rhetoric. Within the concession the streets now bear the name of the "Three Principles of the People" mentioned by the founding father of the nation, Sun Yat-sen, such as Nationalism (*Mínzú*, former Marco Polo Road), Democracy (*Mínzhǔ*), Welfare for the People (*Mínshēng*, former Prince of Udine Road). The most interesting buildings from the historical point of view are still in the modern *Jìnbù dao* (Progress Road, formerly Ermanno Carlotto Road) and *Ziyou dao* (Freedom Road, formerly Roma Road).

In observing the modern city of *Tiānjīn*, architectural canons belonging to the cultural and historical heritage of each colonial nation are still evident today, while the trace of the pre-existing, traditional Chinese quarters have completely disappeared. The space was reinvented, using urban plans and architectural styles that radically transformed the city, however, leaving a representation in small scale images and thousands of miles away. Maurizio Marinelli³⁸ defined the effect of this concentration of cultural diversity with the expression “emotional space” and “emotional capital”, expressions that evoke images and meanings of spaces created by each community to reproduce elements of their own national identity,³⁹ within these local realities linked to the context of traditionalism and certainly in conflict with the prevalent, cultural environment. Wherever the foreigner established his presence, he sought the conversion to the models of his own tradition and culture, often incomprehensible to the local community:

The Chinese people continue to live with her singular customs, so singularly different from ours, with her insensitive mindset to every Western novelty, paying for her situation, jealous of her own ideology, which she regards much better than the western one.⁴⁰

Today the *Tiānjīn* districts have gradually returned to the people and to the daily simplicity of Chinese life after the Second World War, but in opposition to what happened with the arrival of foreigners in the early 1900s, which radically changed the appearance of the city, and in an, apparently, incomprehensible way, compared to the canons of modern Chinese

³⁷ Document filed at the The Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (MAE), *China archive (1931-1945)*, envelope 3, signed by consul Luigi Neyrone, dated 24.4.1931.

³⁸ M. Marinelli, senior lecturer in East Asian History by the University of Sussex (UK).

³⁹ M. Marinelli, *Italian production of space in Tianjin*, in *Foreigners and foreign institutions in Republican China*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ F. Vincenzo, *La concessione italiana*, p.10.

(communist) culture, have maintained, at least in appearance, their western architectural style.⁴¹

It is an extraordinary fact, if we consider that post-war socialist culture has eliminated, without nostalgia, much more important traces of the nation's past. Before the Communist era, in the period between the two World Wars, some concessions underwent major transformations and their presence was dissolved. For example, the German and the Austrian-Hungarian districts were rebuilt by the Chinese government starting from 1917. Similarly, in 1920, the Russian concession was returned to the Chinese by the Soviets. In 1929, Belgium signed a treaty for the restitution of the concession to China. Upon the arrival of the Second World War, only four of the original administrations survived, including the Italian one.

The city was then occupied by the Japanese in 1937. The Italian concessions preserved its status of free administration, being Italy allied of Japan. However, on 8 September 1943, after the signing of armistice with the allied forces landed in Italy, the Italian diplomatic personnel and the military forces gathered in the barracks in *Tiānjīn* received the order to destroy all the archives and diplomatic documentation, to sink all the ships and to surrender with dignity to the Japanese army. To the diplomatic and military personnel was offered the option to cooperate or to refuse and face the consequences. Many of them made the second choice and were interned in concentration camps located in China, Kiangwan (near Shanghai) and Fengtai (near Beijing), while other ones were transferred in Korea and Japan. Reports and diaries of that dramatic experience are still kept in the historic archives of the institutions established in the Chinese cities at that time.⁴² With the establishment of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (Italian Social Republic) the Italian concession in *Tiānjīn* was first administered by Japanese with Italian cooperation, but on 15 July 1944 it was handed over to Japan. The concession then returned to the full national sovereignty of the People's Republic of China at the end of the Second World War and Italy formally renounced the rights of the concession on 10 February 1947.⁴³ On that Monday in Paris it was so stated:

Art. 24 – Italy renounces in favour of China all benefits and privileges resulting from the provision of the final Protocol signed at Peking on 7 September 1901, and all the annexes, notes and documents supplementary thereto, and agrees to the abrogation in respect of Italy of the said protocol, annexes, notes and documents. Italy likewise renounces any claim thereunder to the indemnity.

Art.25 – Italy agrees to the cancellation of the lease from the Chinese Government under which the Italian Concession at 天津 *Tiānjīn* was granted and to transfer to the Chinese Government of any property and archives belonging to the municipality of the said concession.

The legacy left by the Italian presence at *Tiānjīn* was more cultural than economic or military. The Italians had a marginal interest in civil engineering projects, which targeted the exploitation of China's natural resources, as avidly pursued by other major international Powers, and the presence of Italian entrepreneurs and companies was always small in

⁴¹ Particularly in contemporary days the neighbourhoods of the old English, French and Italian concessions, are becoming a meeting place and (unfortunately) mainly a location for hotels, restaurants and shopping.

⁴² Among them the diaries of the Italian Bank of China personnel kept at the UNIC, Diario del Direttore De Paoli (9 settembre – 12 dicembre) and Sig.ri Tavella, Fantechi, Petit and Crespi, *Serie: Costituzione ed Organizzazione banca*, folder 09, documenti De Paoli.

⁴³ The Paris treaty dated 10 February 1947, in which Italy, inter alia, renounced to all the privileges and territories in China.

numbers and industrial initiatives, as evidenced by the economic numbers related to the direct investments and by the records of the commercial trade. Even the reduced military presence, compared to the other Powers, principally represented by a regiment battalion (about 300 soldiers), predominantly located in two barracks in *Tiānjīn*, was proportional to the limited Italian interests and ambitions in China. Italy, which at that time had neither experience nor the economic resources to be able to pursue a sustainable colonial policy in Asia, at the beginning sought to seize the opportunity to achieve a stable presence without, however, planning a real civil project and with the only main ambition not to achieve recognition among the colonial Powers. Also, the failure of *SānMén*'s expedition (1899),⁴⁴ one year before the foundation of the concession of *Tiānjīn*, is still remembered by historiography, as the most eloquent evidence of that political and military improvisation that did not allow Italy to play a more important role in Asia.

However, despite adversity and unpreparedness, the civil and social environment of the concession was still an example of success, achieved with almost no financial support, becoming the symbol of Italy in Asia, representing the image of the collective commitment of the residents and leaving a sign of national pride in a country considered not suitable for alien cultures. The architectural transformation of the neighborhood and the peaceful coexistence, enjoyed by the residents of several nations, particularly of Chinese origins, have remained an example of civilization also celebrated in foreign literature.

The topography and architecture of the Italian concession buildings has been preserved, almost untouched, even after the major political changes that have transformed China. This is still today a rare example of cultural continuity, after the social and political transformation events that took place since the Second World War. The Quarter is today a renowned tourist attraction in *Tiānjīn* and one of the few architectural sites still intact and evidence of the foreign concessions historical period in China. As all the other international concessions, for most of the Chinese people it has become only the memory of a short period of their millennial history, conveniently reproduced in historical books as a multicultural experience, but never considered as a colonial site. Chinese history books describe the concessions with the word *zū jiè* (租借),⁴⁵ which means a territory in temporary lease or *qū* (区), a quarter inhabited by a foreign community, but never use the word *zhí mín dì* (殖民地), which, instead, means colony. For the European people the concessions, almost forgotten in history books, are today only the last memory of the very distant colonial period, when citizens of different nations attempted to reproduce the civil and cultural life of the own motherland, proposing to the Chinese people a new model of civilization and (forced) coexistence, but for the Italians it still remains the last proud trace of the furthest place of the Italianism in the XX century.

⁴⁴ In 1899 Italy, after starting a fruitless negotiation with the imperial government of China, presented an ultimatum with the intention of militarily occupy the territory of *SānMén* bay, in the region of *ZhèJiāng*. The action produced a stalemate, causing an embarrassing diplomatic situation for the Italian government. The historical episode is reported and analysed in G. Borsa, *Italia e Cina*, Pavia, Edizioni di Comunità, 1961. See also O. Coco, *Colonialismo europeo in Estremo Oriente*, p. 34-61.

⁴⁵ See Shan Kequiang and Liu Haiyan, *Tianjin Zujie*, Tianjin People Publication, 1996 (天津人民出版社, 1996, 尚克强 刘海岩).

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