

The history of Huawei in Italy through the lens of corporate nationality

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a historical dimension of the Italian public opinion on Huawei, and vice versa of the Chinese perception of Huawei’s role in Italy. Through a qualitative content analysis, the author examines Italian newspapers framing on Huawei as well as Chinese newspapers framing on the Italian telecommunication market before and after the signature of China–Italy memorandum of understanding in 2019. The research provides a periodization of three stages that highlights the evolution of the Chinese company in Italy and examines to what extent its activities can fit within the paradigm of imperialist actions. Based on a historical perspective, this contribution examines the perception of China’s digital infrastructure outside the Chinese borders, while also focusing on policy imaginaries through the corporate nationality theory and analyzing the rhetoric of “nationality” applied to a specific organizational behavior in the aggregation of different communities.

Keywords

China imperialism, China media, Italian telecommunication, corporate nationality, Huawei, Chinese press, Italian press

Introduction

In line with the rationale of this special issue, this article aims to explore to what extent China’s rise can be considered the primary contemporary challenger to American economic and political hegemony. This study focuses on the experience of Huawei in Italy from its first investments in the

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country in 2004 to July 2020, [Elo & Kyngäs, 2008](#) when the Italian government began to consider the possibility to exclude the Chinese company from its investment on its 5G infrastructure. The relevance of the topic is threefold. First, due to its relationship with Huawei, Italy was one of the first European countries to be engaged into the broader context of the US–China trade war started in 2018 ([Liu & Woo, 2018](#)). Second, zooming into the European context, the Huawei experience in Italy shows that EU had not developed a comprehensive strategy to deal with Chinese telecommunication companies ([Papermans, 2016](#)). Finally, from the Chinese perspective, Huawei’s history in Italy can be considered as a concrete attempt to develop its own Digital Belt and Road Initiative in Europe ([Shen, 2018](#)).

A historical overview on Huawei in Italy

According to most analysts, Chinese companies (and Huawei in particular) exploited contributed to create a form of European Union (EU)-China relations based on competition over cooperation ([Dmitrijevs, 2020](#)). This is despite the fact that China was included among the EU’s six strategic partners in 2003 ([Low, 2007](#)). EU official sources state that thanks to its 17,460 million Euro investments in research and development (R&D), Huawei was the second largest company in the Eurozone in 2021, eclipsed only by the US-based company Alphabet (formerly Google). Not surprisingly, interest in Huawei within the European market has been steady in the last few years. Indeed, in 2016 its investments totaled 9,467 million Euro, making it the eighth largest investor ([EU Commission, 2021](#)). Despite its growing importance within European markets, Huawei—EU relations cannot be considered peaceful. Recent concerns related to cybersecurity and 5G security networks represent two of the most sensitive topics especially after the launch of the *Digital Belt and Road Initiative*. The publication of a report on EU coordinated risk assessment of 5G network security ([EU Commission, 2019](#)) and a toolbox of risk mitigating measures ([EU Commission, 2020](#)), are not enough to elaborate a coordinated EU approach to regulate the activities of the Chinese company in the European market.

By late 2023, Huawei had two headquarters in Italy (one in Rome and one in Milan) and 750 employees. It also had branches in 10 other cities as well as four R + D centers, a business and innovation center, and a cyber security transparency center. Huawei’s infrastructural investment included the creation of telecommunication networks in cooperation with the national carrier Telecom Italia in Basilicata, Calabria, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily in 2004. All these regions are based in Southern Italy and have the lowest national gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the country ([Banca D’Italia, 2017](#)).

Huawei’s business strategies

Huawei’s success in Italy can be explained by the combination of four strategies. The first one is to polish the company language supporting the narrative according to which it is “a private company that is wholly owned by its employees” and therefore not an agent of the Chinese state ([Huawei Italia, 2023](#)). The second strategy is institutional lobbying: In 2021, the company topped the fifth position among the tech firms lobbying EU institutions with an investment of 3 million Euro a year ([Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021](#)). The third strategy consists of direct investments in European Member States to demonstrate its commitment and ability to provide concrete contributions to the country’s economic development (as I will demonstrate in the case of the Italian “Agenda Digitale”). The last strategy is to invest in local training and educational programs, sports events,

and competitions to engage with local communities and governments. Huawei applied all these strategies also in Italy.

Through this approach, Huawei presents a “microcosmic” example of the globalization of China’s evolving digital economy (Wen, 2020). Previous works already defined Huawei’s contribution to the internationalization strategy of Chinese MNEs (Li, 2010) as well as its ambition to be a competitive company in the international market (Low, 2007). Other studies focused on the business culture (Tao, De Cremer, Wu, 2016) as well as its innovative capacity (Yan & Huang, 2022). After the US-China trade war escalated in the late 2010s, more publications focused on the ownership of Huawei (Rühlig, 2020) and defined the actions of the Chinese company as a “threat” (Inkster, 2019). This trend is confirmed by policy papers that expressed concerns over Chinese companies within North American telecommunications sectors (Ford, 2020). On the other hand, research on Huawei’s history in Europe is narrower, focusing specifically on topics such as network security and technology dependency (Papersmans, 2016; Rühlig and Bjork, 2020; Rühlig & Björk, 2020).

Theoretical framework

As other articles in this issue interrogate claims made regarding on China’s imperialist ambitions, this piece contributes to the existing literature by analyzing how Huawei operations in Italy have been perceived by the Italian and Chinese press and institutional media. This study is inspired by the work of the early 20th century Marxist economist Rudolf Hilferding (1981 [1910]), who argues that protectionist measures shield domestic markets from foreign competition while willingness to take military, business and political risks are justified by capital’s constant search for cheap labor and materials (1981). Hilferding’s analysis of imperialism provides an important starting point to investigate the US-China trade tensions and their cultural rivalry for two reasons. First, it represents an alternative to a center/periphery model which is too focused on the competition between major economic superpowers. Second, it highlights that economic and political strategies by major powers can only be fully understood as the product of shifting relations between corporate enterprise and state intervention (Murdock, 2019).

The role of Huawei, at least in Italy, fits Hilferding’s model. Huawei started to move into European markets during the “going out policy” (走出去战略), a PRC strategy initiated in 1999 to encourage its enterprises to invest overseas (Wang, 2016). This strategy was pioneered during the development of the Chinese ICT industry with particular reference to new forms of cooperation with foreign companies, international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) (DeWoskin, 2001), and state investment in modernizing the network infrastructure. The “going out policy” also increased the level of national innovation while limiting technological dependence on foreign corporations; the ultimate result was achieving the national goal of transforming the country into an ICT leader (Hong, 2017; Meng & Li, 2002).

The “going out policy” was an integral part of Huawei’s internationalization. As such, Huawei was already contracted with Italian companies in 2019 when Italy became the first G7 country to sign a memorandum of understanding to join the Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路) (BRI). On that occasion Huawei confirmed its interest to invest in the Italian 5G infrastructure by opening a research center in Milan (Caretto, 2019).

Huawei’s experience in the Italian market can be viewed from at least two perspectives. On the one hand, the state support from which Huawei benefited helped the Chinese company gain a competitive advantage (Pepermans, 2016; Rühlig, 2020). On the other hand, Huawei the spread of the image of China as a leading force in the technology and media sectors. This article argues that the

way it penetrated foreign markets reveals key elements of its Chinese national character. Indeed, Huawei's in Italy, actually supported China's "going out policy" through the promotion Chinese culture and language as will be seen in the "Seeds for Future" program.

This study draws on the theoretical filter of "corporate nationality" to contribute to the debate around China's so-called imperialist expansion. There are two categories that support the "corporate nationality" model as presented by Godlier (2020). The first category refers to the establishment of physical structures such as houses, buildings, and city parks as well as machines and management tools. The second includes the transmission of values and representations of the national space from where the corporation originates. The transmission of values is important because they have a normative impact on people's behavior. Values, and in a broader sense, culture, are institutionalized over the history; this process fuels the creation of a shared idea of what constitutes a national community (Godelier, 2020). In the specific case of Huawei, "corporate nationality" is expressed by a set of material elements combined with representations and values.

From the perspective of corporate nationality, Huawei reflects at least three Chinese national elements. First, through its self-image the Chinese company portrays specific "Chinese" characteristics. This happened for instance already during the first decades of the 2000s with the promotion of a "harmonious" logo designed to recall the "harmonious society" (和谐社会) drawn from the socioeconomic concepts of the Hu-Wen. In a similar vein, at the beginning in 2023, after the officialization of the CPP slogan "Community with a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体) Huawei used the same catchphrase to promote its activities outside China. Second, as was demonstrated by the 2018 arrest of chief officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada, Huawei's international experience reinforces a certain kind of national pride in mainland China. Finally, Huawei actively contributes to support political measures to strengthen the image of the Chinese nation outside its borders. This last element is part of the larger goal to make China a "strong nation" (强国), in Huawei's case through the field of the telecommunications. Confirmation of this element is reflected in the Huawei profile presented on the China Media Group program "Strong Nation Brands" (强国品牌) in 2022. According to their profile of it, Huawei contributes to "let more people around the world appreciate the joy of technological progress and to realize their dreams" (CMG, 2022).

Methods and sampling strategy

Following Elo and Kyngäs (2008), I conducted a "deductive content analysis" on the framing of Huawei in Italy by both Italian and Mainland China news outlets from 2004 to 2020; this approach considers historical frames as a characteristic of the news discourse itself (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Newspapers articles included in the sample were retrieved through the Factiva database. Focusing on framing by news stories is justified by De Vreese who points frames as "an emphasis in salience of different aspects of the topic" (2005). The keywords used for the Italian search were "Italia" and "Huawei"; the first output was of 1398 articles. From this larger corpus, I limited the focus of my research to newspapers which published at least 100 pieces on Huawei's work in Italy (representing the majority of the corpus). The four news outlets are *Il Sole 24 Ore* (202 articles), the highest-circulation Italian financial newspaper, *il Corriere della Sera* (180 articles) Italy's oldest and most read newspaper; *Corriere Comunicazioni* (166 articles), an Italian outlet with a specific focus on digital economy and telecommunication markets; and *Milano Finanza* (106 articles), a newspaper focused on economic and financial issues. The keywords used for the search in Chinese were "意大利" (Italy) and "华为" (Huawei), with the first Factiva output producing 680 articles. The news outlets that published more than 100 pieces on Huawei were the official state news agency of the PRC *Xinhua* (新华) (260 articles), the official newspaper of the CPC *People's Daily* (人民日

报) (121 articles) and *Economic Daily* (经济日报) a Chinese state-owned newspaper focused on economic reports (101 articles).

To make the sample more specific, I selected articles with direct quotes from both Chinese and Italian policymakers and top managers engaged in Huawei operations in Italy through the software Sketch Engine. The relevance of quotations is justified by scholars according to whom journalists use direct quotations to mimic, reproduce or resemble, [Sternberg \(1982\)](#) or—in a border perspective—to represent ([Li, 1986](#)) what others say. Finally, through a qualitative analysis, I selected all the articles with direct references to the idea of “corporate nationality” that is cultural values and political projects that characterize the history of PRC politics such as “harmonious society” (和谐社会), “one belt and one road initiatives” (一带一路), “going out policy” (走出去战略), “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义) etc.

To supplement these journalistic sources, I also applied a textual analysis on Huawei official reports in Chinese to evaluate the internal business perspective of this Chinese company in Italy. Textual analysis of business reports can provide a useful because they contain information for understanding the financial data and testing interesting economic hypothesis ([Li, 2010](#)). Finally, this article also includes the analysis of officials’ statements of Chinese diplomats in Italy inspired Nye’s public diplomacy approach defined as “an attempt by a government to communicate and attract the public” of a foreign country ([Nye, 2008](#)).

Findings

The history of Huawei in Italy can be divided into three stages. The first one goes from 2004 to 2010. During this period Italy was not considered the most strategic European market for the Chinese company. The second stage goes from 2011 to 2016 and fully reflects the paradigm of “corporate nationality.” [Tables 1–3](#) During this period Huawei started to promote a cooperative attitude supporting the Chinese national narrative of itself as a strong yet benevolent country both

Table I. Data collection (Italian newspapers).

Newspapers	Articles
Corriere della Sera	202
Il Sole 24 Ore	180
Corriere Comunicazioni	166
Milano Finanza	106
La Stampa	98
Repubblica	92
Il Fatto Quotidiano	87
Il Messaggero	85
Il Giornale	77
Il Manifesto	69
Il Tempo	67
Italia Oggi	52
La Verità	49
Avvenire	45
Il resto del Carlino	23
TOT	1398

institutionally and economically. In more concrete terms, during this period Huawei (among other activities) invested in cooperation with Italian universities and research centers including but not limited to launching its global corporate social responsibility flagship program, “Seeds for the Future.” The last stage (2017–2020) includes ad hoc Huawei 5G projects in Sardinia, Puglia, and Basilicata as well as the Italian government’s decision to implement an initiative entitled “golden power” aimed to limit or ban foreign investments and corporate transactions involving Italian strategic assets.

First stage (2004–2010)

Italian frame. According to *Il Sole 24 Ore*, Italy was not the primary choice for Huawei’s initial foray into the European market. In 2006, then CEO of Huawei Italia, John X.P. Xiao, stated it preferred to invest in Germany where the telecommunication carrier Vodafone (Huawei’s main partner) was headquartered. Beyond this strategic reason, the manager also complained about Italian immigration policies (Fatiguso, 2006). Despite Huawei’s trepidatious approach to Italian investment, the analysis of Italian outlets illustrates that “the Italian business community expressed the wish that one of China’s most innovative companies could establish scientific collaboration relationships useful to both Italy and China itself” (Fatiguso, 2006).

The same year, Huawei released a new logo which, according to the *Economist Intelligence* unit, was part of an international communication strategy. The presentation of the new Huawei advertising campaign was a topic of discussion also in Italy. *Repubblica* reported on the new Huawei logo specifying that how it is “made up of flower petals, covering towards the base, has among its four key messages, that of harmony.” (Jadeluca, 2006) It is interesting to see that even the wording choice to refer to “harmony” can be considered in line with the PRC socioeconomic program envisioned during the Hu-Wen Jintao premiership introduced during the 2005 National’s People’s Congress and based on sustainable growth and technological advance. The same newspaper also stated that the new Huawei logo is “a very oriental concept, which clashes with the “fierce Asian competition” that we are used to thinking about but also with the messages of unscrupulousness and ruthlessness of many hypercompetitive American models” (Jadeluca, 2006). In 2008, an *Il Corriere della Sera* article reported positively on the appointment of new CEO in Italy David Wang who “compared to his predecessor who could not speak Italian, is studying the local language” (Segantini, 2008) which is “smart and useful to persuade the market that Huawei wants to have more solid roots in Italy” (Segantini, 2008).

Table 2. Data collection (Chinese newspapers).

Newspapers	Articles
Xinhua (新华)	260
People’s Daily (人民日报)	121
Economic Daily (经济日报)	101
Beijing Daily (北京日报)	85
Hebei Daily (河北日报)	67
Shanghai Daily (上海日报)	33
Shanxi Daily (陕西日报)	13
TOT	680

Table 3. Data for the first stage.

Newspaper	Articles on Huawei in Italy	Articles with references to corporate nationality
Il Sole 24 Ore	64	21
Corriere della Sera	52	16
Corriere Comunicazioni	39	11
Milano Finanza	25	4
Xinhua	76	28
People's Daily	39	14
Economic Daily	12	5

Chinese frame. The Chinese press framed Huawei's expansion into Italy through a more institutional lens. In an article from May 2006 *Xinhua* reports that the economic and commercial business counselor's office of the Chinese embassy in Italy praised its strong demand for Chinese capital "as an important measure for Italy to get rid of the bottleneck of economic growth." This diplomat also reflected that "the Huawei Group alone had provided 2000 jobs opportunities for local residents" (*Xinhua*, 2006). At the end of 2006 another article from the *People's Daily* celebrated the first agreement between the Telecom Operator "Telecom Italia" as "another successful cooperation with an European country after a successful and strict evaluation of the Italian engineers" (*People's Daily*, 2006).

First stage analysis. Sources reflect that during this stage both the Italian and the Chinese press did not cover Huawei's operations in Italy extensively. Indeed, the articles analyzed for this period represent less than one third of the total amount of articles analyzed for this research.

Addressing main trends in this stage from the perspective of the Italian press, it emerges that the initial expectations of Huawei's investment in Italy were downsized because of the legal environment along with more attractive conditions in other European countries. However, it is also apparent that the Italian press identified Huawei's investment as an economic opportunity for Italy. Furthermore, Huawei's communication strategy was appreciated by Italian newspapers as it demonstrated both its "harmonious" attitude and global approach. These episodes can be viewed as an expedient to facilitate Huawei imperialist strategy also in Italy. These two trends intensified during the second stage.

Second stage (2011–2016)

Italian frame. During the second stage, China increased its technology exports following its "going out policy" which was supported by both the Chinese and Italian governments. In 2012, Huawei's Italian leadership met with then Prime Minister Mario Monti, expressing its interest in supporting the Italian "Agenda Digitale," a program under the umbrella of EU 10-year strategy "Europe 2020" aimed at speeding up the roll out of high-speed internet in Italy (*Corriere Comunicazioni*, 2012). Interviewed for *Corriere Comunicazioni*, George Zhao, then Huawei Italia managing director, specified that "Italy was the third most preferred country for Huawei investments" (*Campesato*, 2012). During this stage Huawei management became aware of its initial negative reputation; thus it tried to counterbalance accusations of "imperialism" by pointing out three aspects.

The first negative perception presented by the Italian press was related to Huawei's impact on the job market. Accused of bringing more business in China and reducing the workforce in Italy, Zhao Ming, Huawei's managing director in Italy replied:

“In Italy Huawei is not a simple seller of products and services, but it can be considered one of the major Chinese investors. Huawei’s main goal is to strengthen its presence in Italy and in Europe in terms of market shares but also in terms of investments; investments that have a very high technological content and employ highly qualified professionals” (ibid).

The second criticism was about the national origin of management. Huawei’s official answer addressed these concerns:

“Huawei’s Western Europe manager is an Italian. The director of the Microwave division is Italian. All Huawei solutions leaders are Italian. Huawei wants to leverage more local resources and talents to support the growth of its activities in Europe and Italy with the intention of safeguarding benefits to the communities where it operates. The head of Huawei in Italy has always been Chinese. This is something that could change.” (Ibid.)

The final major criticism was that PRC economic support for Huawei made it an agent of the Chinese government, an allegation constant during Huawei’s work in Italy. In this case the official answer was:

“ICT is an open market everywhere, China included. To Huawei, competition is a key factor from which both user companies and final users benefit. Do we want to go back to twenty years ago when there were high prices for everyone and little innovation? The real challenge is not to close the markets, but to make the market bigger for everyone” (ibid)

After initial skepticism, Mr Zhao’s words and Huawei’s investments in Italy were received more positively by the Italian press because “the Chinese company will also leverage local talents to strengthen its operations in Europe providing benefits to the local Italian communities” (D’Anna, 2012).

Beyond this narrative linking the Chinese government’s institutional support and closer connections with the Italian government, during this second stage Huawei launched a series of corporate responsibility activities to improve its reputation. The most important program was Huawei’s “Seeds for the Future.” Launched in 2013, it is a corporate social responsibility (CSR) project aimed at developing local talent in the ICT sector, improving the sharing of technological knowledge, and promoting greater interest in the ICT sector (*Seeds for the Future*, nd.). In Italy the initiative was launched in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). The initiative recruits 15 students each year studying electronic engineering and information to undergo a two-week training in Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing where they attend both technical and Chinese language and culture courses. They also visit Huawei exhibition halls in Shenzhen, the R&D center in Shanghai, and the briefing center in Beijing.

In 2015 the Ministry of Economic Development (MISE) supported Huawei and MIUR in organizing the third edition of the project. The three parties signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding aimed at improving digital skills in Italy by bringing together business and academia. This program is line with the main goals of the Italian “Agenda Digitale” project (Camera, 2015). After three years, the Italian press reflected positively on the Huawei initiative not only because of the technical courses included in the program but also “for its modules on ‘soft skills’ such as cultural awareness and effective communication” (Romano, 2016). Other articles praised Huawei’s program success in “educating students in solving complex global problems and developing leadership skills through teamwork” (Cappadocia, 2016). It is possible to argue that “Seeds

for the Future” is not only an initiative aimed at improving Huawei’s reputation but also fostering its “corporate nationality” by offering courses of Chinese language, projecting abroad the image of an economic and high developed country. Through its CSR initiatives Huawei further communicated a national image of China in the sense defined by Wang as “the climate of opinion formed by collective expressions of perceptions and judgments of a country by its overseas publics” (Wang, 2006, p. 92).

Chinese frame. The strategic decision to launch Huawei’s Global Microwave R&D competence center in Milan in 2011 saw direct support of the Chinese institutions—as reported. Then Chinese Ambassador to Italy Ding Wei delivered a speech during the opening of the center highlighting how “the establishment of the center is a direct reflection of the in-depth development of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Italy in the field of economic research and a bold exploration of high-level cooperation between technology enterprises in China and Italy” (PRC Embassy in Italy, 2011). He also defined this investment as “the epitome of Chinese enterprises ‘going out’ using their own development to contribute to the economic and social development of host countries” (ibid.). Unsurprisingly, the event was positively depicted by the official Chinese press. An article from *People’s Daily* highlights “the development of Chinese funded enterprises in Italy despite Italy’s relatively sluggish economic situation” (People’s Daily, 2011). The Milan center was also considered to be “functional for long-term and overall interests of Chinese funded enterprises” (ibid.).

Huawei’s support for the Italian “Agenda Digitale” was also covered positively. For example, an article published by *Xinhua* in (2013) emphasized the importance of the project:

Huawei provided a large number of information technology solutions to the Italian government and all sectors of society. When Huawei Italy was founded, it had only 10 employees. Now it has more than 700 employees, 80% of whom are Italian. Huawei’s business model breaks through the previous situation where China’s investment was concentrated in labor-intensive industries, and sets a model for cooperation between the two countries in high-tech and knowledge-intensive industries. Together with Huawei, more and more Chinese-funded enterprises have carried out more extensive cooperation with Italy in wider fields such as building materials, metallurgy, and shipbuilding, forming an exciting cooperation momentum. (ibid)

Second stage analysis. Compared to the first stage, in the second stage the Chinese press increased its references to “corporate nationality.” Indeed, both the initiatives organized in Milan and Huawei’s “Seeds for the Future” highlight how Huawei was clearly considered a Chinese company capable to fully support the “going out policy” actively contributing to the development of China’s economic and political role in Italy for the future.

The analysis of Italian sources during the second stage shows not only an increase in articles discussing Huawei through the lens of “corporate nationality” but also more articles with positive tones; specifically in the case of Huawei’s support on the “Agenda Digitale” initiative and in the reports on “Seeds for the Future” program. Huawei’s contribution to the Italian “Agenda Digitale” in particular, fits with Hilferding’s thesis by demonstrating how an emerging yet “peripheral” state actor like China can play an active economic role in a weakened G7 country like Italy in the strategic ICT sector.

Third stage (2017–2020)

Italian frame. The last phase of coverage of Huawei’s investment in Italy focuses on its attempt to create a series of 5G projects in Italy from 2017 to 2020 in cooperation with regional governments—

specifically Puglia, Basilicata, and Sardinia. In 2017, a *Milano Finanza* article reported that Matera and Bari were to join a 5G trial project between the MISE and Huawei. The central foci of the project were Smart City, Public Safety and Virtual Reality (Pira, 2019). Sardinia was another region involved in Huawei's 5G projects. In 2016, the corporation partnered with the Sardinian regional government to launch its Center for Research, Development and Higher Studies in Sardinia (Centro di Ricerca, Sviluppo e Studi Superiori in Sardegna). The main goal of the research center was to develop a series of programs dedicated to R&D and the diffusion of digital skills. Finally, potentially the largest project was in Pula and focused on building a "smart city."

The Italian press reports that the cooperation between Huawei and the Sardinian government should be considered "a model that the Chinese group also intends to export to Italy, and which leverages greater integration and collaboration between public and private sectors" (Pira, 2019). The idea that Huawei was importing a "model" appeared in other articles, like a piece in *Corriere Comunicazioni* that referred to "a business model capable of being the engine of new social development" (*Corriere Comunicazioni*, 2017).

In 2018, another article from the same newspaper reflects a positive framing of Huawei:

"A very important result which places the country at the forefront in Europe and which lays the foundations for what will be the country's true development asset, i.e. applications for vertical markets, which will generate growth for the industry and greater services for citizens". (*Corriere Comunicazioni*, 2018)

In broader terms, the third stage evidences a peak in frequency of coverage on both the Chinese and Italian sides. This increase coincides with both the rising US–China trade war and concerns from Italian policymakers about a possible security threat created by Huawei for Italian 5G networks. In this vein, an article from *Il Corriere della Sera* published January 2019 raises the differences between the Italian and Chinese legal systems:

It is important to remember that Chinese companies' relationships with their government are not like those of private sector companies in the West. China's 2017 National Security Law requires Chinese companies to support, assist, and cooperate with China's national intelligence work wherever they operate. Huawei's competitors in the production and sale of the material necessary for the 5G network are two European companies: while the Chinese control 28% (in terms of turnover) of this global market, the Finnish Nokia has 17% and the Swedish Ericsson 13%. 4%. They would be the ones to benefit from a Chinese blockade. However, the possible blow to Huawei's reputation could also make Italian consumers reflect on the trade-off they are willing to accept between purchasing a good smartphone at a low price and safeguarding the security of their data (Cometto, 2019).

Another article published again on "*Il Corriere della Sera*" used explicit tones on the possible national security risks created by Huawei.

Italy, despite the warnings received from Copasir over the last ten years, has instead put its networks in the hands of the Chinese company, which offered products at extremely low costs. Already in 2009, global cybersecurity agencies had banned Huawei from contracts for critical infrastructure, while in Italy it was making agreements with Telecom to replace Cisco. While you knew where Cisco's products were made, with the quantity of production put in place by Huawei no one has ever been able to check the actual security. Even the Panic Room of Palazzo Chigi, the maximum-security room of the Prime Minister's Office, passes through two large nodes: the first with Tim's routers, made by Huawei. If there

was a microchip, they could listen to or even see the Prime Minister on video: it is possible, but it has never been proven. [...]. Italy therefore leaves its doors open to the Chinese giant, while many Western countries are asking themselves a problem: can we afford to leave all our data under the management of a non-democratic country? In fact, to obtain them, the Beijing government does not need to go through the top management of a company like Huawei, but simply ask an engineer three levels below the chain of command to open a door in the system. That's exactly what the Americans have always done, and that's why they raised the alarm. The difference is that they "spy" inside an alliance, while China is outside. Furthermore, Huawei invests heavily in Italy also because our country is weak on 5G regulations and, by offering jobs in exchange, they can influence the drafting of regulations. (Gabanelli & Marinelli, 2019)

Another article published in *La Repubblica* explicitly linked Huawei to Chinese state objectives: "It would be naive to think that a Chinese company [Huawei] can actually deny its government military cooperation if it is asked to do so" (Rampini, 2019). On the other hand, commentaries highlighted the economic opportunities presented by Huawei as well as the consequences of the nationalist "golden power" project. Specifically, an article published in *Il Corriere della Sera* argued:

"Doing without Huawei would not have technological but economic implications: turning to Western competitors would cost around 600 million euros. But if Chinese companies can defeat the competition, this happens because of the dominant position and the related profits that these operators enjoy in China" (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 2019).

In 2019, the Italian government issued the "National Cybersecurity Perimeter" aimed at expanding the list of public and private companies considered critical for Italian cybersecurity (Camera, 2015). While the new policy did not directly mention removing Huawei from Italy's 5G network, the Italian government applied its "golden power" to limit its direct investments in order to allegedly protect important strategic assets. In 2020, Telecom Italia stated that it stopped its cooperation with Huawei in the core aspects of 5G without excluding the possibility to collaborate with Chinese companies in other areas. This decree was declared in the press to be a "turning point because it defines the national cyber security perimeter and guarantees a high level of security of the networks, information systems, and IT services of Public Administrations, private and national entities and operators. Among the central themes that the decree examines is the development of 5G in a safe environment that also takes into account the international political scenario." (*Il Sole 24 Ore*).

Chinese frame. The Chinese press enthusiastically celebrated Huawei's investment in 5G networks in southern Italy. An article published in *The People's Daily*, for instance, highlights the idea of "self-confidence" compared to the angry and difficulties that the Chinese company had in the past (自信多于愤怒——本报记者走进华为欧洲分公司 "More confident than angry - our reporter walked into Huawei's European branch"). Looking closer, the article explicitly references the Huawei project at the port of Bari:

In the past, when the ship broke down, frogmen [*sic.*] had to go into the water to repair it. But now that's no longer the case. Chinese robots are used to go into the water and make all the required operations, they can also be used remotely." (*People's Daily*, 2019)

Another article from the *Economic Daily* celebrated Huawei's investments in Sardinia:

Table 4. Dataset for the second stage.

Newspaper	Articles on Huawei in Italy	Articles that reference corporate nationality
Il Sole 24 Ore	67	17
Corriere della Sera	62	25
Corriere Comunicazioni	41	9
Milano Finanza	22	7
Xinhua	69	32
People's Daily	35	27
Economic Daily	28	14

Table 5. Dataset for the third stage.

Newspaper	Articles on Huawei in Italy	Articles with references to corporate nationality
Corriere della Sera	86	24
Il Sole 24 Ore	74	13
Corriere Comunicazioni	70	26
Milano Finanza	52	4
Xinhua	79	47
People's Daily	96	64
Economic Daily	48	15

“In more than ten years, Huawei has grown from an unknown private enterprise to a leader in global communications technology, especially in Italy. Huawei is the enabler and partner of Italy’s digital transformation. An example in this sense is ‘smart city system’ built by Huawei in the Sardinian city of Cagliari able to aggregate and analyses a series of data on traffic of the city and aimed at improving the mobility of the city without compromising anyone’s personal information” ([Economic Daily, 2016](#))

While Huawei’s investments were praised, the Italian government’s attempt to apply “golden power” was heavily criticized. Another article in *Economic Daily* lamented that:

“The US decision to ban Huawei equipment had an effect on other countries; among them Italy... For Huawei Italy is a very important market. Recent doubts about Huawei construction of the local 5G network has not caused any adverse effects. As the proverbs says ‘a straight foot is not afraid of a crooked shoe’ (身正不怕影子斜), Huawei has shown to the international community more than once that its 5G technology is worthy of recognition [...]. In the recent years, Huawei had planned to invest US\$3.1 billion in Italy, which is approximately 21 billion yuan in RMB. Once these investment will be implemented, they will bring more than 1,000 jobs to Italy. If Italy no longer cooperates with Huawei, will all these investments be realized? ([Economic Daily, 2020](#))

Analysis of the third stage. During this stage Huawei increased its efforts to promote “corporate nationality,” especially in the field of 5G infrastructure. [Tables 4](#) and [5](#) Furthermore, during this stage Chinese reports on Huawei operations in Italy show an increased confidence by Huawei (and China) in exporting a Chinese model with a specific reference to projects on AI, robotics, and smart cities.

In reference to “corporate nationality” I noted a significant increase both in the Chinese and Italian press. In particular, Chinese outlets emphasized the success of Huawei in Italy as examples of the rise of a “Chinese technology model” that can be exported to other countries. At the same time, the analysis of Italian press shows the highest frequency of references to Chinese “corporate nationality.” This increase can partly link to the expansion of the BRI. It is also possible to argue that the Italian news framing became more focused on political/security concerns and less on economic benefits. This trend is confirmed by the higher frequency of stories from the general newspaper *Corriere della Sera* for the first time in the three stages.

Conclusion

This article provides a history of Huawei’s expansion in Italy, identifying the most important turning points in the unfolding of purported Chinese “imperialism.” The timeframe considered for the research identified starts in 2006 and ends in 2020 when Huawei started to have its 5G projects dismissed through Italy’s “golden power” policy. Inspired by Hilferding’s model, this research shows that Huawei’s growth in Italy reflects previous historical forms of imperialism for two reasons. First, Huawei’s investments in Italy demonstrates how a model based on center/periphery can be challenged by the growing international relevance of Chinese companies like Huawei. Indeed, Huawei is framed in both Italian and Chinese press through the image of China as a great and developed country in the technology sector. Second, Huawei’s experience in Italy also demonstrates attempts to assert international dominance benefit from cooperation between corporate enterprise and state infrastructure. One clear example of this is the direct engagement of the Chinese Embassy in promoting and supporting Huawei’s work in Italy as part of China’s “going out policy.” Finally, Huawei played an active role in promoting Chinese cultural values through the “Seeds for the Future” program.

This article also mobilizes “corporate nationality” to explain how Huawei’s expansion into Italy reflects a series of China’s soft power goals. During the first stage Huawei mainly manifested the “going out policy.” Although official reports and articles from the Chinese press showed that other European countries were more attractive, Huawei supported the Chinese national project to export Chinese products and values to Italy with the presentation of its logo and its principles consistently in line with the paradigm of “harmonious society” (和谐社会). During the second stage, Huawei’s initiatives were more oriented towards CSR-oriented objectives. The promotion of projects like “Seeds for the Future” not only furthered soft power goals but also facilitated Huawei’s future operations through a more direct engagement with strategic academic institutions like research centers and universities. The third stage reflects a more defined awareness of Huawei’s economic power and perceived ties to the Chinese state. The framing in this period is consistent with the philosophical shift among Chinese leadership to paradigm of “strong country” (强国) in the field of telecommunications. The shift is especially apparent in the reaction from the Chinese press to the Italian government’s decision to protect its telecommunication infrastructure. Through the lens of corporate nationality we can see the relationship between soft power and imperialism, according to which “soft power is not limited to a cultural imperialism that entails making a certain culture attractive to foreign nations” (Bell, 2016). It includes the promotion of corporate imperialism—imperialism in this case promoted by a Chinese company—which reinforces the economic power of Chinese technology and media sectors whilst simultaneously promoting the interest of the China state.

When comparing the framing provided by the Chinese and Italian press, one can see in both an increase in references to “corporate nationality.” The analysis of Chinese sources highlights a

growing confidence in playing a more defined role in international markets by exporting business models outside national borders. On the other hand, the Italian press moved from a frame supporting Huawei's "corporate nationality" to a focus on possible threats to national telecommunication markets and security infrastructure. Briefly addressing future avenues of research as well as limitations to this analysis, it remains to be seen how the experience of Huawei can be replicated in other Chinese companies' activities in Italy or other European countries. Future case studies based on historical analysis focused on the telecom sector (e.g., ZTE) or other technological fields such as hardware (e.g., Hikvision in the field of video surveillance) and/or services (Alibaba, Tencent, etc.) can contribute to develop the discussion on this direction. It is also worth noting that the analysis of Chinese sources is mainly based on state owned news outlets, which could reproduce a potential pro-state bias. A possible solution to this limitation can be a triangulation with other sources in future research on this topic.

The history of Huawei in Italy helps to complicate the broader US–China rivalry within the field of telecommunications. It helps more clearly articulate economic and political tensions as they play out within the fragmented space of the EU. The Italian press reaction was not only driven by the pressure from US and the escalating trade war between China and the US but it can also be justified by domestic security and economic concerns.

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