One of the main problems facing scholars engaged in the study of the Italian presence in China during the late Qing-Republican period (especially in Beijing and in some of the most important treaty ports, starting from Tianjin where an Italian Concession was created in 1902) is represented by the gaps and fragmentary nature of the documents and data available, the dispersion of these in dozens of archives and libraries, and by the blanks that exist in the historical records for certain years and—at times—entire periods.

It is nonetheless necessary and important to try to fulfill the task of reconstructing—to the extent that this is possible—the history of the Italian presence in China, and, in particular, that of hundreds of Italians who lived and worked in China during this historical period. It is an important task in that it allows to shed more light on the history of a community—the Italians in China—whose process of formation and whose characteristics have been largely neglected in the past. At the same time, it is expected that a reconstruction of the history of the Italian community may, as it progresses, become part of the larger framework of political, economic, cultural, and human interactions that marked the lives of the foreign communities in China in those decades.

This chapter draws on a set of Italian sources that have become available to scholars only in recent years, especially during the run-up to the celebrations for the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Italy’s unity (1861–2011), or that were otherwise already available but taken in little or no consideration until now. Such sources are then
integrated with select empirical evidence and arguments produced by Chinese and Western historiography. Owing to the complexity of such a topic, this contribution does not address the question of the presence of Italian missionaries in China.

**THE ITALIAN PRESENCE IN CHINA: SOME STATISTICAL TRENDS**

As indicated above, one of the greatest difficulties encountered by scholars in defining the extent of the Italian presence in China is due to the gaps in the statistical documentation in Italy.

In fact, only in 1926 was the *Istituto Centrale di Statistica* (ISTAT, National Institute of Statistics) created as a public research body charged with producing and diffusing data, information, and statistical analysis. Before then, the task of compiling statistical surveys was entrusted to the *Divisione Statistica del Ministero dell’Agricoltura, Commercio e Industria* (Statistics Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Trade, and Industry).

In the 1870s, a few years after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy, the *Divisione Statistica*, in cooperation with the *Commissariato Generale per l’Emigrazione del Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (commissioner general for emigration, Ministry for Foreign Affairs), began to gather and release information on expatriates, as well as to prepare, in 1881, a census of Italians living abroad.3

The data provided by the 1881 census, and more generally those published from the late 1870s up until 1925, are generally of little value insofar as the statistics include “Asia” under the heading “other countries” (together with Oceania, for example). Even when extrapolating data relative to the Asian continent, their granularity will not allow to distinguish by individual countries.

In any case, elaborating the scant data available, the Italian presence in Asia—while continuing to represent a minute proportion in the history of Italian emigration—appears to have tripled between 1871 and 1911, bringing the total number of Italians living in Asian countries from around 4,000 to over 12,000. In subsequent years, following repatriations and a parallel ban on emigration imposed at the outbreak of the first world war, this number declined to just over 9,000 in 1924.4

Combining the aggregated data of the *Commissariato Generale per l’Emigrazione* with those provided by the royal Italian consuls and officials on the ground, it may be estimated that the number of Italians in China would have been the following:5