Making Rural Destinations Global

Identity, Community and Cooperation

Prof. Dr. Michele De Gasperis - Business Diplomat

President, Italian OBOR Institute | Beijing, 13 September 2026

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Ladies and Gentlemen, It is a great pleasure to be here today in Beijing. I would like to begin with one simple idea: rural tourism is no longer only about tourism. It is also about local development, cultural identity, economic opportunities and the future of communities.

China and Italy are known throughout the world for their great cities and extraordinary cultural heritage. But an important part of the identity of both our countries also lives outside the major cities: in historic towns and villages, in mountain areas, along ancient routes, in traditional crafts, local products and landscapes shaped by generations of people. These places are not only part of our past. They can also be part of our future.

Italy has a long experience in rural tourism and in the regeneration of historic villages. From this experience, we have learned an important lesson. Restoring buildings is necessary. Attracting visitors is important. But neither is enough on its own. A territory is truly alive when development creates opportunities for the people who live there. This means supporting local businesses, maintaining services, preserving traditional skills and giving young people a reason to build their future in these communities. For me, the real challenge is therefore to make local identity economically sustainable. Tourism can help us achieve this when it works together with agriculture, crafts, culture, small businesses, education and the social economy.

In Italy, we are also developing the concept of social economy districts: local systems in which cooperatives, social enterprises, small companies, associations, cultural organisations and public institutions work together. The objective is very practical: to keep more of the economic and social value created by tourism inside the local community.

Last April, we had the pleasure of welcoming in Rome a Beijing delegation that included representatives from both Xicheng and Mentougou Districts. That visit opened very promising dialogues on different areas of cooperation. In particular, our discussions with Mentougou explored culture, heritage, tourism, ancient routes, traditional villages and local development. That dialogue also made me reflect on a wider opportunity. China and Italy have many territories with different histories, but similar questions. How can we protect their identity while creating new economic opportunities? How can we connect them to the wider world without losing what makes them unique?

President Xi Jinping has said: “People-to-people friendship is the foundation for stable and sustained international relations.” I believe that cooperation between local communities can give this principle a very practical dimension. When two rural territories work together, we do not connect only two tourist destinations. We connect their people: local institutions, entrepreneurs, artisans, young people, schools, tourism operators and cultural organisations. Tourism can therefore become a practical instrument of people-to-people cooperation.

For this reason, I would like to put forward an idea for discussion: a China–Italy Rural Destinations Partnership Network. Not simply a network of symbolic twinnings, but a platform for practical cooperation between selected Chinese and Italian territories. We could begin with a small number of pilot partnerships. An ancient route in China could cooperate with a historic route in Italy. A traditional Chinese village could work with an Italian borgo. Mountain destinations could exchange experiences on sustainable tourism. Artisans and local businesses could develop cultural and commercial projects together. Each partnership could focus on three dimensions: tourism, local economy and community.

Tourism operators could create new routes and experiences. Local businesses could meet new partners. Young people, schools and artisans could take part in exchange programmes. Local institutions could share experience in heritage protection and territorial development. And I believe CIFTIS could become a natural annual meeting point for this initiative: a place to present results, develop new partnerships and progressively build a wider network of cooperation. The Italian OBOR Institute is ready to work with our partners in Beijing and with interested Italian territories to explore this possibility.

There is also a wider meaning behind this idea. International cooperation becomes stronger when it reaches local communities and creates opportunities that people can see in their daily lives. Becoming more international should not mean becoming more similar. On the contrary, international cooperation can help communities give new economic value to what makes them different. For me, this is the meaning of Making Rural Destinations Global: bringing local territories into the world while keeping their identity alive. From promotion to partnership. From visitors to relationships. From individual destinations to communities working together. I believe China and Italy have a great opportunity to build this connection together. Thank you.