

ANIMALS

The "invisible" Chinese squid, from human rights violations to our tables: this is how it ends up in Italian restaurants and fishmongers



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EMBED



The growth of the Chinese fleet fishing for squid in international waters, abuse at sea and how this product is exported and sold in Italy

Francesco de Augustinis / CorriereTv

On one side there are ships, flying the **Chinese flag**, they are in the open sea even for two years in a row without touching the port. On board the workers fish for **squid**, in a kingdom where the captain is the only authority, there is a clear distinction - first of all ethnic - between the people "in command" and those who do manual work. And there is no one to ask for help in case of mistreatment, physical and verbal violence. This situation results in **frequent cases of forced labor, illegal fishing, human rights abuses, and even a disturbing number of deaths**.

On the other side there are us: the mixed fried squid served in a crowded restaurant by the sea somewhere along the Italian coast, the defrosted squid displayed in the middle of fresh fish in the fish shop, or even the bags of breaded squid rings "alla Romana" on offer at the supermarket.

«Over 90%, 98% even, is frozen - tells us **Valentina Tepedino**, expert in fish products and director of the consulting company Eurofishmarket -. And then you find yourself in many fishmongers, in large distribution as in the traditional fishmong, the fresh squid. Where do they get this fresh, with this low percentage, I struggle to understand it».

This is a central point of this story: **the absence of transparency in the squid supply chain**, which in some cases hides **fraud**, in many others simply the impossibility for those who order or buy squid, often believing it to be a fresh and local product, to **know where it really comes from**. And it is precisely in this opacity of the supply chain that hides a growing amount of squid from the Chinese fleet, the subject in recent years of a long series of journalistic investigations and NGOs, which have denounced overfishing activities, illegal fishing and frequent episodes of forced labor and abuse.

«Today those who consume it, when they buy squid, do not know that they could buy 13 different species, which have a different market value and different origins» says Tepedino. The expert refers to "everything that also involves conscious choice: how far it comes from, the production system and how fishermen are insured, what protections they have, how much they get".

The Chinese fleet

China is **the largest country in the world for squid fishing**: in 2023, catches amounted to **1.1 million tons**, about a third of global catches. But in recent years, the Chinese government's incentive policy has continued to expand the fishing fleet in international waters. Even on the numbers there is opacity: [official estimates of the Chinese government](#) speak of 2,500 ships fishing outside territorial waters, of which about 30 percent fish for squid. According to research by the [British think tank ODI Global](#), instead, the Chinese fleet in international waters in 2020 already amounted to 16,966 ships.

The main areas where Chinese ships fish for squid are the Atlantic, in front of the territorial waters of Argentina, the Pacific, off the coast of Peru, and the Indian Ocean. The southwestern Atlantic, in particular, is the fishing area where the most famous species come from, the **Patagonian squid** and the **Illex argentinus**, which for years has been in the sights of the Spanish fleet, the main supplier for Italy. But things are changing quickly.

"Our catches are unchanged," says **Edelmiro Ulloa**, director of the shipowners' cooperative of Vigo, a port city in Galicia, western Spain, where the Spanish squid fleet is based. According to Ulloa, in recent years the international fleet, in particular Chinese, has grown exponentially in this area: "We are talking about 400 boats - he points out -. The amount that this fleet fishes is not entirely known, but it has nothing to do with our quantities, between 10 and 15 thousand tons».

The same growth of the Chinese fleet occurred in a few years in the Pacific, off the coast of Peru. The Peruvian fleet, the second largest producer of squid in the world, fishes in national waters, in this case the **giant squid of the Pacific** (or Humboldt). Over 200 nautical miles, however, the international fleet went from **302 ships in 2016** to [528 in 2023](#) - of which 522 fly the Chinese flag.

In parallel with the growth of the Chinese fleet, international investigations have also multiplied in recent years, which have associated these ships with the frequent use of illegal fishing practices and abuse.

"Now we have the complete picture," says **Jesús Urios Culiñez**, director for Spain of the Environmental Justice Foundation. The NGO between 2025 and 2026 published three different reports, denouncing documented violations on board numerous Chinese ships operating in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian. The latest report, published in June, summarizes the abuses in the three areas: overfishing, destructive fishing, frequent episodes of shark fin cutting, deliberate capture of other protected species, abuse and violence against workers, almost always coming from Indonesia or the Philippines.

"Without any warning, [one of us] was beaten, taken by the neck, and kicked," a young Indonesian sailor, a former crew member of a Chinese ship active in the Indian Ocean, told EJP investigators, in one of the 430 interviews that gave rise to the reports. "The captain and the tresoman behaved as if it were normal, some of them even laughed," said the witness.

"For me, the most shocking thing is the deaths at sea," says Urios Culiñez. «We have documented in the three jurisdictions 25 deaths that occurred on 20 different ships, all Chinese». According to the researcher, almost all of these deaths were avoidable: some were accidents, most were due to malnutrition problems (Beriberi's disease, due to vitamin deficiencies), in some cases uncured pathologies, such as simple appendicitis, and finally some episodes of suicide and even murder. "Some of these bodies were simply thrown into the sea, others were kept in the freezer," says Urios Culiñez. "This is very serious, and it could have been avoided."

Chinese squid in Italy

In 2025, China was the world's leading exporter of squid-related products (processed and not) for a value of 1.4 billion euros. The main destination for these exports is the United States (171 million euros in 2025), while in Europe the Chinese squid has mainly reached Spain (1.44 million euros) and Italy (41.9 million euros).

«95% of the product sold is frozen or defrosted, entire containers are imported» tells us **Massimo Siccardi**, wholesaler and expert in the fish sector, who confirms to us that «now the Chinese squid is spinning a lot». Another operator of the supply chain in Italy, who preferred to remain anonymous, told us that the Chinese product is present in the market, but most of the squid that is sold to restaurants, supermarkets and fishmongers comes from Spain, which remains our main supplier of squid.

In 2025 Spain was the main exporter of frozen squid to Italy (31 thousand tons, for a value of 195 million euros in 2025), but this figure must be read and interpreted. «Spain is our main country from which we import squid and also totano - says Tepedino -. But in reality Spain has imported it in turn from different parts of the world, at this particular juncture from India, Morocco, China».

In 2025, Spain imported over 41 thousand tons of frozen squid from China, for a value of 172 million euros - about twice as much as in 2023, when imports were 20 thousand tons (79 million euros).

To shed light on the various steps that regulate the arrival of Chinese squid in Italy, we visited the **Seafood Expo in Barcelona**, one of the largest in the world, where producers from all over the world meet with European intermediaries and wholesalers to make agreements for the supply of fish products. The squid is one of the protagonists of the event, and when we pass between the stands of Chinese companies, we are surrounded by agents who offer us supply opportunities at very competitive prices, believing us to be importers.

«We have 19 ships and they all fish for 'Illex' squid, we have an annual fishing capacity of 40 thousand tons», tells us an agent of the Chinese group Dalian Rich Enterprise Group. With 4 squid processing factories, the company - based in Dalian, one of the main ports of China - according to the agent is the largest manufacturer of squid of the species 'Illex argentinus' and exports 800 containers worldwide every year. "Italy is our main market for Illex," says the agent, who shows us some prices, including 5,200 dollars per ton for clean squid rings, which [in Spain are sold wholesale](#) for around 10 euros per kg (10 thousand euros per ton).

Partnerships and certificates

Speaking of transformation, an aspect that further complicates the transparency of the supply chain is that not all the squid processed in Chinese factories comes from ships that are part of the Chinese fleet, due to a trend in recent years of the same Spanish and European companies to transit their squid in China for the cleaning and processing phases. "There may be collaboration agreements between Spanish companies and Chinese companies," admits Ulloa, director of the Vigo shipowners cooperative.

[From 2023](#), a series of investigations by the journalistic project **The Outlaw Ocean project** have also turned the spotlight on the squid and fish products processing industries in China, revealing in this case too the frequent dynamics of forced labor.

"What we found is a state program of forced labor," says **Ian Urbina**, journalist and founder of The Outlaw Ocean project. The investigation, through interviews with workers and online content analysis, reconstructed the outlines of two forced labor transfer programs, from North Korea and among the Uyghur populations of Xinjiang, to the Chinese factories that work with squid. «In the case of the Chinese squid industry - continues Urbina - not only products from Chinese ships work, but also those from Spanish, Italian or French ships. They are caught, frozen, shipped to China, defrosted, processed, cleaned, etc., remade, refrozen again, sent back to Europe and then put on your plate».

The Dalian Rich Enterprise Group, the company we met in Barcelona, according to The Outlaw Ocean project is one of those involved in the forced labor program of the Uyghur populations. The company did not respond to a request for comment on the use of forced labor. The agent we spoke to, in an email shared with us a series of certifications for his processing plants, including a certificate from the Marine Stewardship Company (MSC) and the audit of a private certification body (Sedex) that excludes forced labor.

[According to a 2025 report signed by several NGOs](#), including Oceana, despite the documented violations associated with Chinese fleets, exports of fish products from China reach Europe without the necessary scrutiny. Between 2022 and 2023, out of over 13 thousand certificates relating to the catches of various fish products imported into Europe from China, only 0.4% was verified by the authorities of the member states, and only on two occasions were imports blocked. Italy, according to the NGO report, is the tailight together with Portugal for the verification of certificates that allow the import of fish products.

Meanwhile, the European Union has at least two separate regulations that should protect consumers against the import of fish products at risk. The first is the EU regulation against forced labor, which will come into force in December 2027. The regulation does not specifically concern the fish sector, and could bring measures against individual companies, after any investigations carried out by the European Commission.

The second legislation is the regulation against illegal and unregulated fishing (IUU), which has instead been in force since 2008 and allows the Commission to assign yellow or red cards to "risk" countries, blocking or alerting imports until the countries in question conform to European standards. To date, however, China does not have any kind of card. A spokesman for the European Commission has written to us that this regulation only concerns illegal fishing practices, so he does not care about the conditions of workers, and that it is not possible to make known whether initiatives have ever been taken against China.

«The commission is very strict in applying the regulation, but less so with China. With China there is laxity in community management, for strategic reasons," says Ulloa. «For us the main problem is that the product, in this case of the Chinese fleet, enters the Community market and it is difficult to distinguish it».

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