

The Approaches of Italian Historians to Chinese History in the Early Cold War Period (1950-1960s)

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Abstract: During the 1950s and 1960s, in the international context of the Cold War and the decision of most Western countries, including Italy, not to recognise the People's Republic of China, some Italian historians and scholars became interested in Chinese history and historiography. The case studies presented here offer differing experiences and approaches to these areas of study. These include Enrica Collotti Pisichel who, as a historian, devoted her entire life to the study of Chinese contemporary history; Luciano Petech, an orientalist and historian who focused his studies on Tibet; and Roberto Battaglia, an outstanding historian, who came into contact with China and Chinese history by chance, thanks to the important cultural and intellectual mediation provided by Centro Cina.

Keywords: Italy, People's Republic of China, Historiography, Twentieth century

Introduction

After the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949, most Western countries, including Italy, decided not to recognise the new state. In such a difficult period marked by the intensification of the Cold War, several Italian intellectual associations and groups – often politically and ideologically linked to the Italian Left (communist and socialist parties, independent personalities, etc.) – made growing efforts to develop contacts and dialogue with China, while working hard to inform Italian intellectuals, politicians and, more broadly, the general public in Italy of the main cultural aspects and characteristics of the «New China». I will focus here on those Italian historians who, in those years, were able to produce interesting analyses and studies of Chinese history, thereby contributing positively to achieving a better understanding in Italy of China and its long and rich history.

Culture and Politics in the Early Cold War Period: A Few Introductory Remarks

At the end of 1953, the Centro italiano per le relazioni economiche e culturali con la Cina (Italian Centre for Economic and Cultural Relations with China) – later known as Centro per le relazioni con la Cina (Centre for Relations with China, hereafter Centro Cina) – was established in Rome, at a time that was potentially the beginning of a new era for both Italy and China.

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In Italy, the early 1950s was a period when foreign policy was marked by a strong Atlanticist orientation. Rome was clearly committed to being one of the main actors in post-war Europe and was making great political and diplomatic efforts to enter the United Nations¹ (Varsori 1998).

Also, in 1953, Ferruccio Parri (1890-1981), who was to become one of the main actors in the creation of Centro Cina, joined the newly created *Unità popolare* (People's Unity) movement, which arose from the union of different political tendencies (Colozza 2011). In *Unità popolare*, Parri met Piero Calamandrei (1889-1956), Carlo Cassola (1917-1987) and other leading intellectuals who visited China in the 1950s and, in some cases, also wrote about their experiences in that country (De Giorgi and Samarani 2011, chap. 5).

Although, formally speaking, Centro Cina had no political aims, there was a clear link between its economic and cultural initiatives and the political and parliamentary activity of Ferruccio Parri and others, with the common aim of making political parties, associations, chambers of commerce, universities and intellectuals aware of the need to develop a strong and profound relationship with the People's Republic of China, thus creating the basis for its official recognition by Italy (Meneguzzi Rostagni and Samarani 2014).

Descriptions of the main activities and initiatives of Centro Cina can be found in the *Bollettino di informazioni* (Information Bulletin), whose first issue was published in the autumn of 1953. In the following years, the *Bollettino* was not published regularly and it was later turned into a regular newspaper called *La Cina d'oggi* (Today's China). The *Bollettino*, especially the first issues, included translations of documents and news from Chinese sources (in particular, Xinhua News Agency). *La Cina d'oggi* was first published in 1957 and continued until the early 1960s. The journal was published every three months, mainly under the direction of Sergio Segre (1926-2022), who, in the 1970s would head the foreign affairs bureau of the Italian Communist Party (Samarani 2014).

As for China, by 1953-54 it had largely left behind the difficult and dramatic years following the foundation of the PRC. In July 1953, the Panmunjon Truce Agreement practically marked the end of the Korean War and of China's involvement in it, while the introduction of the first Constitution in September 1954 would lead to the stabilisation of China's policies and institutions, marking the start of the period of «transition to socialism». A mostly ambivalent policy towards the intelligentsia was developed during those years. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) required their services, but on the other, serious suspicions were spread that many of them were untrustworthy, given their urban and bourgeois backgrounds. After 1949, the CCP launched major campaigns to «re-educate» intellectuals and later on the emphasis shifted to an intensive thought-reform movement. Literature without a clear class point of view received blistering criticism, as did any hint that the Party should not control art and literature. In early 1956, the Party publicly discussed the role of

¹ This, however, was only possible in 1955.

intellectuals in the new tasks of national construction and adopted the slogan «Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend», which basically encouraged «free-ranging» discussion and inquiry, with the explicit assumption that this would prove the superiority of Marxism-Leninism and speed up the conversion of intellectuals to communism. In the spring of 1957, however, the CCP Central Committee decided to launch a rectification movement involving the whole Party, thus opening the way to the development of the «Anti-Rightist Campaign» whose main targets were intellectuals (MacFarquhar and Fairbank 1987).

Italian Historians and Chinese History: General Evaluations

Against this broad political, cultural and intellectual backdrop, in the 1950s and 1960s, some Italian historians and scholars gradually began to pay more attention to Chinese history and published a series, albeit rather limited, of books and chapters in books. These focused on the overall history of Chinese civilisation, but also offered specific historical analyses and narratives about ancient China and/or modern and contemporary China.

At the time, knowledge of the Chinese language and use of Chinese language sources were extremely rare in Italy and more or less restricted to sinologists; and contacts with Chinese historians were also very difficult, if not impossible, due to the prevailing political and cultural context marked by the «Cold War spirit». Thus, generally speaking, these publications were based on works produced by American, British and French historians and scholars, but, at the same time, offered new perspectives and approaches to the field. However, translations of Chinese historical works – rather limited in number – became available in Italy from the mid-1950s.

Here I would like to mention two books. The first, published in 1955, was a translation from Russian of what seems to be a manual of history produced collectively by the Dongbei (north-eastern) Political-military Academy. It was a history of contemporary China with an introduction by Mario Alighiero Manacorda, a well-known Italian Marxist pedagogue and historian of culture and education, and was published in Rome by Edizioni di cultura sociale, a publishing company which became the nucleus of the Editori Riuniti publishing house² (Collettivo dell'Accademia politico-militare [Tung-pei] 1955). The second translation was much more important, considering that the original work was the product of three major Chinese historians. The most famous was Jian Bozan (1898-1968), an outstanding Chinese Marxist historian and scholar, who, in the 1920s, had studied at the University of California, became familiar with important Marxist works and taught at Beijing University, also serving as the

² In the following years and decades, Editori Riuniti, which was close to the Italian Communist Party, became the main instrument for the diffusion in Italy of Marxist thought and works related to the social sciences and political issues.

Dean of the Faculty of History and Vice-president of the same university. The others were Shao Xunzheng (1909-1973) from Qinghua University and Hu Hua (1921-1987) from Renmin (People's) University. Jian wrote the chapters on the early period, Shao contributed the section on modern history and Hu focused on the contemporary era. Two separate volumes were published in Italy in 1960 by Editori Riuniti with the title *Storia della Cina antica e moderna* and *Storia della Cina contemporanea*³ (Chien, Shao, and Hu 1960), covering many centuries of history of Chinese civilisation, with the purpose, as indicated in the conclusions, to study the Marxist-Leninist point of view and method, and earnestly re-evaluate the cultural heritage.

A couple of rather important works were produced by an authoritative orientalist and historian, Luciano Petech, who gained recognition for his studies on Asian religions and on Tibet. In 1956, Petech published *Storia della Cina* (Petech 1956) and, in 1957, *Profilo storico della civiltà cinese*, as part of the prestigious editorial series «Civiltà dell'Oriente» (Petech 1957). In particular, his second work ranged from Chinese prehistory to the end of the Qing Empire, also offering an analysis of Manchuria and Tibet. This volume ended with a fairly short chapter on the Republican China period by Giuliano Bertuccioli, a sinologist who had spent some years working at the Italian embassy in pre-communist China.

Mention should also be made of two works which provided a very general overview of Chinese history, written by two non-specialists: Sandro Cassone, *Storia della Cina* (Cassone 1964) and Franco Martinelli, *Storia della Cina* (Martinelli 1967). Around the same period, Cassone published a series of books with the same publisher (CETIM) on different countries; whereas Martinelli proved to be a rather versatile writer addressing very different topics. His *Storia della Cina* was a weighty volume of about 1000 pages, which covered the history of China from ancient times to the start of the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, it provides no indication of the sources used nor a final bibliography. It starts with a discussion of Chinese pre-historical times, continues with a general overview in about 10 chapters of the Chinese Empire and, in the last eight chapters, covers the period from Western colonial penetration of China to the time of Mao Zedong. Chairman Mao is described as the only real historical protagonist of the Chinese communist revolution and, at the same time, is portrayed as being a nightmare for world peace and stability at that time, particularly for the Asian context (Martinelli 1967, 852 ff.).

Enrica Collotti Pischel and Roberto Battaglia: Two Different Approaches to Chinese History and Historiography

The first important work to mention is *Le origini ideologiche della rivoluzione cinese* by Enrica Collotti Pischel, a leading Italian historian – as well as being a

³ The original text was *Zhongguo lishi gaiyao*, published in China in 1956.

left-wing militant – who greatly contributed to the knowledge, understanding and diffusion in Italy of the history and contemporary changes in modern and contemporary China. First published by Einaudi in 1959, the volume offered a very stimulating analysis of the ideological origins of the Chinese revolution, focusing on the birth and development of Mao Zedong's thought in the context of the diffusion of Marxist-Leninist theories after the October Revolution, the action of the Comintern within China and the birth of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 (Collotti Pischel 1959, second revised edition 1979).

In this work and in later writings – particularly in *La rivoluzione ininterrotta. Sviluppo interni e prospettive internazionali*, in which she covered the period from 1956 on the question of the «identity» of the Chinese experience (Collotti Pischel 1962) – Collotti Pischel made an important and innovative contribution to our understanding of the Chinese revolution. However, some parts of her work display her strong ideological support for CCP policies, as seen, for instance, in her very positive evaluation of the Great Leap Forward (but here, we should say that, at that time, our knowledge of those events was completely lacking in terms of data and statistics on the Great Leap Forward, which we obtained later both from official and historical Chinese sources and from Western historiography).

As for the contribution made by Roberto Battaglia (1913-1963), he was a leading historian, a university professor and an anti-fascist militant who wrote fundamental books on the history of the Italian anti-fascist resistance.

His last important published work, *La seconda guerra mondiale. Problemi e nodi cruciali* (Battaglia 1960), is not generally considered to be on the same level as the previous ones. However, its special value consisted in the fact that it managed to raise the issue of the character of the Second World War, while emphasising the elements of continuity with and discontinuity from the First World War (Ragionieri 1963). Battaglia's volume was published in 1960 and included chapters on the war in East and South Asia, with special focus on Japanese expansion, Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima (chapters V and XIII). These chapters can be considered his first and only approach to Asian history, one which was also prompted by his strong passion for travel (Ragionieri 1963, 205).

His specific interest in Chinese history and historiography was linked to his trip to China in 1961 as part of a cultural mission organised by the above-mentioned Centro Cina.⁴ The mission lasted from 23 September to 16 October 1961 and involved both a general and a specific programme of visits. The first part was for all three members of the delegation and featured major cities, schools, factories and people's communes and participation in the 1st October anniversary celebrations for the founding of the PRC, whereas the second was tailored to each member's interests and expertise.

⁴ The other two participants in this mission were the Sicilian painter Saro (Rosario) Mirabella and Italo Rizzi, a well-known specialist in anatomical pathology.

Battaglia's programme included visits to historical museums and history research institutes, and meetings with Chinese historians. We will briefly discuss his main impressions and evaluations (Fondo Roberto Battaglia).

First, during his visits to historical museums in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, he highlighted the excellent didactic and pedagogical organisation, but also the total lack of any catalogue. After his meetings in Beijing and Shanghai with Chinese historians, he highlighted the following main elements:

- Chinese historical periodisation system: in fact, the historical research institutes within the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing⁵ were organised – for modern and contemporary Chinese history – according to a historical chronology with three main periods: 1840-1919, 1919-1949, and 1949-onwards. This periodisation, according to Battaglia, was rather simplistic, especially if compared with its very rich counterpart for European history;
- Chinese historians admitted that non-Marxist and idealistic thinking could also be considered; however, they maintained that idealistic thinking was the manifestation of backward thought that must be educated and developed, in much the same way that a child is educated;
- Chinese historians proved they knew more about Italian history than we did about Chinese history. This was highlighted clearly by a series of questions they raised during the meetings with Battaglia, particularly regarding the origins of fascism and the resistance movement in Italy, together with the influence of the October Revolution on the birth and development of the Italian workers' movement.

Conclusions

I have tried to outline how some Italian historians and scholars became interested in Chinese history and historiography during the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by the Cold War and by the political decision by most Western countries, including Italy, not to recognise the new circumstances in China and Asia, after the establishment of the PRC in October 1949. The political and diplomatic stalemate did not, however, prevent large numbers of Italian academics and intellectuals from making efforts to create contacts and opportunities for exchange with the New China.

The case studies presented represent a variety of experiences and approaches: Enrica Collotti Pischel, who, as a historian, devoted her entire career and life to the study of Chinese modern and contemporary history; Luciano Petech, an orientalist and historian who focused his studies on Tibet; Sandro Cassone and Franco Martinelli, who tried to offer their general views on the history of

⁵ The Chinese Academy of Sciences (*Zhongguo kexue yuan*) was established in November 1949. Its Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences had fourteen research units, including, among others, one for history, one for modern history and one for world history. Only in 1977 was the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan*) established, replacing the old Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences.

Chinese civilisation from ancient times to the modern and contemporary day; and finally, Roberto Battaglia, an eminent historian who came into contact with China and Chinese history by chance, thanks to the important cultural and intellectual mediation provided by Centro Cina.

Although extremely different from each other, all these volumes – together with the translations mentioned here and several others – had the general merit of offering Italian historians and intellectuals various elements of knowledge on the history of one of the world's largest and oldest civilisations.

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Firenze, Istituto Storico Toscano della Resistenza e dell'Età contemporanea, Fondo Roberto Battaglia, File UA 9, sub-files 1 and 2

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