

## Roads to Reconciliation

People's Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy  
During the Cold War Period (1949-1971)

edited by Guido Samarani, Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni and Sofia Graziani

## Editors' Introduction

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The birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 occurred at a time when the world order was being divided into two opposing geopolitical blocs. China's foreign policy was thus from the very beginning heavily influenced by the logic of the Cold War. The Sino-Soviet alliance, formalised in February 1950, was seen by Communist leaders (especially Mao Zedong) as a necessity for the PRC given the emerging international context. The outbreak of the Korean War (1950-1953) further consolidated China's position within the Soviet bloc, causing the majority of Western states not to recognise the newly established Communist government. The new Chinese government also proceeded to eliminate the former Western presence from the country.

International historiography on the Cold War has for a long time been dominated by an emphasis on the bipolar confrontational nature of the Soviet-American conflict as well as by a focus on the superpowers' politics and the role of the United States. With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent access to newly available archival sources from the former Eastern bloc, new approaches to the study of the conflict have emerged, giving way to a more complicated pattern of international relationships (see, for instance, Gaddis 1997; Westad 2007, 2017). Since the '90s, it has thus been possible for historians to further investigate the experience of the Soviet Union from different angles as well as to assess the role of China in the history of the Cold War. The exhaustive studies of Chen Jian, Shen Zihua and Li Danhui, among others, have been important in highlighting the centrality of the Chinese position and deepening the understanding of many important issues and events from China's point of view (see Chen 2001; Shen, Li 2011; for a review of the Chinese scholars' contributions to the wider field of Cold War studies, see Xia 2008).

At the same time, the historiography on the Cold War had conventionally portrayed Mao-era China as sealed off from the West for almost twenty years, from 1949 until the early '70s when PRC began opening to the United States. Recent studies have started to complicate this image, focusing on connections and people-to-people grassroots exchanges between China and Western (including European) countries (see Hooper 2016; Lovell 2015; Romano, Zanier 2017, among the others). This book builds on and further develops studies recently conducted by a bulk of scholars mainly based at the University of Venice and the University of Padua. These studies examined the role played by non-governmental actors (political parties, cultural personalities, and economic actors) in promoting the opening of Western European countries, such as Italy, France, and West Germany to the PRC (Meneguzzi, Samarani 2014; Samarani, Graziani 2015). In point of fact, since the end of the Korean War, while stressing the fundamental relevance of its close alliance with Moscow and the socialist world, China also began looking at Western Europe, which was generally maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Such interest intertwined with the growing attention that the major European capitals were developing towards Communist China, despite the obligations and constraints imposed by the political and military alliances and by the need of avoiding offending the sensibility of Washington.

Focusing on Western Europe-China relations and interactions beyond conventional diplomatic channels, this book provides new perspectives on China's foreign exchanges in the years of intense Cold War (the '50s-'60s), showing that there was much more going on between Communist China and Western Europe that has yet been brought to the scholarly attention both in China and in the West. At the same time, the book shows how the approaches and range of interactions with China varied depending on the peculiarities of individual countries and their modes of dependency to the US.

This volume consists of nine chapters, most of which are drawn from the papers originally delivered at the International Workshop, *Italy, Europe, China: Economic, Political and Cultural Relations During the Cold War Years (1949-1971)*. The workshop was held at the Department of Asian and North African Studies of Ca' Foscari University of Venice on 13th-14th February 2014 as part of the Ca' Foscari University Research Project on *Italy, Europe, China. Economic, Political, and Cultural Relations in the Cold War Years (1954-1971)*, coordinated by Professor Guido Samarani. Additionally, the volume includes chapters by international and outstanding scholars who have made valuable contributions to the study of the PRC's foreign policy and engagement with the Western world during the Cold War.

The first essay illustrates the main trends in Chinese scholarship on the PRC's foreign policy during the Cold War. Prominent Chinese historians Liang Zhi and Shen Zhihua offer a detailed review of Chinese scholars' research, with a focus on the period between 2001 and 2015. They highlight

the importance of historical documents made available since 2004, when the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC were opened to the public, in allowing further development of ‘The New Cold War History’ as a field of study. By opening up many new research questions and focusing their research on high-level, external contacts as well as grassroots exchanges, Chinese scholars have recently contributed to a change in perspective, methodology and research topics in Cold War history studies that were previously dominated by an excessive emphasis on the role of the US as well as on high-level politics.

The following four chapters address Europe-China relations and interactions from different perspectives. Relying on social history sources (including oral history), the contribution by Beverley Hooper, Emeritus Professor at the University of Sheffield, offers an acute analysis of the experience of the small non-official European community in Mao’s China (the ‘50s and ‘60s). The focus is on the everyday lives of three different groups of Europeans (mostly British and to a lesser extent French and Italians, as well as Swedes) who worked or studied within Chinese institutions at that time. These three groups were ‘foreign experts’, students of Chinese language and culture, and ‘foreign comrades’ consisting of long-term residents politically and ideologically committed to the new China. What emerges is that all these groups, albeit with different degrees, were denied genuine contact with many aspects of everyday Chinese life, thus experiencing ‘privileged segregation’ that caused frustration especially among foreign students. Beverley Hooper’s essay also reveals how their everyday lives and intra-group relationships were affected by the tumultuous politics of the Mao years, especially when it came to the long-term residents who had decided to support Chinese communism (being consequently alienated from their home country).

The third essay in the volume addresses the case of the Federal Republic of Germany’s non-official relations with the PRC. Giovanni Bernardini focuses on the role played by West German economic elites in shaping bilateral relations and paving the way to the reopening of relations with the PRC, with particular attention to the complex negotiation and the long-term implications of the 1957 trade agreement. Through an accurate analysis of the interplay between economic actors and government authorities largely based on German archival sources, Bernardini shows how the relations with China were influenced by historical experience dating back to the early 20th century (German companies had been among the most active in the Chinese market before 1949) and by purely economic reasons that went beyond the logic of the East-West confrontation.

Another country that could boast close ties with China was Great Britain, the Asian colonial power par excellence until the Second World War, which maintained a fundamental presence in the area through the British Colony of Hong Kong and controlled, through its banks, Europe-China financial

flows. Roberto Peruzzi's essay addresses Sino-British economic relations through Hong Kong focusing on the crucial years of 1966-1967 when the Cultural Revolution on the one hand and the Hong Kong's disturbances and riots on the other caused the temporary crisis of their mutually beneficial relationship. By connecting the riots involving the Hong Kong Colony to the British Government's decision to implement the Sterling devaluation in November 1967, Peruzzi argues the existence of a linkage between British authorities' official interpretation on the nature of the riots and the financial measures adopted. Peruzzi also suggests that the management of the Hong Kong emergency by the British colonial authorities marked the beginning of the end of British power in Hong Kong.

Among Western European countries, the case of France is also extremely significant considering that in 1964, searching for an autonomous foreign policy – albeit within the framework of the alliances – the French government decided under the impulse of Charles de Gaulle to recognise the PRC long before other partners of Western Europe did. Yet, De Gaulle's decision can be understood as the culmination of a process of increasing economic and commercial contacts that developed in the previous decade. Thierry Robin's essay addresses this issue, looking at the role played by economic actors in defending French economic interests in China – interests that predated the establishment of the Communist government in 1949 – and promoting the opening to the PRC. Robin's essay reconstructs the history of Sino-French unofficial relations since 1949. Additionally, he identifies the 1956 French economic mission (led by Henri Rochereau) to China as the starting point of a gradual process of Franco-Chinese collaboration that would see a growing number of private players involved and forging business links with Beijing, providing the basis for 1964's decision to establish full diplomatic relations with the PRC.

The other three essays in the volume focus on the case of Italy's relations with the PRC and provide new insights into the role of different Italian non-governmental actors in promoting dialogue and exchanges and contributing to shaping the understanding of China in Italy.

In her essay, Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni makes use of both diplomatic documents and personal archives and diaries of eminent Italian politicians. She reconstructs in detail the Italian position vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China, at a time when – similarly to other Western European countries – Italian official policy was compelled by membership in the Atlantic alliance and by relations with the United States. What emerges is a complex interplay between economic actors like Dino Gentili and Enrico Mattei and politicians, such as the Socialist Pietro Nenni, who worked in favour of China-Italy exchanges as early as the '50s. Then, in the '60s centre-left governments accelerated the process, favouring, in 1964, the conclusion of the commercial agreement between Italy and China. Thanks to the Socialist Pietro Nenni and the Christian Democrat Aldo Moro's

initiative, the PRC was recognised, two years before the more celebrated Nixon's visit to Beijing.

A key political actor in the unconventional diplomacy between Italy and the PRC in the '50s was the Italian Communist Party. Mainly relying on Italian archival sources and memories by former political leaders, Guido Samarani reconstructs the relationship between the Italian and Chinese Communist Parties from the first exchange of delegation in 1956 up until 1963, when in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, bilateral relations were interrupted. In particular, his essay sheds light on the significance and implications of the first high-level official Italian Communist Party delegation visiting China in April 1959 at a time when Sino-Soviet relations were deteriorating, and the Italian Communist Party leadership was torn between its search for autonomy and alignment with Moscow.

If party-to-party direct contacts took place no earlier than 1956 when national congresses of both parties provided the occasion for the first exchange of delegations, then it was before that date through indirect channels or at the individual level that contacts were developed. Laura De Giorgi's contribution delved into the personal experience of Velio Spano, the first Italian Communist Party representative to travel to China in Autumn 1949. Making use of Spano's personal archives, she explores his short-term sojourn in China against the backdrop of the complex political environment of that period. The focus is on his personal experience, as well as on his perceptions and the implications of his presence in Mao's China. De Giorgi's essay shows that Velio Spano's journey to China was a significant episode in the relations between the Italian Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party as well as in the history of broader Sino-Italian relations, as she writes: "Even a partial overview of Spano's personal archives shows that the network of contacts he had had the opportunity to create in China during those weeks in 1949 were considered, at least in Italy, an important asset for the development of informal relations between the two countries".

At the same time in the 1950s, important avenues for early encounters between Italian and Chinese Communists were offered by international 'front' organisations. Sofia Graziani's essay delved into this issue, examining contacts established and developed within international youth organisations linked to the Soviet-sponsored peace movement at a time when the direct exchange between the Italian and Chinese Communist parties had yet to start. Relying on a large variety of primary and secondary sources, she provides evidence of how participation in Soviet-led international organisations made early political contacts and interactions possible, laying the foundation for future dialogue and exchanges. The focus in Graziani's essay is on Bruno Bernini, whose personal experience in China is examined within the context of the World Federation of Democratic Youth's policies and initiatives in the early and mid-'50s.

Together, the essays in this volume offer new insights into the complex history of Sino-European relations in the Mao years and shed light on the existence of a breadth of vivid interactions and connections in the realm of politics, economy and culture, contributing to dismiss the long-held idea of Mao-era China as an isolated country.

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