



BRILL

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF
EAST ASIAN STUDIES 23 (2024) 93–108

European Journal
of
East Asian Studies
brill.com/ejea

The Happy Builders of New China

Images of Chinese Revolutionary Youth in the 1950s Italian Accounts of the People's Republic

Laura De Giorgi | ORCID: 0000-0002-6702-3093

Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University
of Venice, Venice, Italy
degiorgi@unive.it

Received 23 June 2024 | Accepted 3 July 2024 |

Published online 18 July 2024

Abstract

This paper offers an outline of the narratives and perceptions by Italian travellers about the life and social position of Chinese youth in the People's Republic during the 1950s. Its goal is to explore how the image of Chinese youth under Socialism produced by transnational propaganda in the Socialist cosmopolis and circulating abroad intertwined with the factual observations and the personal assumptions of the Italian intellectuals on the revolutionary social transformation of China in that period. It argues that, although travellers were impressed by the apparent protagonism of the younger generation in the construction of Socialism in China in those years and read it as a symbol of new China, they also speculated on how the conditions of youth after the revolution had really implied a dramatic change in their social and cultural power and in their political emancipation.

Keywords

People's Republic of China – youth – Italian travel literature – international propaganda – Cold War

During the 1950s, images of youngsters played a pivotal role in international propaganda by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since modern education

and organised mobilisation of the younger generation represented a strategic tool to promote industrialisation, media representations of children and teenagers engaged in the Socialist construction were often used to support a positive impression of the new Socialist society to foreign eyes. The new China born out of the revolution and shaped by the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to be powerfully embodied in the healthy and smiling boys and girls put on stage in propaganda materials and in public diplomacy's international events.

Nevertheless, until the Cultural Revolution, this highly mediatic visibility of children and youngsters in Chinese foreign propaganda did not necessarily grant a clear understanding of youth's distinctive position as a specific socio-cultural group in order to analyse the Chinese Socialist changing political landscape, in spite of the relevance of the organised activism promoted by the State in the school (Chan 1985; Unger 1982) and the role played by the Party and official organisations addressed at youth (Funnell 1970; Healy 1982; Graziani 2013, Tsimonis 2021; Doyon 2023). As evidence of this, it is worth mentioning how, in the mid-1960s, the preface of one of the few books dedicated to the topic published in the West during the Maoist era lamented that there was a 'lack of systematic, sustained, and thorough study of the problems of the youth in mainland China. Yet the subject is of the greatest importance. The youth are probably *the* decisive element in the outcome of the great Communist experiment over large stretches of the globe today' (Kirby, 1965, i). Just one year later, the Cultural Revolution projected at global level the image of Chinese students as 'Mao's children' as well as the angry icon of protest and rebellion against the system in the name of revolutionary values, making Chinese youth an inspiration for Western protesters, as well a distinct political subject, a perception destined to last in Western imagery despite its actual ambivalence (Lanza 2012; Lanza 2015).

Aiming at shedding some light on these shifting perceptions of Chinese youth, this paper looks at the transnational and transcultural processes and factors at play in the construction of the external image of Chinese revolutionary youth before the Cultural Revolution. After 1949, class and gender were certainly the most important notions in the public discourse about the new society created by the Revolution and in its consequent translation in international propaganda. For example, women's emancipation under the CCP—as liberation from family obligations thanks to the marriage law and from social limitation thanks to industrial work—was a pervasive topic in foreign discourse about the new society, whereas literature and films put workers and peasants at the centre of the narratives. Conversely, notwithstanding the weight that the rhetoric of youth and newness had had in the struggle against imperialism and

in the search for modernity and revolution since the early twentieth century, how the notions of age and generation intersected with class and gender in shaping the image and perception of the political and cultural construction of Chinese Socialism in foreign eyes still deserves to be explored, despite the importance played by childhood and youth in the cultural Cold War discourse about images about the present and the future (Peacock 2014).

Taking as a case study the perception of youth in a selection of Italian accounts of the People's Republic of China during the mid-1950s, the article briefly offers an outline on how the imagery concerning the life of young people in the People's Republic produced and circulating from 1949 in the Socialist transnational context under the aegis of the Soviet Union intertwined with the actual experience of youth lives by Italian visitors and articulated in their discourse on Chinese revolution and Socialism in those years.

1 The Construction of the Image of Chinese Youth in the Socialist Propaganda as a Transnational Process

Recognition of the importance of young people in international propaganda and public diplomacy was a widespread phenomenon during the Cold War. As Peacock has argued, both the USA and the USSR competed to construct and promote the circulation of images of childhood onto the global stage. These images aimed at reflecting the values of their respective social and political systems and were attributed a strong propaganda usefulness at international level, as boys and girls were deemed to embody not only the present but also the future of their respective societies (Peacock 2014).

The role of youth was also emphasised by the activities played by important international organisations, which often operated along the lines of the ideological divide. In the Socialist block, the most important ones were the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) and the International Union of Students (IUS). Both established just after the end of the Second World War, within a few years, after the withdrawal of non-Communist components, they were dominated by the Soviets (Graziani 2018; Graziani 2019). Among their initiatives there were the organisation of huge conferences and events (such as the biannual World Festival of Youth sponsored by the WFDY) which served as platforms for spreading an international political agenda as well as for creating connections and collaboration among the different national organisations that were members (Koivunen 2023).

One outcome of all these activities was the creation of a global imagery of youth as a social and political actor at the international level as well as at

the national level widely shared in the Socialist cosmopolis. It was an imagery whose main features were not exclusive of the Communist camp, as revealed by the label of 'democratic'—a keyword in left-wing and united front transnational propaganda of those years. Attributes of democratic youth were specific emotional and behavioural qualities connected to age—such as enthusiasm, curiosity and sociability—and to morality—such as self-restraint and self-discipline—but also a widespread awareness of political issues and willingness to cover public roles, as demonstrated by their social engagement in service to collective interests. Democratic youth was normatively imagined as a cohort of progressive boys and girls willing to play their part for the sake of a better society, often participating in organised and structured public activities under the aegis of the State. As a transcultural and transnational discourse, this understanding of youth's task in society expanded the material and cultural differences of youngsters' conditions between countries and societies into the greater narrative of the new world generation's contribution to progress and struggle against imperialism and capitalism, inspired by the Soviet Union and Socialist countries.

Since the foundation of the PRC, following the Chinese State's participation in the Socialist camp, the national and international imagery of Chinese young people in the new society born out of the revolution was also shaped by these political and cultural processes, occurring under Soviet influence. On the one hand, although the Soviet example had for a long time inspired the CCP's conception and discourse about youth, in the early 1950s this inspiration was institutionalised through the adoption of the Soviet model in all fields, including the cultural and educational ones. On the other hand, the PRC's belonging to the Socialist block and its alliance with the USSR opened the way for a lively international exchange within the network of Soviet sponsored youth organisations, which also contributed to accommodating the image of Chinese revolutionary youth to the broader discourse in the Socialist field and to the CCP's policies of learning from the Soviet Union. For example, though several Chinese organisations had participated in the WFDY in the early years just after their establishment, after 1949 the only Chinese organisation which continued was the All-China Democratic Youth Federation, whose main bulk was represented by the Chinese Youth League, the political youth organisation directly connected to the Party (Graziani 2018; Graziani 2019).

China's participation in the international Socialist platform of young people's activism under the aegis of the WFDY and IUS contributed to the international circulation of a representation of the PRC's youngsters consistent with the Socialist normative vision of youth's spiritual and behavioural features and social roles. At the same time, this representation was used to legitimise the

domestic policies and discourses about the new generation to the eyes of Chinese as well as of foreign audiences.

Visual and textual propaganda produced in this context for the sake of external propaganda offers clear evidence of the transnational processes which were at play in the construction of the international image of Chinese youth since the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949. As the anonymous editors of a 1950 booklet published in Beijing by the Foreign Language Press stated in their foreword, it was deemed important 'enable foreign readers to gain a general idea of the youth movement in New China, thus contributing to the understanding and solidarity of the Chinese youth and the youth of other lands' (*China's Youth March Forward* 1950, 2). This solidarity was based on a constant flow of personal contacts and the exchange of printed material. A full chapter of the booklet was dedicated to stress how internationalism was a deep need for Chinese youth that had remained isolated from the world for a long time, as shown by the domestic enthusiasm demonstrated by Chinese boys and girls to celebrate Chinese youth delegations to events such as the World Youth Festival in Prague in 1949, the World Peace Festival the same year in Budapest, or the Second World Congress of the International Union of Students again in Prague in 1950. This enthusiasm was nourished by follow-up events, such as lectures and meetings, where the delegates were invited to report what they had learned and also what they had taught to youth of 'other lands' (*China's Youth March Forward* 1950, 55–56). At the same time, the All-China Federation of Democratic Youth provided the opportunity for a 'regular exchange of newspapers, magazines, books and photos between the Federation and the youth organisations in the Soviet Union, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Korea, Austria, France, Italy, Finland, Belgium and Holland' (*China's Youth March Forward* 1950, 62).

Similarly, the propaganda materials produced in the context of visits of WFDY international delegations to the PRC during the 1950s also offer clear evidence about how the construction and spread of ideas and images about the new generations of China were connected to the transnational exchanges in the Socialist cosmopolis.

As early as in October 1950, a WFDY delegation, composed of delegates from several countries, went for an official trip to China, visiting several cities and having talks and meetings with leaders and officials. After the visit, in 1951 the WFDY published a booklet *Young Builders of New China* which was intended to offer the triumphant portrayal of young workers, students, soldiers and women in the revolution and in the construction of new China. The introduction was written by the delegation leader, the Italian Enrico Boccara, who explicitly stated that the WFDY wanted to 'pay homage to the successes and to the vic-

tory of the Chinese people *and* [*italics mine*] youth, and to assure them of the solidarity of the world youth in their struggle against American aggression in Taiwan and Korea and in their magnificent work of constructing the new China' (*Young Builders of New China* 1951, i).

Aiming at offering an illustrated description of the improvement of the conditions of Chinese youth after 1949, the organisation of Chinese youth, China's anti American imperialism movement, the Sino-Soviet alliance, and the peace movement for the Korea war, the booklet was a catalogue of revolutionary propaganda tropes, ranging from the testimonies of young heroes and letters of martyrs to detailed information on the improvement of material conditions of workers and students, under just one year of the Communist Party's government. This notion of 'builders of New China' certainly hinted at the post-World War II global trend to stress youngsters' domestic agency within their own nation and society, a role that, in Socialist societies, had to be fully played under the State's aegis.

Although the booklet was a product of Chinese propaganda aimed at foreign readership and sanctioned by the greatest international organisation of youth dominated by the Soviet Union, it is interesting to note that, several months after its publication, it was also translated into Chinese (*Xin Zhongguo de qingnian jianshe zhe* 1951). The translation included an introduction explaining that the pamphlet had been printed during the visit of the WDFY's delegation in order 'to present the new life and new climate for Chinese youth after 1949 and their heroic struggle to protect and construct their own great country'. In the booklet, the new introduction went on, the reader had the opportunity to learn about the progress and situation of young people under the CCP and the leadership of Mao Zedong and about anti-imperialism activities in China, but also to become aware of the attention and the support that foreign public opinion dedicated to the People's Republic in general, but especially to the activism and conditions of Chinese youth. Addressed to a domestic audience, the Chinese version served to project and give legitimacy in terms of foreign approval to the new government's discourse about the role of youth in building the new Socialist society.

The circular and transnational process of the construction and legitimisation of an image of Chinese youth's life and role after the Revolution modelled after the Soviet example was, actually, a complex phenomenon, which implied also the huge translation of Soviet books and cultural products aimed at the youngsters and the reform of the educational system. But, the systematic participation of the PRC's youth organisations in the international events of the WFDY and the IUS continued to be important, especially in giving a global visibility to Chinese youth. During the WDFY's Youth Festival in Warsaw in 1955,

the Chinese delegation prepared another propaganda booklet, this time in Russian, English, French, and Chinese. Triumphantly titled *Happy Youth of China* (*Xinfu de Zhongguo qingnian* 1954), the pamphlet collected photos and texts portraying Chinese youth engaged in rural and industrial work, studying, in leisure time, and in families. The Chinese youngsters were defined as the new 'masters' (*zhuren*) of their country, with the intent of providing evidence of the empowerment of youth promoted and guaranteed by the Socialist State. The Communist Party had on the one hand freed boys and girls from the oppression of the old society and on the other hand was protecting their material and spiritual development as fully recognised citizens of the new People's Republic.

The booklet also proudly defined Chinese boys and girls as 'happy'. This state of mind—happiness—was at the same time granted by their empowerment as well as by the possibility to fully display the emotional and moral qualities ideally attributed to their age, as enthusiasm, curiosity, moral pureness, courage, and sociability after the demise of the old society's oppression. In this view, Socialism—differently from Capitalism—offered the younger generation the freedom to live according to the natural features of their age, as imaged by the progressive ideology of modernity.

On the whole, these propaganda materials at national and international levels illustrating the new life of Chinese youth in the People's Republic emphasised some key concepts of the Socialist transnational discourse in the 1950s. The young generation was defined as 'builders', suggesting how Socialism was a material and spiritual construction to be sought collectively. Chinese youngsters had to acknowledge that they had become the 'masters' of their own country, as the young peasants, workers and students—males and females—shown in the photos and texts of these pamphlets embodied the progressive social classes that constituted the 'people' in Mao Zedong's new democracy. On the other hand, the celebration of 'happiness' as the central emotion of the life of young people proved the success of the revolution not only as a structural transformation of the society and the victory against foreign imperialism, but also as a process generating individual and collective psychological well-being as a consequence of a mandatory optimism derived by a sense of belonging to and participation in the collective enterprise (Larson 2016; Larson 2019).

This representation of Chinese youth was fully consistent with the Socialist imagery of the Cold War, and it constituted one important facet of a greater narrative about the PRC circulating abroad through printed propaganda and public diplomatic events. It staged Chinese youth at the centre of the new revolutionary society, as the epitome of the progressive and collective values that shaped the construction of Socialism. Sanctioned at domestic and international levels, and despite its stereotyped character, this image served to confirm

the PRC's belonging to the family of the Socialist nations and it was also destined to affect foreigner visitors' discourse about the new society and the role of Chinese youth in the revolution.

2 Chinese Socialist Youth in Italian Travelogues

Western visitors to the People's Republic were also important agents in the transcultural and transnational processes behind the construction of the international and domestic imagery of the People's Republic in the 1950s. On the one hand they were the recipients of Chinese propaganda (Brady 2003), but on the other hand they were also motivated by a genuine interest to go beyond the official representation hoping to attain a better understanding of the political, socio-economic and cultural processes occurring beyond the Bamboo Curtain.

Despite the absence of diplomatic relations with most of the Western countries and its exclusion from the United Nations, after 1949 the People's Republic of China was not an isolated country, not only because of its relations within the Socialist world and new states in Asia and Africa. By means of unofficial diplomacy, the cultural and economic relations with several Western capitalist countries were also partially maintained although not always in a systematic way (Samarani, Meneguzzi Rostagni and Graziani 2018; Schaufelbuehl, Wyss and Zanier 2019). Especially during the mid-1950s, the main instrument of unofficial diplomacy was the exchange of delegations. In the PRC, these activities were subjected to official management and control, as one of the main goals was to take advantage of the presence of foreigners in order to consolidate and propagate a positive image of the new Socialist State abroad, especially in the West. The accounts of travellers and journalistic reports were, basically, the main channels through which Western audience could get some glimpses of the reality beyond the official representation.

In Italy, narratives on revolutionary China mirrored the authors' different ideological and political concerns and cultural sensibilities (Basilone 2022), often along the dividing lines of the Cold War, and portraits of Chinese youth were also destined to be shaped by the degree of adherence or sympathy towards the CCP and the official narrative the Party offered to visitors. For many travellers, the new Socialist State born out of anti-imperialist struggle was genuinely oriented to pursue ideals of democracy, social justice, and equality which, in Italy, had animated the birth of the Republic after the fall of Fascism and now seemed to have been set aside in the pursuit of material well-being and individual self-realisation promoted by the new consumer culture imported from the USA. These factors certainly facilitated the reception and

acceptance of the idealised image of the socially engaged youth of new China manufactured and circulated at transnational level in the Socialist camp in their narratives about the People's Republic.

Even if age—separate from class and gender—was not specifically extrapolated as a topic of reflection in the discourses about China in these works, the predominance of the role of young people in the Chinese revolution could not go unnoticed. Rather it was a preeminent feature of the new social landscape. In the first account of the Chinese revolution published in Italian by the Communist journalist Velio Spano after a long period of travel in the newly liberated China in 1949, the author expressed several times how he had been impressed by the young age of partisans and soldiers he met during his stay, telling his readership how they were mostly teenagers, and suggesting, implicitly, that the War of Liberation was more often than not fought by a young generation of militants and combatants. Similarly, he mentioned with appreciation the enthusiastic support of young boys and girls to the Party and their openness towards international supporters (Spano 1950).

The human face of revolutionary China was represented by its young people, and this was evident in all Italian narratives, as social renovation and a farewell to the old society were also seen as constituting a generational passage. In his reportage written in 1954, the leftist journalist, Felice Chilanti stressed the young age of many factory workers, who he described as teenager peasants who had just entered the industrial labour force, with a pure heart and innocent soul (Chilanti 1954) that reflected their moral qualities typical of youth not corrupted by the evils of capitalist modernisation and materialism.

However, observation of the younger generation of workers and students at the core of national construction could also give some clues to better understand the peculiarities of the Chinese path to Socialism. This was the attempt made by the literary critic Franco Fortini, who was one of the members of the most famous Italian cultural delegation to the PRC, the one led by Piero Calamandrei in 1955 whose impact on Italian public opinion was quite significant (De Giorgi 2017).

In a 1956 report of his talk with a young female worker in Shanghai, Franco Fortini aspired to offer a portrait of these 'new' human beings, emphasising how they were like a generation struggling to 'reform' their parents' values and behaviour, and education was their first task. Solicited by the questions of the Italian interlocutor, the girl described her life as characterised by the need to overcome ignorance. 'We must study, learn and learn again. [...]. We need to improve our political knowledge, we must learn our Constitution, the Five-years plan. And to deepen our understanding of our literature.' As a reply to the Italian visitor who mocked her adherence to the Party's diktat asking if

she also read something like a book of fiction titled *My life for the Party*, the young worker just smiled embarrassed, confirming that she actually read the same books which all the young Chinese people read, novels about production, works that nourished the energy of the builders of Socialism. (Fortini 1956a, 343). And again, urged by her interviewer to tell him what was, in her view, the ultimate goal of human life, she thoughtfully replied just 'to be happy, together getting rid of poverty and exploitation', in the future and in the present time (Fortini 1956a, 346). Perfectly acting the expected role of the happy builder of her Socialist motherland, her words compelled Fortini to comment on the idealistic push towards egalitarianism that he considered the very true and distinctive feature of Chinese Communism.

On the whole, the discourse on new Chinese youth produced by Italian travellers was usually connected to their exploration of two specific social spaces, both possessing a highly symbolic relevance in the picture of the progress and character of the Socialist construction in China. The first one was schools and universities, which implied that the notion of youth was often conflated with that of the students; the second one was the public spaces, as squares, parks and streets, that witnessed young people's spontaneous aggregation or, more frequently, their involvement in organised propaganda. Both spaces worked as stages where Chinese boys and girls were called to perform their revolutionary identity as the new generation of Socialist citizens. At the same time, both spaces also hinted, in different degrees, at the existence of a social and cultural hierarchy confining the agency of youth to the roles decided by the State.

Visits to schools and universities, as attendance at propaganda events such as musical or dance performances, were activities always included in the program offered to Western travellers in the People's Republic. They were especially important in offering some understanding of the conditions for youth. In fact, even if in the 1950s visitors enjoyed a less restrained mobility that gave them some opportunities to observe Chinese lifestyle outside the perimeter set by Chinese authorities, ignorance of the language in practice limited the spontaneous collection of information.

It was evident that the main stage where children and youngsters were called to play their role in the new society was represented by schools and educational institutions. The PRC government had a special pride in illustrating the progress made in the educational realm, and as intellectuals, Italian visitors were specifically interested to this field. On these occasions, visitors were usually taken to see the premises, but also invited to meet the teachers and students.

This is what another member of the Italian cultural delegation led by Piero Calamandrei in 1955, the writer Carlo Cassola, did during the organised visit to a secondary school in Shanghai. Curious to know the actual contents that

Chinese high school students were compelled to learn, he first noticed the predominance of textbooks translated from Russian, and then he was amused by the possibility to ask students questions in order to gauge their knowledge of history, Marxist theory, and foreign literature. He interrogated the students on world history and concluded that the most precise answer was just the one in response to the question he asked about Ernst Thälmann, the German Communist Party leader executed by the Nazis in 1944 (Cassola, 1956). But he was also impressed by the importance given to scientific and technical education.

The organisation and content of education were considered as significant in order to measure the revolutionary zeal of youth and their will to service the socialist construction, as there was a wide consensus that 'to learn' was the first duty of the young. But doubts remained about how 'revolutionary' and 'democratic' the new Chinese educational system was and how it could contribute to real progress for the young generation. The general impression was that reality lagged behind propaganda.

In her comment after a 1954 travel in China, Anna Marchesini Gobetti described the 26-year-old interpreter who had accompanied the delegation as a rural young boy who, thanks to the establishment of the People's Republic, had at last had the chance to overcome illiteracy and to graduate in French in a few years. Although admiring the progress made by this young peasant who had become something akin to an intellectual, she could not avoid noticing that:

although he has attended regular classes, his culture is basically one of a self-taught person, with all the advantages and limits: fresh curiosity on the one side and naïve fanaticism on the other side, ample readings and original insights on some topics and deafness to the point of negation on others. He perfectly knew all that concerns the history and the living reality of his own country, he could elaborate on all articles of the Constitution, and he was well acquainted with all the glories of the People's Army and the exact numbers of the domestic production, but he had very vague ideas about the sequence of the dynasties of Song and Ming. Exactly the opposite of what occurs to our students. [...] If I could come back to China in ten years from now [...] I think I would see not only that the buildings have been multiplied, the machines have been perfected and the standard of living has improved; I would also find not a youth whose education is improvised thanks to their amazing efforts in difficulties and in the heat of the struggle, but one peacefully maturing in an untiring labour of construction.

MARCHESINI GOBETTI 1956, 327

Gobetti was quite confident that it was only a question of time, but it was also true that education of the youth seemed to be basically addressing the training of the obedient citizens and workers needed for industrialisation rather than making a decisive revolutionary transformation of Chinese society.

Curious about the revolutionary character of the new educational system, in his visit to Beijing University, Franco Fortini poignantly asked if there was 'the practice of students' criticism to the professors'. The answer he received was that students periodically discussed the teaching methodology with their professors, whereas the teachers mutually discussed and criticised methods and results among them (Fortini, 1956b, 45).

The issue was not trivial. If schools were the most important social space where youth, as students, were thought to be giving their fundamental contribution to the revolution, visitors could have expected that the new social relations produced would have been primarily visible there. The notion of youth as 'masters' of the nation had to be concretised, at least to some degree, in the democratisation of the educational system, that had to make it radically different from the patriarchal and authoritarian models of the past.

However, the conclusions gained from visiting Chinese schools in the 1950s and from conversations with the students did not fully support the visitors' assumptions that this was happening. The few cases of students and educated youth from rural origins offered to their eyes were clearly not enough to contradict the general impression that the new Chinese youth, at least in schools, were experiencing a much less real democratic and revolutionary life than described by the rhetoric of propaganda. Visitors, as the above mentioned Fortini, noticed for example how the majority of the students at the university were from the upper classes and how the access to the Chinese educational system for the sons and daughters of the working and rural classes was lagging behind the Soviet Union and the East European Socialist States (Fortini 1965b, 45).

The impression that Chinese youth's experience of the new society was mainly characterised by a discipline and regimentation within a system where their agency was channelled along the pathway decided by the State was also shared by foreign peers, such as the Italian students in Chinese universities (De Giorgi 2020). In the description of his Chinese student fellows in the 1957, one of them, Filippo Coccia, noticed how:

students take part in a lot of meetings, where they criticise their schoolmates [...]. Here students are shy, though very assertive in defending their opinions, and they are very assertive even when they are in a queue: at the bus stops, they always respect their turn, but in shops, at the theatre, and in the streets, they don't hesitate to push [...]. If someone pushes or steps

on their toes they simply endure it though. University life absorbs them completely, as besides four or five hours of classes every day, they must practice different sports, gymnastics, athletics, basketball (the most popular), volleyball, and a special gym-dance [...]. They have dinner very early (the canteen closes at six) but go to bed when they like. They often go to the cinema [...] in winter [they go] to the great hall of the canteen where there are dancing parties. Most girls have braids or short haircut without any styling. They often marry before finishing their studies.

COCCIA 2017, 46–47

Observations of Chinese youth outside schools and universities tended to confirm the impression of a highly self-disciplined generation, not least due to the important role played in public by the performance of youth organisations, and especially the Young Pioneers, in the schools and in the course of propaganda events.

The Young Pioneers were the symbol of the dedication of Chinese youth to the Socialist construction. Its members, whose age ranged from 9 to 15 years old, received political education through small groups discussion and performed a wide range of activities under the supervision of adults and teachers (Samarani 2003). The presence and performance of Young Pioneers wearing their red scarves had usually a great emotional impact to the eyes of most visitors, strengthening the perception of the centrality attributed to the participation of the youngest generation in social life. The Young Pioneers embodied the new cultural identity of Socialist China. To many visitors the meaning of social transformation under the government of the CCP was perceived first of all thanks to the young bodies who filled with their voices and movements the streets and the squares of the Chinese cities during the propaganda events.

However, where the revolutionary quality of this youth organisation resided was still vague. Visiting the Young Pioneers' headquarters in Shanghai, for example Fortini expressed his admiration for the lively environment he found and for the vivacious but always polite boys and girls, who looked to him so different from the agitation and nervousness of Italian students after school. He also appreciated how there seemed not to be any military discipline apparently imposed upon the young members of the association nor a reverential fear of the adult principal who led them. He was also mainly impressed by the national pride that exuded from the attitude and behaviour of these boys and girls, a national pride marked by the will to eliminate all the signs of the previous colonial oppression. His fellow traveler Carlo Cassola was, at any rate, more skeptical. The Young Pioneers' premises crowded with young boys and girls reminded him of the Catholic scout organisations. So—he asked—where

is the difference made by the revolution? (Fortini 1956b, 173). On that occasion, he got no answer. However, the question remained in the air.

3 Concluding Remarks

In the 1950s images of the People's Republic of China produced, circulated, and consumed in China and abroad, youth played a central role, as an epitome of the new and revolutionary Chinese society. This representation of youth stressed the symbolic role attributed to the youngest generation as the builders and masters of a new democratic society whose construction could not be achieved without their enthusiastic participation. At the core of the message there was the idea that the Socialist State was the guarantor of material security and educational opportunities for the youngsters and in exchange it received their loyalty and happy obedience to the roles and goals set for them by the Party.

Modelled after the Soviet Union, and legitimised by its circulation within the transnational context of the Socialist cosmopolis, this image of youth confirmed the adherence of the People's Republic's revolutionary route to the pattern of Socialist construction and of social transformation sanctioned by the USSR and was widely accepted also by foreign observers.

As expected, foreign travellers recognised in the new conditions of Chinese youth how revolution had meant the opportunity for Chinese youth to get rid of old familiar constraints and to find and affirm a new central role in society. To their eyes, the young faces and bodies which saturated the public space in the People's Republic highlighted also how the moral qualities ideally attributed to youth—*independence, enthusiasm and pureness*—had become the emotional core of China's path to Socialism.

Emphasising young people's protagonism in texts and performances, Chinese propaganda seemed to be effective in supporting the claim that the past, with all its social evils and corrupt values, was definitively over in the minds of the new generation. However, to several observers, the smiling and serious Chinese youth could not dissolve doubts and uncertainties. Acknowledging that Chinese youth's main task was to learn and perform to be new Socialist persons, travellers also perceived how, in spite of the revolutionary rhetoric, a real transformation of the social and cultural hierarchies had still to be accomplished and that the needs of the Socialist construction often confined the youngest in a subordinated position. Seen from foreign eyes, the life of youths in Socialist China revealed the increasing capacity and willingness of the Party-State to educate and engage them in the huge enterprise of making China a modern

nation state. But if the revolution had to consist just of this, what young people had received from it seemed to be more visibility, not necessarily more power.

References

- Basilone, Linetto. 2022. *The Distance to China: Twentieth-Century Italian Travel Narratives of Patriotism, Commitment and Disillusion (1898–1985)*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Brady, Anne Marie. 2003. *Making the Foreigner Serve China: Managing the Foreigners in the People's Republic*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cassola, Carlo. 1956. "Una scuola secondaria." *La Cina d'oggi*, edited by Il Ponte, 339–341. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Chan, Anita. 1985. *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Chilanti, Felice. 1954. *La Cina fa parte del mondo*, Roma: Edizioni di Cultura Sociale.
- China's Youth March Forward*. 1950. Peking: Foreign Language Press.
- Coccia, Filippo. 2017. *Lettere dalla Cina*, edited by Lucia Battaglia and Giorgio Trentin. Roma: Aracne.
- De Giorgi, Laura. 2017. "Chinese Brush, Western Canvas: The Travels of Italian Artists and Writers, and the Making of China's International Cultural Identity in the Mid-1950s." *Modern Asian Studies* 51(1): 170–193.
- De Giorgi, Laura. 2020. "Italians in Beijing (1953–1962)." In *Contact Zones in China: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Merle Schatz, Laura De Giorgi and Peter Ludes, 81–96. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Doyon, Jérôme. 2023. *Rejuvenating Communism: Youth Organizations and Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Fortini, Franco. 1956a. "Gli uomini devono essere felici." *La Cina D'oggi*, edited by Il Ponte, 342–346. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Fortini, Franco. 1956b. *Asia Maggiore. Viaggio nella Cina*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Funnell, Victor C. 1970. "The Chinese Communist Youth Movement, 1949–1966." *The China Quarterly* 42: 105–130.
- Graziani, Sofia. 2013. *Il Partito e i giovani. Storia della Lega giovanile comunista in Cina*. Venezia: Cafoscarina.
- Graziani, Sofia. 2017. "The Case of Youth Exchanges and Interactions between the PRC and Italy in the 1950s." *Modern Asian Studies* 51(1): 194–226.
- Graziani, Sofia. 2018. "International Political Activism in the 50s. The World Federation of Democratic Youth and Bruno Bernini's Encounter with Mao's China." In *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, 197–219. Venezia: Ca' Foscari University Digital Press.

- Graziani, Sofia. 2019. "China's Communist Youth League, Transnational Networks and Sino-European Interactions in the Early Cold War." In *Europe and China in the Cold War: Exchanges Beyond the Bloc Logic and the Sino-Soviet Split*, edited by Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, Marco Wyss and Valeria Zanier, 108–133. Leiden: Brill.
- Healy, Paul. 1982. *The Chinese Communist Youth League, 1949–1979*. Southport, QLD: Griffith Asian Papers, Griffith University.
- Kirby, Stuart E. 1965. *Youth in China*. Hong Kong: Dragonfly Books.
- Koivunen, Pia. 2023. *Performing Peace and Friendship: The World Youth Festivals and Soviet Cultural Diplomacy*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Lanza, Fabio. 2012. "Springtime and Morning Suns: 'Youth' as a Political Category in Twentieth-Century China." *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5(1): 31–51.
- Lanza, Fabio. 2015. "Deng's Children: Chinese 'Youth' and the 1989 Movement." In *Transnational Histories of Youth in the Twentieth-Century*, edited by Richard Ivan Jobs and David M. Pomfret, 260–282. New York, NY: Palgrave-McMillan.
- Larson, Wendy. 2016. "Curing Unhappiness in Revolutionary China: Optimism under Socialism and Capitalism." In *Discourses of Disease: Writing Illness, the Mind and the Body in Modern China*, edited by Howard F.Y. Choy, 55–89. Leiden: Brill.
- Larson, Wendy. 2019. "Can a Revolutionary Be Happy? The Debate on Happiness in 1960s China." *Prism* 6(1): 3–18.
- Marchesini Gobetti, Ada. 1956. "Gentilezza di un grande popolo." In *La Cina d'oggi*, edited by Il Ponte, 325–331. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Peacock, Margaret. 2014. *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*. Chapel Hill, CA: University of California Press.
- Samarani, Guido. 2003. *Figli della rivoluzione: I Giovani Pionieri nella Cina socialista (1949–1966)*. Bologna: Annali dell'Istituto Gramsci (Emilia-Romagna): 333–346.
- Samarani, Guido, Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni, and Sofia Graziani, eds. 2018. *Roads to Reconciliation: People's Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy During the Cold War Period (1949–1971)*. Venezia: Ca' Foscari University Digital Press.
- Schaufelbuehl, Janick Marina, Wyss Marco, and Valeria Zanier, eds. 2019. *Europe and China in the Cold War: Exchanges Beyond the Bloc Logic and the Sino-Soviet Split*. Leiden: Brill.
- Spano, Velio. 1950. *Nella Cina di Mao Ze-tun*. Milano: Milano Sera Editrice.
- Tsimonis, Konstantinos. 2021. *The Chinese Communist Youth League: Juniority and Responsiveness in a Party Youth Organization*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Unger, Jonathan. 1982. *Education under Mao. Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Xin Zhongguo de qingnian jianshe zhe*. 1951. Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe.
- Xinfu de Zhongguo qingnian*. 1955. Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe.
- Young Builders of New China*. 1951. New Delhi: People's Publishing House.