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6 Italians in Beijing (1953–1962)

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, treaty ports like Shanghai and colonial outposts such as Hong Kong were certainly typical “contact zones,” characterized by complex social dynamics and cultural negotiations under colonial rule or the specific legal arrangement of the extraterritoriality (Goodman, Goodman 2012; Bickers, Jackson 2016; Brunero, Villalta Puig 2018).

Nevertheless, the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 changed both the global and the local context of the encounter between foreigners and China. The Chinese Communist Party was anxious to rid its country of the colonial past and to redefine its relations with the outer world as a socialist nation; this political and ideological shift was destined to shape the cultural and institutional co-presence of groups of different cultures and languages in its territory as a strong State bureaucracy became an important actor in this area. 1949 also changed the geography of contact zones in China. Since Beijing was again the capital city of China, after two decades during which the political centre of the Republic had moved to the South, and it was the seat of political power in a centralized State, it became the main gateway for contacts between the People's Republic and the outer world. From 1949 on, Beijing hosted most of the foreigners who were allowed to live and work in China, as previous places which had a pivotal role as “contact zones” such as Shanghai and Tianjin lost importance.

Mirroring China's different political relations, within the Socialist bloc, with the West and with the Third world countries respectively, the alien presence in Beijing was essentially made up of the diplomatic communities of the countries which had recognized the PRC, the so-called “foreign friends” and “foreign experts,” students, plus some journalists (Hooper 2017). On the whole, Westerners were just a tiny minority, and moreover as Beverley Hooper has shown, they were actually divided into small communities, whose relationships with the local society were shaped by different institutional factors. If we look at this presence through the lens of the “contact zone” we can actually distinguish several social and cultural spaces of “contact,” partially overlapping but also characterized by specific dynamics and practices.

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In order to explore this multifaceted contact zone, this chapter will focus on the Italian presence in Beijing during the 1950s and early 1960s, when that small community began to take shape, living in a social space characterized by the presence of individuals from different countries. As Italy had no diplomatic relations with China until 1970, in this period most of the Italians who lived in Beijing were actually supporters of or sympathizers with the revolution. They had gone to the People's Republic assuming that they would operate within an imagined cultural community, sharing the ideology and values on one side of the Cold War political front. Acting under the ideal of socialist internationalism, which was expected to accommodate cultural differences and allow for crossing boundaries, they moved to Beijing to be engaged with China in the name of shared transnational ideology. However, their presence and lifestyle, as well as their interactions with the Chinese, were closely managed and controlled by the Chinese State, eager to shape their relations with the local community (Brady 2003). They found themselves living in a contact zone made up of multiple social spaces, where cultural negotiations and human interactions were strongly, though differently, shaped by institutional and political factors and socio-cultural power hierarchies.

The Historical Context: Italians in Socialist Beijing

Since the early 1950s, after the previous community of Italian missionaries, businessmen and diplomats left China, Italian sojourners in the PRC capital city belonged to mainly three categories: foreign correspondents of the Communist newspaper *l'Unità*, students or foreign experts (Samarani, De Giorgi 2011; Pini 2011).

The background to their presence in China was shaped by the peculiar Italian political landscape during the first decade of the Cold War. In spite of Rome's strong alliance with the United States, Italian leftist political parties like the Italian Communist Party and the Italian Socialist Party had an important role in the domestic cultural and social arena, and claimed to have a voice in Italian foreign policy, especially towards Socialist countries and the Third World (Samarani, Graziani 2015). Though the opening of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China was hindered by the duty of loyalty to the North Atlantic Treaty, relations with Communist China developed in the framework of so-called people to people's diplomacy, which also included people of different ideological backgrounds, and of political cooperation among leftist parties. Since 1949 several intellectuals and

delegations had visited the PRC and Italy hosted Chinese missions to explore opportunities for commercial and cultural exchange (De Giorgi 2014). Living in Beijing was possible only under the umbrella of socialist cooperation. The few Italians who moved to live in the Chinese capital city were members of or sympathizers with the Italian Communist Party or, if not, approved by it (De Giorgi 2015). Their mobility and stay in the People's Republic actually resulted from cooperative dynamics within the Socialist camp, even after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960 jeopardized the unity of the Communist international front.

Amid the social landscape of Westerners present in Beijing, no Italians belonged to that small *élite* of “foreign friends” who were entitled to a privileged relationship with their hosts, such as Carl Crook, Israel Epstein, Sid Shapiro, George Hatem, Alley Rewi, Gladys Yang, Joan Hinton, Sid Engst, to mention just a few. Many of these people had developed a strong relationship with the Chinese communists before 1949 and later had an important role in the People Republic's cultural relations with the outer world, being involved in the outward propaganda, cultural diplomacy and friendly relations with the West (Hooper 2017). Unlike them, the Italians in Beijing had no experience with China before 1949 and their stay was to last only a few years.

The first Italians who moved to live in Beijing were the journalist Franco Calamandrei, a news correspondent of *l'Unità*, and his family in autumn 1953. He was the son of Piero Calamandrei, a famous anti-fascist intellectual, jurist and politician, and was married to the Communist comrade and journalist Anna Maria Regard. The couple had a six-year old daughter, Silvia. Leaving from Prague, and travelling through the Soviet Union, they reached Beijing at dawn on October 1st, just in time to attend the great parade for National Day. They lived in Beijing from autumn 1953 to the second half of 1956 (Regard 2010; Calamandrei 2012). At that time, only one other Italian citizen was living in the Chinese capital city, the engineer Spartaco Muratori, who acted as an economic and commercial broker for the Italian businessman Dino Gentili and who also had strong ties with the Italian Communist Party (Capisani 2013; Luti 1994).

In 1956, Franco Calamandrei and his family left China for good, and in 1957 a new correspondent for *l'Unità* Emilio Sarzi Amadè arrived in Beijing with his wife. He remained until 1961. Afterwards, no correspondent of the Communist newspaper would live in China.

In the late 1950s, the Italian community began to enlarge, slowly arriving at ten persons. Thanks to the activities of the Centro per lo sviluppo delle relazioni economiche e culturali con la Cina (Centre for the development of economic and cultural relations with China) (Samarani 2014), some Italian students were sent to attend courses in Beijing. In 1957 the first three Italian students of Chinese language arrived in the Chinese capital, to be enrolled at Beijing University.

They were Filippo Coccia, Edoarda Masi and Renata Pisu (Zuccheri 2010). In the same year, an economic expert from the Italian Communist Party, Giuseppe Regis, and his wife, the sinologist Maria Arena, moved to China. In 1959 a group of Italian experts, mainly working in radio propaganda for international audiences and all members of the Italian Communist Party, started to live there: they were Marisa Musu, her husband Aldo Poeta, Manlio Fiacchi and his wife. In the early 1960s, new supporters arrived (Pini 2011). This small band survived the difficulties in relations between the CCP and ICP after the Sino-Soviet split, and went on to develop during the Cultural Revolution and after the beginning of diplomatic relations between Italy and China in 1970.

These three social groups – journalists, experts and students – actually lived in different contexts, which shaped their modes of contact as well as their relationship with Chinese society.

Italian Journalists in the 1950s Beijing Contact Zone

The tiny community of Italians in China in the 1950s and early 1960s was mainly composed of members of or sympathizers with the Italian Communist Party. Their presence reflected the political intent to give concrete and durable meaning to the ideal of international cooperation and friendship within the Socialist world. Their experiences were also clearly affected by the dynamics of Chinese relations with the world and by the complex interplay among Cold War ideology, politics and nationalism. In other words, on the one hand they nurtured various normative expectations about their role, persuaded as they were that shared Socialist values would facilitate exchange and interaction, bridging the cultural boundaries between them and their hosts. On the other hand, much to their disappointment, their actual experience was greatly shaped by the limitations imposed by Chinese bureaucratic organization concerning foreigners living in the PRC and by Cold War political and ideological dynamics.

In spite of being the main point of encounter between China and the world in the PRC, in the 1950s and 1960s Beijing was not really a cosmopolitan city *per se*. Since the presence of foreigners was actually confined to certain specific localities and roles within the city, the real social spaces where interactions could take place were shaped by specific rules of work and living and by forms of communication, especially as concerned language (Hooper 2017). The Italians' experience with China was essentially confined to some physical, social and cultural settings where individuals of different nationalities – Westerners, Asians, Africans –

interacted with China, contributing to a complex redefinition of individual and group identities.

In the experience of the Calamandreis, the contact zone in China was essentially defined by their role as foreign journalists, in spite of their expectation of being comrades with the Chinese. The two journalists were both committed to providing Italian Communist Party and leftist newspapers and magazines with frequent detailed reports about the socialist transformation in China. Franco worked for the *Unità* as a news correspondent, Maria Teresa wrote for *Nuovo Corriere* and *Paese Sera*; both of them contributed to *Vie Nuove* and *Il Contemporaneo*. Their writings were products of their life in the contact zone in Beijing as news correspondents, and their political and cultural outlook were certainly shaped by a new awareness of the importance of Asia – and China – for understanding international politics, something that they personally admitted. However, it is also true that their knowledge of China was influenced by the specific features of their life as foreigners in Beijing, in a context where contact was as controlled as possible by the Chinese authorities. Dissatisfaction with the quality of relations and how this reflected on their work was certainly the other side of their experience.

Living and working arrangements, and various aspects of their social life, were planned in order to create a distance between them, as foreigners, and local society. In the Chinese capital city, the Calamandrei family lived in the Beifang Hotel, where several other foreign correspondents were hosted. Among them were Alan Winnington of the British Communist newspaper *Worker Daily* and his wife Esther, Karel and Vlasta Beba, journalists on the Czechoslovakian *Rude Prava*, and the Australian communist journalist Wilfred Burchett. These colleagues became good friends of the Calamandrei family, supporting each other when needed. Among the Calamandreis' friends there were also the Jewish Austrian communist journalist Fritz Jensen with his Chinese wife Wang Wu'an and the couple formed by architect Hua Lanlong, educated in France and his French wife, who had just moved back from France to China (Regard 2010). The social life of this community centered on the International Club, the circle that, after 1949, had become a center for the new socialist and cosmopolitan cultural life under Soviet influence. At the Club they met other members of the foreign community, had dinner, danced and watched the Soviet, Chinese and Indian movies which were screened in 1950s Beijing.

The Calamandreis were just two individuals in a small cosmopolitan group of leftist intellectuals and journalists whose relationships with local society were carefully managed by Chinese institutions – in spite of their assumed ideological closeness to the host country. Most of their relations with Chinese citizens were limited to people with whom they worked, mainly officers from

the Foreign Ministry who had to respect specific rules in dealing with foreigners (Brady 2011). Moreover, while they often wandered freely around the city, looking for curios, art objects and handcrafts, and eating Chinese food, their personal and individual knowledge of China was basically sensorial, based on seeing, smelling, listening, often limited to intuitive impressions, their direct intellectual exchange and direct human dialogue being hindered by their ignorance of the Chinese language. Evidently, the linguistic aspect of the interaction was a core element. English and French were the languages commonly used within the small foreign community, but also with Chinese co-workers. Chinese interpreters played a fundamental role as linguistic and cultural mediators in this contact zone. The Calamandreis aspired to developing a less mediated way of experiencing Chinese society, breaking the boundaries imposed on them. For example, they declined the invitation to have their daughter Silvia enrolled in the French Catholic nuns' school, which was left in activity even when all foreign educational institutions had been closed, in order to provide children of the diplomatic corps in Beijing with a Western education. They insisted in enrolling their daughter Silvia at a Chinese school in central Beijing, an élite primary school attended by children from the party *nomenklatura*, and eventually they succeeded (Regard 2010). Moreover, they both tried to study Chinese and Maria Teresa also had the idea of teaching Italian to the two interpreters who helped them understand the Chinese Press.

However, this was not enough. As journalists the Calamandreis were engaged in intercultural communication between Italy and China but they depended on the necessary linguistic, political and cultural mediation of Chinese personnel and institutions. Knowledge of Chinese affairs depended on translation from the Chinese official Press. As described by Maria Teresa Regard, almost every day some officials visited them to help translate the main articles in the Chinese Press, mainly the *People's Daily*, from Chinese to Italian via English or French. At the same time, she was asked to translate editorials from the *Unità* and the writings and speeches of Togliatti into English to be then translated into Chinese (Regard 2010).

Language was also a fundamental limitation in another part of the Calamandreis' work, that is visits and interviews. In winter 1953, they were taken to visit Shanghai, Hangzhou, Changsha, Shaoshan, and Canton. In the following years, Franco travelled several times throughout China, from the North-East to Mongolia, alone or together with his wife. In 1954, the couple went to Vietnam, where they met the commander Giap. One year later, they visited Tibet. Official visits included factories, agricultural cooperatives and villages, schools, offices, judicial offices, but also museums, artistic spots, monuments and archeological sites; as journalists, they could also conduct interviews and

participate in meetings. Franco Calamandrei accompanied foreign delegations, as in the case of the British Labour Party's mission to China in 1954 and he was engaged in organizing the first Italian cultural mission headed by Franco's father, Piero Calamandrei, in September 1955 (De Giorgi 2017). In all these activities, they had interpreters with them. In a private note during his first trip in 1953, he wrote that the Chinese interpreter was very good, but he often seemed reluctant to offer explanations or answer questions. "Some visits – Franco wrote – were made in absolute silence" (Calamandrei 1953–56).

This highly controlled environment was certainly a source of discontent, since Franco Calamandrei and his wife thought that their mission was to introduce socialist China and the Chinese revolution to Italian public opinion. As Italian Communist Party intellectuals, they were aware of the political and ideological meaning of their job in the context of the Cold War and the importance of working in liaison with their hosts. Nevertheless, in their private writings they sometimes complained of the limits and constraints of Chinese officialdom and bureaucracy. They were aware that they were kept at a distance from a more direct knowledge of Chinese affairs, not only because of the language but above all because they were considered aliens in spite of the ideal of socialist internationalism. As fellow Communists, they expected to be part of a transnational community sharing practices, norms and values, where cultural (and national) differences did not count that much. But they soon realized that this was not the case (Calamandrei 2014). Quite revealing are some notes written by Franco, for discussion at a meeting about foreign propaganda with Chinese officials, held apparently in June 1954 (Calamandrei 1953–1956). The Italian journalist remarked that they were Party journalists working for the Party Press in Italy and that they were somehow legitimated to participate actively in the planning of China's external propaganda, especially towards Western capitalist countries. In sum, they aspired to be identified not only as journalists, but also as political comrades coming to cooperate on an equal footing for the success of socialism in the Cold War. This was explicitly pointed out by Franco Calamandrei in the following note, addressed to his Chinese counterparts:

It should be kept in mind that Party journalists are not only interested in what can make news, materials for immediate publication, but all that can provide them with the background and, thanks to a deeper knowledge of the facts, raise their general political understanding. (Translation by the author)

But their complaints and suggestions did not change the mode of interaction. A feeling of disappointment began to loom in the background, as Maria Teresa recorded in her autobiography, due to the rigid bureaucratic rules under which not only the Chinese people, but they too had to live and work. In early Summer 1956, Maria Teresa and their daughter Silvia went back to Italy, where She

maintained a strong interest in China, translating Chinese literature from English, and happily seizing the opportunity to go back to the People's Republic in the 1980s (Calamandrei 2012). Her daughter Silvia also went back to China to study in the 1970s. Also, Franco Calamandrei followed his family back to Italy a few weeks later than Maria Teresa, after the Chinese Communist Party Eighth Congress in autumn 1956. He never went back to China and was replaced by Emilio Sarzi Amadè, who came to Beijing with his wife.

Sarzi Amadè's experience was, actually, similar to that of Calamandrei, as the same communication practices and living arrangements shaped his working and living experience. The room for negotiation within the contact zone was further curtailed when the ideological climate radicalized at the end of the 1950s. After his arrival in Beijing in 1957, Sarzi Amadè met Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. During his stay in Beijing, in 1960, he also had the chance to interview the last Manchu Emperor Pu Yi, and from the Chinese capital city he made trips to North Korea and Vietnam. As it had been for Calamandrei, Sarzi Amadè's sojourn in Beijing enabled him to develop a deep interest in Asia, which he furthered after his return to Italy in 1961. While he was there, the political and ideological conditions were slowly changing. By 1959 the negative effects of tensions in the Socialist world and in China started to be felt. In a long letter addressed to the Italian Communist Party headquarters in Rome, dated May 1960, Sarzi Amadè expressed his concern, describing how the scope for professional interactions was gradually shrinking (Sarzi Amadè 1960).

The first issue relates to work and the position of a party organ's news correspondent (of our country or other capitalist or socialist countries) in this capital city. Here, my three years' experience has been marked by two different periods. The first stage, including 1957 and 1958, was the best: obviously there was a kind of barrier to any effective understanding of problems, but there were unlimited possibilities of travel anywhere in China and of obtaining meetings and interviews that could help people understand the situation. The positive aspects outweighed the negative.

The second stage – more or less the last year, part of 1959 and 1960 – has been characterized by increasing difficulties and negative features: fewer opportunities to make useful trips, fewer opportunities to do good interviews, and some episodes that I am going to describe in this letter. I would like to stress that what I am about to tell is not only a personal opinion, but the general opinion of all news correspondents living in Beijing from all countries. I got the impression that some important change had happened in the [Chinese] attitude toward foreign correspondents and, generally speaking, in information policy when at the beginning of August 1959, I came back from a short trip to Italy. (Translation by the author)

The experience of these Italian Communist journalists' life in the contact zone was certainly much affected by the sensitivity of their political role. Their expectation of profiting by their ideological commitment and professional identity

within the contact zone was hindered by the Chinese political policy of keeping strict control over the circulation of information and the process of building China's image abroad. Their life in China certainly changed their world outlook and enriched their intellectual background: but the contact zone they created in the People's Republic was subordinate to and shaped by the general political and ideological constraints.

Interaction by Experts and Students: The Multiple Identities within the Contact Zone

At the time when Sarzi Amadè was there, the Italian community had begun to enlarge and be more differentiated. Consequently, new patterns of interaction and new social spaces were emerging in Socialist Beijing, making this contact zone more complex than could be assumed if we limited our observation to the experience of foreign correspondents.

In the second half of the 1950s, the arrival of students and experts enriched the Italian presence in Beijing. In 1957, Filippo Coccia, Edoarda Masi, and Renata Pisu arrived in the Chinese capital in order to attend courses at Beijing University, thanks to the relations between the Centro Cina and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign People. Giuseppe Regis, and his wife, the sinologist Maria Arena, also moved to China as experts sent by the Communist Party, and in 1959 some other Italian comrades began to work for Chinese radio.

As with the journalists, their life in China was limited by the physical and institutional segregation between foreigners and local people, imposed by Chinese bureaucracy. However, the two groups' experiences in the contact zone were slightly different, as their interaction with the Chinese – for work and study – was more flexible and maybe productive than it was for foreign correspondents.

Italian experts were sent by the Italian Communist Party to cooperate in developing relations with Italy and Chinese foreign relations. Some of them had the task of teaching Italian and economics to Chinese cadres working in foreign trade, as in the case of Regis. Others worked in culture and propaganda, on Beijing international radio (Peking Radio) for example, which in the early 1960s began to broadcast Italian language programs as part of a renewed effort of cultural diplomacy towards Western Europe. The experts worked in Chinese institutions, together with or subordinate to Chinese colleagues, as did the significant number of Soviet experts who had arrived in the PRC some years earlier. Most experts had been living in the recently built Friendship Hotel, a compound in Soviet

style located in the outskirts of Beijing, which hosted Russian and Western guests coming to help with Chinese industrialization and modernization (Hooper 2017). These international experts' lives were materially comfortable, but their lifestyle reflected the distance from Chinese society imposed by their hosts and their very limited autonomy in work. Power asymmetry became evident to their eyes, in some cases generating deep dissatisfaction.

Marisa Musu was one of these experts; she stayed in China from late 1959 to 1962, and later recalled her experience in her autobiography (Musu 1979). A member of the Italian Communist Party, Marisa Musu had moved to Beijing together with her husband Aldo Poeta and their children. Together with the painter Manlio Fiacchi and his wife, the couple were expected to work at the new Italian section of Peking Radio, the Chinese radio broadcasting station producing international propaganda.

Her commitment to work in a Chinese institution as a comrade and expert was damaged, in her perception, by this highly controlled bureaucratic environment. She began to harbour doubts about the meaning and value of the experience for herself and her family from a political and human perspective. In a letter in May 1960 addressed to an important Italian Communist cadre, Marisa Musu and Aldo Poeta identified several factors, e.g., Chinese mistrust of foreigners, and what they perceived as increasing Chinese nationalism (Musu 1960). They had the feeling that the values of international socialist cooperation were in practice subordinated to nationalism and immediate political goals. Musu's impressions and opinions were due to new difficulties in the relationship between the Italian Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party, mirroring the effects of ructions in the Socialist camp as well as China's growing nationalism (Samarani, Graziani 2015).

However, the issues at stake were not only political or ideological. The impossibility of forming what she perceived as an "authentic" relation with the Chinese people also weighed in Musu's discontent. She came to feel a sort of discomfort about her lifestyle as a foreigner in China. For example, the Calamandreis had won their battle to have their daughter enrolled in a Chinese school; by contrast Marisa Musu and her husband failed to get a similar permit and their children were enrolled in the school established by the Democratic Republic of Germany just for Western children. Since this school was far away from the Friendship Hotel, a Chinese government car carried her children to school every morning. She began to realize that the quality of material life offered – and imposed – was higher than what was available to the average Chinese citizen, and a sense of uneasiness began to permeate her approach to China. Material benefits were a kind of wall, a boundary which served to mark their alienage from the local community; inability to cross this boundary was also a sign of the asymmetry of power

she felt in doing her professional work, as she witnessed how her ideas and suggestions were not listened to by her Chinese colleagues.

Eventually, a personal crisis precipitated her decision to leave China well before the date agreed upon at the beginning, against the will of the Party that had sent her (Musu 1979). Others did not share her decision, but preferred to stay, feeling that the experience of being in China and supporting Chinese socialism outweighed this kind of difficulty, which was partly facilitated in some cases by learning the Chinese language. Together with the Regis couple, there were several other people who stayed on, such as Giorgio Zucchetti, who later founded the Association of Sino-Italian Friendship in Rome, and subsequently Primerose Gigliesi, who also worked as a translator.

Though their exposure to Chinese culture and society was highly controlled, experts who chose to stay longer in China found that language skills were certainly important in enhancing their agency in the contact zone and opening opportunities for interaction. This was even truer for the Italian students. At least for the first three, Masi, Pisu and Coccia, their experience was the starting point in a lifelong interest in Chinese politics, culture and society which became an important trait of their personal career and identity. Notwithstanding the limitations imposed by authorities, their daily life at the University created a social and cultural space where human interactions could develop – something far more difficult to attain in other contexts. The spatial organization of Chinese universities was designed to confine foreigners to certain specific places, as the campus dormitories and canteen destined for foreigners were not the same as those for Chinese students. There, Italian students lived in an international community of youths from different countries, mainly the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, but also from Asia and Africa. However, they also had the chance to create personal relationships with Chinese students and professors, in class and outside class, experiencing the social life of the University. This gave them the opportunity to witness the impact of political events of the period – from the Anti-Rightists Campaign and the frenzied period of the Great Leap Forward – as well as rising tensions among the Russians, Polish and Hungarians, and between the Russians and the Chinese, seen through the lens of the small international society living in the University (Masi 1993).

The letters sent home by Filippo Coccia offer an interesting perspective on social and cultural dynamics within the small contact zone inside the University, and also on the network of relations linking Italians to other members of the national community, such as journalists and experts (Coccia 2018). Their social contacts with China inside the University compound – “our life is virtually enclosed within the University walls” wrote Coccia in one letter (Coccia 2018, 49) – developed through some fundamental cultural practices, such as learning in class,

eating at the canteen and sharing leisure time watching films or engaging in sports activities on campus. Moreover, their lifestyle was much closer to that of the local society, as shown by their consumption patterns. They often bought and wore Chinese clothes and shoes, smoked Chinese cigarettes, drank tea and ate Chinese food. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how other social practices – like drinking at bars, dinners at restaurants downtown, or attendance at official events – were actually confined to relations with other foreigners. Living in this contact zone implied activation of different repertoires of cultural engagement according to the differing contexts and people they shared time with.

On the one hand, their lifestyles and attitudes were certainly changed as they sought to overcome the imposed segregation, to cross linguistic barriers and behave according to the cultural codes of the local society.

For instance, the Chinese language class, initially planned to be held in French, was actually the most intense area of interaction and adaptation. A close collaborative relationship could be formed with their Chinese teacher and, after a certain degree of language proficiency, with the other students. Moreover, each of them had to teach Italian to certain Chinese students who were deputed to liaise with them. These learning and collaborative activities, later enriched by part-time jobs as translators of literature – an important outcome of this contact zone – were certainly conditioned and controlled by political factors. However, the general perception of these students was that, except for love and sexual relationships, interaction with locals was possible, even though such relations were not always satisfying. Similarly, sharing meals at the Chinese students' canteen, shopping at Chinese stores and using Chinese goods in daily life were important correctives to their perceived identity as foreigners and Italians. Unlike the news correspondents and experts whose identity was bound up with their profession, the students' more flexible identity opened up various pathways of interaction, adaptation and even personal transformation.

On the other hand, this actively pursued process was matched by the need to preserve some identity features as Westerners and Italians. Such were, for example, the forms of social life that they shared with other Western students, mostly from East European countries, such as drinking with friends in bars and at parties, from which Chinese students were excluded; or some aspects of food culture, like the longing for coffee, cheese or spaghetti when they met or were hosted by Italian experts like the Regis or foreign correspondents like the Sarzi Amadè family. Moreover, the chance to read Italian books, newspapers and magazines – a constant request from home – were important links with the homeland and, indirectly, with their basic cultural identity. An “Italian” identity that could indeed help to create a relationship with the Chinese and other

foreigners. For example, Italian popular culture (songs or movie stars) well known to other Westerners and to the Chinese were both strong identity markers in the eyes of others, and also used as cues in the search for dialogue and cultural exchange.

Lastly, in the students' case, political comradeship was apparently less important an asset in acting within the contact zone than for experts or journalists like the Calamandreis. For the most mature and intellectual students like Edoarda Masi, sharing the ideological and political commitment to the Communist Party was fundamental for her interaction with local society. But to her dismay, she discovered that her request to participate in meetings of the University branch of the Chinese Communist Party was refused because, in spite of her political convictions, she was a foreigner. The reverse of what she had assumed: ideology and politics proved more a barrier than a bridge within the contact zone in socialist Beijing (Masi 2004).

Conclusion: Italian Sojourners in a Multifaceted Socialist Contact Zone

This overview of the different experiences of these groups of Italian sojourners forging lives in Cold War Beijing highlights the interplay of different factors in shaping and structuring the interactions between them – as foreigners – and the local society.

Maybe paradoxically, it became evident that ideology and politics played a role more in maintaining boundaries than in weakening them within this socialist contact zone. Beijing as a contact zone was mainly designed by the legacy of the colonial period and the Cold War framework. Chinese political and ideological concerns contributed to preserving and building new physical, social and cultural boundaries between foreigners – Italians included – and local society, under the pretense of respecting different lifestyles. Chinese bureaucracy exerted a more or less visible control over daily life and work routines and over the local mobility of aliens within the city. The upshot was that the distance between “them” and “us” continued to pervade most human interactions in this context. For the Italians who moved to China in order to witness and support its Socialist transformation for ideological reasons and who were sympathizers with the revolution, this was perceived as conflicting with the ideals of Socialist cooperation among fellow comrades, and proved a source of disappointment and uneasiness.

The institutional cultural practices governing individuals and communities with different cultural backgrounds changed according to the system of social and cultural power. Consequently, the contact zone was not a homogeneous social space, but characterized by different possibilities of institutionalized socialization. Language dictated the possibility/impossibility of crossing boundaries but also involved the emergence of a third zone where at least a partial encounter could be managed (as by the use of other languages, like English and French). But even in this third zone, language was never a neutral tool of communication: it reflected complex meanings and identities.

Ignorance of the Chinese language cramped opportunities of interaction within the contact zone, and helped the Chinese to keep control – especially over the journalists, who were perceived as the most powerful channels of knowledge and understanding about China abroad. For those of them who did not know Chinese, communicating in English and French (the languages of old imperialism) was the only choice, a choice that, in contrast with the new ideological stance of the Chinese government, still echoed the old cultural hierarchies (and distances) of the colonial era. In other words, language confined even the Italian communist journalists to their identity as foreigners, implicitly still suggesting their ties to erstwhile Western colonialism in China, in spite of their ideological adherence to socialism.

In this perspective, only by learning the local language and using it in daily life could one go beyond this third zone with all its ambiguities. Italian students, apparently less powerful in the social and cultural hierarchy, were at an advantage in expanding and creating a new terrain of cultural encounter, since they learnt Chinese and began to use it in everyday communication. Unlike other groups, in their classroom and living habits, students were able to adjust their identity and cope with the cultural distance imposed on them as foreigners in a more productive way. Actually, it was not only a linguistic issue, but connected to lifestyle – the way of living, using objects, dress codes, food habits and tastes. More than the other groups, they could play with multiple identities and use various cultural resources, enabling them to live and produce a contact zone where, in spite of the political and ideological restraints of the Cold War, new cultural encounters could, at least partially, be contrived.

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