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In the academic literature dedicated to the normalization of relations between China and Italy at the end of 1960s, little attention has been dedicated to the role of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano PCI), which is usually considered a marginal actor in that context. Historians have usually emphasized how, from 1963 on, the Italian Communists’ close position to the Soviet Union in the crisis between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) - which was the reference point for Italian Communist leaders - froze the dialogue between the Italian and Chinese Communists. This article by Carlotta Clivio aims to change this perception. Founding her analysis on original archival research, she argues that, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and in the process of rapprochement between Italy and China, the PCI strove to find a way to interact with the Chinese Communists, emphasizing its identity as an intermediary partner between the Soviets and the Chinese in the international and domestic arena. From this perspective, the article fills a historiographical void not only as it concerns the history of PCI and CCP relations, but also with respect to the political processes involved in the opening of diplomatic relations between China and Italy in 1970. The author’s main argument is that the PCI sought to affirm an autonomous policy towards China, one that was actually founded on avoiding supporting or attacking Chinese leader Mao Zedong and on affirming an intermediate position within the

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Socialist field. This position, which had already been expressed by the late Party Secretary Palmiro Togliatti in his *Memoriale of Yalta* (1964),\(^2\) permitted the PCI in the mid-1960s to seek a new identity as an autonomous actor in the international political arena.

To this end, relations with China were deemed to have a great importance. From a general perspective, the article explicitly builds on previous literature of the international dimensions of PCI’s history, a topic of increasing academic interest since the early 2000s.\(^3\) The article is divided into three sections. The first analyzes how the Italian Communists tried to figure out, politically and ideologically, a specific China-policy in the late 1960s. In the second section, the author investigates how this “China policy” was tentatively translated into political action by the Party, in both the international socialist arena and in the Italian domestic context, by building “asymmetric alliances”\(^8\). The third section briefly outlines the role of some PCI intellectuals in the political interactions with China in the last 1960s. The author makes use of documents from the PCI archives and Italian and foreign press reports and comments. As for the Chinese side, the author unsurprisingly seems to have had limited access to the archives of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the CCP regarding the relations between PCI and CCP, as she manages to quote only some letters regarding the role of Florence’s mayor, the Christian Democrat Giorgio La Pira, as evidence of the failure of the Christian Democratic Party’s China policy in the mid-1960s, or a few Chinese documents that are preserved in Italian archives.

The starting point of Clivio’s narrative is 1966, with “China’s rupture in the socialist camp”\(^3\) which was caused by Mao’s affirmation that both the Soviet Union and the United States were imperialist enemies to fight against. This offered a chance for the PCI to search for a direct relationship with China, with the intent of remarking its equidistance from Washington and Moscow (though actually the Italian Communists’ rupture with Moscow occurred in 1969, one year after the Soviet Union’s intervention in Prague). From January 1966 to the end of November 1966 the PCI worked to articulate, in political and ideological terms, its own China policy, which was based on the legacy of Togliatti’s position and carried on mainly by Enrico Berlinguer. Berlinguer was in charge of the Department of the Foreign Affairs of the PCI and he was surely one of the most important supporters of the idea that the Italian Communists’ needed to affirm their specific position in the international arena, and have their own ‘foreign policy’ within the Italian political sphere.

According to Clivio, affirming its role as an interlocutor with China in these years represented an important realm where the PCI could shape this international role. Nevertheless, even though Clivio implicitly suggests that several factors had an influence on this desire, the specific and contextual reasons for the importance of

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\(^2\) Palmiro Togliatti, “Memoriale di Yalta,” *Rinascita* 35 (5 September, 1964)

China for the PCI are not fully explored and elaborated in the article. On the one hand the debates, which concerned political and ideological analyses about Soviet and Chinese socialism, were relevant for intra-Party political dynamics; in fact in 1966 leftist dissent within the PCI emerged at the X Congress. On the other hand, the PCI’s attitude towards the Sino-Soviet conflict in the Socialist camp could have influenced the relations with the non-aligned countries and other Communist parties in Western Europe. At the same time, the search for a role in the dialogue with China had become relevant as it had become clear that, after 1964, Italy’s diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic was just a question of time.

From Clivio’s analysis of the available sources, it is evident that the PCI had scarce access to information about Chinese current events and this fact represented a serious limitation to its ambitions of being recognized as a player in the field. The PCI leadership was divided in its reading of the ongoing Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which depended essentially on polarized press accounts from Chinese news agencies or pro-Soviet newspapers. However their general understanding of its causes persuaded them that given the PCI’s experiences it could perhaps persuade the Chinese to put an end to their violent attacks on the Soviet Union. In their opinion this would also have helped to ease the isolation of the PRC in the Socialist realm during the Cultural Revolution. More than offering a study of the ideological and political debates which nourished this persuasion, however, Clivio is interested in reconstructing the Italian Communists’ attempts to find a direct contact of China and, at the same time, to have the PCI recognized as a player by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The PCI’s relations with Hanoi and Pyongyang were instrumental to this end, and one interesting and new element presented in Clivio’s article is its analysis of the reconstruction of PCI’s interactions with North Korea, which may have helped them to understand the situation and to identify the best way to approach Maoist China. Clivio admits that the PCI was not able to take advantage of Koreans’ suggestions, as it continued to look for a public engagement to China in a critical way. According to the author, the PCI’s attitude was essentially based upon the will to affirm its autonomous foreign policy actions, and disregarding a more tactical policy towards Mao. But the article does not fully explore the ideological reasons and the contingent factors - as the lack of information about Chinese politics- that hindered PCI’s management of its relation with China. Clivio argues that the PCI’s aim of developing an autonomous foreign policy was better achieved on the domestic front, but she again also notes that the merit is due more to Christian Democrat Aldo Moro’s eagerness to have a dialogue with the PCI than to the Italian state’s recognition of the PCI as a real player in the international field. From Moro’s perspective, an Italian policy in favour of China’s admission to the United Nations and toward diplomatic recognition would have helped this dialogue in the domestic field, but apparently it did not depend upon the specific importance of the PCI in the relations with China.

Finally, another interesting aspect of the article is its revelation of some direct contact between the PCI and the CCP in 1969 in Berne, and, thanks to a number of Communist journalists, also in China and in France in 1970. While during the first occasion in 1969 the PCI encountered a rigid Chinese position, in the following year the participants seemed much more open to develop a dialogue with their Italian Communist counterparts. What actually changed was the Chinese domestic situation, something that the PCI may not have been fully able to appreciate.

The study could have been further enriched by outlining in a more detailed way how this China policy was added to the PCI’s ‘foreign policy’ within the Socialist and not-Socialist camps in the context of détente. What is missing in Clivio’s analysis is Chinese opinion of both the PCI’s ‘autonomous foreign policy’ and of its
ambition to become a player in the Italian decision to recognize the People’s Republic of China. This is due to the difficulty of not having access to Chinese archival documents on this topic and certainly is not the fault of the author. The Chinese sources quoted in the article do not add new information about the CCP’s attitude towards the PCI, as they mainly date from the first period of the Cultural Revolution. Even though the article downplays the weight of the PCI’s intra-Party ideological confrontations, by placing the events it analyses in the framework of the complex interplay between the domestic political context and the international situation (though downplaying the weight of PCI’s intra-Party ideological confrontations) it certainly contributes to a better understanding of the history of CCP and PCI relations and of their possible implications for Sino-Italian relations in a crucial period.


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