

## Roads to Reconciliation

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

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## A Welcome Guest?

### A Preliminary Assessment of Velio Spano's Journey to Mao's China 1949-1950

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**Abstract** Velio Spano was an important member of the Italian Communist Party, who visited Communist China in the crucial period of Autumn 1949 and wrote the first book in Italian about the Chinese revolution. Often mentioned in works dedicated to the history of Sino-Italian relations, this event has never been thoroughly studied. The recent availability of Spano's personal archives offer the possibility to better investigate his visit to China and to place it in the complex political environment of that period. This paper is a first attempt to use Spano's personal records about his stay to explore the actual reality of his experience and the implications of his presence in 1949 China.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Velio Spano's Travels in Liberated China: a General Overview from His Personal Notes. – 3 Behind the Public Narrative: Spano and Mao's 'Cold Bench'. – 4 Conclusions: Velio Spano in the Relations Between CCP and ICP.

**Keywords** Velio Spano. Sino-Italian Relations. Chinese Communist Party. 1949 China. Mao Zedong.

## 1 Introduction

After 1949, relations between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Italian Communist Party (ICP) played a significant role in the evolution of relations between Italy and China, contributing to those contacts that in the '50s fostered the emergence of Sino-Italian bilateral trade and cultural ties in spite of the lack of political recognition (Samarani, De Giorgi 2011).

Indeed, these inter-Party relations occurred against a very complex backdrop. On the one side, they were articulated within the ideological and political framework of the Socialist camp dominated by the Soviet Union and later by the rivalry between the USSR and the People's Republic of China (Samarani, Graziani 2015, 7-29). On the other, they developed in a complicated interplay of cooperation and competition with other Italian and West European political forces and individuals (Samarani, Meneguzzi Rostagni 2014). Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that intellectuals and

political figures of the Italian Communist Party played a pivotal role on several occasions in the history of Western Europe's long process of rapprochement to the People's Republic of China since 1949.

Actually, before the establishment of the People's Republic, as far as it is known, no Italian Communist, or Italian agent of the Comintern or sympathiser for Communism was in China. The contacts between the CCP and ICP originated in Moscow, where Palmiro Togliatti stayed during the World War II. In the Soviet capital city Italian and Chinese Communists lived or sent their families to flee from political persecution, and so had the opportunity to meet and get to know one other (Pini 2011, 46-52).

The turning point, as yet unexplored, in the relations between the two parties came in Autumn 1949 with the visit of a prominent Italian Communist, Velio Spano (1905-1964), who was in China from the beginning of September 1949 until early January 1950. Velio Spano was there as the correspondent of the ICP party newspaper, *L'Unità*. He published his reports describing the events and context of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in the newspaper (De Giorgi 2010), and later in a book, the first dedicated to Mao's China (Spano 1950).

This essay is a preliminary attempt to investigate the experience of Velio Spano in 1949 China as emerges from his unpublished personal travel notes and records.<sup>1</sup> These documents offer interesting research prospects. Giving an account of the activities of Spano in China, his personal diaries offer a rich portrait of the complicated environment of the Liberation. As an important member of a Communist Party, Spano was given the opportunity to meet the top Chinese leaders and to follow the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in South China. But, though he was a foreign comrade, his role was also a sensitive one for his Chinese hosts (Brady 2003). An analysis of his experience offers some insights into the political context of that period, both in the domestic field and from the perspective of Chinese relations with the outer world, and especially Sino-Soviet and Sino-Italian relations.

As a first exploration of these sources, the essay will first give an outline of Spano's journey as described in his personal travel journal,<sup>2</sup> and then present some issues relating to Spano's presence, with details of Spano's meeting with Mao Zedong in the light of the Italian visitor's perception and experience of Liberation in China.<sup>3</sup> Finally, it will conclude with details

1 The author wishes to thank Chiara and Paola Spano, Velio's daughters, and the Archives of the Gramsci Foundation (Archivi Fondazione Gramsci) in Rome for the kind support given to this research.

2 Velio Spano, *Taccuino blu*. Archivi Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF 90, busta 13, *Taccuini*. Hereinafter referred to as *Taccuino blu*.

3 Velio Spano, *Appunti presi in Cina, I-IX*. Archivi Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF 90, busta 13, *Taccuini*. Hereinafter referred to as *Appunti presi in Cina*.

of the role that Spano played in relations between CCP and ICP after his return in the '50s.

## 2 Velio Spano's Travels in Liberated China: a General Overview from His Personal Notes

At the time of his trip to China, Velio Spano was not just the correspondent of the ICP's paper. He was one of the most important Party figures, and very close to Secretary Palmiro Togliatti. Spano had a long career in the ICP. He had joined the Party just after its foundation, as a young student (he was born in the same province, Sardinia, as Antonio Gramsci). Due to the fascist repression, he began his activities as an underground member. Denounced and arrested in 1928, he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. After his release, Spano continued his political activities abroad, as an underground Communist in France, Egypt, Spain and Tunisia, working mainly as a journalist and a propagandist (El Houssi 2014). In October 1943, Spano and his wife Nadia Gallico returned to South Italy, at that time under Allied occupation. He became the director of the South Italy edition of *L'Unità* and a member of the Political Bureau of the ICP. From 1946 to 1948 Spano was a member of the Constituent Assembly as representative for Sardinia, and in 1948 a member of the Italian Senate (Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia).

His stay in China can be quite precisely reconstructed through his travel journal. He remained in China from 6th September 1949 to 10th January 1950, spending most of his time in Beijing, but also visiting several places in Central and South China, and in North China and Manchuria. Almost every day, he reported in a small blue notebook the main activities of that day, the people he met and, not rarely, his first-hand impressions, allowing the reader to have quite a precise idea of his experience in China, though the lack of detail often hinders a full understanding of the actual events and of Spano's ideas. Besides his short travel notes, at any rate, Spano reported much more detailed accounts of his visits and interviews on some other notebooks, to be used as the basis for his newspapers articles and later his book. While the travel journal gives us some hints on Spano's feeling and opinions, the unpublished reports are less personal and in most cases in them he just recorded the information received by his hosts at meetings and visits.<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to say how much of Spano's trip was planned before his arrival in China. Apparently not much. His tour was organised taking the

4 During his trip, Velio Spano took almost 400 photographs. The author is currently working on this interesting visual source in order to analyse Spano's gaze at China and to better reconstruct the human and social context of his experience.

opportunities offered by the socialist internationalist network that, under the Soviet aegis, developed across the two blocks during the Cold War and that, in 1949, had begun to include also China (Geoffreys 2014). Spano was one of the foreign speakers at the foundation meeting of the Chinese Congress for World Peace, held in Beijing on 2nd October 1949. Nevertheless, his visit was obviously linked to the wish of the ICP to develop contacts with the Chinese Communists, as the Italian draft of a letter of introduction written by Palmiro Togliatti and dated 29th July 1949 testifies. In this letter the Italian leader mentioned that Spano was going to China to better understand the Chinese revolution and collect the correct information for the Italian public opinion.<sup>5</sup> Not by chance, in the few original Chinese documents – mostly official invitations – preserved in the Archives at Fondazione Gramsci, Spano is more often indicated as a member of the Italian Communist Party's Central Committee than as a journalist of the Communist newspaper *L'Unità*.

According to his own notes, Spano left Rome on 19th August 1949 and two days later, in Prague, he was joined by the Communist Emilio Sereni, the secretary of the Italian Socialist Party Pietro Nenni, with his wife, the painter Renato Guttuso and the architect Pio Montesi.<sup>6</sup> The four were on their way to Moscow as members of the Italian delegation at the meeting of the Soviet Partisans for Peace, the Soviet branch of the World Committee of the Partisans for Peace, whose vice-Chairman was Pietro Nenni (Giacomini 1984; Geoffreys 2014).

Once in the Soviet capital city, on 23rd August (Spano wrote “they were not expecting us”),<sup>7</sup> he met Carolina Misiano. She was Francesco Misiano's daughter, a Socialist politician and film director who had fled to the USSR and died in 1936 (*Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*). Carolina Misiano, at that time professor of modern history at Moscow University, provided Spano with a contact for a certain Dyakov, probably the Soviet expert on Asian affairs, Aleksei Mikhailovic Dyakov. This man was somehow in charge of Spano's trip, though there are no traces of him in Spano's notes on his stay in China. On Sunday 28th August, Spano left Moscow at 10 p.m. to go to China by train, apparently together with Dyakov.

On that occasion he met or was introduced to Wang Jiaxiang. In Spring and Summer 1949, together with Liu Shaoqi, Wang had stayed in Moscow in order to negotiate the future alliance between the two countries.

5 “Minuta di lettera di Togliatti di presentazione di Velio Spano ai dirigenti del Pcc cinese, in occasione del suo viaggio in Cina 29 luglio 1949”, Archivi Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Palmiro Togliatti, Serie 5, *Corrispondenza politica*, 1949, 08/01/1949-25/11/1949, UA 6, Busta 1 (URL <http://www.archivionline.senato.it/default.htm>).

6 *Taccuino blu*, 22nd August 1949.

7 *Taccuino blu*, 23rd August 1949.

While Liu had gone back to Beijing in July, Wang was returning to China in late August in order to participate in the Central Political Consultative Conference in September (Heinzing 2015, 221). Spano spent some time with Wang and his wife, travelling together with some Chinese students and was left with a very positive impression. Later, in Beijing, Wang was put in charge of the organisation of Spano's work by Mao Zedong himself, and so became a pivotal figure in managing the presence of the Italian visitor in China, something that could suggest that the Chinese leader was especially sensitive to the role of Spano as it concerned the relations with the Soviets.

Spano arrived in China on 5th September at Manzhouli, and one day later he was in Harbin. His first official meeting occurred when he was welcomed by Gao Gang in Shenyang. After a short visit of the city, just one day later, on Wednesday 10th Spano arrived in Beijing. He was hosted at the former Germania Hotel. The same evening, Zhou Enlai visited him at the hotel, bringing Mao's greetings, and two days later, he was invited by Liu Shaoqi and his wife for dinner.

Spano spent more than one month in Beijing, leaving for the South on October 20th. During this period he attended two main events, namely the meeting of the new Central Political Consultative Conference, held from 21st September to 30th September and the establishment of the People's Republic on 1st October. Besides meeting with several leading figures of the CCP, including Mao, he also participated in several social events, especially banquets and theatre shows, and visited factories, universities, offices and villages. Moreover, as noted above, he addressed the meeting for the foundation of the Chinese Congress for World Peace, which was held on 2nd October, but also gave several lectures to cadres and students and released interviews. For a couple of days, he went also to visit Tianjin and gave talks there.

Hu Qiaomu and Wang Jiaxiang were the two most important CCP members in charge of supervising Spano's work in Beijing. Hu was actually the secretary of Mao Zedong. During the first week in Beijing, Spano discussed with Hu several aspects of his work as a journalist. He was eager to send news and dispatches home, and he was allowed to use the French telegraph.<sup>8</sup> This was very expensive and he was obliged to stop. Authorised then to use the Chinese telegraph at Press fees, he realised that the costs were still too high to send full articles to Italy. Effectively, Spano used the telegraph to communicate briefly with Togliatti (T. or To. in his notes), while the articles about China were sent by ordinary mail, and published in Italy some weeks after the events described.<sup>9</sup>

8 *Taccuino blu*, 13th September 1949.

9 *Taccuino blu*, 14th September 1949.

Wang, who was made responsible for Spano by Mao himself, was actually in charge of organising and approving his travel and work activities. As Spano noticed, at any rate, Mao had the last word regarding his work-plan.<sup>10</sup>

The first social event Spano participated in was the banquet for Sino-Soviet friendship, held on 15th September in Beijing. On that occasion he had the opportunity to meet the mayor of Shanghai, Chen Yi, and also Li Lisan and Zhu De. Zhu De invited him for dinner, but it was with Chen Yi that Spano apparently developed a more substantial relationship, since they met several times also in Shanghai. He also had the opportunity to meet and interview Guo Moruo, and Song Qingling. Moreover, in Beijing he also had long conversations with Peng Zhen, and other members of the local Party and government. He often spent time with some Soviet colleagues, sharing several visits and coordinating his writings with them.

In the second half of October 1949, Spano was allowed to make a long trip to the South, provided with an official authorisation signed by Zhu De himself. He left from Beijing with a group of interpreters and aides on 20th October. The first stop was Xuzhou, where the group (Spano often speaks of 'us' but it is not clear if he refers to his interpreters) waited all day long "the Soviets from the South and Liu Bocheng from the North".<sup>11</sup> Then they decided to leave together with the staff of the Second Army, and were joined by Liu Bocheng, Chen Yi and Deng Xiaoping.

The journey to the South with the People's Liberation Army was neither comfortable nor easy. After Xuzhou, Spano together with Liu Bocheng and the other military commanders moved to Zhengzhou and then to Hankou. Here they were welcomed by Lin Biao, whom he interviewed. From Hankou, the group continued by boat to Jiujiang where they arrived on 26th October. Spano fell ill. Travelling in a truck, he arrived in Ji'an in Jiangxi. From that moment, due to his precarious health, it seems that relations with his hosts became slightly more complicated, since his poor health made him less patient and co-operative before the Chinese' eyes. By truck, 'on impossible roads' that followed the course of the Ganjiang River, the group reached Ganzhou, and then Shaoguan in Guangdong Province. On 1st November, at last, he was able to leave for Canton, just two weeks after the city had been conquered by the PLA.

His journey in the South revealed to Spano a different situation from that in the North. There was still war, as he emphasised in his book (Spano 1950, 96-103). From his annotations in the travel journal, it would seem he had the impression that, whereas in Manchuria and North China the Party was actually in full control of the situation, in the Southern regions this was not the case at all. Commanders complained that subordinates

<sup>10</sup> *Taccuino blu*, 17th October 1949.

<sup>11</sup> *Taccuino blu*, 21st October 1949.

ignored orders, local cadres were quite reticent, disorganisation reigned everywhere and comrades seemed to take many things too lightly.<sup>12</sup> As he wrote in the published book, this was another China, and Northern comrades were simply not able to speak the local language (Spano 1950, 97). But the problem was more complex than just a question of communication. In Shaoguan he noticed that the Party's authority was really weak and often challenged at local level.

We must leave at 5 a.m. Yeh Kien-Yin [Ye Jianying author's note] has telegraphed twice ordering that we leave immediately. But the local cadre, Huan, does not want to understand and simply goes on sleeping. At the station, there is an indescribable confusion. At last, at 7 a.m. an armored car arrives to be used as a locomotive. We know that Huan has lied: the telephone line to Canton is working and the only interruption of the line is the bridge.<sup>13</sup>

Several similar episodes of disorganisation and insubordination were reported briefly by Spano during his trip to the South.

The Italian journalist spent ten days in Canton, meeting Ye Jianying several times, and having conversations with several local military cadres. He got the impression that the political and social situation there was really complicated. His entry for 8th November reports he had had a conversation with Fang Fang, who was in charge of rural reform in Guangdong. "I have the impression that they finally begin to think seriously of the problem of the agrarian class".<sup>14</sup> Later he had conversations also with Chen Geng, military commander of the Fourth Army. He had the feeling that in South China the Communists had a lot of work to do, and that there was not enough awareness of the challenges the Party had to face.

On 12th November, Spano left Canton. Through Shaoguan, Ganzhou, Nanchang, he reached Hangzhou, where he met Tan Zhenli. In Shanghai, where he arrived on 20th November, he had talks with Rao Sushu and Chen Yi and several other important CCP cadres, such as Zhang Hanfu, who later became vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs and Liu Xiao, who in 1955 became Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Talks in Shanghai mainly concerned the economy. On 4th December, after two weeks in Shanghai, Spano left for Nanjing, and on 8th December he was again in Beijing, where after some days he was informed by Hu Qiaomu that Mao had left for Moscow ("This thing can evidently be of enormous relevance", he wrote in his travel

12 *Taccuino blu*, 27th October, 30th October 1949.

13 *Taccuino blu*, 2nd November 1949.

14 *Taccuino blu*, 8th November 1949.

journal).<sup>15</sup> In Beijing, Spano had now the opportunity to talk to Bo Yibo and Li Lisan, and made some visits around the outskirts of the capital. A few days later, he went to visit Baoding. During his last days in Beijing he mainly worked at home, feeling quite lonely, despite official banquets and meetings. On 2nd January, Spano left Beijing, making his way back to Moscow through Manchuria, where he stopped for several days, and met Gao Gang. On 10th January, he finally crossed the border. His visit to China had come to an end after four whole months.

During his trip, Spano had the opportunity to have talks at the highest level of power in China. These conversations furnished him with information about the old China and the revolution that were reported in his articles and books, but evidently they also touched upon sensitive issues, such as rural reform and party organisation at local level. Besides work meetings, Spano's contacts with his hosts were developed not only at official events, like banquets, dinners and the theatre, but also through informal occasions such as strolls and private visits to family homes, which are often not reported in detail.

But the Chinese were not the only figures in the picture. Spano was also in close contact with the Soviets and other foreigners present in China at that time. As can be seen in Spano's travel journal, the Soviets played a great role in his stay in Beijing. He often, apparently, coordinated his informative work with his Soviet colleagues, and especially with Vladimir Rogov, the Tass correspondent who had long experience in China. Rogov features prominently in Spano's diary referred to on several occasions as a friendly colleague. Spano also met Alexander Fedeev, the Soviet writer, at that time Chairman of the Writers' Association of the Soviet Union, who was there for the establishment of the People's Republic and the birth of the Chinese Congress for World Peace. Besides Rogov, Spano reports meetings with General Ivan Kovalev, at the time Stalin's middleman in Beijing. After a dinner with him, in 17th October, he wrote that he absolutely had to meet him again after his return to Beijing after the trip to South, though the diary does not report when, if at all, this new meeting took place. With Rogov and Kovalev, Spano exchanged views and impressions about China and their hosts. He also had a long conversation, which he defined a 'courtesy visit' with Pyotr Shabaev, *chargé d'affaires* at the Soviet Embassy in Canton.<sup>16</sup> According to Soviet sources, the visit was requested secretly by Spano himself (Meliksetov 1996; Hou 2010).

Moreover, Spano met several Westerners who were there for the Peace Conference, part of the network of international solidarity that, in the name of peace, the Soviet Union was creating, offering new channels of

15 *Taccuino blu*, 11th December 1949.

16 *Taccuino blu*, 9th December 1949.



exchange and contacts between the West and China. Among these, he met the famous Russian violinist, Galina Barinova, and the French Communist Party feminist activist, Simone Bertrand.

He did also meet some Italians. In his book on China, Spano mentioned only Father Paludetti, who was in charge of an Italian school in Hankou that he was invited to visit<sup>17</sup> (Spano 1950, 90). But he also met an unnamed Italian priest in Tianjin, a well-known Italian resident in Beijing, Dr. Ugo Capuzzo, a physician one-time owner of one of the most famous nightclubs in the city, and in Shanghai, Giuseppe Altomare, trade *attachè* at the Italian Embassy there.<sup>18</sup> Spano spent several days with Altomare and was considerably impressed by him, as he recorded in his notes. He also introduced Altomare to Zhang Hanfu, suggesting that Spano was also exploring the business opportunities for Italian firms in view of the huge sums that the Chinese told him were earmarked for investment in industrial development.<sup>19</sup> Incidentally the relationship between Spano and Altomare is quite intriguing, as it apparently continued in the following years. A letter of Altomare to Spano, dated 20th July 1952, when Altomare was already moved to Hong Kong, suggests that not only the two were good friends and shared common views and ideological positions regarding Communist China, but also that Altomare was eager to support the Chinese propaganda in the West.<sup>20</sup>

All these elements compose a complex picture of Spano's experience during these four months in China. Actually, his presence was a noteworthy, but also apparently a problematic, event where political, cultural and contingent factors were intertwined, influencing the attitude of the Chinese leadership towards him and his perception of the Chinese revolution.

### 3 Behind the Public Narrative: Spano and Mao's 'Cold Bench'

Considering Spano's background, his close relation with Togliatti and the support he evidently received from the Soviet Union, his visit to China raises important questions. Though the specific historical circumstances that determined Spano's visit are still to be explored, it occurred in a period when

17 Informed of Spano's arrival, Father Paludetti in person invited him to visit the school he directed. See "Lettera di padre Paludetti", 25th October 1949, Archivi Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6, "Esteri e Movimento Pace", FF 91, *Viaggio in Cina: Lettere e Foto*. Busta 14.

18 *Taccuino blu*, 21st, 22nd November 1949.

19 *Taccuino blu*, 29th November 1949.

20 See "Lettera di Giuseppe Altomare a Velio Spano", 20 luglio 1952, Archivio Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF. 91, *Viaggio in Cina: Lettere e foto*, busta 14.

China was reflecting about and preparing itself for a possible integration in the Socialist world. Nevertheless, though he met international activists and spoke to the assembly of the Chinese Congress for World Peace, Spano was not actually in China just as a representative of Communist internationalism. His presence had also a more specific political impact, since it also had something to do with inter-Party relationships. As we have seen, Togliatti himself wrote a letter of introduction for Spano to the Chinese leaders. The Italian Communist leader's interest in developing contacts with the Chinese Communists and understanding better the Chinese situation is confirmed by the fact that, during his stay in China, Spano frequently made references to dispatches addressed directly by him to the ICP leader.

Moreover, Spano's visit came during a crucial moment for China for important decisions on economic strategy and international politics were being taken by the Chinese Communists in those months. More precisely, it was at this time that the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists were discussing a future alliance (Heinzig 2015; Shen, Xia 2015). Spano arrived in China from the Soviet Union. The Soviets supported his trip, and in China he was in close contact with Soviet journalists and representatives. And, as already noticed, during Spano's stay in China, Mao himself made Wang Jiaxiang responsible for Spano's work.

All this reveals a complicated scenario. Certainly the relationship that Spano had with the Soviets was an important factor for it affected the Chinese attitude towards him, as well as his view of the Chinese revolution. Spano's experience in China may well reveal much concerning relations between the Soviet Union and China at that time: annotations in his travel diary, for instance, would suggest that talks with Rogov, Cavalev and Shabaev were important for Spano's views of China. In spite of the revolutionary enthusiasm and strength that he clearly acknowledged his Chinese hosts possessed, he was aware of the huge challenges that the Chinese Communist Party had to face and recognised that, in many cases, the leaders undervalued the risks and the challenges ahead, relying almost blindly, on their military capacity and Mao's ideology of rural revolution.

An evaluation of his relations with the Chinese, and of how his presence was considered by the Chinese leaders at that time is also rather complicated. Certainly, he received material support and appreciated the friendly attitude of Chinese leaders and cadres shown him on many occasions. He had the opportunity to visit several places, even recently-liberated Canton, and, with the help of some interpreters, was able also to have long conversations with several Chinese national and local leaders, in the North as in the South. These visits and conversations, duly recorded, represent the bulk of his articles, travelogue and a book on the Chinese revolution that

he wrote but never published.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, such unpublished sources as his travel journal reveal that Spano's experience of China was not all plain sailing. His journal entries seem to suggest that Spano was aware of some ambivalence in his regard especially during and after his trip to the South. He made frequent reference to a Chinese proverb, mentioning that he had found 'a cold bench' (*leng bandeng*) as a way to indicate the difficulties and obstacles of various kinds that he had encountered. Interestingly enough, it was Mao himself who suggested this expression to Spano during their conversation. The President warned him that he might well come upon 'a cold bench' hinting likely cold or unfriendly attitudes.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the conversation between Mao and Spano is quite revealing of how the Chinese considered and what they expected from their Italian comrade. Spano reported their meeting in a notebook,<sup>23</sup> and these annotations were the basis for a chapter of his book (Spano 1950, 49-57). Actually, his personal notes give some information about the talks with Mao that were not included in the published report, and help to understand how Spano's role was considered by the Chinese Communists.

The meeting between Mao and Spano took place on 23rd September, ten days after his arrival in Beijing. Spano had already met Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Zhu De. He had seen Mao at the Assembly of the Political Consultative Conference on 21st September. The day after, Hu Qiaomu came to his hotel to tell him that Mao was waiting for him. Mao was with Wang Jiaxiang and immediately told Spano that maybe not all the comrades had understood the relevance of his presence, and that he would explain it to everyone, making Spano understand that he had his personal approval. The President explained that the Chinese Communists' victory had been made possible by the Chinese people's struggle as well as the support of others, first of the Soviet Union, and then of the new democratic countries (i.e. Socialist brother countries) and the workers in capitalist countries. This aid had to be material as well as political.<sup>24</sup> Once the importance of international support for the Chinese revolution was acknowledged, however, Mao reminded Spano immediately that the main goal of his trip was not to inform the outer world as a journalist but to study and understand China. "To send reports and articles is now secondary. You can do it, but it is not essential" he said. In actual fact, Mao emphasised, "a useful aspect of your trip is your participation in our activities, and we invite you to

21 The manuscript of this book is preserved in the Archives of the Fondazione Gramsci. Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico. Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace. FF. 92 "Originale libro sulla Cina. Inedito", 1950, busta 14.

22 *Taccuino blu*, 22nd September 1949.

23 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

24 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

speak out and share your experience with us". Replying to this invitation, Spano courteously affirmed that he had nothing to teach. But Mao insisted, replying that "you must not think that in China everything is going well".<sup>25</sup>

During the conversation, Mao insisted that Spano study China, its modern history, and the history of the Party, in order to understand their past experience, their mistakes and the way they had been able to overcome them. Moreover, Spano was "not here only to eat from the others, but also to give them to eat. You cannot only take, you should also give. Do tell us what Italy is like".<sup>26</sup> So he presented the Italian situation to Mao, even drawing a small map of the country in the notebook to show where places were. Mao ordered that a great map of Italy should be ready for Spano's lectures to the cadres.

But again the President felt that it was important that the guest not focus too much on his role as a journalist.

Do not hurry to publish. You can send your impressions to Italy, but what is essential is that you study the situation. You now have just some information for a couple of articles, but not to write an organic study. I will provide you with the material. Tonight you will have dinner at my place: you will find all the comrades of the Central Committee whom I told to help you in everything, here in Beijing and outside Beijing. Now, since every task needs someone who is in charge, Comrade Wang will be the responsible for your work.<sup>27</sup>

A second concern of Mao's was to inform or rather, warn, Spano that he might come upon a number of difficulties in his work, in spite of Mao's support and approval. Mao apparently apologised for the fact that Spano had not been received in a proper manner. But he reminded his guest that, as a Communist, he had to be ready for anything.

Communists must prepare themselves to meet any event. And you who have come to China must be ready to find 'a cold bench', as we say. Maybe also when you go to the provinces, I believe it will be easy for you because we will help you, but at any rate you must be ready to sit on a 'cold bench'. The Chinese people do not like foreigners. And it is easy to understand. Italian missionaries in China do not treat the Chinese well. The worst are the American, then the British and the French, but also the Italians.<sup>28</sup>

25 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

26 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

27 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

28 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

When Spano replied that even in Italy the priests are bad to Italians, Mao reminded him that at any rate,

missionaries had been very able at overcoming any difficulty: when the Chinese people had refused their 'mercenary-religion', they looked for ill people and they began to distribute presents for the New Year's Festival. You should do as they did, overcome the difficulties. For everything, it is necessary to fight, without struggle you obtain nothing.<sup>29</sup>

What did Mao actually mean by 'cold bench'? Was he referring to the weak Party control and disorganisation in the provinces, and especially in the South, a reality that could influence Spano's opinion of Chinese revolution and certainly hinder his work? Or was he hinting at the fact that Spano should be aware that his presence could in some cases be unwelcome, and he had to downsize his expectations in order to do his work, to win over their friendship and trust and offer something in exchange?

Indeed, Spano was quite impressed by Mao's words, and often referred to the 'cold bench' in his travel diary. He discovered that they were sitting on a cold bench during his long trip to Canton, when he became aware of the local disorganisation and maybe hostility of the local cadres. In Shaoguan, in his entry for 31st October he wrote: "At Shaoguan there is the cold bench of Mao. Comrades are like fish out of water. The last stop to Canton is clearly difficult".<sup>30</sup> Back in Shaoguan after two weeks, upon his return to North China, he mentioned again the difficult situation writing "once again, the usual cold bench".<sup>31</sup> It is evident that disorganisation and insubordination delayed the travel and almost made work impossible, not only for Spano, but for all the comrades who had come with him to the recently-liberated South. According to Spano, more than himself, it was these revolutionary comrades who were sitting on a cold bench, unable to control the affairs on the field, actually without power and often not really aware of the challenges they have to face.

But back in Beijing, in early December 1949, Spano experimented a different kind of 'cold bench', an unexpected sense of marginalization if not distrust from his hosts. It was not disorganisation. It looked more like political isolation from the CCP comrades. The entries for these days in his travel journal suggest that he began to perceive that the climate around him was not positive, though it is not easy to catch the full meaning of his notes.

December, Friday 9th. Arrival in Beijing. Again the 'cold bench'. C. [Kovalev?] and R. [Rogov?] are travelling to Moscow, who knows why? The im-

29 *Appunti presi in Cina*, II, 23rd September 1949.

30 *Taccuino blu*, 31st October 1949.

31 *Taccuino blu*, 14th November 1949.

pressions of C. have been confirmed to me by P. [not identified]. “They do not like our help”, he/she said talking of the non c. [?] of the government.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the lack of detail, the overall impression is that he felt that his own relations with the Chinese comrades had become colder than he had expected. He spent the last days in Beijing mainly working alone in the hotel. He had meetings with Bo Yibo and Li Lisan. Spano’s records of these conversations hint at an increasing skepticism towards the Chinese revolutionary strategy at this stage, for example regarding the CCP leaders’ trust in the capacity of the Army and Mao’s political leadership in addressing the menace of insurgent capitalism in rural areas;<sup>33</sup> their ‘too schematic’ understanding of class struggle<sup>34</sup> and their ability to build up the Party in the countryside, as demonstrated by their confusing information about the actual numbers of Party members.<sup>35</sup> His initial enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution seems, according to these short comments, dampened by the feeling that too many questions were not fully addressed or understood. With Liu Shaoqi, he had the opportunity to discuss a possible Italian support to new China, as the dispatch of technicians. Liu was skeptical about this, though he agreed to develop an exchange of ‘comrades’ between the two parties.<sup>36</sup> It is hard to say if the Chinese political establishment was aware of his skepticism and doubts and but they did have some doubts about their Italian comrade. Spano’s travel journal testifies, at any rate, that his feeling of being marginalized in Beijing persisted for several days. In the Chinese capital he found himself isolated and kept at a distance. He recorded:

December, 20th. I leave for Tangshan and then Baoding where all, even the president of the government, Yan, who is ill, will receive us. In the evening, at Beijing, ‘cold bench’. Mao’s visit has not had the effect that I expected.

December, 21st. There is an atmosphere of celebration, it is the anniversary of Stalin. Parade and speech of Zhou. They forgot to invite me to the meeting. Later they apologized a lot.

December 22nd. I worked at home. Hu [Qiaomu] sent someone to inform me that he will answer the day after tomorrow about the last meetings. He requires a letter. I do not understand this bureaucratic attitude.<sup>37</sup>

32 *Taccuino blu*, 9th December 1949.

33 *Taccuino blu*, 12th December 1949.

34 *Taccuino blu*, 13th December 1949.

35 *Taccuino blu*, 24th December 1949.

36 *Appunti presi in Cina*, IX, December 26th, 1949.

37 *Taccuino blu*, 21st, 22nd, 23rd December 1949.

Spano recorded in his travel journal that he just worked at home, receiving some visits from his collaborators, but attracting no sign of interest from the Chinese authorities. He felt to all intents and purposes, practically ignored. The reasons for this cold attitude were not clear to him. Were maybe Spano's close relations to the Soviets in China a problematic issue for his hosts? As we have seen in 20th December record, Spano seemed disappointed that Mao's visit to Moscow was not facilitating the cooperation between him, the Chinese and the Soviets, suggesting that he was aware that his own position was closely linked to the development of Sino-Soviet relations. But he did not explicit his views about this in his notes.

He just decided to go back to Italy: "December 23rd. Still at home. I begin to prepare my baggage. We need to telegraph in order to guarantee the connection".<sup>38</sup> Apparently, his decision to leave China made his relationship with his hosts smoother. The Chinese comrades in the Central Committee again seemed eager to show their friendship in the last days of his stay in Beijing. On 26th December he was invited to a last official banquet at Zhongnanhai. There he met Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, Li Lisan, Bo Yibo and several other leaders. According to Spano's notes, they all were very eager in giving him advice about the Italian situation and the risks of an imperialist attack to both Italy and France.<sup>39</sup> Liu insisted that the Italian Communists had to be ready for a clandestine struggle and military operations. On his side, Zhu De emphasised the need of a the party's political work within the army. Lastly Zhou told Spano that according to his own view, Togliatti had to refuse the parliament and flee to an area where he could be protected by the support of the masses in the fight for revolution. Spano commented "they all mention Mao, the Chinese example, the Chinese experience, the Chinese victory".<sup>40</sup> Apparently propaganda had taken the place of discussion and confrontation with the foreign comrade.

Later Spano laconically noticed that with the Chinese now "everything seems fine".<sup>41</sup> On 2nd January, he left Beijing. In his published reports he never mentioned the 'cold bench' as he had experienced it in China.

38 *Taccuino blu*, 23rd December 1949.

39 *Appunti presi in Cina*, IX, 26th December 1949.

40 *Appunti presi in Cina*, IX, 26th December 1949.

41 *Taccuino blu*, 28th December 1949.

## 4 Conclusions: Velio Spano in the Relations Between CCP and ICP

The legacy of Spano's long sojourn in China during those crucial months for the relations between Italy and China is still unexplored. On the public side, back in Italy Spano had several conferences introducing the Chinese Revolution to the Italian public, and wrote several articles and a book that was actually the first about the topic in Italy. Nevertheless, he did not publish another book he later worked on about the ideological and political problem of the Chinese revolution, and class struggle in China. His political interests and activities, moreover, were mainly focused on other issues, and especially on the struggles of the miners in his province, Sardinia.

Nevertheless, in 1956 he was put in charge of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the ICP, and two years later he became the Secretary of the Italian Congress for Peace (Cerrai 2011). This double role projected Spano again at the forefront of relations between Italy (especially the ICP) and the Socialist world, China included. Even a partial overview of Spano's personal archives for that period, actually, shows that the network of contacts he had had the opportunity to create in China during those weeks in 1949 were considered, at least in Italy, an important asset for the development of informal relations between the two countries. One example of this can be seen in his relationship with the Centro per le Relazioni Economiche e Culturali con la Cina (Centre for Economic and Cultural Relations with China) that since 1954 was in charge of organizing several exchanges and missions with People's China (Samarani, Meneguzzi 2014, 93-118).

Spano and Sergio Segre, the ICP member who was the secretary of the Centre, often exchanged opinions on the topic of Italian relations with China. Spano was consulted about all important issues, as the choice of Italian students to send to China,<sup>42</sup> the Italian proposal of opening a branch of the Chinese News Agency Xinhua in Italy<sup>43</sup> and the economic mission to China to be led by the Christian Democrat, Teresio Guglielmono,<sup>44</sup> in view of a meeting that Spano was expected to have (and actually had) with

**42** "Lettera di Sergio Segre a Spano", July 31st 1957, Archivio Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF.108 *Centro Cina*, busta 17.

**43** "Lettera di Velio Spano a Sergio Segre", April 1st 1958, Archivio Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF.108 *Centro Cina*, busta 17

**44** "Lettera di Sergio Segre a Velio Spano", June 12, 1958, Archivio Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF.108 *Centro Cina*, busta 17.



Chen Yi in Berne, in Summer 1958.<sup>45</sup> This event, still unstudied, raised several expectations on the ICP side that they would again play a pivotal role in Sino-Italian relations, a role apparently weakened by the activism of other economic and political players, which may well have been more appreciated by the Chinese government looking for political recognition and economic aid beyond the Soviet umbrella.

Spano's role in the relations with China in the '50s is also proven by a letter that Deng Xiaoping himself sent to Spano in 1957, as a reply to a previous letter that the Italian politician had addressed to Deng thanks to the help of the Communist economic expert Giuseppe Regis and the Chinese Embassy in Berne.<sup>46</sup>

In the history of relations between the People's Republic and Italy, Velio Spano's journey to China is often just mentioned as a significant, but not so determining episode. Conversely, a closer look at his experience in China and at its subsequent legacy reveals a much richer and more complex significance of that experience, both in terms of the Italian Communist Party's understanding of the Chinese revolution and the development of relations with the Chinese Communists within the Socialist camp and in terms of prospects for Sino-Italian relations. Apparently, after this visit, Spano himself did not claim a specific public role in the ICP in relations with the Chinese side. But this role was a fact. Considered from a historical perspective, nobody, in Italy, shared the privilege that Spano had enjoyed: to be a witness - if not an actor - of those crucial months when much of the new China and of its relations to the outer world were effectively being shaped.

**45** The trip to Berne has been mentioned by Spano's daughters who were with their father on that occasion. Personal communication to the Author.

**46** "Lettera di Deng Xiaoping", January 30th, 1957. Archivio Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Velio Spano e Nadia Gallico, Serie 6: Esteri e Movimento per la Pace, FF.110 *Lettera di Deng Xiaoping*, busta 17.

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