

The Historian's Gaze

Essays on Modern and Contemporary China
in Honour of Guido Samarani

edited by Laura De Giorgi and Sofia Graziani

Introduction

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This volume brings together a group of historians of modern China and East Asia, based in Italy and abroad, who, as colleagues or former students, have shared with Guido Samarani the intellectual and human experience of studying China in the last thirty years and engaging in the development of the field. It has no ambition to reflect the vast range of research topics and interests Samarani has contributed to and to represent the whole community of scholars who have collaborated with him during his long career. It represents just a small tribute by some of them to a friend and colleague, whose outstanding research activities have greatly increased our understanding of Chinese modern and contemporary history, as well as inspiring and influencing students and academics active both in Italy and abroad.

In the last decades, the study of modern and contemporary China has widened its scope to include a vast variety of disciplinary approaches. The increasing availability of sources and the multiplication of perspectives have offered new pathways for research but also new challenges. Historians of China have been called to specialise but at the same time maintain and develop their capacity to look at China from wider chronological and geographical angles; they have been asked to read Chinese history from within, exploring the original sources in depth and at the same time considering the intertwining of the regional and global factors that have affected the dynamics of Chinese history in the last centuries.

The historical research of Samarani highlights all these challenges. As he puts it in his seminal book *La Cina contemporanea* (2017), the twentieth century has been a period of great transformations for China, a period when the political, social and cultural values that shaped the collective and individual lives of the Chinese people have been deeply changed by revolutions and modernisation at the intersection of local and global factors. These transformations have also implied significant changes in the ways in which the Chinese past has been investigated and conceptualized in light of the problems and opportunities of the contemporary age.

Samarani's prominent position as a widely recognised scholar at both the national and international levels grew from his intellectual and scholarly interests in the political history of twentieth-century China and his constant scientific commitment throughout his long academic career. During his 37 years of academic activities (1983-2020), he distinguished himself through his strong dedication to developing historical research on issues including problems of modernisation in the Republican period, the history of modern political thought from Sun Yat-sen to the People's Republic of China, the diplomatic and political relations between Italy and China, and finally contemporary China's foreign policy and world outlook. This is demonstrated by the quantity and quality of his scientific contributions (in Italian, English, Chinese, Japanese and German) as well as by several pioneering research projects that he has promoted and directed since 2003 as part of his constant commitment to the internationalisation of historical research on China in Italy.

These projects developed in the framework of a broad collaboration at the international level and opened new perspectives regarding the international dimension of Chinese contemporary history, leading Samarani to establish himself as a recognised authority in the study of China's relations with Italy in the European context of the twentieth century.

Samarani's major scientific contributions include an innovative study of China under the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Una modernizzazione mancata. Aspetti e problemi dello sviluppo capitalistico in Cina tra le due guerre*, 1988) and several articles on the history of the Chinese Nationalist Party's prominent intellectual and political personalities, such as Dai Jitao and Hu Hanmin. Later, in 2004, he published the first edition of *La Cina contemporanea*, the most important and comprehensive Italian book dedicated to the history of China in the twentieth century. This work was the outcome of twenty years of research and reflection on the political, cultural and economic transformation of China during the twentieth century. This research nourished Samarani's renewed interest in the ideological and political evolution of the Chinese Communist Party, which formed the basis for his and Sofia Graziani's book on the

history of the CCP (*La Cina rossa. Storia del Partito comunista cinese*, 2023). This book demonstrates how, after his retirement, Samarani has remained an enthusiast scholar keen to share his insights and research with our community.

Another field of great interest for Samarani is the history of the relations between Italy and China in the modern and contemporary periods. He was co-author, together with Laura De Giorgi, of a pioneering work on this topic (*Lontane, vicine. Le relazioni fra Cina e Italia nel Novecento*, 2011), as well as author of numerous ground-breaking studies on aspects of the Italian presence in China in the inter-war period and the 1950s, previously neglected by Italian and international history scholars. In the last ten years, Samarani has also co-edited books in Italian, English and Chinese on the history of relations between China and Europe during the Cold War.

Inspired by Samarani's vast and multiple research interests, and with the aim of acknowledging his role in the development of the study of Chinese modern and contemporary history in Italy and abroad, the essays collected in this volume weave together new interpretations and perspectives on the history and historiography of modern and contemporary China. They cover a broad range of periods and topics, from imperial times to the contemporary age, with most focussing on the modern and contemporary eras. The book opens with an essay by Federica Ferlanti on the notion of modernity and its meaning over time in relation to both historians' subjectivity and the nation- and state-building process in China. Historiographical and *longue durée* historical concerns also animate the following three essays: Marina Miranda's examination of the evolving Chinese academic and political discussion of the role of foreign concessions, Elisa Giunipero's introduction to World History/Global History in China and Larry Shyu and Yu Shen's overview of policies regarding national minorities in China's modern history, from the Qing to the People's Republic.

The changing political and cultural landscapes at the domestic level are at the centre of the four essays that follow, which present a number of case studies, beginning with Aglaia De Angeli's semiotic analysis of Sun Yat-sen as an emblem of modernity. The essay by Andrea Revelant addresses the representation of Nationalist China in Japan's leading newspapers, providing insights into Japanese public opinion and attitudes towards China in the late 1920s, while Laura De Giorgi's contribution focuses on nation-building and war propaganda in China during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, with particular attention to the discourse on wounded soldiers. Sofia Graziani's essay focuses on the role of youth organisations (the Youth League) in the Chinese Communist Party's political strategy after the end of the Sino-Japanese War. The final section of the book consists of Chen Hongmin's and Barbara Onnis's contri-

butions, which address two different crucial themes in China's relations with the world, namely China's role in the international organisations born from the two world wars (the League of Nations and the United Nations), and the evolution of foreign policy-making processes and actors since the Deng era. The book closes with an essay by Paolo Santangelo on the senses in the Neo-Confucian philosophical tradition, which broadly reminds us of the importance of Sino-logical and textual approaches to Chinese history.

On the whole, the array of topics developed by the authors reflects the richness of approaches and interests that Samarani has sewn and developed in a continuous and rich exchange with colleagues in Italy and abroad. Through this small tribute, we would like to express our gratitude for his intellectual and academic work and for the support and inspiration that he has always offered and continues to offer, not only as an esteemed scholar but also as a dear teacher, colleague and friend.

Guido Samarani's Main Publications

- Una modernizzazione mancata. Aspetti e problemi dello sviluppo capitalistico in Cina tra le due guerre.* Venezia: Cafoscarina, 1988.
- La Cina verso il 2000. Potere politico e trasformazioni economico-sociali.* Venezia: Cafoscarina, 1994.
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