

Report of the workshop *Women's transnational activism in the Twentieth Century: framing the Chinese case in a global perspective*, International Conference, Oct. 21, 2022, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

A very comprehensive and enriching reflection on transnational women networks from a global and transnational perspective was the focus of the conference *Women's transnational activism in the Twentieth Century: framing the Chinese case in a global perspective*. It was organized by Professor Laura De Giorgi and Ph.D. students Federica Cicci and Rossella Roncati at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on Friday, 21 October 2022, within the Ph.D. Program in "Transcultural Studies on Eurasia and North Africa." It aimed to analyze the transnational women networks paying attention to the female dimension and also to the different constructions of female identity generated during the twentieth century. The result was a stimulating workshop, heterogeneous both in terms of the topics analyzed and the diversity of methodological approaches.

The first session of the workshop was chaired by organizer Professor Laura De Giorgi, Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The introductory speech was held by guest speaker Francisca de Haan, Central European University, on *Global Socialist Feminists and the 'Century of Women': Recent Publications and New Findings*. In the last few years, a significant number of new publications about various forms of "global feminisms" have appeared. She found it crucial to speak about women's movements and feminisms in the plural in order to underline the different features that have always characterized them with forms of overlap, cooperation, and controversy between them. Therefore, the plural is a way to designate that there was and is not only one feminism, despite the general understanding of "feminism" as this Western phenomenon. In her contribution, she first discussed this important trend and explored the ways in which these publications have enriched our knowledge and understanding of the history of global feminisms. Then, based on her recent work, and in particular the edited *Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World* (forthcoming, 2022), she argued that historians still underestimate socialist and communist women's contributions to what has been called "the century of women." Indeed, there was a global women's movement in the form of the *Women's International Democratic Federation* (WIDF) and active left-feminist women's organizations in all parts of the world. Now we are only in the early stages of discovering this vast history mainly due to the Western supremacy in historiography and the enduring influence of the Cold War. The WIDF members and leaders were women on the political left, including left-liberal, socialist, and communist women. After the fall of European state socialism, in many former European socialist countries self-identified liberal feminist women firstly fervently refused their countries' communist past and the contributions of communist women to improving women's status and social, political and civil rights. According to de Haan, what is important today is reconsidering the history

of women's movements and feminisms in Europe and beyond, in order to include the history and influences of socialist women and their organizations. Necessarily, if they were sited in European state socialist countries, it is significant to understand that the history of these women's organizations was not isolated from what happened in other parts of the world.

Eloisa Betti, the second guest speaker from Bologna University, examined *Italian Left-wing Women's Agency and International Exchanges across the Iron Curtain*. During the Cold War years, Italian Left-wing women's agency was highly influenced by their international networks and exchanges, which contributed to creating a powerful imaginary of gender equality and especially advancing women workers rights. She argued that especially the first phase of the Cold War was marked by imaginaries and models strongly conditioned by bipolar equilibriums, which for the Communists were translated into a particular attachment to the Soviet bloc and an idealization of the USSR. Women were witnesses and promoters of such a narrative, which they reproduced publicly and privately. At the same time, they embraced the imaginary of equality and the models of emancipation of real socialism, reasserted in Italy by the Communist Party and the Union of Italian Women (UDI). These were renegotiated in light of the tradition of agency and social conflict proper to each region, given the high heterogeneity of the Italian context. She interestingly explored the impact and extent of these exchanges, by investigating the case of UDI with specific reference to the Communist run Emilia-Romagna Region.

The second session of the workshop, chaired by Sofia Graziani from the University of Trento, was dedicated to the topic of Chinese women, declined on the one hand through the analysis of humanitarian relief efforts during the years of the War of Resistance and, on the other, the relationship with the Union of Italian women during the Cold War. Federica Cicci, in the presentation *In the name of the Red Cross Society of China: women's activism and humanitarian aid during the war (1937-1945)*, discussed the participation of Chinese women in humanitarian aid from the War of Resistance to the Second World War. By analyzing the power relations and humanitarian activities in the Red Cross, her contribution intertwined with issues concerning the meaning of gender and state in modern China, assessing women's role within the Chinese Red Cross, particularly nurses in designing aid programs, and how significant it was. She claimed that one woman played a special role in the growth of military nursing assistance for Chinese troops: Zhou Meiyu. Specifically, the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps had a major task in supporting the training of military medical personnel and Zhou was particularly successful in establishing a valid medical expert in the new education programs. She drew on different examples to illustrate how, breaking down gender boundaries, humanitarian war services in wartime were promoted, and how women's work and relationships with Western women served as a window on which gender shaped the meanings of humanitarianism, war and nation-building in modern China, while offering the opportunity to re-discuss the social values and traditional roles of women.

Rossella Roncati, with her contribution *Sino-Italian relations and transnational women's activism in the Global Cold War: the case of Maria Antonietta Maccioc-*

chi, la Chinoise, claimed that in the aftermath of World War II, a global network of multilateral relations developed among different leftist women's associations. This milieu sparked connections between the All-China Women's Democratic Federation (ACWDF) and the Union of Italian Women (UDI). When these two associations were founded, their relations were internationally fostered through the net of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) – an umbrella federation which, since the 1950s, promoted Third-Worldist and anti-imperialist ideals. Worldwide exchanges among women flourished during the 1950s and 1960s, including Italy and China. She argued that key moments for the establishment of cultural and political ties between women's groups materialized through international congresses and exchanges of delegations. These latter diplomatic travels gave their participants the opportunity to experience how women's rights were promoted and implemented in each country. Recent historiography on the topic stressed how evidence of these crucial moments helps to reconstruct how women international debates penetrated and interacted with local and transnational contexts. By adopting a feminist critical approach and considering the existing scholarship on, *inter alia*, Global Socialist Feminism, her contribution looked at the relations between Chinese and Italian women organizations as a relevant case-study in order to understand how different feminist national agendas intertwined, shaped and were shaped by global politics and Cold War dynamics. Relying on the UDI National Archive, and the personal archive of Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, Italian activist involved in these exchanges, Rossella's research enriched our understanding of the Global Cold War transnational relations from the perspective of women's role and experience. Furthermore, it shed light on a pivotal, though still understudied, moment in the emergence of a transcultural discourse on women and feminism.

The concluding sections of the conference were dedicated to comments and questions, regarding the two last papers first from the discussant Jennifer Bond, University College London, and then from the audience. Bond raised an important issue on how we get at Chinese women's experience of international women's organizations and how we can understand their international identity formation. It is a big issue on how it is possible to reshape our research from a different perspective without having access to Chinese primary sources. Another related question to both concerned what changed in women's international activities before and after the Second World War. The two papers touched upon motherhood and the centrality of traditional female roles in these organizations. This showed a connecting point between pre-post war. For instance, we know from the work of scholars such as Leila J. Rupp that a shared experience of gendered violence and shared experience of loss of sons was part of the rhetoric in which women's international solidarities were formed in the interwar period. Nonetheless, she highlighted that Cicci's rich paper uncovered the important work done by women in the Chinese Red Cross during the War of Resistance against Japan and that was an excellent contribution to the growing literature on Chinese women's wartime work and participation in international organizations. Concerning Roncati's contribution, she underlined that it was a fascinating in-depth and well-crafted insight into Sino-Italian women's activism and its results in that period.

The relevance of the event that needs to be emphasized and that makes it a fundamental reference point is the awareness of the inescapability of a gender perspective in the analysis of transnational women networks in a global and international view. Although the contributions were thematically heterogeneous, some general considerations can be drawn. Firstly, it emerged how, during the twentieth century, the female figure, straddling the public and private spheres, was at the center of significant transformations; roles, mentalities, social practices, and the very representations of gender differences constitute an important spy to identify changes and resistance to change. The reports highlighted how to better understand the transnational women networks from a global and transnational perspective, it is necessary to examine gender relations over a long chronological period and pay attention to the conflicts embedded in the patriarchal family model. The complexity of women's experiences declined according to precise factors (i.e., geographical, political contexts, social classes, etc.) was also emphasized. It is an issue of being able to focus on women's roles and presence beyond the threshold of the 1930s, when patriotic mobilization emerged strongly, framing them in the context of the war, as well as exploring the side of international relations with women in China, Europe and the rest of the world. Overall, the contributions called for an analysis of the wartime and post-war experience in the making, at a time when the female condition, although different and contrasting, seemed more dynamic than ever.

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