"Comparative Epistemologies for Thinking China,"

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Interviewee: **Sauro Angelini**

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**LP:** Today is June 15, 2013 and I’m about to interview Sauro Angelini. So, I would like you to start giving me some personal information, where you were born, where you grew up, your studies.

**SA:** I was born in Abruzzo, in Isola del Gran Sasso in ’42. When I was a boy I moved with my family to Rome and I grew up in Rome. Later, I had to go abroad to find a job because I couldn’t find a job here, so I went to Germany, Canada, then Cuba in ’67. From ’67 to ’69, I was in Cuba, then I came back to Italy and left to Paris. In Paris, I started studying again and I got a graduation degree from university. I’ve got a Maitrise in sociology. My interest towards China was born in Paris. We were studying the Eastern countries. There were two big groups at the Ecole Pratique des Haute Etudes, where I had started to attend the third cycle. One group dealt with the Eastern countries, another group studied China. I was in the China group, so I decided that I wanted to go there and see. In the 70s, there wasn’t much information on China. I mean, few people had been there and the real information was little. Furthermore, the stuff published by the people who had gone and come back was essentially what the Chinese had told them, so nothing real. There wasn’t any critical analysis of what was happening. So I decided to go to China. I went there in July ’76.
I arrived the day after the death of Zhu De, so they took me to Zhu De’s funeral right away. A couple of weeks later, there was a terrible earthquake, the Tangshan earthquake. I used to live at the Friendship hotel, which was the hotel of all the sois-disant experts. We were called experts because at that time in order to go to China you had to work for the Chinese government. There weren’t many other possibilities, aside from being a diplomat.

LP: So you went to China as an expert? And what kind of job did you have?

SA: I had to correct the Italian versions of those magazines that were also published in Italian like “La Cina”. I would also correct books or other publications in other languages because the publications in Italian were very few if compared to those in the other languages like French, English of course, Spanish. There was a lot more work for the magazines publishing in those other languages.

LP: Had you studied Chinese?

SA: No, I hadn’t studied Chinese. I didn’t go as sinologist. I was one of the few who had gone for other reasons. I went there to see what was happening in China from an economic point of view, because we had very little, too little information to carry out an analysis on China. Therefore, I wanted to know what was going on. Of course, I had gone with the idea that the Cultural Revolution was doing something good. When I arrived, immediately after the Tangshan earthquake, Mao died. Mao died in September, on September 9, ’76. Soon after there was the fall of the Gang of Four and it was a really great experience because I started realizing how things worked in China. We got to know it in the morning. The Chinese still didn’t know anything. I remember that I called the Princigalli, without saying the name, and I asked: “Ada, is it true what they say?” She understood right away of course, and replied: “Yes, apparently yes”. I took my bike and I went to the south of Beijing, where all the factories were, because I thought that another revolution would start. I went up and down this working class area for three days but nothing happened. After three days, the Party began organizing some parades, publicizing the fall of the Gang of Four. They made parades on the Chang’an jie for almost a week to show their happiness for the fall of the Gang of Four. After that, Deng Xiaoping obviously took the power again and the changes begun very slowly.

LP: You said that these events helped you understanding China better. Can you explain better what you mean? What did they make you understand exactly?
SA: When I arrived there, I believed in what they were telling me, with a grain of salt of course, with some doubts. Then I realized that it wasn’t exactly the way it seemed like. It was a matter of language. The Chinese do not speak in a direct way, they are very indirect. When I arrived, they were criticizing Deng Xiaoping and everybody had to write dazibao against Deng Xiaoping. But they knew each other and they knew who was actually criticizing and who wasn’t. The person referring to the critics on the papers wasn’t really criticizing him. Those trying to add their own critical words were evidently criticizing. It’s typical of Chinese language. We, foreigners were understanding very little at the time, honestly. There I slowly started understanding also these things. I realized that many people were against the Cultural Revolution, that the Cultural Revolution wasn’t the event that had been described in France or in Europe. I realized the damages it had caused. Slowly, Deng’s opening policy began and brought China to today’s situation. I witnessed all the phases of this change. I was interested in seeing how these changes would work.

LP: So you went for the first time in ’76. How long did you stay?

SA: I remained in China until last year, almost uninterruptedly because there were some periods in which I came back to Italy, but I’ve constantly gone back there. My wife was French and was specialized in teaching French to foreigners. So she had the opportunity, she applied to go teach in China and was hired by Beijing University, where she taught for eight years. I stopped working for the Chinese and I found a job with an Italian company exporting machinery to China. After five years I decided to set up my own company. I exported machinery and implants until 2006-2007.

LP: Let’s back up. Where did you get your little information on China from before going there?

SA: Mainly from the publications and pamphlets of the Chinese themselves: “Pechino Informazione”, “La Cina in costruzione”. I had read a lot. I had read for example everything Mao had written. I would read anything they published. Plus, I would read the books of those who had been to China like Macciocchi, or another French journal publishing a lot on China…the… the… I can’t remember. There was also an Italian magazine, I think it was called “Vento dell’Est”, which published a lot on China, but mainly Chinese articles, because they were written in a very Chinese way, in agreement with Chinese ideology. I must say that many of these people who had been to China and then published books, like Macciocchi, didn’t really do a good job. They did a terrible job because they just repeated in the book what they
had heard from the Chinese. So our knowledge was very poor. I started to know China only when I started visiting the factories, the countryside etc. And it was totally different from what they were telling us. While the Chinese in the magazines would write that they had solved the problem of pollution, the problem of safety in the factories, I found out that it wasn’t true at all. I saw them doing absurd things. They were very very far from the kind of problems we were trying to solve in Europe. I later realized that I had been a stupid in believing that they had been able to solve these problems because China was very poor, because solving these problems would have meant being a developed country, and China wasn’t. They wouldn’t even see obvious problems! I remember one time in a silk factory, I saw a woman with her hands constantly in hot water –because to make silk they put the cocoon in hot water and the women must find the ending in order to wrap it. It’s always the same women staying there to do this, with their hands merged in hot water for eight hours a day. I remember that I asked: “Aren’t there occupational diseases?” It took me forever to make them understand what I meant by occupational diseases…the Chinese wouldn’t even see the problem: “why should we change her? She is good. Why? Why would we substitute her?” For them the problem did not exist. Therefore, when in Europe we were debating on certain issues, the Chinese wouldn’t even consider it an issue. It wasn’t their fault though. It was the fault of our intellectuals going to China and writing nonsenses on what was going on. You can’t say that the Chinese were responsible for this. It was the people not telling the truth about what they had seen.

LP: When in the ‘70s you arrived in China, were you able to travel freely?

SA: No, the foreigners couldn’t go beyond a radius of 20km around Beijing. The Chinese couldn’t invite us or needed a permission to invite us. They weren’t free to invite us and we couldn’t invite them…I mean, we could invite them but they had to ask for a permission and then they had to register downstairs where the fuwuyuan would write down their name, surname, time of arrival, etc. They knew everything. They kept a file on all the people coming to my house.

LP: Were you able to get in touch with the Chinese? Were you able to make any Chinese friends?

SA: I had some contacts. In my department some of my co-workers were really on the ball, very open. But friendship, the way we mean it, it’s very hard, even after thirty years. It’s hard because it’s a matter of… Our mentality is so different, so distant that sometimes it’s hard. Well, this doesn’t mean…I have met some very dear
people who have helped me a lot, who have been very good to me. I owe them a lot, I’m linked to them by gratefulness, affection. But there is always some sort of distance. Especially back then, a Chinese who was in contact with a foreigner might have some troubles so nobody would try to have a rapport with foreigners. Even after, when Deng Xiaoping took the power back, a long time was needed before the mentality changed. Now it’s totally different. You can have all the relations you want. But a long time was needed; it wasn’t immediate. People were distrustful. Then the situation slowly developed. Before in China, everything was centralized. When I started working there, some people were wonderful, very professional, more professional than those dealing with import-export today. Some people of the centralized corporation of Tech-import, of the Machinery were really good. They were good, really good and updated. I learned a lot from them and their word was better than signing a contract. They were very honest and expected the same from the other party. So in the 80s, if you tried to bluff, you would be rejected. They appreciated and praised honesty above all. If you were honest with them, they were honest with you. Nowadays it’s different, everything has changed. But those people were very good, both from a professional and human point of view. I got a lot from them, I must admit.

LP: The difference between China in the past and in the present is evident. I was wondering whether some specific episodes made you, and the other Westerners, understand how things were slowly changing.

SA: Well, the West was suspicious at first. They never believed that the Chinese were serious about it. But the Chinese put into practice everything that they had promised. They would do what they said. So initially we didn’t know if the changes would happen for real. Then we slowly understood they were serious about it. They started their own way, with samples, liberalizing certain area, seeing how the liberalization was going and going on. For example, the first thing they did was liberalizing the small trade and dividing the land and gave it to people under the payment of a rent. The land still belongs to the State but they lease it to people for thirty-five years, and then they do the renewal of the lease. Anything produced by the land belongs to the farmers. This was the first reform. So we began to see that the little markets had more abundance, more variety of products; the products were better. The trade was moving from the country to the city. There were people buying in the country and selling in the city. They were very good at this. One time I went to some faraway place in Jilin and I was surprised to find oranges, bananas, unthinkable stuff. I realized that in a very short time they had been able to create private supply chains
even in places that were in the middle of nowhere. The Russians are different. The Chinese are really good. Then the handicraft was liberalized. Everything happened really slowly. For example, a Chinese factory was an entire world. Some big factories hosted within their perimeter schools, hospitals and hotels. They would give jobs to many people. Everything depended from the famous danwei, the work unit. When they said: “This work unit has ten thousand workers” it didn’t mean ten thousand wormen. Two or three thousands were working for the services. So, changing this kind of structure required a lot of time. They knew that the work productivity was very low because trying to give a job to anybody the Chinese productivity was low. So rationalizing these factories transforming them in a capitalistic productive unit meant leaving millions of people unemployed. And the Chinese couldn’t afford a situation of this kind. So they did everything very gradually in order to avoid bigger problems. Liberalizing China and making it grow at the same time wasn’t easy at all. They have been pretty good. They have had some problems in certain areas of course but not huge social issues.

**LP:** So you saw the Chinese slowly regaining some freedom that they didn’t have before.

**SA:** Yes. For example the Chinese today can read anything they like. Sometimes I smile when I go to a hotel and I find anything, all the newspapers and the magazines of the world. They read books, anything. Especially with the internet, if you know the foreign languages you really read what you want. So from this point of view a lot has changed. The young are different, they can travel abroad. Many Chinese today travel abroad. There are ten thousands of Chinese going abroad every year. They are curious; they want to know what happens, what people do abroad. Women have had the most advantages from the revolution because they started from a very behind position. To understand the conditions of the women in China in the past you should read Le palanquin des larmes, now it’s also a movie. And the situation in the country was even worse. Today women are pillars. They are extremely proactive, great workers; they are really good. This doesn’t mean that today there isn’t a trend of people who want to go back to the old mentality, especially in the countryside. But women are now strong because they work, because they are independent and can fight against this old mentality.

**LP:** You said that when you arrived in ’76 you couldn’t move form Beijing, you had few contacts with the Chinese. Then the situation changed also for the foreigners, you gained more freedom. How did this happen?
SA: It was just as slow. I remember you couldn’t go to the Fragrant Hills and you would rant and rave: “I wonder what’s there. Probably wonderful villas, like in Hollywood!” One time I went there, I entered one of these houses that were assigned to the ministers, not to people. Every minister had their retirement house there. I went there and I realized they were nothing special, nothing luxurious. They had the same furniture we had at the Friendship hotel, exactly the same! They had small rooms. It was still a privilege, because a normal citizen couldn’t afford it but nothing as luxurious as I thought.

LP: So slowly you were free to go around. Where did you go first?

SA: I must say that I’ve always traveled around China for my job so I didn’t really find the need… For my job, I have traveled everywhere, even to very secluded areas, because the factories were there. I have slept in the factories because the small towns did not have hotels, and we would sleep in the guesthouses of the factories. That’s how one would travel before. Hotels? Why would the Chinese need hotels? They weren’t travelling anywhere. If they travelled, it was to go visit a factory, so the factories had guesthouses. When they let the people make joint ventures, from the middle of the 80s, the foreigners came more and more so they began building these kind of infrastructures even in small places.

For example, I remember that you would work from your hotel. Before, there were no office buildings. The first office building was build at the Citic, around the second half of the 80s. That was the first. It was considered a skyscraper at the time. Today is shorter than many others. Back then, the Chinese could not buy houses, neither could the foreigners. There was no freedom to buy real estate. This came later on. They made a reform… It was great. Too bad there aren’t many studies on the real estate reform in China. Someone should do it. The real estate reform in China was made in one year. In one year they liberalized all the houses of all the cities of China. It’s something really big. And they did it without creating many problems. They demonstrated very good organization in doing this. They did it around the middle of the 90s. Then they gave us the opportunity to buy houses, to buy offices. I bought the first offices available in China. In ’94 they approved this law and I bought them immediately because the rent was very high.

LP: And the buying cost was low?
SA: If compared to rent, yes. We would pay absurd rent in China, probably the highest of the world. We would pay something like 100 dollars per square meter a month.

LP: And buying? We are talking about Beijing, right?

SA: Yes. With 560,000 dollars I bought an office of 244 per square meters. So it cost 2200-2300 dollars per square meter. Today it costs a lot more, according to the area. Some apartments can cost up to 5000-6000 yuan per square meter. Beijing is very expensive.

LP: Did you see Beijing changing?

SA: Totally. The old Beijing doesn’t exist anymore. I knew Beijing very well because I used to ride a bicycle a lot for my work. I spent two years of my life going to each and every single hutong, so I knew all the small roads. Well, there wasn’t much to do so you would spend every Saturday and Sunday going to find scavengers. There weren’t many other possibilities, so you would just go around Beijing. So I knew it very well. Beijing has been completely razed and rebuilt. Aside from some areas in the North…I happened to go to same places I had been before and I didn’t know where I was. Districts that I used to know very well. For example, the district of Beida, of Renmin daxue, was county-side. Haidian was a country village. In front of the Friendship hotel there was a pigsty. There were farmers there, at the crossroad. Now you can’t recognize it anymore, you don’t know where you are.

LP: Do you miss anything of the old Beijing?

SA: Oh my God. Foreigners are weird. Everybody complains that they destroyed Beijing. But Beijing wasn’t a city like Rome, with solid buildings. The Chinese buildings were poor; they were made of bric-à-brac. I saw that when there was the earthquake. Aside some mansions in the North of Beijing, well, not really mansions, I mean siheyuan, which were made pretty well, the rest in the South was… You couldn’t even drive in the hutong so it was different to rebuild everything. They should have rebuilt everything and move the Chinese residents somewhere else, because they used to live in 7-8 sq. m. each. With the development, they wanted to give an apartment to each family and they couldn’t. They needed money that they didn’t have. Furthermore, they do not have the cult of antiquities like us. Yes, they have monuments…but they didn’t think that a city was a monument. They have been strongly criticized for demolishing everything. Well, they have preserved a part of the north. The rest was completely rebuilt and renovated.
LP: Even though you had moved to China in ’76, you would come back periodically. Would you find interest regarding China? Were you bombed with questions on China?

SA: No. I’ve always been leftist and I would try to explain to the Communist Party here: “Listen, gentlemen, in China this and this is happening. The statalization of the means of production didn’t lead to the improvement of the production strength. It’s exactly the opposite: it was an obstacle to the development of the production strength”. This was the reason why in the Eastern European countries, in those same years, in the 80s, there was the liberalization. The Communist Parties of all these countries realized that a change was needed. There was no revolution, there weren’t mass protests to change the regime. No! The leaders of the Communist Parties did it. Deng Xiaoping was a Party member. Same as Gorbaciov. They changed because they realized that that kind of social and economical organization wasn’t allowing the country go grow. It was necessary. Some countries did better than others. I think Gorbaciov didn’t do a good job. He believed in the American sirens and the Americans ruined him. The Chinese didn’t believe that. When the Americans said: “Liberalize the Industry!”, there was no middle class with capital that could have bought the factories. Who would they sell it to? They needed to create first. The Chinese were very smart: they first created the stock market, then made some experiments, created special zones like Shenzhen, Xiamen, Tianjin, Dalian, where one could invest freely. Then they spread this freedom to the rest of the country. These things must be done very slowly…For example, the Tian’anmen issue between Zhao Ziyang and the others was on this topic. Zhao Ziyang wanted a faster liberalization, like Gorbaciov’s. The rest of the Party said: “No, we’re gonna ruin everything like this!” So, aside from the Tian’anmen massacre that I totally condemn and we all do, politically speaking, they were right. You would have sent the country to hell. I mean, keeping one billion and two hundred thousand people and contemporarily creating growth and development for them is not an easy task. For example, we start with a percentage of farmers of 3-4%, like all the other developed countries. China will reach these percentages. But at the time it meant urbanizing seven-eight hundred millions of people. Urbanizing 7-8 hundred million people; it’s like urbanizing 15 Italies. These are huge numbers. It’s hard to even think about these numbers. So the reforms had to be done according to certain criterias. I think that the Party leaders were very smart and Zhao Ziyang was totally wong. I repeat: the way they reacted was completely wrong though. In the west they think that the protesters were students, common citizens… No! In China, nothing happens without
the support of the Party. So those people in Tian’anmen were one side of the Party against the other.

LP: When in Italy you did say: “It’s not working there”, who was your interlocutor? What was the reaction?

SA: I would report to the Party. I was a member of the Communist Party. They wouldn’t listen to me! When there was change, I would also try to explain the change but they still wouldn’t listen. I don’t know, maybe it was because I was from a little town. Probably, if I had been in Bologna, where I live now, people would have been more receptive. But I was from a little town of Abruzzo region and China was too far for them.

LP: Now it’s all changed. After the Chinese economic boom, everyone wants to go to China.

SA: For different reasons. When we went, we had ideological motivations. 90% of the people studying Chinese back then would do it for ideological reasons. I remember I met a person in China who would read the ‘Osservatore Romano’ [the Vatican’s newspaper]. When we met him, we would look at him as if he were the devil. He was an ex-seminarian who is still there. Today we laugh of these things, but at the time the atmosphere was completely different. I mean, between the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, Italian students, Italian people were very politicized. Now it’s different.

I remember that in Paris we abducted the President of the University. This person, something like ten years later, came to China and was my guest. I had been one of his abductors!

LP: Why did you abduct him?

SA: Bah, just for University organization reasons. He was a communist but we abducted him because we were extreme leftists! Hahahaha. Ten years later, we were chatting and he said: “Listen Sauro, everything is so changed that people, young people don’t care anymore. They don’t want to change the world anymore. They don’t have any dreams. They don’t hope in a better, egalitarian, fair society anymore. You were mean but in the end, I miss your jokes!” That’s what he said. Well we were extreme. We didn’t have very clear projects, but at least we had dreams. We wanted to fight for a fairer society. Today there’s nothing of all this. Today, can you think about it?! If I think that in Italy we still have Berlusconi, I want to cry! Today people
accept anything. People know that he is a thief? It doesn’t matter, they keep voting for him. We have elected really dirty people! In the past I’ve always voted against the Christian Democratic Party, but at least at the time they would understand something about politics. Today there is a real cultural decline. Our last Parliament was terrible…I don’t know where they found those people! How can you vote for them??!! You are rightist, ok, but vote for somebody capable, with something inside his head!

LP: Yeah, I know…Let’s go back to China. The Italy-China relations had officially started in the 70s. Did you see them evolving? Did you see the Chinese doing something to understand the Italians and the Italians doing something to know the Chinese better?

SA: If I compare the Italians with the French, the Germans, the English, we have been the worst. We were leaders in the 80s: we were the second European country for export in China. We had great chances but we played our cards badly because our government wasn’t serious. We do not have foreign policies. We do not have long-term projects on what we want to do with China. Today is the same. So other countries have surpassed us. Germany, France, England know what they want and programme their foreign politics by 10, 20 years. We do it day by day. The best ambassador in China was Francisci, who was there when I arrived. Another good one was Bruni. Then just a bunch of people just placed there, who had no clue of what China was, no cultural preparation, nothing… Whereas, the French choose very experienced people.

LP: So if you had to make an analysis...

SA: Negative, negative. Even the approach, I mean. I can tell you that I’ve had many problems with the Embassy because of visas. I have sent thousands of Chinese technicians to Italy in my thirty years of work. When you sell machinery, the technicians would first come and see the factories, then, after the sale, they would check if they worked fine before they got shipped. So there was this come and go of technicians. The Embassy should have helped me because I was exporting Italian products to China. But they always caused troubles. This is very stupid, very negative. The problem is that some officers are good but they are just individuals.

For example, the only good Director of the Italian Cultural Centre was Barbara Alighiero. She did a lot, she created something. All the others have done nothing.
Unfortunately, she didn’t have enough money to do what she would have liked to do. Whereas, Spain has a huge Cultural Centre in Beijing.

We must give the Chinese the opportunity to come to study in Italy. The Chinese really want to go abroad. We make it hard for them, when we should do the opposite. Because when these people, after studying in Italy, will go back to China and become managers, they will still be attached to Italy. We must make them come here, become doctors, engineers, economists. We do the opposite and it’s desolating. There are few good people in a sea of mediocrity. That’s because the job postings are dirty in Italy. There are no serious postings. They don’t hire people because of their abilities but because of the people supporting them. So important positions are given to people who are worth nothing.

**LP: Do you see it so dark in the future as well?**

SA: Yes…I see for Italy a very dark future. We do not have a strategy for China. We don’t know what we want to do in China. We should promote our leading sectors. That’s what the Chinese want. I’ve seen Italian politicians going to China and say: “I want to have a discussion on this field”. That’s wrong. When you take an appointment with the Chinese, you must tell them exactly what you want. It’s not just chitchat. You must have a programme: “I’m coming to discuss these topics”. You make a list and they would make you meet the people specialized in the topics you wanted to discuss. I saw some delegations with anybodies, coming to…just take contacts…What contacts do you want if you have nothing to propose? We should organize and say: “All right, we are good in these fields, let’s push these ones and the others will benefit as well”. When Germany made a joint-venture for cars many other German entrepreuners arrived. Because a car factory assembles, but the different pieces are made elsewhere. That’s what they did.

I don’t have many hopes for our future cooperation with China, unless we make a radical change in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But our problem is that in Italy abilities are not awarded. When you say that you are going for an interview, people ask you: “Who is recommending you?” Otherwise, why would you go?

**LP: You left China last year, what happened?**

SA: I didn’t have a job anymore. They let me stay there two or three years but if you don’t have a job, you have no justification to stay there.

**LP: Did you close your company?**
SA: Yes, yes, I closed everything and there was no justification to remain in China. Anyways, I had decided to come back, also because I’m getting older and in China you don’t get the medical assistance you have in Italy. I prefer to stay here where I get better health care.

LP: What’s your relationship with China today?

SA: It’s not very good because I think the Chinese made some grave mistakes, especially concerning two big issues: one is the problem of the corruption within the Party. Corruption had spread within the Party and this might cause some troubles, because people do not trust them anymore. The second problem is pollution. This wild industrialization, which has been fruitful and has given jobs to many young people coming from the countryside, is however creating many problems for the atmosphere, for the ground water, for the fields. They use the water of the rivers to irrigate. The water is very polluted and it’s destroying the fields. This is a really grave problem! I don’t know how China will solve this problem, but it’s very urgent. Last winter Beijing was unliveable. There was some sort of mist. At least you can see the mist, but the pollution of the water is invisible and it affects food. The Chinese are worried about what they might eat today. We have some very good foodstuff that the Chinese middle class would buy if they knew that they were reliable.

LP: Yes, more and more people can afford the ‘made in Italy’ in China I’ve heard.

SA: Of course, but, again, in order to achieve things you must be organized. We still go there with a suitcase, hoping to sell stuff. There is no country system. We should invest in structures, in logistics in order to facilitate the export of our products. Milk for example. The Chinese buy it from New Zealand, from France. Whoever has money, doesn’t buy Chinese milk. They don’t trust it anymore. Same with pork, after what happened in Hanzhou last year in December…We could export our products, we have enough, but we need to be organized. You can’t simply improvise. You might have a good product but if you are not organized, you won’t sell it.

LP: Do you go back often?

SA: Maybe I’ll go back this summer, to meet some friends. I will just go for fun. I mean, I love China. I still feel very attached. Even when I criticize it, I don’t do it with a negative attitude. I realize that there are some problems and I wish that they could be solved. The Chinese deserve it. But there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Some people have become really wealthy. Some legally because they were smart. Others have become rich thanks to political corruption. Especially in the
real-estate field. If you want to make a new building you need buildable areas. In Italy we have had the same situation. All the Italian builders were somehow linked to the political parties in order to obtain contracts. Other people became rich thanks to their cleverness, readiness to seize the moment. When they liberalized the small companies, they bought them, worked on them. The Chinese work all the time, 24 hours a day. There are no Saturdays, nor Sundays. They constantly work. China is the only country where shops are opened 365 days a year and close at 22:00. Since I came back, I find very strange to see shops closing. Everything is shut down at 19:30! I find it really weird.

LP: I had the same sensation when I came back from China.

SA: Where have you been?

LP: I lived in Shanghai for three years.

SA: Shanghai, Shanghai is a wonderful city. The post-industrialism has already started there. When I first went to Pudong in the 80s, there were just dilapidated factories of the beginning of the 20th century. In ten years they made a new city. Pudong is totally new. They did it very quickly. If I think that to have a third lane in the highway around Rome we had to wait for the Giubileum! And they just finished it, ten years later…The Chinese in Beijing completed the third ring in ’93. From ’93 to today they have made the fourth, the fifth, the sixth and they are completing the seventh. Our timing is too slow. Just think about the SA-RC highway…The Mestre connection…these things are taking ages. We are an old country. The Chinese have really surpassed us in certain things.

For example, my daughter has just bought a house and had to pay €9000 to the notary public. When I sold my house in China, I went to an office, they told me how much I had to pay for taxes, I went back with the receipt and in 15 minutes they made the property change with the computer. And you pay only 650 yuan, €50! In the end, what’s the task of the notary public? He just goes to transcribe the deed in a government office. Why do you need him? Can’t you just go by yourself? And today we have computers, you just write it there and that’s it. What’s a notary public for? You save €9000 when you buy a house. In this the Chinese are better.

Broadband. In Beijing my phone works even when I’m three floors underground, in my garage, anywhere. In Italy, in some places, for example in Emilia Romagna region where I live, if I’m in the kitchen my phone has less signal, I need to go to the toilet to make a phone call! It’s crazy!
LP: So for certain things you think they are ahead of us, while for other things...

SA: For others they are behind of course. The medical assistance for example. Historically it is like this. There were no doctors in the countryside. Our tradition is good in this, we should safeguard it. My daughter just came back from the States and told me that there if you have money you get treated, otherwise you die. So Europe from this point of view is still the best geographical area to live in.

In China right now they have to deal with the problem of corruption that is really threatening the regime. They fear this a lot. The problem is: what would happen afterwards? Because many people think that introducing a democratic system could be better. I’m not so sure about it. Because democracy has its cons...for example it’s easy to create nationalist parties and this in China could be a problem. I’m worried about this. I hope in a very gradual change. I think that something like ten years ago they were making some experiments in this sense. You know, they officially have 9 parties in the constitution, included the Democratic Party. Ten years ago, these parties were recruiting. So I thought that maybe they were starting to give the possibilities to these parties to enter the institutions...like what they had done in the Soviet Union. But if China did like the Soviet Union, it would be a problem for everybody. In a globalized world, when they say ‘Chinia is not growing enough’, the American and the Japanese stockmarkets would drop immediately. We can’t afford this, today. It’s dangerous and it’s in everybody’s interest that things are done gradually.

Chinese economy is growing, people can find anything. However, there are many injustices. I was talking with some workers who told me that before, even though you were making less money, the work unit would give you a house. The house wasn’t as beautiful as houses today but everybody had one. Today young people must buy their own house and those who live in cities like Shanghai and is a waiter, or a cleaner, can’t buy one. Today, the cost of an apartment can’t be paid by a lifetime of work in cities like Beijing or Shanghai! People start complaining. People don’t agree. These issues must find a solution or people will explode. In the capitalistic world there are cycles of expansion and contraction. At the first contraction, crisis, the regime might fall.

In other things they have followed the American model. In the school system for example. Some private schools train you to pass the examination to access University, or to go study abroad. The Chinese dream to go study abroad. They go back to China after, but they say: “I’ve graduated in the States, France, Italy” they
feel more prestigious. It makes your work more prestigious. That’s why we should open to Chinese students. Especially the scientific faculties. Having a Chinese leadership who has studied in Italy would give us a lot of economical advantages.

LP: Great. Very good observation. Thanks a lot.