

WHEN WE WERE “CHINESE”

Aside from the excellent quality of the restaurants and the ability to boast one of the oldest civilizations on the planet, the Chinese people themselves are marvellous. They are considerably more “Chinese” in the north part of the country, while in the south they have become more Westernized. At the end of a month-long visit, however, the Chinese Communist Party seemed considerably more like the Chinese Capitalist Party. Somewhere between the Great Wall and the skyscrapers in Shanghai (which are higher, more modern and more numerous than those in New York) there is still a population that dreams of Mao Tse Tung: a people who is proud to work and eat every day. And yet the contrast between the richness of the cities and their suburbs (not to mention the suburban “agglomerates”, for lack of a better term, which house a vast majority of the cities’ population) is so sharp that it causes one to ponder what it is that creates such a social mystery in which the Medieval and the Future blend so harmoniously together. The lack of infrastructures, restrooms, running water, and all of those things which are our Western standards, and therefore are an integral part of our lives, are still elements that must be conquered by many Chinese. However one then visits the skyscraper in the Financial District of Shanghai and stumbles upon the futuristic computerized public toilet, which tests the limit of your human fantasy. Once “used” the guest has the possibility of choosing among various types of “washing” settings with water pressure and temperature options. Somewhere in between these two extremes is the China that we criticize, praise, hate, and love. One merely has to cross the river that separates downtown Shanghai from the other riverbank to leap from the future into neighborhoods which are home to buildings in such a state of destitution and decay that they are far worse in comparison to the slums of the European nomads. And yet one can perceive from the expressions on people’s faces not only the dignity with which the Chinese face these extreme conditions (both in Beijing and Shanghai) but also the reason behind this serenity: hope. We continue to state that our youth has everything and yet they are unsatisfied. However, we ourselves in general have considerably more than we had 50 years ago and yet we too continue to be unsatisfied. We believe that we have made many sacrifices to give our children a better life and, despite the fact that all of our progress is right before our eyes, we are unable to comprehend our dissatisfaction. We constantly celebrate our past (especially in our communities) and we band together in solidarity to tell, we know not whom, how generous we are. We have managed to inflate our “kindness” in the belief that hope could be an interchangeable feeling. The Chinese have in their eyes that same “light” that we Italians had after WWII. I remember that workers, ex-Army officers, and former soldiers were still waiting for the Welfare system to provide them with a home. While they waited they lived in very dignified shacks. The charitable spirit which united the more fortunate members of society with those who were still waiting was one of collected hope for a better future. Even those who left Italy, like those of you most likely reading this article, had that same hope in their eyes. We can still see it in yellowing photographs, in the documentaries made from footage of the time, with how much courage we faced the future which left behind a past to be forgotten and a present to be improved. These are the same ideals which allow the Chinese to not be jealous of their more fortunate fellowmen because, “Tomorrow, with my job, I can make it too!”. We waited on line for 4 hours at Mao Tse Tung’s Mausoleum in Beijing where, together along with 30,000 other Chinese we patiently waited our turn to see the Father of Modern China. Even the poorest citizens, upon entering the tomb, purchased a flower to thank Mao for having given them the opportunity to study, eat, and to be a part of the World Power that China has become. From hunger and misery, they have risen to sit at the table with all of the other world powers. They are a bit like we were, in a 20th Century which saw us trying to redeem ourselves, and then were able to sit at this table after 70 years. What followed was a period of class struggles, scandals, easy riches, well-being and the difficulty of trying to maintain all of the things that were conquered. Political corruption has already infected the new generations and we can see this in young Italians, who are considerably better educated than those who merely had hope instead of a college degree. This is further evidenced by the desire to be

a protagonist at all costs, which places more emphasis on personal image rather than substance of character. One can also see this in the desire to “get-rich-quick”, without rules and punishment, which is lived (as the Holy Father also says) in the credo of moral relativism. It is the necessity to “belong” and to possess a title in order to attain credibility in a context which is both cynical and indifferent. And yet we were once like the Chinese! We made our mark upon the 20th Century by inventing the most sophisticated factory in the world: the Ferrari Factory! The founders of our democracy used to take the public city bus to reach the Parliament building. Today, we pay our politicians 15 times more than we pay our researchers. And then we wonder why our children all aspire to become politicians...I, of all people, found “La Dolce Vita” in China and was an active participant! When I was a youth in Rome, I could not even conceive of going to the Via Veneto because I was from San Giovanni, a more middle-class neighborhood, and truly believed that only the wealthy and the Americans could afford to spend 100 Lire for an espresso, while the bar below my home clearly made the better coffee at 20 Lire. I never looked with disdain upon those folks who lived in the barracks, waiting for their welfare housing in the 50s nor did I look upon the wealthy with hate because they could spend my family’s monthly salary in one evening. I lived with the hope that one day, I too could do the same. When finally I was able to do the same in Beijing and Shanghai, the Chinese thanked me and never even asked for tips because their dignity and pride are the motivations behind their jobs. It is with the hope that they too will be successful that they looked upon me with respect and in recognition of the valuable currency which I brought with me. In China, politics is rarely spoken about and yet the country grows at least 10 times faster than we can hope to grow. Their springboard is the hope they have of a better future based on respect for one’s fellowman and for the common good of the community and the State. Where there is much Good, there is also Evil, and China is no exception to this rule. We read every day of the punishments inflicted upon those who make mistakes and our press is always hasty in defining those punishments too severe and in violation of one’s civil liberties. Yet our culture is the true added value in a territory, quite insignificant when compared to the vastness of China, that has succeeded in teaching the world the meaning of Life. In order to be successful, one must turn to the values which rule our societies. In China, I rediscovered that same interest for working that prompted us Italians, like the Chinese, to scatter ourselves across the globe. The more we continued to work, like the Chinese, the richer we became. Today, it is the politicians who explain every night on television to those who live in social conditions far worse than those observed in China, why we have such great difficulty competing with the Chinese.