Daily Life in Revolutionary China

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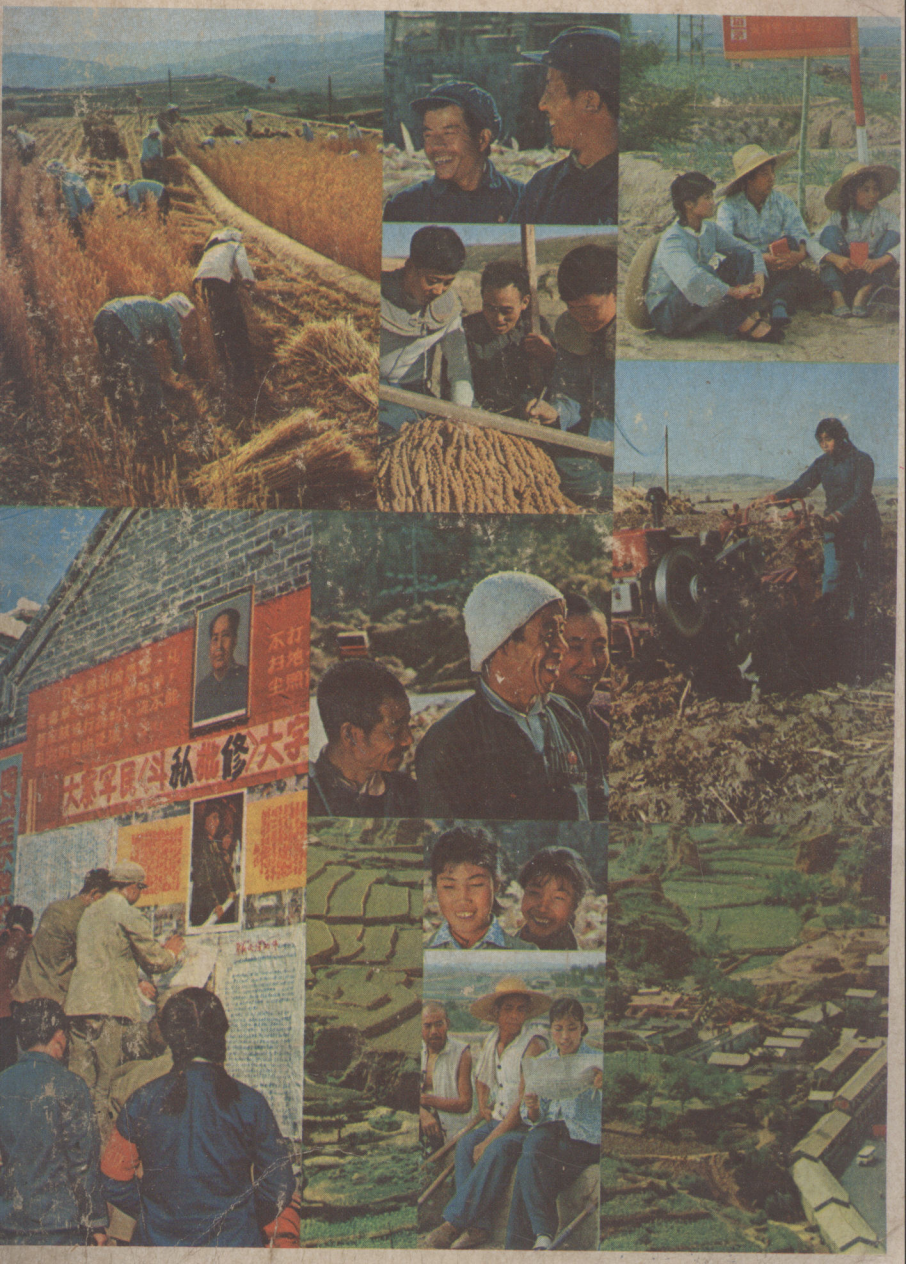

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In order to prepare this volume for publication as rapidly as possible, the work of translating was divided among the following six people: Kathy Brown, Alfred Ehrenfeld, Lynn Garafola, Bobbye Ortiz, Malcolm Reid, and Jane Werner. The translation as a whole was then reviewed by Alfred Ehrenfeld and Frank Kehl, and Professor Kehl also checked the translation of Chinese names, terms, slogans, etc. The publisher wishes to thank all of the above for their dispatch and cooperation, without which the speedy realization of this project would have been impossible.

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Introduction to China

I took the Paris-Shanghai plane on October 26, 1970, at 1:30 P.M. Destination Peking. Until I actually boarded the Air France DC-8, I felt as though I was leaving for Mars. But everything went smoothly. The plane took off for Shanghai via Athens, Cairo, and Karachi. Four hours after leaving Karachi the jet plunged into the dawn we had been pursuing, and I experienced a first, rather violent, emotion as I watched the chestnut- and ochre-colored desert regions of southwest China. The giant stretched out below us looked available, inviting, accessible at last. Feeling the need to unburden myself, I approached the Chinese diplomat who had been travelling with us from Paris. I sat down beside him, nodded toward the window, and said: "Do you know, my husband and I are the first Communists to return to China after a ten-year freeze in relations, or should I call it a ten-year split . . ." "You are certainly good friends of China," he answered briefly, following a typically Chinese dialectical procedure which consists less in giving an answer than in summing up, in jumping two or three intermediate conversational steps so as to reach an immediate conclusion.

I recall other moments of equally powerful emotion. I had a similar experience as a young woman in Brest Litovsk when I first met a Soviet army soldier who had entered the train at the border to collect our passports. We had hardly emerged from the underground resistance struggle and the soldier represented victorious Communism, "hard as steel," "pure as a diamond." There are many today who say that Communism with a "C" can be found here, in the heart of Asia, an all-powerful safeguard against the disillusionments, temporizations, and stagnation of the struggle in the West.

But aren't we still haunted by Prague, by the vise-like grip of the two world powers, by the split in the workers' movement, by the great theoretical and political dispute which concerns not only Moscow and Peking but the struggle for socialism everywhere?

I don't think that we should cling to the Chinese experience as blindly as we did to that of the USSR in the fifties, or transfer to China the hopes placed earlier in the Soviet Union. One historical error cannot be redeemed with another. One and one is still two. We must do our utmost to make a serious study of the vast subject which is Mao Tse-tung's China. Will I succeed?

In the plane the sixteen Chinese with whom we had been travelling from Paris wake, converse rapidly with one another, are visibly happy: they are *home.* During the flight they maintained a kind of astonished silence toward the French stewardesses. They refused the offers of liquor, rarely left their seats, and spoke only when absolutely necessary. Now, however, they tell us that they have come from Africa, Algeria, Congo-Brazzaville, that they are technical workers assisting the underdeveloped nations. They live like the workers in those countries. They get the same pay, and no distinction is made between engineers and unskilled laborers, for the division of labor into higher and lower grades has been abolished in China and they act abroad as they would in their own country. It would be difficult, in fact, to distinguish in this group between the Arabic-speaking chauffeur working in Algeria and the diplomat who heads a delegation in Paris. Their relations show no trace of the hierarchical attitude which, in the West, is considered the hallmark of success and brandished like a sign. During the ten-hour flight I could observe them closely. It was my first direct experience of an unknown world.

But now I have forgotten these travel companions and concentrate on discovering what I can about China from an altitude of 33,000 feet. I am experiencing a mixed and contradictory sensation of profound agitation and overwhelming joy. My return to China after sixteen years—from September-October 1954 until today, October 26, 1970—is due less to personal merit than to a fortuitous set of circumstances.

First (personal) prologue to China

The first question a Chinese asks you when you meet him abroad is: "Have you visited China?" If the answer is affirmative the conversation becomes less constrained simply because he knows that your attitude toward a world as complex as China is not merely bookish or theoretical but the result of a practical experience, however modest. "If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must bite into it," says Mao. I had had a taste of China in 1954, but it was only later that I fully understood how important that experience had been for me. My trip to China (forty-five days, from Mukden to Shanghai) had set off a powerful ferment within me. For many months after my return I was unable to adjust to my accustomed life. I was suffering from "China sickness." I don't think this ever happened to me in any other country, except for much more marginal or personal reasons. If I had been asked to work in China at that time, when I was twenty-five, I would have accepted. But political life took me elsewhere. A party activist cannot devote herself to Sinology but must remain faithful to certain political options. The turmoil within me resulted from what was in fact a political choice. During my 1954 trip I had felt in a confused way that China would eventually give a powerful impulse to the world revolution, and that its strategy would have an impact on the entire movement. Historically, the implantation of Marxism-Leninism in this country did not merely represent one more socialist revolution in a vast country, which then numbered 600 million inhabitants, but also the revolution of an autonomous, highly developed, five-thousand-year-old civilization. It marked the birth of a global force with an impact similar to that attributed to Greek or Roman civilization in centuries past. But with a difference—this was the civilization of socialism.

On this trip I have brought with me the articles I wrote in 1954. They are extremely enthusiastic. Today there is nothing I would change in what was then a basic intuition on my part. I will quote them very briefly:

> China, for the colonizers, adventurers, and wives of Western capitalists, exemplified the vast gap between their own high degree of hu-

> manity and the *low degree of humanity of the coolie, the cheapest human flesh in the world along with that of the blacks.* . . . But it is precisely this land, where people were treated as dirt, that produced the movement of revolt against English, French, German, and American colonialism and gave the "white man" his first taste of defeat. The "white man" resorted in vain to his tanks, aircraft carriers, and bombers. The Chinese drove him out, along with his gambling houses, brothels, opium dens, spies, and courtesans. He is now raving in America and Britain, asserting that China has fallen into the hands of bloodthirsty, lawless revolutionaries. He advocates a war for the liberation of China so that it may again have the "freedom" to enjoy brothels, opium dens, gambling houses, and epidemics. So that the world may be delivered from the "Yellow Peril." The Chinese Revolution represents the historical defeat of imperialism.

I understand now that for the generation which had come out of the underground resistance, the Chinese Revolution was also the personal experience of an earlier October. As Mao advanced toward Shanghai, Chiang Kai-shek, disguised as a sailor and protected by the Americans, abandoned his yellow villa and fled by junk on the Hwang-Po toward Formosa. The guerrillas fought with weapons captured from the enemy. We in the Western European countries who were forced to surrender our weapons were psychologically redeemed by the Chinese. China was not affected by the division of the world into spheres of influence at the Yalta Conference; more precisely, China had already disrupted the logic of blocs. If one wishes to find a constant in Chinese policy since this period, it will be found in the stubborn, uncompromising refusal to become subordinated to either bloc. Mao against Stalin, that advocate of the united front with Chiang Kai-shek until the eve of defeat. Stalin against Mao, whom he regarded as a mere "rebellious peasant chief."

When I visited China in 1954 there was no indication of future developments. I recall the platform on Tien An Men square in Peking on October 1, on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of Liberation. Surrounded by a thousand other guests, I saw Mao Tse-tung come forward with Khrushchev, then secretary of the Russian Communist Party. The Soviet Union and China were on excellent terms.

Mao and Khrushchev stood side by side as they saluted the red masses of Peking. They waved their caps at the schoolchildren who were launching hundreds of kites, miniature airplanes which rose like swallows, covering the sky with red dots. I saw Mao again in the reception room of the Great Hall of the People. Khrushchev was still at his side, following him wherever he went. None of us at the time paid any particular attention to Khrushchev, and yet within hardly more than two years he would make his secret report to the Twentieth Congress. Who would have thought that Khrushchev, the head of the great friendly socialist nation, would be speaking of a "Yellow Peril"?

Mao made an unexpected appearance at the Peking hotel reception. The day before yesterday I reread the following memo in my appointment book: "This is a wonderful moment . . . Chairman Mao arrived unannounced through a side door, dressed modestly in his everyday gray . . . He was greeted affectionately in every imaginable language. He responded by raising his glass and toasting his guests . . . Seen at close range, his face seemed luminous: smooth skin, no wrinkles, a pervasive light irony."

Chou En-lai, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, had approached our delegation (we were seven delegates from the union of Italian women—Communists, Socialists, Catholics) and asked me whether we were enjoying our trip. After a short speech to the delegations attending the reception, he had again gently approached us, raised his glass, and said: "To the health of Italy." (Who would have thought that it would take Italy sixteen more years to establish diplomatic relations with Peking?) I had already met Chou En-lai and his wonderful co-worker Kung Peng (my only Chinese woman friend, who died in Peking just a month ago) in Geneva in the spring of 1954, during the conference on Indochina at which China made its official comeback on the stage of history.

Other links have been established between China and myself. After October 1956, I asked Curzio Malaparte to take a trip to China for *Vie Nuove*, the Italian Communist Party weekly which I then edited. I remember visiting Malaparte in his Capri villa, which reminds one of a red heron wading into the sea. During his trip, already stricken with cancer, he had become hopelessly ill. He had been hospitalized and attended for three months by Peking doc-

tors. Returning to Italy shortly before his death, he had willed his villa to China: he wanted it to become a study center for Chinese intellectuals. His last words on leaving China were: "I love the Chinese." He said this in the Chinese he had learned in Peking: *Wo ai chungkuo jen.* But to the government authorities China was not a "legal entity" and could not receive a bequest. The villa is still there, solitary, as if waiting.

Change of scenery. Paris 1964. General de Gaulle's press conference in the Elysée Palace. When the general announced the diplomatic recognition of China, I was in the Salle des Fêtes, seated in the midst of a thousand journalists who were awaiting the historic event. I was correspondent for *Unità.* Whereas for the others this announcement was no more than a simple news item to be recorded and transmitted, I felt carried away listening to de Gaulle's words in the historic context of vast China's triumphant socialism. I fixed my eyes on my notebook. From now on there would be either silence or polemics between us. And here this bourgeois general was throwing *our China* in our faces!

Second (less personal) prologue to China

> . . . in dealing with questions of party history we should lay the stress not on the responsibility of certain individual comrades but on the analysis of the circumstances in which the errors were committed, on the content of the errors and on their social, historical and ideological roots . . .
>
> —Mao Tse-tung, *Our Study and the Current Situation*

I am flying to China. This sixteen-year absence is minute in terms of the Chinese way of measuring time, yet it represents an immense span of years and experiences. One of its most traumatic events was the calculated split with China, which began in 1960 with the recall of Soviet technicians, and continued with the campaign to "excommunicate" China and the unleashing of anti-Chinese propaganda. The last *Unità* correspondent had left China in 1961.

Many of us (as the storm grew more violent) continued to be-

lieve in China's immense revolutionary vitality. Not intellectually or through a privileged intuition, or because we took no stock in Reuters, the Associated Press, and Tass. But simply because in our lives as political activists there were two fixed elements: the October Revolution and the Chinese Revolution. This conviction was shared by many party members. It was certainly not the Soviet Union's unilateral cancellation of its contracts with China, which caused very serious difficulties for the Chinese economy, that made us differ. Nor was it the dramatic Tenth Congress of the Italian Communist Party (CPI) in December 1962, where we participated officially in the consummation of what one Communist leader likened to "the schism between the Church of Rome and the Church of Byzantium, one which may last just as long"—for there the 1,020 delegates rose and vigorously applauded the speech by the Chinese delegate, Chao Yi-ming. I think that in this manner we, like thousands of others, demonstrated our rejection of the condemnation.

Little more than a year later Palmiro Togliatti, then head of the Italian Communist Party, while not sharing the views of the Chinese, became concerned over the widening split and its repercussions within the workers' movement. He advocated a more flexible attitude toward China, which he set forth in his famous article, "The Chinese Challenge." Certain French Communists like Jeannette Vermeersch (wife of Maurice Thorez, head of the French Communist Party), however, regarded this as a clearly pro-Chinese gesture by the Italian Communists. She denounced it at the Seventeenth Congress of the French Communist Party (CPF), and called the Communist student periodical, *Clarté,* to account for wishing to reprint the article: "This publication should not be called 'Clarity' but confusion," she said ominously.

I had direct evidence of the fact that Togliatti, although profoundly hostile to the Chinese strategy, experienced moments of profound uncertainty at the end of his life. I had gone to see him at his home in Rome after the Seventeenth Congress of the CPF. He talked about his article on China, and then, as though addressing a much more important audience, he said: "The discussion within the international workers' movement has been seriously undermined by the split with the Chinese leaders. It has become impov-

erished and onesided, almost lifeless." He was very animated, and he voiced a political esteem for the Chinese which contrasted sharply with Khrushchev's vulgarity at that time.

Togliatti wanted to gain time and initiate a discussion of the Chinese theses so as to refute them theoretically and, above all, delay the convocation of a world congress of Communist parties, which Khrushchev wanted to turn into a tribunal that would excommunicate China. As one commentator explained: "A new world congress following those of 1957 and 1960 would find us with positions opposed to those of the Soviet comrades." *

Togliatti's last act was to take a trip "under the sign of uncertainty." Although ill and tired, he went to Moscow in August 1964 to urge Khrushchev to abandon his plan to "excommunicate" China, a plan which the CPI regarded as a mistake. Togliatti died in Yalta without having completed his mission and without even having met Khrushchev. ("The fact that he was not able to meet with Khrushchev made him worry even more; it seemed as if he viewed this as the symptom of an ambiguous situation," to quote the same commentator.) Expressing his profound misgivings about the validity of the policy of split, he refused to restore the lines that he had deleted in the document known as the *Yalta Testament.* Through one of those contradictions which keep recurring in the history of the workers' movement, this policy had found proponents at the Tenth Congress, people who were caught up in the atmosphere of subordination to Khrushchev's strategy. For the first time Togliatti clearly expressed his disapproval of Khrushchev's attack on China, declaring that "The workers' movement never understood why the Soviet technicians were recalled from China." It is well known that when Luigi Longo, who was to head the CPI after Togliatti's death, went to Moscow, he decided to publish the *Yalta Testament*: "This is the moment to publish it, we must make it public at once." This act, which disregarded Soviet opposition (Khrushchev and Brezhnev), was an important step in the development of autonomous policies within the international movement, a development which did not always proceed in linear fashion, but which eventually resulted in the condemnation of the Prague inva-

* A. Natta, *Ore di Yalta* (Rome: Editore Riuniti, 1970).

sion, and in the successive positions adopted by Enrico Berlinguer at the preparatory meetings for the congress of Communist parties and during the congress itself. The CPI leadership, moreover, wrote to Longo on August 18, 1964, while he was still in Yalta: "The document left by Togliatti clearly confirms the positions of our party concerning the current situation in the international Communist movement."

Given this background, it is perhaps easier to understand why in March 1966 the chief of *Unità*, Mario Alicata, asked me to take an official letter to the Chinese embassy in Paris, requesting permission for one of our correspondents to go to China to gather "first-hand information concerning Chinese life and the activities of the party." In those days I could not even gain admission to the embassy, which was located on the Boulevard Bineau. When I telephoned I was asked to spell my complicated name and that of my newspaper, and was finally asked: "What is *Unità?* Is it a Soviet publication?" "No, Italian Communist." "Did you say American?" And the like. The comrades stationed at the embassy gate would not let me enter. The diplomats refused to receive me, declaring that relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the Italian Communist Party had been broken off at the Tenth Congress. The Chinese rejected all my initiatives with the keen yet subtle irony they reserved for us.

I persevered, however, with "Chinese patience" until the day when I was told that since I was a journalist and since a newspaper was involved, I could present my letter to the Hsinhua News Agency—New China News Agency—which was also located on the Boulevard Bineau. This letter was never answered, although I personally called for an answer every two weeks. I was compensated, however, by the friendship I struck up with the comrades at the Hsinhua Agency—Communists always manage to find a common language. These "inscrutable Chinese," as they were called by the Parisian press, soon became my cordial and highly intelligent comrades who eventually enlightened me a little on the events of the Cultural Revolution. This was the period when *France-Soir* ran such huge headlines as "China in Chaos" or "Mao Doomed?", and *Le Figaro*—I remember this well—proclaimed: "Maoism Is Disintegrating." The comrade journalists of the Chinese agency sent me

their newsletter regularly and even visited me at my home early in 1968. I was then about to leave Paris for Italy. There was no doubt in my mind that my "mission" for *Unità* had failed, but my agency comrades told me not to lose hope. We parted good friends. I was starting out on another life but would not forget them. They understood and wished me well. My free subscription to Hsinhua was transferred to my Rome address. We did not meet again until January 1970 when, at my request, my friend Charles Bettelheim introduced me to the same ambassador who had refused to receive me in 1967. The Chinese embassy was no longer in Neuilly. It was again housed in the handsome buildings on Avenue George V from which the Taiwan "representatives" had been expelled.

I never directly broached the subject of the China trip to the ambassador during this meeting, although he was quite aware of it. I adapted myself to his circuitous conversational ways and to his oblique questions, which led me into speaking of India, which I had visited the previous year, and of Europe, with which I had been concerned for years. Eventually I realized that he wanted to "understand" me. He was evaluating neither India, Europe, nor Japan (which he knew quite well), but me, my perspicacity, my political position. Everything was nuance and allusion. It is through this diplomat that I began to realize the difficulty of adapting our way of reasoning and understanding things (which is related to Cartesian rationalism) to the more complex and subtle way of the Chinese (which values the understanding of every nuance and allusion rather than our "logic of reasoning" which is frequently mere syllogistics).

The world was now contained within that drawing room, furnished with yellow sofas. An excellent interpreter translated from the French. The hours passed without the ambassador ever looking at his watch, and soon I was no longer aware of being surrounded by Paris and the harsh Western world. I was immersed in a beloved and distant China which beckoned dimly through the political finesse of this Communist diplomat. One of the outrageous things now being said about the Chinese is that they would like to split the Communist parties. Nothing is further from the truth. The Chinese, concrete in outlook, have been interested essentially in establishing a dialogue with those in the Western Communist parties

who can be regarded as "friends of China." They want to break through the walls of distrust that have been raised between us, but without ever embarrassing anyone.

I met the ambassador only three times. He was then negotiating Italy's diplomatic recognition of China with Gardini, the Italian ambassador in Paris. (These negotiations, by the way, were successful.) On second thought it seems as if I met him innumerable times—a long series of meetings, reflections, and thoughts which, without my being aware of it, enabled me to come to grips with China as I began to see things in their true light. I informed the party of these meetings.

Then the Chinese launched their satellite on April 24, 1970. The management of *Unità* (headed now by Pajetta) published an article, written by Alberto Jacoviello, praising China's feat. *Le Monde* and the world press quoted it at length, offering various interpretations of our new attitude toward China. For the first time it seemed to me that the ambassador was really interested in us. "Who wrote the article?" he asked me. "My husband," I answered, blushing, and added: "Would you like to meet him?" "With pleasure," came the answer, "as soon as possible."

He was clearly familiar with a polemical article Alberto had written for the "free forum" of *Le Monde* in answer to the Soviet journalist Dadianze, who had called for a kind of Holy Alliance against the "Yellow Peril." I then realized that the Chinese diplomats and party leaders concerned with international affairs read everything dealing with other Communist parties. They were minutely informed about our public documents, our published accounts of Central Committee discussions, and knew of every line in *Unità* dealing with China.

After the regional electoral campaign, my husband and I went to Paris. The ambassador and the press attaché had invited us to lunch at the ambassador's residence on the Boulevard Bineau. This was in June. The heat was stifling, and the humid and close air of Paris was charged with dust. The ambassador had a very long conversation with my husband, an extraordinary political conversation ranging over Europe, Germany, the socialist camp, the Mediterranean, and the Near East. Alberto then officially requested a visa for *Unità*. The ambassador appeared in agreement but replied that

this was a delicate matter that must be viewed in the context of the relations between the two parties.

In August, while I was unexpectedly detained in parliament as the honorable Colombo presented the cabinet that had emerged from successive crises, I received a note from the ambassador ("Dear Madam, dear Sir . . .") informing us that he wished to see us as soon as possible about an urgent message. I called the embassy in Paris to find out whether it was really urgent, especially since my husband was away on vacation. The interpreter made some inquiries and said yes, it was *urgent*. I consulted with the party leaders and took a plane on the morning of August 12, promising to be back that very evening. It never occurred to me that the visa might be granted. As always, the ambassador questioned me on my latest trips to Hong Kong, Japan, Ceylon. He let me talk at length, paying close attention, as though this were the principal object of our meeting. Finally he told me: "Peking informs me that the visas for you and your husband have been granted. These visas are granted to two friends of China. We realize, of course, that you are political activists. But you are not a party delegation, you have no party messages to communicate, and you are not official correspondents. On your return—and only on your return—you will be free to publish whatever and wherever you wish. You will be able to see anything you desire in China. You will be able to establish your own itinerary and stay wherever you wish for as long as you deem necessary. You are expected as soon as possible. In Peking you will be received by the tourist agency, for you will be the guests of neither the party nor the government. You are two friends of China, although your political allegiance is well known. The tourist agency will organize your trip, as it does for all foreigners."

"This is wonderful," I said. "This is a happy day." But I added immediately: "And what are we to do if there are difficulties?" The ambassador looked at me as though he were suddenly very far away. Then he said, weighing every word: "Well, in that case we will postpone the trip until more auspicious times."

My husband and I wanted to leave at once, but things were not that simple. After so many years of polemics, a trip to China by a Communist deputy and by the chief of the foreign desk of *Unità* was an important political event that raised many problems. The