

Between "Humanistic Capitalism" and "Shared Prosperity".

A talk with Brunello Cucinelli

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In a world that seems to be going back to the rhetoric of ideological blocs, characteristic of the past century, talking to Brunello Cucinelli is a therapeutic experience, capable of re-aligning expectations, even the most cautious, to a confidence in the future that draws from a profound vision of the dialogue between western and eastern civilisations. Not at all an easy exercise these days. When listening to him, one instinctively thinks of a *chengyu* whose origins are lost in the mists of time: *tianxia yijia* (天下一家). The idiomatic expression, a product of ancient Chinese folk wisdom, has been a reminder for centuries that "under the sky", i.e. throughout the world, there is "one single family". As if to say that mankind is one and only one, and that any divisive striving is doomed to failure: four simple characters that sum up a worldview often hampered by an anxiety-ridden reading of the present. There is no doubt that these are the same coordinates guiding Brunello's philosophy, who in the marvellous park of Solomeo, the Umbrian village of cashmere and harmony, splendidly restored and brought back to life thanks to the economy of beauty, has erected the Monument to the Dignity of Man: a travertine exedra surmounted by five arches above which the words "Tribute to the Dignity of Man" are inscribed in bronze letters, and below each arch the names of the five continents are carved. A work built in the manner of the ancients, based on the rules of Vitruvius, Palladio and Sebastiano Serlio. Nor is it the only sculpture in the small medieval hamlet that suggests an ideal bridge to classical Chinese thought. Strolling through the centre of Solomeo, the encounter between the two civilisations takes plastic form in the marble busts of Plato and Confucius, who seem to converse with each other, inspiring the idea that the values that bring them closer are more relevant than those that drive them apart.

Brunello Cucinelli was born in 1953 into a family of farmers in Umbria. "As a child I lived with my grandfather, without electricity or running water, running every day in the fields, looking after the farm animals and watching the stars at night with my family". Having moved with his family to the city at the age of 15, having experienced first-hand the humiliations his father suffered while working in the factory, he began to conceive the idea of fighting for "the moral and economic dignity of man". During the university time, with \$550, he established the eponymous brand, and with an original cashmere dyeing technique applied to women's clothing he breathed new life into a market where, at the time, the colours used were only almost exclusively classic. Today, the total capitalisation value of the company, which was listed on the Milan Stock Exchange ten years ago, is around 3.5 billion euros.

Passionate about philosophy, he has always believed in humanism, finding comfort and inspiration in the greats of the past, from Dante to Galileo, who applied it to spirituality and science. Brunello felt the need to place the dignity of man and care for Creation at the heart of his industrial work, conceiving an idea, that of humanistic capitalism, which permeates every aspect of his entrepreneurial vision. And he translated a dream into reality. The dream of Solomeo. Beginning in 1982, he began the restoration of the village, where he established a Forum of the Arts dedicated to culture, opened a School of Arts and Crafts, and adapted old factories just outside the village so that the arts that had existed there for centuries, those of knitwear, tailoring, and the processing and colouring of cloth, could once again flourish.

If it is clear that Brunello's cultural references are rooted in the Italian Renaissance, in the thought of St Francis and St Benedict and in Hellenism, what makes his project even more fascinating and universal is his declared love for Confucianism. He told this story himself in a recent interview published in the Chinese edition of Tatler magazine, the most authoritative voice of British and global elegance, to which he revealed that his company's management principles are explicitly based on Master Kong's thinking. "Nobody clocks in or out, there are long breaks and, regardless of tenure, you can buy the company's products at cost price. Employees' salaries are 20 per cent higher than in the industry. E-mails or telephone calls after 5.30 p.m. are prohibited. One phone call only in case of real need. All people must have more time for family and rest, to cultivate their interests and passions, only then can they develop more creativity the day after at work". One associates this vision with the Xi Jinping government's condemnation of the oppressive "996 model" work culture, which imposes a twelve-hour workday for six days a week, especially in Chinese tech companies. A practice irreconcilable with the values of *gongtong fuyu* (共同富裕), "shared prosperity", an essential element of Chinese socialism, already present in the political debate since the 1950s and taken up by Xi at the 10th meeting of the Central Committee for Finance and Economy in 2021.

But it is above all a letter that Brunello wrote in May 2020, immediately after the lifting of the lockdown and upon the first tentative return to a new normality, that proves the ideal thread linking "humanistic capitalism" and "shared prosperity". Here is a passage from *Lettera di un nonno nel giorno natale della vita nuova* (Letter from a Grandfather on the first day of a new life):

My dear grandchildren, you will understand that we must distance ourselves from any wealth that is not earned with honesty, and that wealth itself is nothing if it is not also for others. ■

INTERVIEW / Brunello Cucinelli

Executive Chairman and Creative Director – Brunello Cucinelli SpA

What was Brunello Cucinelli's first Chinese experience?

The Franciscan monk Giovanni da Pian del Carpine was born just five kilometres from my house, in the late 12th century, and in 1244 he decided to go to Karakorum. I was a boy when I discovered his story. I have always been a lover of history and Franciscanism. Brother John had heard about these distant lands, where, according to the chronicles of the time, half men and half dragons lived. Curiosity about a different culture moved him, and this immediately bewitched me. It took him two years to reach Mongolia and two years to return, on foot.

My first trip to China dates back to 1989 and the reasons were partly work-related, partly cultural. I brought with me the expectations of a man in love with history, a man who lives as an Italian but has always thought as a Greek. Even today, reflecting on what is happening in the world, I am reminded of Thucydides and his account of the twenty-seven years of the Peloponnesian War. How wonderful are the words of the Greek historian when he tells of Pericles. Right when his consensus begins to wane, Pericles himself says: "The empire is like a tyranny". Or even earlier, when in the 6th century BC, the Athenians asked the wise Solon to stay in power longer, as he was a good ruler, and he replied: "No, because I might turn into a tyrant. Remember, O my esteemed Athenians, from the throne of a tyrant, no one comes down alive".

China immediately revealed to me the greatness of its people and the weight of the immense and tangible legacy of its Celestial Empire. Confucius was born in China in the same 6th century B.C., in the era of Solon and Cyrus the Great, the man who enlightened mankind for sixty years; and the splendour of Confucius' thought began to radiate to the other half of the known world.

Confucius, Plato, Pericles, Solon and Cyrus influenced the cultural roots of East and West more than anyone else. As a young man, I felt I was growing up with their words. If you think about what they said, you can intimately perceive just how eternal their thinking is. In my home, among many others, I have a large bust of Cyrus, but the force that the discovery of China and its thought exerted on me was immense. Perhaps today, unintentionally, I feel even closer to Confucius and his vision than I do to that of Plato.

In recent years, when talking about China, the name of the Greek historian is mostly associated with the theory of the "Thucydides trap", an expression coined by the US political scientist Graham Allison in an article published in the Financial Times in 2012. The theory holds that political tensions for supremacy between the emerging power in the international system and the declining power inevitably lead to war. Just as the Athenian historian and military man of the classical age assumed that the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta had been caused by Spartan fear of growing Athenian territorial hegemony, the clash between the US and China seems inescapable in the third millennium.

I have faith in humanity. St Francis of Assisi went to the Sultan of Egypt in 1219. The Christian friar and the grandson of the great Saladin and lord of Egypt became friends. The Sultan was the most powerful man and for Francis also the potentially most dangerous man. Two worlds theoretically distant, but capable of meeting, of finding a synthesis. Twenty years later, it was Frederick II who, as soon as he was elected Christian emperor, went to the Sultan and became his friend to the point that in 1229, together they signed the first pact for the pacific demilitarisation of Jerusalem that we know of. I believe this is also true today: if you have great respect for the cultures of others in all their facets, from language to religion to philosophy, peace is possible. Instead, we are often inclined to place the alleged supremacy of our own culture before others. We have to accept that the 19th century was Europe's century, the 20th century America's, and that this is China's century. Only those who do not want to know, understand and empathise with Chinese culture might truly have a problem. I often say this to the Chinese staff I work with: you are the masters of humanity for this century, be enlightened.

Let's go back to that first trip in 1989. Was it a pure pleasure trip or was it the entrepreneur travelling in search of inspiration and opportunity?

I went as an entrepreneur, a small businessman who first stopped in Hong Kong and then moved to mainland China. Of Hong Kong, I still remember the feeling of being projected into the future. During a meeting, two people had their first mobile phone on the table, something I had never seen before. At lunch, I was eating with a person who kept on making calls. I remember my astonishment and his thoughtfulness: "I'm sure you will have the same before long". We would talk honestly, he would tell me about production, about what they were doing. It was a very frank and open way of doing business. I decided to take a two or three-day holiday in Guilin and then visit Beijing for a few days, together with my Japanese partner at the time. We travelled with the spirit of someone who is ready to discover new opportunities. From Beijing, we moved north to Mongolia to see the world's finest cashmere. I like to think that this inclination of thought towards China, more philosophical if you like, finds material correspondence in the product: if the fascination for ideas brought me to China with my heart, cashmere has then tied me in a double bond to this world.

Those who take a close look at things in China cannot help but perceive an ideal value juxtaposition between the cornerstones of Humanistic Capitalism, outlined in October at the G20 summit in front of the world's greats, and certain "shared welfare" policies implemented to counter economic and social inequalities in China.

I often hear President Xi say in his speeches: "We want prosperity for our people and harmony for human beings". China has defeated hunger in a country where less than a hundred years ago there were famines and enormous hardships. We no longer reason with the yardstick of someone who has suffered hunger and still has to deal with an immense population and land. It is a different feeling, which has a national dimension but also an intimate one, present in every individual. A few nights ago I hosted five Buddhist monks for dinner. Charming people. I was struck by one of their statements: "Let us eat a fair amount so that there may be enough left for all mankind". Simple and powerful. It agrees perfectly with a vision I have always sought. There was a beautiful full moon. At one point in the evening, one of them looked at the moon and said to me: "There are three things you cannot hide for long: the sun, the moon and the truth". Moreover, it is the vision of time and the orientation to the long term that wins me over. We here at Solomeo also tend towards a long-term conception of planning and this year we enter our eleventh five-year plan.

I believe I have seen something in the square of Solomeo that is unique in Italy, if not in the world: on either side of the entrance to one of the marvellously restored medieval buildings in this village of the spirit, there is a marble bust of Confucius and one of Plato. Under that of Confucius, a plaque, also made of marble, reads "I invent nothing new. I have faith in the ancients and I love them", while under Plato's the following is written: "The soul of man is immortal and incorruptible". They seem to converse. A connection we perhaps desperately need these days.

Sure. I think so, too. And we have placed Confucius on the right when looking at the castle, not by chance, to emphasise that reflection on human nature was born in China with Confucius, about a century earlier than in Greece.

I wonder if this strong inclination towards China and its culture has ever encountered obstacles or resistance. It is incontrovertible that the fashion industry, and in particular its absolute luxury segment, has enjoyed the exponential growth of Chinese consumers in terms of spending power over the last two decades. But it is equally true that there have also been critical issues on the production and commercial side. I am thinking of the problems related to the respect of intellectual property rights, of the market control with 'Italian sounding' products, or, to come to the present day, of the growing competition from local companies with increasingly higher quality potential, represented by the 'China chic' phenomenon, which is literally all the rage among the *linglinghou*, those born after 2000.

Distrust is an attitude I have also seen in the past towards other cultures, other nationalities. Towards the end of the 1990s, it happened with Russian customers, who were often forced to pay 30 per cent in advance, even after many years of client or partnership relations. What we are saying here is noble, but often the popular, superficial myths about China concern only a few clichés. One is under the illusion that this dimension is sufficient to describe a complex reality, a history thousands of years long, one of the cradles of human civilisation. I am not interested in this simplistic thinking. Instead, I find points of contact with the deepest values of our culture. Perhaps, when we take a closer look at ourselves, we discover that we are more alike than we imagine. The value of family and the ambition for great projects, those that remain in the ages, unite us. Is this not the same view as Emperor Hadrian when he said, "We build for eternity"?

Because we have perhaps somewhat lost this long-term orientation, this ability to abstract ourselves from contingency in order to plan for the future?

We are struggling. In recent times, I believe, so much of what has come to us from the West, and from America in particular, has raised our standards of living. In all areas of living: in the sciences, in medicine, in everyday habits. Technological innovation has revolutionised our world, raising the quality of our material existence, but it has left us with an increasing malaise of the soul. Perhaps guiltily, we have not equally drawn from the East.

On my first trip to China, I went with my partners to Shenzhen to visit a family-run factory that, like us, worked in the knitwear and yarn industry. I was immediately struck by the presence of two children near the knitting machine. I come from the countryside, from a farming family. My mother would often knit with the needles and I would help her unroll the skein of wool. These two children, who helped their parents in Shenzhen, projected me back to my childhood and made me feel a kinship with this people, with whom I feel I share deep roots. As a child, I had as many as two uncles who left the countryside to go and work abroad. When I heard that these and other Chinese families had left their villages, up to a thousand kilometres away, to find work in Shenzhen, I empathised with the somewhat sorrowful soul of those who leave their homeland to work far away. I still nostalgically relive the festive atmosphere when my uncles returned for Christmas, but I remember that when they left after the holidays, on 3 January, we all cried. Perhaps it is in these simple things that lies the sympathy I have always had for this people.

On the one hand the common peasant roots, on the other the shared moral universe. These seem to be the extremes of the thread linking Brunello Cucinelli to China. In between, a story that tells of the valorisation of ancient knowledge, the inheritance of tradition, the relationship between profit and giving back.

We are a fashion house but at the same time I would like my company to be considered an 'Industry' in the classic sense of the word. A reality capable of remaining in the Solomeo valley for hundreds of years. I come from a family of socialist background, where the word "people" had a deep meaning. I believe that kindness in dialogue and a harmonious encounter with others always wins out. Today, I am proud to say that among the many small factories working for our company, there are two led by two lovely Chinese families.

What future does Brunello Cucinelli imagine? Should we expect a return to a world divided into blocs, similar to what we experienced during the Cold War, or can we be more optimistic?

Young people dress alike, they have the same ideal and material dreams. Cultures are bound to mix much more easily than in the last century. I see a great openness in the new generations. This is certainly not enough to hide from our gaze the subject of tyranny, which we still experience in our time and which is part of humanity. The past teaches us this. Not only Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War, but the Thirty Years' War itself has much to teach us these days. In the first unfortunate days of this war, I immediately went back to history, to my safe references.

Humanity needs to find a new Peace of Westphalia. In 1648, after thirty years of war, there was a strong need to find peace again, a peace that was skilfully and laboriously woven by the delegations of many countries, and not directly by the kings. Today, I believe, we need a new Westphalia more than ever.