

# Interview of Professor Stig Thøgersen

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**Interview conducted by Toivo Qiu (裘瀚雲)**

**Transcribed by Toivo Qiu (裘瀚雲)**

Qiu: So, we usually start with a question about your family background. When were you born and where did you study? When did you start your school and what made you into a sinologist?

Thøgersen: I was born in 1952 in Copenhagen and I stayed there until 1978. So, I lived the first twenty-six years of my life in Copenhagen. I also of course went to primary and secondary school there. I matriculated in 1970 aged 18. I had no clear idea about what I would be doing. At that time, one could study anything at the university. If one changed one's mind, one could switch subject or even the faculty. Deciding what to study was not a very big decision at that time. Just after matriculating I got a nice part-time job at a school as a substitute teacher and I enjoyed that a lot. So, I was looking for something that did not take too much of my time. At that time, we did not have many Chinese lessons weekly; I do not remember the exact number of hours, but it was something like eight hours a week.

Q: Who were your professors back then?

T: The professor of China studies was Søren Egerod who was a linguist specialising in Chinese dialects. However, he was also interested in Classical Chinese literature and philosophy and he actually translated the Mencius into Danish. However, we did not see much of him as he was only teaching Classical Chinese and mainly for the MA students. So, we had other teachers who were more into modern Chinese. We had a senior lecturer called Birthe Arendrup who used to be a school teacher but later studied Chinese. Due to her background, she was a very good teacher. She knew about teaching which was very rare in the university circles.

Q: How many years did you study Chinese?

T: I first studied from 1970 to 1974 and then got a scholarship to go to China. We were in the second group of Danish students after the Cultural Revolution; the first group was sent in 1973. There were three who got a scholarship in 1974 and I was one of them. That was when I decided to take Chinese really seriously and to make an effort to really learn the language because in the early 1970's we had practically no connection to China; we were studying a language which no-one spoke in Copenhagen; if I were to go to a Chinese restaurant, they would all speak Cantonese and I would not understand anything. Therefore, it was a very unreal feeling to study Chinese. I stayed one year at the Beijing Languages Institute (北京語言學院) and when we really got to studying in China we realised that there actually were real people speaking this strange language. Then I decided that I would go on with an MA degree.

Q: Were you taught traditional or simplified characters here in Denmark?

T: We started by using John De Francis' textbook which had both traditional and simplified characters but later we read the likes of the People's Daily and others which were in simplified characters, so we were actually taught both. Then, of course, when we got to China, it was only simplified.

Q: What was your main emphasis at your MA studies?

T: It was modern Chinese. While in China, I decided that I would concentrate on contemporary China. I took my MA degree in Aarhus but without ever moving here. At that time there was more emphasis on modern China here in Aarhus whereas Copenhagen was still concentrating more on traditional sinology. So, after getting back from China in 1975, I got a position as a teaching assistant here at Aarhus because the actual teaching assistant went to China with the next round of scholarships and I was his substitute from 1975 to 1976. That was how I got in touch with the Aarhus University and the way they study here.

So, when I started doing my MA here in Aarhus, I decided that the focus of my thesis would be on contemporary Chinese literature. I wrote about three novels dealing with rural China by a very leftist author called Hao Ran (浩然) who wrote before and during the Cultural Revolution.

Q: What were your experiences in China during your first stay there?

T: It was very different from what I had expected. I had never been to Asia before when I went to China. We first took the train to Moscow and there switched to the Trans-Siberian railroad, so the journey to Beijing took us eight days. We were actually on the same train as a delegation from the Finnish Communist Party. There were many things that surprised me. One of the most difficult things was the relationships with the Chinese students. At the Language Institute we each shared a room with a student studying English and we very quickly found out that the Chinese students had to report to their superiors everything we said and did. It was very difficult to become friends with them. The best place to meet them was at the basketball field. I played a lot of basketball at that time and there one could interact with people in a more normal way. Otherwise it was difficult. They had practiced saying certain mainly political phrases in English. However, then of course, there were young people from all over the world and that was very interesting. Many of these people are now professors in various parts of Europe and the world. They were all studying at the Language Institute or the Peking University. Then we had a very interesting situation there as our prime minister, Poul Hartling, visited Beijing in October 1974. As there were so few Danes in China at that time, the embassy invited us, the three students, to join the prime minister. So, we went to the Great Hall of the People (人民大会堂) for the big banquet there and we also went to a Chinese opera where Jiang Qing (江青) was also present. We got this real, "royal" treatment, which was quite amazing. We even saw Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) then.

Q: His position at that time was not too good.

T: It was very shaky; he was going in and out of favour. However, in October 1974, he was there.

Q: After MA studies, did you continue to PhD study?

T: Actually, there were no PhD study programmes in China Studies in Denmark at that time. What one could do was to get a scholarship wherewith one could study very much like a PhD but there was no PhD degree at the end. I did research about the middle school education reform, but then, it was already the early 1980's when China was going through major education reforms after the fall of the gang of four. So, they re-designed the whole secondary school system. I did a study of that under my

scholarship and that became my first book. However, that was in a completely different environment as going to China in the 1980's was wildly different from going to China in the 1970's. In the eighties, people in China were extremely interested in the west; they adored everything that was western including the clothing and if one could take one's friends into the friendship store, they would be very happy as they could buy all this stuff.

Q: Was there a break between your MA studies and these scholarship studies?

T: Yes, because at that time the Danish system was a four-plus-two-system; so, one would study one's major for four years, which was China studies for me, and then two years one's minor which was Nordic literature and languages<sup>1</sup> for me. That was the break in my China studies.

Q: However, within China studies, you had also studied modern Chinese literature, so these two were related in a way.

T: Yes, in a way. For my minor, I went back to Copenhagen, or rather, I stayed in Copenhagen for my minor.

Q: Were there changes going on in the Danish university system while you were studying?

T: Yes. China studies were transformed from something which one could call sinology in the classical sense into something that was becoming more like language-based area studies. However, that was a process running from the 1970's and by the early 1980's it was mainly contemporary Chinese language and politics and economics played a much larger role.

Q: The deaths of Mao and Karlsgren were maybe factors behind that.

T: Maybe. It was difficult to seek jobs within classical sinology. Then everybody in Denmark started talking about how important China was after the economic reforms implemented by Deng. We had a prime minister, Poul Schlüter from the conservative party, who said that he wanted Denmark to become the world leader in Chinese, so everyone was imagining there would be vast amounts of jobs, opportunities and money to be made in China. China studies started attracting different kinds of students, as in the 1970's one would mainly have students with a very left-wing inclination studying Chinese, whereas in the 1980's one would have more students who saw China as a career and business opportunity.

Q: So, what did you do in the 1980's, after having done these post-MA studies?

T: I got a position here at Aarhus. In Denmark we have a system roughly corresponding to assistant professor, associate professor and professor. So, I started as an assistant professor here in Aarhus after having graduated from Nordic languages and literature in 1978. I saw that there would be no open positions in Copenhagen as there would be at least ten years before the next retirement there and I could not wait for that. There was an open post here in Aarhus, first as a substitute teacher for Vibeke Børdahl. As her husband was Norwegian, she moved to Norway. She has translated a lot of Chinese literature, including *Jinpingmei* (金瓶梅). So, I started as a substitute teacher and after some research scholarships I was later able to get a more permanent position in 1986, if I remember correctly.

Q: So, were you lecturing on modern Chinese literature?

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<sup>1</sup> In this case Nordic languages mean the Scandinavian languages.

T: Yes, and on language, also. Language still took up a very large part of the curriculum and there were not a lot of lectures on Chinese politics etc. So, the programme was mostly based on reading and discussing texts, but there was no systematic teaching of Chinese politics.

Q: Was the language teaching more linguistically or practically oriented?

T: A lot of emphasis was put on grammar, but it was also practical in the sense of reading newspapers. Of course, literature was also studied.

Q: Were the students taught how to actually speak?

T: Yes, because already at that time almost all students went on a one-year exchange to China as a part of their BA studies and we also had an exchange teacher from China who would stay here for two to three years and give courses on spoken Chinese. So, there was also an emphasis on spoken Chinese.

Q: So, when did you start getting these courses on Chinese politics, economics and so on?

T: We started getting those in the mid-1980's. My own focus was on the education system.

Q: Have you studied social sciences?

T: Never formally, I have studied it on my own.

Q: In the 1980's, you started having more practically-oriented China studies in Denmark. Did you have any major changes in the 1990's?

T: I think the Tiananmen demonstrations and June 1989 were a kind of a turning point in many ways because we then once again started getting more politically motivated students who were interested in what was happening in Chinese politics. Actually, in the late 1980's, the interest in China was dropping and we were thinking it would plummet even further after the Tiananmen, but actually, more students got attracted to China studies because it was so prominent in the media.

Q: Were the students more human rights-oriented?

T: Yes, and we also received students who were interested in modern Chinese fine arts. At one time, we had the poet Bei Dao (北島) as a guest lecturer here for two or three years. However, due to university reforms, the students were forced to study and graduate more quickly. Previously, they could study for a very long time, but then things were tightened up. University gradually became more school-like; one had to finish within a specified time and take one's exams. So, that was a significant change.

Q: So, what kind of research were you doing back then?

T: My main project in the 1990's was in Shandong province (山東) in a county called Zouping (鄒平). I did research on the history of education in that county from late Qing-dynasty up to that date. That was amongst my most interesting times in China because before that I did not know a lot about the rural areas because we, the foreign exchange students, had been living in cities in the 1970's. The only places I could visit during my exchange were Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and, of course, Yan'an (延安). However, in the 1990's, I stayed in Chinese villages and interviewed the local people because it was partly an oral history project. I also looked at archival material and other things like that. However, it was very much an oral history of the local education through the period. So, that really turned my interest towards rural China and what was going on there. That was later extended to rural

politics and a group of European scholars, including me, later tried to set up a fieldwork base in Xuanwei (宣威), Yunnan (雲南). There I was studying local politics and how the communist party actually manages to control the villages. Yunnan was so different from Shandong and in some ways, the two provinces were like two different countries! However, then again, there were also many things in common. So, my research interests evolved from education in the cities to education in the rural areas and to local politics in the rural areas.

Q: What were your observations on politics and education in these rural areas? Were they similar all across China or were they vastly different?

T: I think that they were not vastly different, but they were somewhat different. I did much more research in Shandong as my doctoral thesis was based on research done there. There one could feel how the local people emphasised Shandong being the home of Confucius and there was a more traditional attitude towards the upbringing of the children and so on. In this regard, Yunnan was definitely different. However, I was staying in an area in Yunnan completely dominated by the Han Chinese, so I have never done research in minority areas for linguistic reasons. My main advantage as a researcher is that I can actually talk to the local people and understand what they say.

Q: Did the new millennium then bring more reforms in Denmark when it came to China studies?

T: There were many years that we only had to marginally adapt to these reforms but over the last half a decade or so we have seen a development where China studies are much less isolated. We have always been in the same department with Japanese studies but now we are also in the same department with Russian studies, Brazilian studies and so on. So, also amongst the students, there is a greater focus on China's global connections and her role in the world; I mean, during my generation China was something completely unique – a kind of a box of its own – and of course, we knew that it had a certain kind of relationship with the USSR and with the USA and so on, but we tended to study China in isolation. However, our present programme studies China from a more global perspective also due to changes in the university structure but also due to the fact that China itself plays a much more active role at the world stage than before. Save for that, the only other major change in the BA programme is that we used to send our students on exchange to China for one year as a part of their BA studies and they could choose their exchange university from a list and then they would get a scholarship so that they would be scattered all around China and fought their own way through the bureaucracy, which is very interesting but also very time-consuming, but now we send all our students as one class to Peking University and only for one semester. So, that has changed; people used to come back from China with all kinds of experiences and understandings, but now they are more like a class.

Q: So, do they only spend half a year in China?

T: Yes.

Q: Interesting, for our university recommends at least one year for its students.

T: Yes, there really is not enough time for one-year exchange in our programme, and that is our problem because there also are many things we want to teach our students here. The other big structural change is that we now have many high schools teaching Chinese in Denmark. So, we are now getting new students who are learning Chinese in order to teach it at high schools, so they combine it with German, English, history or any other school subject so that they have at least two

subject they can teach. These students are somewhat different from our other students because they are not necessarily interested in Chinese society, but more in the language.

Q: They are more interested in the language.

T: Yes.

Q: I assume they also must study pedagogics.

T: Yes.

Q: Do the students here in Denmark also have to study at least up to the MA level like in Finland in order to be able to get a proper academic job?

T: It is very much the same here. Officially, we are forced to claim that they are qualified for a job after finishing their BA, but in reality, it is very rare; practically everyone studies up to the MA level. We just changed the MA programme which is now called “Global and Area Studies”. So, part of the time we teach all these students from different area studies programmes in joint seminars – we have not started yet but that is what is going to happen.

Q: In Helsinki, we have two BA programmes for the students of Asian studies, one specialising on language and another one specialising on cultural studies. On the MA level, we have four programmes, a Finnish-language language programme, a Finnish-language cultural studies programme, an English-language programme on intercultural relations and an English-language programme on linguistics. Do you similarly have a system where you have a larger selection of MA programmes than BA programmes?

T: Yes, they can choose from a wide range of programmes, but only one of these is run by us. There are two lines in that programme, the line for those aspiring to become teachers and the ordinary line. In the ordinary line the focus is on the social sciences.

Q: Is the line for the aspiring teachers then specialised on language?

T: Yes. The students there spend one semester at the East China Normal University (華東師範大學) and they have the Teaching Chinese to Foreigners-programme (對外漢語) which they follow.

Q: How many PhD students do you currently have?

T: We do not have any at the moment but I have supervised around ten during the years I have spent here. We only started getting PhD programmes in the humanities during the 1980’s and we have normally had a maximum of one to three PhD students at one time. During the last few years our PhD programme has not attracted a lot of students. Sometimes we have asked our own students about it. Being a PhD student in Denmark is quite attractive for the students because they get a salary and have three years to finish their thesis. However, we have had difficulties attracting new PhD students because our MA students do not think that the academia is a very promising career option. After getting their MA degree, they prefer going into business or doing other things. Actually, many of those who did get their PhDs also work elsewhere than in the academia; one of them is a journalist and another is a director of a Danish-Chinese university cooperation programme. Those who decide to continue in academia get one year as a post-doc, then another, then they apply for a third year and so on. There are very few permanent positions available so academia is not considered a very attractive career path.

Q: Do you have a division in Denmark between teaching universities and research universities?

T: All universities do research but then we have got something called university colleges training primary school teachers, nurses, social workers etc. which are more like professional colleges.

Q: In Finland we also have those but they are not considered universities in our system.

T: In all the eight universities of Denmark all the teachers also have a research obligation. This is not the case in professional colleges.

Q: When you do have PhD students, are they also obliged to teach?

T: Yes. They at least have to teach two courses during the three years they prepare their thesis.

Q: I would like to ask about the source and quality of the students of China studies over time. You have already explained that during the 1970's they were already quite politically motivated and in the 1980's they were business-oriented and in the 1990's they were more inclined towards human rights and arts.

T: Well, that is too generalised. But I think the general attitude towards studies has changed even more. I feel that the students used to be more interested in China as a whole – they would read a lot about China on their own while nowadays it has come to be “reading what the teacher asks one to read and that's it” for many of the students.

Q: So, the university has become a school.

T: It has become a school to a very large extent. I also think that the difference between the very good students and the not so good students has increased enormously; the level of our best students now is much higher than when I was studying because they have been prepared at high school to work academically and they can do a lot of different things, but we also get students who really are not suited for university education. I think this enormous difference is very difficult when one teaches because the problem for whom to lecture arises. If one lectures to the top ten, one loses the rest, and if one lectures to the bottom quarter one then loses the top students. I think that has become more difficult.

Q: How do you actually choose your students?

T: We cannot choose them ourselves. It is a national system where one writes an application based on one's mark in the matriculation examination. Then 20 % of the students are admitted on other grounds based on for example their special connections to China and so on – some students have been volunteers at Chinese kindergartens for a year or something like that.

Q: Interesting that you have this kind of a back door to studies because in Finland there is no possibility for that. When I started my studies, half of our new students were admitted based on their combined score of their matriculation examination and the entrance examination and the other half based on the entrance examination score only. How hard is it for one to get in?

T: It depends on the number of applicants. Some popular programmes like psychology and political science are very difficult to enter and others like economics are quite easy. It has nothing to do with how difficult the subject is. China studies is at a kind of a medium level.

Q: At the University of Helsinki, it used to be so that about four percent of the applicants to Asian studies were accepted.

T: That is much more difficult than in Denmark.

Q: Have the dissertations that you have supervised changed in their contents or quality over the years?

T: They have. Now the students are forced to write their MA theses in a time of four months. There used to be no maximum number of pages for one's MA thesis – in the 1970's I had a colleague whose MA thesis was 280 pages long – but then we had a maximum of one hundred pages and now the length is down to between sixty and eighty pages. One cannot do the same amount of research in four months as one is able to do in one year so nowadays it is very difficult to base one's MA thesis on fieldwork. That is very sad as I really try to promote fieldwork-based research. It is hard to do fieldwork and write up a thesis in four months.

Q: How about the PhD theses?

T: While preparing them, fieldwork is still performed and I think they are often very interesting. I would really like to have more PhD theses to supervise.

Q: What is the usual focus of the PhD students? Is it politics, economics, anthropology or what?

T: It is very individual because we often have PhD students who have their main supervisor in China studies and a co-supervisor in the discipline they want to study. For example, we had two PhD students together with media studies and one of them was studying journalism education in China and the other one was studying the media in Hong Kong and how they provide an outlet for investigative journalists from the mainland. However, we had another one who was studying political activist art who had a co-supervisor from art history. So, it is very varied, but we only want PhD students who work with Chinese language sources. We sometimes get approached by people who want to do something on China but not based on Chinese language sources. I feel that that is not really our field.

Q: Do you have students focusing on minorities – minority languages, for example?

T: We have not had any students focusing on linguistics at the PhD level. We had a student who wrote on education in ethnic minority areas, but her focus was not on language. We now have one PhD student with a main supervisor in linguistics and then with a co-supervisor from us. She is specialising in phonology and especially on how foreign students of Chinese pronounce Chinese. We do not have any linguists at our staff, either.

Q: Has there been any change in the distribution of the PhD subjects over time?

T: It is very hard to do statistics on such small numbers, but I cannot see any systematic change. It has more to do with the persons and it is rather unpredictable.

Q: How much do scholars here cooperate with Chinese scholars or other international scholars in China studies?

T: Well, every one of us has his/her personal network of colleagues. We used to work closely with the Erasmus network where we were in a very good group with Oxford, Cambridge and other universities where we could send our students. However, Erasmus is now more focused on individual scholarships. We each work with international scholars, including Chinese scholars, in our respective fields. Each of us has his/her own field. I have worked with sociologists at Shandong University (山東大學) in my projects, but I have also worked with the East China Normal University on education,



and with Central China Normal University (華中師範大學) in Wuhan (武漢) on rural politics. I also worked with a scholar from Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on local elections.

Q: What is the primary source of research funding in Denmark? Is it still the state?

T: Yes, it is.

Q: Do you also have enterprises funding research?

T: Yes, if we talk of Denmark as a whole there have been some scholarships offered by for example the Danish Industries which is an organisation promoting Danish enterprises. They funded one PhD student who worked on China. Then there is the Sino-Danish Centre which is a university centre in China. It is a cooperation of all the Danish Universities and the Chinese Academy of Sciences (中國科學院) in Beijing. They also finance PhD scholarships. So, there are occasionally cases of private funding, but usually the PhD students are funded by the universities themselves or by the research councils for social sciences or humanities.

Q: Do you still have these exchanging native teachers of Chinese coming to your university?

T: Now we have a permanent Chinese teacher who is living in Denmark with her family. Then, we get a new trainee from East China Normal University every year. As we send our students to Peking University, a teacher from Beida occasionally comes to Aarhus to teach for a semester as part of the contract we have with them.

Q: Are you involved a lot on academic debates on China or China studies especially with regards to human rights?

T: At the moment, I am not involved, but I was after 1989, for who was not? I have been working on village elections and connected hereto I have somewhat discussed democratic rights, also in the media. However, I do not think there is a huge debate in Denmark concerning human rights in China. We have the Danish Centre for Human Rights where there are several experts of human rights in China.

Q: I think Norway and Sweden are generally-speaking more human rights -oriented.

T: It might be so in government circles but Denmark has also been quite engaged through the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

Q: Do you work a lot with the Danish government?

T: No, but we are invited twice a year to meetings in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the people from their Asia Office where they every time invite about ten China specialists and discuss what is happening at the ministry and what we are doing.

Q: What are your experiences on publishing your research? Have you worked with Chinese publishers?

T: Two of my books have been translated into Chinese but I have not been working directly with the publishers. My book on the history of education in Zouping, Shandong, was translated by a Chinese academic who had taken part in much of the fieldwork for the book. He published it with a university press in China. There were no problems at all. My other book translated into Chinese was about doing fieldwork in China which I edited together with Maria Heimer from Uppsala. We were approached by someone who wanted to make a Chinese version thereof and we were told that they would only publish some of the papers – so, in the Chinese version of the book some of the most critical articles are excluded. There was one paper by Mette Halskov Hansen titled “Walking in the Footsteps of the

Communist Party”. It was a very interesting paper as it showed how much of the fieldwork in China was actually conditioned by the political authorities – how they can guide one in certain directions and how they can prevent one from proceeding to certain topics. However, that was unfortunately left out from the Chinese translation.

Q: What is your self-perceived contribution to China studies, especially in the Scandinavian context?

T: I do not think of it in an especially Scandinavian context but I think my main contribution is my doctoral dissertation – the history of Chinese education, especially how China as a state grew with the expansion of the education system, how people use the education system to advance in society, but also how education is a tool for the state to control people. I really enjoyed writing that book and I see that as my major contribution.

Q: Do you have any self-perceived problems in past research? If you were doing your past research now, would you change anything in the process?

T: The main problem I have had is access to fieldwork. I think fieldwork is too often controlled by the local authorities – I have always worked through official channels because I have also been very dependent on getting access to documents, and if one uses the bottom-up approach one gets a lot of people’s voices and the ideas of the “old hundred families” (老百姓). However, it is then very difficult to get access to the documents on the same issue. If I were to do another similar project now, I would do it in a more anthropological and bottom-up manner. I would enter China in a less official way, but that is getting more and more difficult.

Q: What are your views on the future of China studies in Denmark and the Nordic countries?

T: My greatest worry at the moment is that we, and especially the students, do not have enough time to do the fieldwork that is needed to go deep into what is happening in China right now. This is connected to the way the Xi Jinping government is controlling access to China – doing fieldwork is becoming ever more difficult. It is a bit better if one looks Chinese and can move around, but if one looks Nordic, one simply cannot move “under the radar”. The time pressure from teaching combined with the difficulties involved in getting access to fieldwork may cause a problem of one getting a superficial and partly state controlled understanding of how things are.

Q: I think a problem is that the students of China studies still often start from zero when it comes to their knowledge of China. This is not a problem in North American studies or European studies where the students already have a rather large knowledge base when they start their studies.

T: Yes, one has to spend a lot of time teaching people very basic things. However, I see the future of China studies and especially studies on the language as reasonably good – the fact that so many students at high schools decide to study Chinese is quite encouraging even though they do not learn much Chinese during the three years. However, when they got to China with their class, at least they realise that there is something out there called China.

Q: How often do you go to China?

T: I used to go twice a year but now it has been already one and a half years since I have last been there. My current study is about changing Chinese perceptions on childhood – how different philosophers, psychologists and politicians have looked at children and childhood and what that can tell us about how China has been changing during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. That study is very much

based on written sources. Therefore, I currently do not have any particular need to go to China. I will go again this autumn.

Q: As a final question I would like to ask about your views on China's future.

T: That is very big question. Right at the moment I am very pessimistic on China based on what I hear from my Chinese colleagues and friends. The tightening of the ideological atmosphere, the increased control over academia and the very propagandistic approach to nearly everything. So, in that way I am very pessimistic. What made me more optimistic are interviews I recently did with Chinese students in Denmark – they were not elite students at all, they were being trained to become kindergarten teachers. They were still very open-minded and interested in what is going on, and it was very interesting to talk with them as they did a lot of independent thinking. So, apparently it is possible for people to go through this machine and still come out as independently thinking individuals.

Q: Maybe the propaganda is a bit old-fashioned and ineffective due to it having been designed by people who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. If you would like to tell something more, we can continue, but if you have told everything, I thank you for the interview.

T: I think I have told everything. Thank you.