



Encounter Ethnography and Making the ‘Made in Italy’ Brand: Chinese Migrant Experiences

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Drawing on ethnographic research in Prato, Italy, a city known for its concentration of Chinese migrants working in the fast-fashion sector, this essay charts the contours of what encounters between ‘Made in Italy’ and ‘Made in China’ have produced. Grappling with the observation that place-based labels exist paradoxically in an intensely globalised world, it focuses on place-based histories to argue for a dynamic consciousness of place.

Chinese New Year
Celebration in Prato, Italy.
PC: pratosfera.com.

The history of the ‘Made in Italy’ brand can be traced back to the 1930s—a nationalist moment in Italian society. Autarky was in vogue. Borders were strict. Fascism coursed through the social soul. This cumbersome legacy was shed in brilliant fashion in the postwar era and only took hold on an international scale in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Made in Italy label came to evoke the Renaissance, its legacy of quality, and its connection to the Enlightenment.

As Chinese migrants set up shop in the Renaissance belt of central Italy with particular acumen from the early 2000s, the result has fuelled controversy as well as nurtured collaboration. In the historical industrial district of Prato alone, the Chinese migratory presence has meant substantial adjustments in institutions, whether healthcare services, public schools, politics, or the arts. In this essay, my goal is to chart several important contours of what the encounter between ‘Made in Italy’ and ‘Made in China’ has produced.

I draw on the method of *encounter ethnography*, which I developed for my collaborative project *Tight Knit: Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion* (Krause 2018). In centring on encounters themselves, the method places all residents, regardless of citizenship status, on an equal playing field and thus offers a work-around to methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller 2012). Encounters are useful as an operational tool because they allow the ethnographer to cast an analytical gaze on points of intersection. They push attention on fleeting moments in which jarring differences in disposition may be present or surprising similarities in sensibility may converge. Encounter ethnography asks analysts to linger and to question common sense. After all, common sense is often a far cry from good sense (Crehan 2016; Gramsci 1971; Lan 2015).

Chinese Migrants in Prato

Prato has become famous for its concentration of Chinese migrants. It is estimated that between 25,000 and 50,000 migrants from China live there—the first number is official, the second includes migrants who live and work under the radar. In 2020, the city had a registered population of 195,089, of whom 42,371 (22 per cent) were classified as *stranieri* (‘foreign residents’)—well above the national average of 8.5 per cent. Registered Chinese migrants total about 58 per cent of official

resident foreigners (Comune di Prato 2020). Chinese migrants often settle and work in two industrial districts: Macrolotto Zero, near the old town centre, and Macrolotto Uno, in the sprawling outskirts of the city towards the towns abutting the verdant hills of Montalbano.

A majority of Chinese residents in Prato migrated from Zhejiang Province, specifically the city of Wenzhou—famous for its can-do economic model of development. The diaspora was driven by a desire not only to claim the status of overseas migrant, but also to gain access to opportunities for making money in Europe. In addition, Wenzhou migrants cared deeply about becoming their own boss and the autonomy it promised. The cut-and-sew sector of the Italian fashion industry was appealing because it required very little capital outlay to open a finishing workshop. This, in part, is why the Chinese have come to dominate the sector, known in Italian as *confezione*. It is also why there is a great number of Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato.

Chinese migrants developed a niche economy based on fast fashion. As of 2019, one in every three businesses in Prato registered with the local Chamber of Commerce was owned by migrants (Camera di Commercio 2020). Chinese migrants are diverse not only in terms of documented status, but also in terms of socioeconomic class, education, and occupation. Chinese-owned firms number more than 6,000. More than half (3,700) are categorised as cut-and-sew workshops. Compared with other migrant groups, Chinese entrepreneurs show a high percentage of women owners: 45 per cent, compared with 55 per cent men. Firms are increasingly diverse in type, and include fast-fashion wholesalers, textile factories, and support services, including real estate activities, restaurants, bars, and small retail shops.

That said, becoming successful in the fast-fashion sector requires tremendous sacrifice. Demands on time and lifestyle are particularly challenging—specifically during the pre-COVID-19 era. The Chinese who migrated to Prato tended to be young. Many couples

married and had babies. In the era before the tragic Teresa Moda fire of 2013, in which seven Chinese workers died, many workers lived in factory dormitories, which were not suitable for childrearing. For this reason, many parents sent their infants back to China to be cared for by grandparents. Elsewhere, I have argued that these young parents sought quality care for their children (Krause 2020). At the same time, this circulation of children allowed the parents to tap into non-capitalist relations that ultimately enhanced their global networks and underwrote capitalist value (Krause and Bressan 2018; Tsing 2013).

Encounter One: A Flood and a Flood of Metaphors

Tracing the encounter between Made in Italy and Made in China entails place-based histories of each of these labels. Both have their own stories and sets of metaphors. Both are filled with stereotypes, positive and negative—for example, an easy elegance versus ‘a horrifying kitsch’ (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019: 63).

When I began the project in 2012, I had a hunch that the Made in Italy brand served as a magnetic force drawing migrants from China. *The Economist* had identified Italy as ‘the world’s top-ranking exporter in textiles, clothing, and leather goods’ (London 2013). This made Italy stand out among developed economies. I wondered what sort of affinity Chinese migrants had with the Made in Italy label. I assumed the draw to work in the Made in Italy sector brought meaning to their lives or added symbolic capital to their work. My hunch was that they would find value working in a sector known for superior quality and design.

The imagined association between Made in Italy and the Renaissance in part explains the label’s resilience and prestige. In reality, this link amounts to a myth of continuity—one that

has nevertheless proven resilient in a globalised fashion industry. Especially important for the Made in Italy label was the historic flood in November 1966 that deluged Florence, submerging 1,300 works of art and millions of manuscripts. Paintings and sculptures were anthropomorphised as a ‘hospital’ was set up in the lemon house of Boboli Gardens. An international recovery effort served to educate a broad public about the value of Renaissance patrimony and its significance to Western humanism. The rescue operators found their *bella figura* in Jackie Kennedy, who was appointed honorary president of the US Committee for the Rescue of Italian Art. Fundraisers proliferated across the United States, from non-profit organisations to university campuses. Not unlike Trobriand Islanders’ *kula* shells or Scotland’s crown jewels, historical sentiment grew among American consumers for goods associated with the Made in Italy brand.

I can say with confidence that migrants from Zhejiang Province did not bring with them the same sense of historical sentiment for the Made in Italy brand. I worked with a research assistant to test this assumption. She was intimate with the migrant community, having migrated herself to Italy when she was around 10 years of age, and was not only fluent in Italian and Mandarin, but also a native speaker of Wenzhouese, the dialect of many Chinese migrants in Prato. We worked on an interview protocol that included questions about the value of working in the Made in Italy fashion sector. When we tested the protocol, this aspect proved nonexistent. It revealed two worlds encountering one another. The collision was jarring.

The research assistant insisted that the questions did not make sense to Chinese migrants from Wenzhou. She asserted that the questions were nearly impossible to translate and complicated to explain. I came to realise that the migrants did not have deep associations with the label. They understood Italy as a market in which exports were important. If, as a brand, the affinity with Italy helped exports,

that in turn boosted employment for the Italian economy and those working within its borders. The workers had little appreciation of the label's history.

The Made in Italy label originated in the fascist era. It resulted from an intensive nationalist politics challenging French hegemony in the fashion sector. The dictator Benito Mussolini closed borders and limited trade to reconstitute the industry. In part, this forced innovation in fibre and design. Fashion historian Eugenia Paulicelli (2004) argues that the fashion industry was one of the main industries that the fascist state targeted due to its potential to define *italianità* and to exalt a national sense of self. Of course, once fascism fell, the Italian industry worked hard to distance itself from its soiled political roots.

The Italian economy boomed with help from the postwar Marshall Plan, which funded industrial districts, such as the one supporting textiles and knitwear in Prato. Peasants abandoned the countryside and its hierarchical mode of sharecropping agriculture. Many dreamed of a freer life as they went to Prato to work in the factories and embraced militant egalitarianism. That dream reached its height during the labour struggles of the 'Hot Autumn' of 1968. The unintended result was a new era of diffuse industry. Sweater-making was outsourced locally to small industrial artisan shops. An Italian artisan, Antonio, recalled the long hours of work, saying: '*I cinesi siamo noi* [We are the Chinese].'

This metaphorical reckoning points to an awareness of structural similarities between Italian and Chinese migrants from different eras. One of our Chinese research participants, Peng, characterised his experience of becoming a worker in the fast-fashion industry as a 'fistful of tears'. The fist metaphor conjures up the unanticipated emotional struggles he encountered as a young migrant. Inside that fist was a world of hardship and suffering as well as high-mindedness and determination. Eventually, Peng got married. He and his wife, Lily, had a baby boy, whom they sent back to China to live with grandparents, and began

their own firm. Peng exchanged his youth for money. Also within that fist was a world of regional structures and sentiments that collided with and animated new globalised desires and experiences.

Encounter Two: The Gucci Debacle, or A Label's Value and Its Connection With Place

This sounds like a bad joke: to promote integration, a contemporary art museum hires a famous artist, known for his provocative work, only to censure the artist in the middle of the live performance.

Late into the evening of 22 June 2018, in the Macrolotto Zero neighbourhood at the heart of Prato's Chinatown, Rainer Ganahl's show was first interrupted by whistles, shouts, and swearing, and then cut off by the museum director. What had begun as a celebration of the Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art's thirtieth anniversary, combined with a street festival to ease tensions between the city's Chinese and Italian communities, ended in accusations that the internationally renowned artist's work was offensive and superficial.

The artist's initial proposal had seemed innocent enough to appease multicultural sensibilities: 'Please, teach me Chinese—Please, teach me Italian.' The initiative was launched in the spirit of mutual understanding and cultural reciprocity. On the afternoon of 22 June, I strolled along Via Pistoiese through the 'Pop Art' street festival, passing food banks, children creating artwork, and Chinese adults preparing to perform—eight women dressed in flowing pink tunics over white pants flanking two men, one all in white, the other in a black tunic and white pants. The group stood picture-ready in the Piazza dell'Immaginario in front of its red wall with a triptych sequence of green leafy branches.

Late that evening, the artist arrived an hour and a half after his slotted performance time of 9.30pm. Despite a thinning crowd, the show created a stir as he began to screen video of a fashion show. ‘Models’ held signs that juxtaposed the words ‘Gucci a Prato’ and ‘Marx a Prato’. The metaphor short-circuited the distance between luxury and exploitation. The final surprise, however, came with a series of short clips that captured local scenes: a factory inspection inside a Chinese workshop and a well-known Chinese protest against inspections.

The performance and its message created cacophony. Institutional organisers reacted as though the message was a threat. A Chinese singer who had remained in the audience exchanged harsh words with the artist. Others later expressed to me their view that the worst offence was to censure an invited artist regardless of whether he was arrogant, tone deaf, or ill-prepared.

What struck me about this encounter was that the artist was invited to the heart of Prato’s Chinatown to engage in a form of storytelling, if you will. His story meandered beyond the soft lines of cultural exchange to send a hard but simple message: of exploitation. In a sense, what artists do is reflect their impressions of reality back on to a people, an era, a place. Inviting a virtual newcomer into that setting to send an oversimplified message of exploitation was bound to stir up controversy. (He was accused of trying to represent Prato merely by googling it and finding the headlines.)

One commentator suggested that local artists would have made for a better cultural exchange. Without a doubt, such an encounter would have looked different. Would it have reached a resolution? Would it have still been messy, loud, full of anger and misunderstanding?

Globalised Fashion and Place-Based Consciousness

Before the novel coronavirus pandemic, the economist Giacomo Becattini characterised Italy as suffering its worst economic crisis in 80 years. Famous for his work related to local development and industrial districts, Becattini acknowledged capitalism was a broken system. To ferry Italy beyond crisis, he elaborated a solution in his last book, *La coscienza dei luoghi* (*The Consciousness of Places*, 2015), that centres place-based knowledge. The book’s subtitle, *Territory as a Choral Subject*, offers vision through metaphor: voices find harmony in context. The future of a given place is moored to ‘authentic motors of development’: historical patrimony, infrastructure, and collective knowhow (Becattini 2015: 22–23). In practice, these voices may or may not be in harmony; they may be in conflict or have a polyphonic quality. The degree to which local economic development syncs with diverse human economies and local social relations remains an open question.

A hallmark of ‘made in’ labels is the connection with place. In a world where globalised supply chains have become hegemonic, and the hands behind those labels diasporic, any given consciousness of place becomes dynamic. Such dynamism may contradict the indexing of place, which conjures up particular associations, some of which are quite fixed—in essence, the opposite of dynamic.

The connection that is evoked between the Made in Italy label and the Renaissance relies on a myth of continuity. Postwar workers in the Made in Italy sectors largely migrated from rural regions and were hardly Renaissance princes. Nevertheless, the myth endures. It is a myth steeped in a particular place, commonly represented by landscapes with rolling hills covered in vineyards, olive groves, cypress trees, and even Medici palaces.

In the contemporary era, a complex set of international agreements shapes the contours of place-based labelling in Europe. A system of geographic indicators, such as protected designations of origin, signals quality products such as olive oil, salamis, and wine. Slow-food designations also exist for specialty products promoted in the interest of biodiversity. Such labelling apparatuses form an uneasy backdrop against which diasporic Chinese workers and entrepreneurs experience their lives. How are such residents' contributions to particular places considered?

I want to conclude with several points. First, place-based labels exist paradoxically in an intensely globalised world. Second, place-based labelling practices contain particular histories and generate assumptions about specific territories—whether a nation-state (for example, Italy or China), a region or province (for example, Tuscany or Zhejiang), or a city (for example, Florence or Wenzhou). And third, place-based labels are meaningful because of their connections with specific features—the soil, the air, the climate—and particular histories, legacies of cultural patrimony, and personal or collective knowhow.

As populations change, myths of continuity become harder to sustain. I am left wondering: what new forms of dynamic place-based consciousness are already emerging to include all players in a local society that is intricately and intimately connected to a globalised world? ■

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