Migration, Production Networks, and Identity Politics in Europe: Chinese Immigrant Communities in Italy and Spain

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Abstract

Transnational migration has profoundly altered the make-up of our globalizing world. On the one hand, new immigrants have revitalized local economies and increased the diversity of host societies; on the other hand, their presence has often precipitated ethnic and social friction and challenged previous understandings of equality and citizenship. Although the Chinese community in Southern Europe only began to grow significantly in the 1990s, their quick rise has heightened fears that immigrants are not only capturing a disproportionate share of national wealth, but more importantly, creating new divisions that will inevitably tear society apart. These dynamics are at the heart of the Chinese immigrant experience in Italy and Spain.

This paper tackles issues of identity, allegiance, and inclusion and the ways in which they have been defined and recast in relation to the Chinese community in contemporary Italy and Spain. Drawing on interviews conducted with 74 respondents (primarily Chinese immigrants) in Italy from 2007-2010 and 80 in Spain from 2008 and 2011, this paper seeks to synthesize the micro-level, lived experiences of immigrants with the insights drawn from diaspora and globalization studies. Contrary to some academic assessments, I argue that the divisions between the Chinese, Italians, and Spanish, while sizable and problematic, are eroding much more quickly than is commonly assumed. The elongation and expansion of social and production networks from the Pacific to the Mediterranean have forced Chinese and Europeans alike to reassess not only who is, but who can be Italian or Spanish. Indeed, this process of re-evaluation may potentially lead to increased social inclusion at the micro-level and more far-sighted policies at such macro-level institutions as the European Union.

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International migration hardly seems novel anymore. In the post-World War II era especially, people have been increasingly on the move, crisscrossing the globe and settling in new, even unexpected places. Prato, Italy, a city located eleven miles from its famous neighbor Florence, is an extraordinary case in point. Today, a visitor can walk down Via Pistoiese on the city’s west side and hear nothing but Chinese being spoken and patronize a seemingly endless line of Chinese-owned stores. In one of the city’s industrial districts (macrolotto industriale), that same visitor would find an equally stunning development: Chinese owners, once apprentices and workers, running the vast majority of the textiles-apparel companies based there and even subcontracting for such leading design houses as Giorgio Armani and Dolce & Gabbana. Italian products once made by migrants from Italy’s South are now increasingly made…by the Chinese!

Astonishingly, Fuenlabrada, Spain has undergone a similar transformation. Located on the outskirts of Madrid, it is home to the largest concentration of Chinese businesses in Spain and unlike any other industrial district in Iberia. Walking down Calle Manuel Cobo Calleja, the main thoroughfare that bisects the area, one is immediately struck by the vast assortment of goods for sale as well as the immense scale of the businesses. In these cavernous warehouses, clients from near and far – Chinese, European, and African – can find inexpensive products, ranging from apparel to household wares to luggage to souvenirs and beyond, all shipped directly from China. Those looking for a specific item like shoes or purses can head straight to what I call “Shoe Street” or “Purse Alley,” unplanned sub-districts within the larger area that have emerged to serve customers with more specific needs.

A generation ago, such developments would have been unimaginable. Today, they are the
focus of intense media scrutiny and political debate. In Italy, this sense of unease was crucial in the return of current Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to political prominence as well as the growing influence of a key political party, the Northern League (*Lega Nord*). Determined to fulfill its campaign promises and curtail the perceived ills of migration, the Berlusconi-led government initiated police sweeps in the country’s major metropolises in April 2008. Such actions quickly cascaded into vigilante action against the Roma community near Naples and in early 2010, military-style raids on Prato’s Chinese-owned businesses after local elections installed a center-right administration in the city for the first time in 63 years.\(^1\) The crackdown traumatized the Chinese community to such a degree that “newspapers reported that China’s consul-general in nearby Florence compared the raids with the Nazi SS.”\(^2\) This unprecedented denunciation was a remarkable break from previous Chinese pronouncements and signaled the Chinese government’s grave concern that its nationals had become scapegoats for Italy’s domestic difficulties.

The “Great Recession” has further stoked widespread suspicions throughout Europe that China intends to use its financial clout and production capacity to dominate it. During German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit to China in February 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stated that China’s willingness to work with the European Union to stem its financial crisis does not mean “China wants to buy Europe.” He declared further that “China doesn’t have this intention, and doesn’t have this ability.”\(^3\) That he felt obligated to make such a statement underscores not only how nervous foreign leaders are about the consequences of China’s seemingly unrelenting rise, but equally important, how much the country has scrambled international dynamics from

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the global to the local level.

The scholarly literature, while helpful in showing how structural change can impact migration flows and choice of destinations, provides fewer specific insights into how China’s economic clout and continuing ascendancy in world affairs impact how Chinese migrants, Italians, and Spaniards perceive and interact with one another and ultimately, the willingness of the Chinese to remain in venue societies for the long-term. If we are to better understand their prospects for incorporation, we must adopt a different perspective and ask new questions. How, for example, should European states treat a growing coterie of Chinese entrepreneurs who generate vital tax revenues and economic activity, but sometimes do not fully comprehend or even resist prevailing social and cultural norms? In what ways are the social networks of Chinese migrants reconfiguring global production chains and what long-term impact will this have for local businesses and individual consumers within Italy and Spain? Is the constant shuttling between Italy, Spain, and China among Chinese businesspeople in particular more likely to harden existing identities or lead to “flexible citizenship?”

In this paper, I seek to answer these questions using a micro-level, ethnographic approach. I draw and rely primarily upon personal interviews I conducted with 74 respondents in Italy from 2007, 2008, and 2010 and 80 respondents in Spain in 2008 and 2011. In so doing, I seek to go beyond prevailing explanations about immigrant identity and behavior by recording and incorporating the voices of the actors themselves – the mostly first generation Chinese

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6 In Italy, most of my interviews were conducted in Prato, although I draw upon testimony collected in Bologna, Milan, Florence, and Venice. In Spain, I conducted field research and interviews in Barcelona, Valencia, and Madrid.
immigrants who helped build the Chinese community into an economic powerhouse. Adopting such a perspective simultaneously avoids the pitfalls of simplifying assumptions and lays out in more detailed fashion, the broader socioeconomic context in which Chinese migrants are reformulating their understandings of identity and citizenship. Moreover, by seeing the Chinese as a diverse rather than a homogenous group, we can better understand how and why economic success and social and political incorporation varies; we may even uncover previously hidden forces and triggers for such phenomena.

Undergirding my argument is the notion of exaptation. In essence, macro-level changes – demographic shifts in southern Europe, inconsistent and lax immigration policies, and China’s post-Mao reforms and reintegration into the global economy – carved out unprecedented opportunities for Chinese entrepreneurs to apply business strategies originally developed to tackle the risks and challenges of China’s planned economy. I argue that it is this synchronicity between strategy and environment that has allowed the Chinese to establish themselves in various lines of business and thrive. While Italian and Spanish unease with Chinese economic success is understandable, my data reveals that it is not the outgrowth of what Samuel Huntington famously called a “clash of civilizations,” but rather the extension of a more

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9 The idea was first articulated in a 1971 essay written by Stephen Jay Gould and Elisabeth Vrba. The classic example of bird feathers is used in evolutionary biology to explain how the function of specific traits might shift. Steven Johnson uses this concept to explain how Gutenberg adapted wine-making techniques to the creation of the printing press. See Where Good Ideas Come From (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 153.
fundamental and ongoing redefinition of economic and social identities.

The theoretical upshot here is that while these identities are undoubtedly intertwined, they are not immutable but malleable because their construction and activation are based more on contextual factors rather than supposedly primordial differences between groups. Put another way, daily engagement i.e. lived economic and social experience, coupled with macro level policies, are ultimately more decisive in shaping understandings of and dynamics between groups rather than cultural divides. Hence, as conditions shift, so too will identities. If my position is correct, the integration of Chinese immigrants into Italian and Spanish societies is neither impossible nor dangerous for the long-term prosperity and stability of both countries. Indeed, it may even bolster both.

**Legacies, Networks, and Breakthrough**

Although the Chinese are now a settled community in Italy and Spain, few initially thought they would establish long-term roots when they first arrived in the mid-late 1980s. However, demographic decline, inconsistent and lax enforcement of immigration policies, and China’s reintegration into the international economic system set the stage for an accidental but perfect storm. The opening of an unprecedented gateway to southern Europe prompted many Chinese to reassess their options and eventually, move.

Of these developments, China’s post-1978 reforms were perhaps the most decisive in “pushing” Chinese migrants towards Europe. Seeking to revitalize a stagnant economy, the Chinese party-state under the direction of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping gradually dismantled Maoist policies and encouraged private enterprise and more market-based production. With the de-collectivization of agriculture and the acceleration of the economic boom, villagers,
especially those in the interior regions of the country, increasingly evaded the strictures of the household registration (hukou) system, a set of controls imposed during the Maoist period to prevent rural-urban migration, and took on the most arduous factory and construction jobs in the country’s major metropolises. They became a “floating population” (liudong renkou), temporary sojourners numbering in the tens of millions, who were critical in transforming China into the world’s leading industrial workshop. Despite suffering from pervasive discrimination and exploitation during their time in the cities, many migrants returned to their homes with new skills and perspectives and some hard earned money to start businesses of their own, heightening the prospects for change in their hometowns.

In the international arena, a more open and cooperative stance emerged in tandem with the swing in domestic policies. Recognizing that China could not modernize its economy without foreign assistance, government officials encouraged more international investment, joint venture projects, and engagement with the outside world. While this spawned new partnerships with major corporations like Volkswagen and General Electric, this policy shift also aimed to re-engage Chinese Diaspora communities worldwide. Historically, overseas Chinese have served as a crucial source of startup capital for ventures back home and a valuable connection and resource for relatives and friends seeking to follow in their footsteps. It is under these auspices that residents of Zhejiang – specifically, Wenzhou and Qingtian – began re-establishing themselves in Italy and Spain.

Wenzhou and Qingtian natives were able to do so partly because of their historic ties to Europe, which date back to the late nineteenth century. The historian Philip Kuhn traces the

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beginnings of the relationship to stone carvings that an enterprising native first began selling in the late nineteenth century:

Europe (host today to a burgeoning Wenzhouese population) first attracted immigrants from nearby Qingtian county in a hardscrabble border area up the Ou River from Wenzhou city. Qingtian, Though mountainous and dirt poor, boasted one salable resource – an attractive pale-green soapstone that local artisans carved into decorative shapes. These carvings reportedly were first sold as curios to foreigners in China in the 1880s by a Qingting man. Having discovered their market value, he and other sculptors (the story goes) boarded a steamer to France in 1893, which was the beginning of Wenzhou-area emigration to Europe. The ensuing outflow, sparked by fabulous stories about quick riches (including one in which a Qingtian emigrant presented a carving to the Dutch Queen), provided the bridgehead for a surge of Wenzhou-to-Europe migration after World War II.12

Even today, rock quarries in Qingtian continue to operate as miners dig for a rapidly dwindling supply of the pale-green soapstone that became a sensation in Europe more than a century ago. More important, the Chinese state’s unwillingness to invest in the area’s physical and social infrastructure compelled area residents to adopt outmigration as a survival strategy, and over time, see it as a local tradition and even, a rite of passage. A 30-year-old male owner of a small grocery in Madrid, a Qingtian native himself, notes how the area’s historic underdevelopment and the high rates of outmigration among residents are connected. He states: “Qingtian natives I have to say are not well educated. Our area is not known for producing any industrial goods or other tradable commodities. Over half of the Qingtian population has family overseas; in some cases, the entire family lives overseas.”13 He explains further that the area’s recent economic upswing is largely due to the contributions of migrants: “I remember reading a report about a professor in China who was curious about why Qingtian is so wealthy despite having no industry, etc. Through his research, he discovered that area residents are prosperous because they

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13 Respondent S63, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 22, 2011. His account accords with comparative data we have for Qingtian’s neighbors, the residents of Wenzhou. According to Kuhn, “out of a population of about 6.9 million (1994), Wenzhou municipality recorded 165,000 as living in Europe, 95% in France, Holland, Italy, and Spain.” Kuhn, 336.
receive remittances from relatives abroad that total $5 million per day!”

When I visited Qingtian in June 2011, I saw how those remittances transformed the areas bordering the Ou River, precipitating a binge of hotel construction and the proliferation of restaurants and bars (some like Barcelona Bar named after the very cities in which their compatriots made their fortunes). Although the less accessible quarters near the mountains and away from the river were just beginning to show more ostensible signs of development, it was clear that the area was at long last developing and moving beyond its historic dependence on mining.

While recognizing the significance of ecology and sociopolitical context on the area’s developmental history and traditions, one cannot explain the success of Qingtian and Wenzhou natives abroad without accounting for the extensive and tight-knit family and social networks to which they belong. To be sure, natives of other regions like Guangdong and Fujian can also boast of broad, supportive networks; however, Qingtianese and Wenzhounese networks are well-known for their ability to amass and share capital, resources, know-how, and even labor on a scale and for a longer duration that few others can match and none can exceed. Working with fellow natives (tongxiang), they could “hit the ground running” so to speak after completing the long and often treacherous journey from China to Europe, which often involved taking the overland route through Russia and Eastern Europe.

Another respondent, a male owner of a wholesale clothing shop in Barcelona who has lived in Spain for 17 years could only express deep admiration for them:

90% of the Chinese here are from the Wenzhou or Qingtian region. I am from Shanghai and I have to say that I really admire their collective spirit. People from Shanghai are much more self-interested: you keep your money in your pocket and

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14 Respondent S63, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 22, 2011.
15 See Pieke et al., Transnational Chinese.
16 Despite the potential dangers of riding the Trans-Siberian railroad, this was a popular route because it was relatively inexpensive and border controls were rather loose after the collapse of the Leninist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.
I'll keep my money in my pocket. We don't work together quite as well as they do. I once went out to dinner with a friend from Qingtian. We ran into some of his friends and by the time we were ready to leave, they had already paid for our dinners! Any friend of theirs is treated as if they are part of the group. They really do work together: that's why they've come to own so many large-scale shops in such a short time.\textsuperscript{17}

Arguably, what most distinguishes migrants from this particular region though is their extensive history as entrepreneurs. Even prior to their arrival in Italy and Spain, the Qingtianese and Wenzhouese were already known as some of China’s most formidable and pioneering business people. Their enterprising spirit was partly the outgrowth of the area’s longstanding ecological constraints (mountainous, comparatively inaccessible terrain and lack of resources), which led residents to seek out and collaborate with one another on a wide variety of commercial pursuits, including petty trade, umbrella and shoe production and cotton spinning, in order to survive. These experiences actually enhanced their familiarity with and dexterity in handling business-related challenges; it also strengthened the familial and social connections that they relied on for resources and support. Moreover, decades of isolation and state neglect during the Maoist period only reinforced notions that taking risks was critical to attaining financial security and success. In fact, much like entrepreneurs in California's Silicon Valley, these particular Chinese are not averse to risk, but instead expect and welcome it.\textsuperscript{18} In fact, my prior research on Wenzhou revealed that area natives often feel embarrassed or ashamed if they do not put everything they have – their resources, reputation – on the line as they seek to fulfill their ambitions. This is what they expect of themselves and each other; this is a fundamental feature of the region’s social norms and dynamics.

Nevertheless, none of this explains how or why the Chinese ended up settling in Italy and

\textsuperscript{17} Respondent S35, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 7, 2011.
Spain. According to the respondents, Spain turned out to be a destination by default, born of convenience rather than desire. A Fuzhou native and hair salon owner in Valencia reveals that it was not part of a plan at all: “I went to Hong Kong first things didn't go well there and then I had a relative who said Spain was good. I wanted to go to the US at first…”

Others point out that they had initially emigrated elsewhere, but were unable to secure residency. A Chinese restaurant owner in Santa Coloma (outside of Barcelona) reveals that “I spent some time in Germany but the residency requirements are tough there so I came to Spain instead. To be honest, I would rather go back [to Germany] but I can’t.”

Some younger respondents almost appear to have ended up in Spain by sheer coincidence. Take, for example, the following case – a female Qingtian native in her early 30s, already an owner of a clothing shop in Barcelona after 6 years of residing in Spain. Although she had started a good career as a secondary school teacher, she also craved change:

I am the type who likes excitement and I found teaching to be somewhat dull even though it was very stable. Before I went to the Normal University, my mom even told me, “If you don't want to go into education, you should go abroad and join your aunt.” So there was actually a lot of family pressure. I didn't think much about going abroad at the time, but my family kept reminding me and pressuring me to consider it. Because my aunt had already been here [Barcelona] for sometime, she applied for me as her relative to join her. I didn't think much would come of it, so I sent in my passport application. Who knew that after just one month, my application was approved. My aunt then sent in my application here in Spain and also within one month, my request was approved. After all this, I kind of had to come. So I paid over 100,000 renminbi to get out.

A running joke among Chinese migrants is that all one needs to do is wait five years or so for the Italian government to announce one of its periodic regularizations (santoria) and

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19 Respondent S1, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, June 29, 2008.
20 Respondent S22, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, July 8, 2008.
21 Respondent S32, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 5, 2011.
residency in Italy could be attained. Several respondents admitted that while Italy was not their top choice, securing residency there nevertheless had its advantages. They could travel freely and visit family and friends living elsewhere in the European Union; they also enjoyed and benefited from Italy’s generous social welfare policies, especially health care, in ways that Chinese migrants elsewhere in Europe could not. As Kitty Calavita has noted, this is how “Italy became a ‘back door’ to the rest of Europe…[and] an alternative to northern destinations.”

Although virtually none of my respondents considered Italy or Spain top destinations, they nevertheless acknowledged how starting over in southern Europe afforded them more freedom and opportunity than they first imagined.

**Textiles and Tensions in Prato and Beyond**

Prato is Italy’s historic textile hub and home to one of the largest, if not the largest, Chinese communities in Italy. Estimates on the size of the community, however, range widely: the commune of Prato claims that Chinese with legal residence status number approximately 10,000, but informal accounts suggest the total number of Chinese ranges from 20,000 to 40,000 (including those who are undocumented) out of an aggregate 180,000 for the entire city. Based on these numbers, the Chinese would constitute eleven to sixteen percent of the city’s population. Most of the Chinese in Prato work in the textiles-apparel and leather goods sectors, which have simultaneously taken full advantage of the low wage labor provided by the Chinese while supplying those same workers with employment and skill development. Indeed, these

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early apprenticeships provided them with valuable experience and insights into these industries, which they later used to launch their own companies.

In addition, comparatively permissive local policies regarding migrants, partly born of local political rivalries, made it easier for the Chinese to settle in Prato. A Chinese respondent, a male college student, part-time cultural mediator, and ten-year resident of the city, recounts the situation in the following manner:

Prato encouraged the Chinese to settle here. One of the reasons had to do with the city's desire to become independent of Florence. Before, Prato was under the jurisdiction of Florence. In order to become independent, it had to reach municipality status, which requires a population of 180,000. The city loosened laws so that Chinese owners could have workers live on factory premises [and thus, increase the resident population].

Another Chinese gentlemen in his 40s who currently serves as a Chinese business association representative and has lived in Italy since 1998, echoes this point as well, emphasizing that Italians initially welcomed the Chinese to achieve their own political objectives:

[The] Pratesi need to remember that in order for the city to become independent of Florence, it needed a population of 170,000 [or 180,000. It’s unclear which is correct]. The Chinese came because they could register their workplace as their residence. But two years ago [2008], the government ended this policy. Yet without it, Prato would still be a part of Florence.

Word spread quickly among Wenzhounese networks that Prato was an attractive destination. He continues:

There are very few big companies in the area with 50 or more employees. Companies in Prato are typically small family-run businesses and this was attractive to the Chinese as well. Italy fits right in with Chinese family business practices and preferences...You have to think, why didn't Chinese people go to Pistoia and Arrezo?

24 Respondent I38, personal interview, Campi Bisenzio, Italy, June 27, 2008. It is important to point out that even in the 1960s and 1970s, Italian workers often lived in the factories in which they worked. Despite regulations banning such arrangements, local enforcement of these stipulations was lax.
26 Respondent I38, personal interview, Campi Bisenzio, Italy, June 27, 2008.
A Chinese newspaper editor concurs: “Their [Wenzhounese] small, family-based businesses are actually a great fit for the production structure of the Italian economy. Its small scale and batch oriented production allows them to survive without large capital investment.”

For example, one respondent, a Jiangsu native in his 50s who owns a small firm on the outskirts of Milan, told me that his sewing machines cost €1,300 each (I counted seven in his workshop) and rent was €1,400 per month. To him, these costs were not prohibitive at all. As another Wenzhounese working in a purse factory put it: “It's not too hard to start a company here if you work for a few years and save some money – you can borrow the rest from relatives. With €50,000, you can be your own boss.”

Indeed, once Chinese migrants had settled in Prato, kith and kin were crucial in helping them understand and meet business requirements. Thus, even though few, if any, of the migrants possessed extensive prior knowledge of Italy in general and Prato in particular, many did feel a gut level familiarity or resonance with their new environment. They felt comfortable.

Still, the textiles-apparel industry remains a tough and competitive enterprise. Although the Chinese are now engaged in nearly every aspect of the industry, from fabric dyeing and printing to even fashion design, the majority of Chinese firms remain engaged in the nitty-gritty production of clothes. Most notably, they are closely associated with a specific niche of the broader market, pronto moda. Pronto moda or “ready to wear” garments epitomize what is fashionable, what’s “hot” to a largely twenty-something crowd. To them, what's hot at any given moment is shaped by, among other things, variations in fabric, color, pattern, and cut and in many cases, departures from the more mainstream look promoted by retail chain stores.

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30 Pronto moda garments are typically less expensive than clothes sold in retail stores and thus, especially attractive to consumers with more limited incomes.
While relatives and associates are attuned to trends and provide valuable market analysis (Chinese social networks encompass all of Italy and other parts of Europe like Spain), the unpredictability of popular tastes nevertheless prevents these companies from making mass quantities of a specific item. Also, given the short turnaround time demanded by clients, the situation becomes fraught with stress, as one Chinese textiles enterprise owner explains:

It’s really hard to work with Chinese customers [who order *pronto moda* garments]. Sometimes they will come to us with a design and ask us to make a sample. I usually make it myself especially if it might result in a large order because I don’t trust the workers to be very careful with such an important task. The problem is that the customer comes in during the afternoon and if they like the sample, they want the order filled the next morning or within two days. Although they often only want one to 40-60 pieces total, the deadline is very tight. Italian companies are a bit better. They tell us what they want two months in advance but they also are stricter about quality.31

A female Wenzhouese who had recently moved to Prato after selling her factory in Naples stresses similar points:

We used to own an apparel company in Naples. The Chinese own many apparel factories there: mine made children’s clothing [woolen jackets]. But it was hard to stay in business and hard for workers too. Owners had many burdens – it wasn’t easy. We took orders from Italian companies but didn’t do much work for Chinese clients. Chinese customers would usually come in asking for 100 pieces of something and if we took that order, we’d have to work through the night so that the goods could be shipped the next morning. It was too grueling so we stopped doing that kind of work.32

A typical workday can last more than ten hours and involve the completion of 1,000-2,000 pieces during that span. In contrast to the more conventional 9-5 regimen, employees in textiles-apparel firms “start work in the afternoon and [continue] through the night, finishing around 3-4 a.m. Workers sleep from around 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.” They also take several breaks for meals from 3-4 p.m., 7-8 p.m., 10-11 p.m., and 2-3 a.m.33 Seeking to capitalize on fast-changing trends, these factories have little alternative but to operate through the night so as to meet early

morning pickup/delivery times. One consequence, as a worker at a synthetic fabric company succinctly and wryly noted, is that “Italians work eight hours per day [while] the Chinese only rest eight hours per day.”[^34] The irony is that the Chinese today are how the Italians used to be, according to a retired Italian academic:

We Italians used to work 12-14 hours per day as well. Just 20 years ago, I remember my father asking my mother’s uncle how much he earned. The uncle said, “500,000 lire.” My father said he earned twice that by working 12 hours per day. Italians also wanted to drive a Mercedes! The Chinese learned from us, especially how to engage in “black work” [uninsured, informal, undocumented work].[^35]

While pronto moda’s emphasis on small batch production involves less overall financial risk for these family-based companies, it also limits their opportunities for growth. The reality is that pronto moda garments simply do not command the high prices and high profit margins typically associated with designer label apparel. Making matters worse is fierce competition from new firms eager to secure just a small slice of the market.[^36] In 2007, I visited a small textile operation in Prato, just off Via Pistoiese, and the owner, a man in his late 20s and a native of Qingtian, offered the following assessment with some frustration:

It's really getting competitive. When a customer asks for a quote, I might say €4 per piece. But someone else will come along and drop it to €3.80 and another will drop it even further to €3.60. Sometimes they are not making any profit whatsoever. They are breaking even but hoping to get more contracts in the future. I don't care if I lose a contract – maybe your quality is better or you have a longstanding relationship with a client. That's fine. But the pricing should all be the same. No one can make any money this way. Chinese are always fighting themselves.[^37]

In 2010, the situation was even worse. Another owner, a male Wenzhounese in his 50s who has been in Italy since 1990, was especially agitated when discussing the challenges he faces:

[^34]: Respondent I19, personal interview, Prato, Italy, July 2007.
[^36]: Observers estimate that there are between 4,000-7,000 small enterprises in Prato, including those that are not officially registered.
Chinese competition is crazy. I don’t take orders where the profits are lower than €1.5 per piece. Take this coat, for example. I would charge €10-11 but another competitor is offering to do it for €6.9. The material already costs €3; I outsource the button sewing – that’s €2, then you have to sew and ship and there are utility costs as well. It’s outrageous that some folks will do the work for €0.1 per piece!\(^\text{38}\)

In addition to low pricing, these firms have to contend with slow-paying and even late-paying clients. Pinched for cash themselves, the customers buy largely on credit and promise to settle their outstanding debts once the merchandise has been completely sold off. The danger of course is that the products may fizzle in the market and result in losses, further tightening already strained finances. The Chinese owner from Jiangsu cited earlier worries about how long he can hold out, especially with seven employees under his charge:

I have one really good friend who borrowed money from another friend to loan to me because I had €80,000 in unpaid work orders! It was scary. Last year [2007] it took my customers eight months to pay me. Normally, businesses are supposed to pay within three months. But [some of my Italian customers] held the money for much longer – they say they can't pay until their customers have paid them. But right now, I owe €10,000 in back pay – it's making me nervous. It's been four months since my clients have paid me.\(^\text{39}\)

Without steady cash flow, these companies are understandably reluctant to expand their operations and acquire better, more expensive machinery. To alleviate these pressures, some have adapted by moving up the production chain, shifting away from low-end items and more towards expensive goods like those of Giorgio Armani and Dolce & Gabbana. A young Chinese leathers goods seller describes the situation in the following terms:

My cousin owns a factory [near Milan] that makes purses for Dolce & Gabbana. They sell the products for approximately €100 each to Dolce & Gabbana, but Dolce & Gabbana sells the bags for over €1000 each. They have higher rents and overall cost to be sure, but people are willing to pay because they want the brand. It’s true they have very high and exacting standards. They want better zippers and metal rings, for example. And because it’s Dolce & Gabbana, the Chinese workers are more careful. With the merchandise we sell, they don’t

\(^{38}\) Respondent I44, personal interview, Prato, Italy, July 18, 2010.  
\(^{39}\) Respondent I22, personal interview, Milan, Italy, June 14, 2008.
need to be as rigorous. Chinese workers are smart: they don’t need to pay quite as much attention to these goods because the profits are so low.40

Such moves certainly involve a good measure of risk, but it is precisely this nimbleness and willingness to make rapid strategic shifts that sets Chinese businesses apart and more importantly, keeps them afloat.

**Stereotypes, Social Friction, and Citizenship in Italy**

Although Sino-Italian friction has often been portrayed as the consequence of cultural or civilizational conflict, especially by the popular media, these tensions arguably spring more from structural features and transformations. Put another way, Chinese migrants and Italian citizens are not predestined to struggle with one another because of irreducible, primordial differences and allegiances. Instead, friction arises more from unorthodox work schedules, difficulties in language acquisition, and a seemingly self-imposed isolation by both communities. Around them exists an edifice of *constructed* stereotypes and misperceptions, ones that have seriously damaged relations between the two groups, but also ones that can ultimately be corrected.

In some sense, this feels counter-intuitive. The mistrust between Chinese and Italians runs deep and has not dissipated but increased in recent years. An Italian man in his thirties, the founder of a school in Bologna, suggests that perceptions, especially negative ones, remain “sticky” and relatively unaffected by new information:

> Italian perceptions of the Chinese are slowly changing but only among a small group of people. Most Italians don’t know much about the Chinese and I don’t have any friends who are currently studying Chinese. My former secretary studied Chinese though and became quite good. She started learning while working for me and then she went to China and learned even more. But now as China’s economy is growing and Chinese power is increasing, I think more Italians are taking notice. Most Italians believe the Chinese are very quiet and keep to themselves. They are not well-integrated into Chinese society because there is no need to be. They have their own

40 Respondent I73, personal interview, Venice, Italy, August 4, 2010.
language, friends, businesses, and community. Because of this, many Italians think they are dangerous.\(^{41}\)

Contrast this with the views of an older gentleman, the salesman I cited earlier:

I don’t have a problem with immigrants who come here and work hard and want to integrate into Italian society. That’s not a problem – you have to be able to adjust to the host country. Take, for example, a Chinese girl I know. She came to Italy when she was very young and she has a younger sister who was born in Italy. She speaks perfect Italian and graduated from an Italian college. Now she is serving as a language and cultural mediator in a hospital, helping people who can’t communicate in Italian. Her father is an accountant and her mother also works full-time. They don’t live only among the Chinese; they live among the Italians. I don’t mind if you want to speak Chinese or Arabic at home, but you also have to learn Italian. It’s not right if you only speak Arabic all day and nothing else.\(^{42}\)

In both cases, the respondents identify a pervasive assumption that the Chinese and most other, if not all immigrants do not want to or worse, are incapable of integrating or assimilating into Italian society. Others have taken the numerous Chinese business and cultural associations that exist today as evidence that the Chinese want to live a world apart from Italians, forgetting that those groups serve those who are unable to, at least for the time being, function effectively in Italian society. Still, these perceptions point to a very critical development, the very high expectations that many Italians have in connection to immigrants in general and the Chinese in particular. These are not expectations that can be met overnight.

Nevertheless, many Chinese have tried. Recognizing that they cannot function as independent individuals, let alone enjoy all that Italy has to offer, they struggle to improve their Italian in those rare moments when they are free from work. Unfortunately for most, their window of opportunity is a small one, as is the case with this Wenzhounese woman:

I’d like to learn more Italian but I can only take classes in August when there are fewer work orders and people are on holiday. My husband took classes for three months last year but it was hard to keep up with work while watching my two kids. I know a lot of words but don't understand any grammar -- but when I speak to clients, they understand

\(^{41}\) Respondent I2, personal interview, Bologna, Italy, July 14, 2007.
\(^{42}\) Respondent I9, personal interview, Florence, Italy, July 22, 2007.
what I mean [laughs]. My husband knows grammar but he doesn't speak up – he's embarrassed whenever he says anything wrong. Inquisitive and outgoing, her brother-in-law found an exciting and unconventional way of picking up slang and interacting with locals. As he put it, “I learned Italian by watching sports in a bar. I have no sense of proper grammar but I do have a pretty good vocabulary just from listening to people there [laughs]. Although both are enthusiastic about learning, their textile business precludes them from enrolling in day and night classes. They are asleep during the day and at work during the night. The culprit here is not indifference or utter disregard for Italy, but their atypical work schedules.

To be sure, stereotypes run rampant among the Chinese as well. Some interpret their own taxing schedules to mean that the Chinese are inherently more industrious and more deserving than Italians. In the words of a young Chinese entrepreneur in Milan: “Italians are jealous that we drive BMWs and Mercedes and they drive Fiats. They're upset that we've worked hard and achieved something. It's not our fault that they don't set their sights as high as we do.” This statement reveals a rather unusual conflation of class and ethnic identity: economic success exacerbates the cultural divide that already exists between the two groups. Another Chinese woman in Milan expressed similar views but also distinguished the suspicions of older Italians from the openness of younger Italians:

Italians are not like the French. The French actually respect Chinese people. They understand the culture and outlook. The Italians don't know much at all: they focus on all the negative stories they see in the news like the situation in Tibet, no elections, etc. But so few of them have been to China so they don't know how things really are. Some of the younger Italians though do understand and they are much better in comparison to the older generation. They don't like us at all; they are suspicious and don't want us here.

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43 Respondent I16, personal interview, Prato, Italy, July 27, 2007. It is also important to note that most language classes are taught during the day, the time when most workers in the textiles industry are either asleep or preparing to go to work.
45 Respondent I24, personal interview, Milan, Italy, June 17, 2008.
We wouldn't be here either if there wasn't a chance for us to make some money. Chinese and Italians are very different in many ways. Italians really like to enjoy themselves: they go on holiday for as long as possible but for us, a few days is fine. We just see things differently.\textsuperscript{46}

In short, the Italians are and always will be the way they are and the same goes for the Chinese. There is little room for anyone to change and grow. All of this is just as inaccurate and negative as the stereotypes that Italians unfairly foist upon the Chinese. Moreover, the problem with such statements is that they essentialize differences in outlook and practices that are fluid and inchoate and transform them into things immutable and eternal. They provide an easy explanation of hardship and suffering that relieves the accuser of any responsibility in the matter, placing the blame entirely on the shoulders of the “other.” Not surprisingly, as these stereotypes harden, frustration and rage only increase on both sides.

Under such circumstances, it seems unlikely that any Chinese would ever seek or want Italian citizenship. When I asked my respondents whether or not they wanted citizenship, nearly all were either non-committal or against acquiring Italian citizenship. For some, it is simply an issue of practicality. For Chinese traveling to China with a non-Chinese passport, getting a visa is a hassle, especially if they visit several times a year to either see family or conduct business. Another respondent would not even consider the possibility, underscoring the corrosive effect of discrimination:

Even if I carry an Italian passport, I wouldn't feel Italian. I'm still Chinese. When Italians look at me, they only see an Asian face. I'd only get the Italian citizenship for tax purposes or other benefits. I don't want it for any other reason, even if the Italian government gave it to me as a gift.\textsuperscript{47}

Others have cited the complicated requirements of naturalization, citing the use of \textit{jus sanguinis} (citizenship by ancestry or “blood”) to prevent those without such backgrounds from ever

\textsuperscript{46} Respondent I23, personal interview, Milan, Italy, June 15, 2008.
\textsuperscript{47} Respondent I35, personal interview, Prato, Italy, June 25, 2008.
gaining citizenship. According to several respondents, until last year (pending a revised citizenship law), children born on Italian soil of Chinese parents did not and could not formally hold Italian citizenship. Only when they turned 18 and became legal adults, however, do they have the option of acquiring of Italian citizenship. Until then, the Italian government views them as sharing the same citizenship as their parents. Her again, it is structural attributes—the government’s narrow definition of political membership i.e. citizenship—that are contributing to persistent tensions between the Chinese and Italians.48

What are the prospects for positive change in the near future? Despite the semi-hostile political environment, they are arguably better than one might expect. As language barriers fall and daily interactions increase, mutual understanding between Chinese and Italians continues to improve, albeit slowly. A retired Prato native expressed very positive views about the Chinese and contended that with time, most of the current frictions will disappear:

We do need to improve connections with the major problem is language. 50% of the problem will go away once communication improves. This is a problem that will go away in a generation.

I went to our nearby park where many older Chinese gather and practice taiji at 9 a.m. in the morning. I asked the teacher if I could learn as well and even though we didn't have an extensive conversation, they welcomed me. I have been going for about a year but can't remember all the movements [laughs].49

Contrary to conventional expectations and scholarship, it is the older Italians, especially those who migrated to Tuscany from the south in the 1960s, who understand the plight of Chinese migrants. The parallels between their own experiences and those of the Chinese are uncanny, much to the shock of one young Chinese male:

When I've talked to older Italians, I'm surprised that they understand our situation. They say that when they as southerners came to Prato decades ago to work in the textile mills,

they suffered discrimination as well. It was clear from their accents; they were treated just as badly as immigrants are today. They reminisce about festivals and holidays they enjoyed during their childhood. There is still a big festival in Prato that is more a Southern tradition but that's because the community here is so big. [Some of them] have thought about going back [to the south] but they've been here for a long time now and after having kids especially, it's much harder for them to move. They have roots here now.  

Other Italian respondents took the government to task for current tensions. A Pratesi man in his mid-50s states: “The current immigration issues are the fault of Italians and the Italian government. If we had made clear rules for everyone to follow right at the beginning, relations between the Chinese and Italians would be much better.” An Italian woman in her mid-50s also echoes this point: “Although Italians blame the Chinese for breaking the laws, this result is our fault. We haven’t made clear what we want and how they should behave. If we were clear right from the beginning that any immigrant who wants to stay must do things the Italian way, the situation wouldn’t be as chaotic as it is now.” Amazingly, many of my Italian respondents pointed more to structural deficiencies, not cultural differences as the primary reason for friction between migrants and Italians. What this implies is that many of the current problems can be resolved through more effective policies (undoubtedly a big “if”), increased understanding, and greater tolerance. A high-ranking representative of a local school (a native and life-long resident of Prato) offers this sophisticated and thorough assessment:

The political environment right now is not good for immigrants, but I think immigration is a positive phenomenon. The Pratesi are at fault for current attitudes. For years, the left did nothing so stereotypes flourished. People still believe that the Chinese are stealing jobs. No one has done a serious analysis of the challenges posed by migration. Chinese migration took place during a crisis in Prato. The Chinese are being blamed for it, but no one realizes that it would have happened anyway. The analysis should have been about the economy before the arrival of the Chinese in order for us to understand the full picture.

In my opinion, the Chinese involvement and role in the local economy will deepen and lead us to a new stage of development. The Chinese are investing here while Italians invest

50 Respondent I38, personal interview, Prato, Italy, June 27, 2008.
elsewhere. The Chinese are keeping Prato alive. I spoke with some Italian kids and they said their fathers work in a Chinese-owned factory! Their bosses are Chinese. No one sees this. All they do is blame without understanding that Italians can work because of the Chinese.  

Indeed, perceptions are shifting in a subtle but significant way and the impact on relations between the two groups is palpable.

Among teens and twenty-somethings especially, differences are being bridged. Although little or no survey data exists to confirm such changes as robust trends, there is no doubt that small pockets of tolerance and exchange now exist. One Italian respondent has witnessed this personally. As he puts it: “I have seen some Chinese and Italians who are good friends and even some [Chinese-Italian] couples. Maybe with more time things will improve even more.”

Another Chinese respondent uses her personal experience to guide her rather than reports by the media or stereotypes:

I want to have more Italian friends. I get along with my next-door neighbors. They are really nice. Because we work at night, some neighbors complained about the noise. We try to keep it down but one lady across the street complained of threatened to call the police. My next-door neighbors told her that we were good people and don't cause problems and they were able to calm her down. She hasn't complained since! Sometimes I bring them some small gifts like fruits or treats and they are delighted. There are some really wonderful Italian people.

Economic Transformation and the Chinese in Spain

The Chinese experience in Spain is notable for its striking resemblance to that of their counterparts in Italy. The seemingly unlimited potential of the post-Franco Spanish economic boom, coupled with a smaller-scale demographic transition, generated dynamics similar to Italy’s and opened the door for the Chinese and other migrants to take low-skilled jobs, especially in the textile and shoe industries.

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53 Respondent #52, personal interview, Prato, Italy, July 26, 2010.
One of the earliest Chinese communities in Spain emerged in Elche, a town in Alicante province, to the south of Valencia. A Wenzhou-based shoe wholesaler who has resided in Spain for over 20 years explains:

There are over 500 Chinese in Elche. There are more than 100 businesses here, [even a] market and each employs 3-4 people... Wenzhou natives own half of the businesses here. We sell shoes made in China. This is Spain’s shoe capital, at least it was 5-6 years ago. Some Chinese work in Spanish companies – some work in shoe stitching, for example.56

His comment is particularly revealing: while Chinese migrants had indeed taken some jobs previously held by Spanish workers, they still preferred to own and operate their own businesses. As more relatives and fellow natives joined them, they drew upon their social networks to catapult themselves towards economic independence and enhance their competitiveness vis-à-vis Spanish rivals. Indeed, they went well beyond. In tapping into China’s rapidly expanding shoe production capacity to satisfy their own economic aims, these migrants turned entrepreneurs inadvertently but effectively brought global competition directly to local Spanish industry and with it, charges of infringement and conflict. Another Chinese shoe wholesaler describes the situation in these terms:

The Elche Incident three years ago [2005] was unfair in terms of Spanish accusations that the Chinese illegally copied Spanish designs. There is only so much you can do with a shoe; the designs are limited. And Elche was in decline before the Chinese arrived. Spanish shoe company executives began importing from China and so we paid attention to where these orders were coming from. We thought this was a good opportunity so we came. Even the Italians invested here after their production costs went up.57

Hence, while Rafaela Dancygier is correct to note that immigrant-native conflict arises as economic pressures mount, it is important to remember that during this earlier stage of Chinese migration to Spain, the forces that were upending economic dynamics at the local level went well

beyond the migrants themselves and were actually global in nature. A Spanish textiles company executive acknowledges this point:

The industrial net [industry] is disappearing. 10 years ago, there were many companies. What is happening in Spain is like what happened in the United States 10 years ago except that Spain can't switch from manufacturing to trading as quickly as the US did. People can't switch as quickly, especially older people. So many of our looms have been sold to China and Pakistan. They would be worthless if we just kept them here.

He also recognizes that within these changed circumstances, companies need to devise new strategies rather than simply engage in a race to the bottom. He notes:

We hope to keep our business going but must keep adapting. Maybe we will only have 150 workers in five years, who knows? We can compete only in turning out good quality, small batches and in designs. In Ontinyent, there are 30-40 big companies employing over 100 people each. But we can't compete in terms of quantity. If, say an item costs €12-13/piece in China versus €15-16 in Spain, we won't win.

As global production shifted in new directions, so too did the basic structure of the local political economy.

Nevertheless, as competition increased and job prospects in the sector waned, the Chinese branched out into a host of more service-oriented sectors, including hair salons, restaurants, and markets. However, the emerging constellation of businesses is not merely the backbone of an “ethnic economy”; in fact, these shops serve an increasingly non-Chinese clientele, forcing their owners to learn new routines as well as the preferences of their customers. These shifts pose new challenges. An older Qingtianese, a gentleman in his 70s and a president of one of the local native-place associations, confides that business diversification has been marked by a frenzied, helter-skelter quality:  

[The Chinese] started off working in the most labor intensive jobs like restaurants

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59 Respondent S2, personal interview, Ontinyent, Spain, July 4, 2008.
60 Respondent S2, personal interview, Ontinyent, Spain, July 4, 2008.
and textiles…But now Chinese businesses have become more diverse and we have different kinds of shops and some Chinese even work for Spanish companies.

The problem that we Chinese have is that we all rush in to the same line of business if people think it is a good bet. These baiyuan shops [bazaar or “dollar” stores] are a perfect example. They sell all sorts of daily necessities but once the Chinese all started to open these kinds of shops, the market became oversaturated and was unsustainable. Now the Chinese are buying up bars because people think it is more stable.\(^{61}\)

An employee at a wholesale garments shop in Barcelona concurs with the assessment:

Two years ago [2006], there were very few Chinese stores in this area, but since then there has been an explosion in the number of shops. It seems like everyone was getting into the business and now the rage is cafés. Everyone thinks that cafés offer steadier business but it’s grueling. You have to be there early in the morning and late at night.\(^{62}\)

The move towards diversification resulted not only from intensifying competition amongst the Chinese themselves, but a major demographic and social shift, the retirement of a generation of Spanish shopkeepers and their children’s pursuit of professional careers and turn away from the family business. The Chinese filled this vacuum, taking on punishing regimens that kept many a neighborhood’s economic and social vitality intact. A female Wenzhounese café owner in Manises (near Valencia) highlights just how taxing her enterprise is:

This is the toughest job. We open at eight in the morning and sometimes we don't go home until 3:30 a.m.! What can you do when customers stay and don't go home? We have to stay open. Even though my husband and I and our employees rotate, he sometimes only sleeps for three hours before coming back at 6:30 to get ready. I usually come in the late morning to get ready for the big lunch rush.\(^{63}\)

In addition to a punishing work regimen, she must also contend with aggressive rivals who are more than willing to engage in “self-exploitation” in order to lure away her customers. She continues:

When I first took over this bar, I was the only one in the area. Now there are two

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\(^{61}\) Respondent S31, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 5, 2011.

\(^{62}\) Respondent S26, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, July 10, 2008.

\(^{63}\) Respondent S48, personal interview, Manises, Spain, April 13, 2011.
more Chinese owned bars on the street. The competition is really fierce – why is it that the Chinese have to always be competing against one another? Couldn't they have gone a little farther away? You see the liqueur that those two men just drank? I used to charge €3.5 for a glass one year ago [2010]; now I can only charge €1.5. I used to charge €1.6 for a beer at now I can only charge €1.1 and on top of that, I have to give customers two tapas (peanuts and olives). This is all because of the other Chinese owned cafés nearby. They keep dropping their prices and I have to do the same.⁶⁴

What is apparent here is the Janus-faced quality of the social networks to which these migrants belong. On the one hand, these connections provide the critical resources that allow a would-be entrepreneur to enter into a particular line of business. This partially explains how and why Chinese businesses achieved rapid proliferation and domination of specific markets. On the other hand, the oversaturation of these sectors underscores the relative inability of these networks to self-regulate and stabilize the dynamics between competing businesses within a specific sector.

In fact, declining revenue, especially in the context of Spain’s deepening economic crisis, produced a shakeout with numerous businesses going bankrupt. With the halcyon days of seemingly endless profits now behind them, more and more Chinese migrants realize that they might have to adopt different strategies in order to survive. Some, like this Wenzhounese grocer in Madrid, have simply scaled back their dreams:

I don't really think about making it big anymore. When I was in the wholesale garment business, I was doing well but then lost a few million euros. I then decided to buy this grocery store and as long as I can feed my family, I'm okay with being a small business owner. It certainly hasn't been easy. Since everyone is buying less, we just have to stay open and keep working. I pay roughly €2000 in rent every month and my Spanish landlord has been unwilling to reduce the rent. He's pretty stubborn – he says that if I don't want to pay, I can always close up and he'll find another tenant. All I'm doing right now is making money for him [laughs].⁶⁵

Others have chosen to remain in the same line of business, but have moved out of the major metropolises to smaller towns in northern Spain, for instance, where there are fewer Chinese

⁶⁴ Respondent S48, personal interview, Manises, Spain, April 13, 2011.
⁶⁵ Respondent S49, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 17, 2011.
rivals. Still others are focused on simple trading, selling whatever item that is in high demand at the moment. Adopting a high volume, low margin approach (what I would call the “Costco model”), these entrepreneurs shuttle between Spain and Yiwu, China’s largest market for petty commodities. Not surprisingly, Yiwu is located in the central part of their home province of Zhejiang on China’s southeastern coast where their guanxi or connections and understanding of business norms provides them with an edge in dealmaking. Such a strategy can be both expensive and risky given high operational costs and the unpredictability of consumer tastes. Nevertheless, the payoff can be huge given the right circumstances and timing, as one female Qingtianese woman explains:

We go to China once a month to place orders. At first, it was hard, but now we are used to traveling back and forth. The tickets are not too expensive – €600-700. A lot of our goods are from Zhejiang. Some things sell out very quickly. Take Spanish flags, for example. They’ve been popular since Spain won the World Cup. One of my friends brought in a big shipment of them. In China, they only cost 0.6 RMB but he sold them here initially for one euro, then two euros, then three euros, and then six euros! Spanish people were lining up to buy them and he just couldn't sell them fast enough. I don't know how much she made but it was quite a lot.

This was clearly a case of taking full advantage of a one-time event, Spain’s victory over the Netherlands in the 2010 World Cup, but it also testifies to the business acumen of these entrepreneurs. They recognized an emerging need and quickly tapped suppliers in China to satisfy market demand.

Equally impressive are those with considerably more capital who are going in the opposite direction: they seek to increase the scale of their operations and enhance their branding with the goal of capturing a larger segment of the market. This is how a Wenzhounese owner of a women’s fashion store in Madrid explains emerging challenges:

What's changed since the economic slump? Before, when the economy was good,
it was easy to sell anything. But now, we must try to create our own distinctive brand. It's not enough to just import apparel from other places and resell it here. The apparel industry in China is a blank slate – it hasn't developed a global brand yet. People know Meters Bonwei in Beijing, Shanghai, but who has heard of them in Europe or the United States? I think we have to develop our own designs, bringing together what we've learned here in Spain with China's market and production.87

Contrary to popular perceptions (fanned by uninformed media and policymakers alike), each of these examples reveal that the Chinese do not, in fact, have a clear and coherent strategy for taking over Europe. Instead, what largely shapes their behavior is a combination of the social and the situational: they seek to secure better futures for themselves and their families, but must do so in a broader but increasingly turbulent socioeconomic environment. In this sense, they are no different from other migrants…or natives for that matter.

(Re)imagined Communities and Identities

Given the striking variation in goals, socioeconomic background, and behavior among Chinese migrants, it seems odd that many observers of transnational migration nevertheless assume that primordial differences are what ultimately determines a migrant’s ability to assimilate or integrate with its venue society. To be sure, even the migrants themselves often express such sentiments, claiming that the values of their new homelands simply do not accord with their own and would undermine who they are. However, my data reveals a different and more nuanced picture, one fraught with both ambivalence and enthusiasm, and deeply shaped by generation, time of arrival, and experience in Spain.

It should come as no surprise that first generation Chinese migrants identify more with their homelands than with their destination societies. Most of them left China when they were already young adults and their understandings and allegiances, consolidated. They are the first to

87 Respondent S60, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 20, 2011.
recognize that their limited language skills and their limited understandings of Spanish social
mores preclude them from full acceptance. A female Wenzhounese grocery shop owner in
Valencia views the situation in blunt terms: “We (Chinese) are still different. The Spanish look at
us and they know we are not Spanish. My kids speak Mandarin and Wenzhou dialect but they are
not Chinese and they are not really Spanish. It’s tough for them. They don’t have too many
Spanish friends.”\textsuperscript{68} A Chinese shoe wholesaler in Elche puts it this way:

> Even though I’ve been here for 20 years, I feel like I have no roots here. In China
> I can be cocky because after all, it’s my home. Here, I feel that Spanish people
> still don’t understand how we Chinese live. We don’t have really deep exchanges.
> There isn’t any kind of unconditional support like I would have from a buddy.
> Look at the guy sitting across from me [his Spanish business associate], we never
> get together beyond having coffee. He doesn’t know what I do and vice versa.\textsuperscript{69}

Similarly, a kind Wenzhounese apparel shop owner, a man who has lived in Barcelona for 20
years, complains:

> For first generation immigrants, it is impossible to fully assimilate. Whenever I
> pick up the phone, Spanish people can tell that I have an accent. They are often
> quite rude. Sometimes I just explode and say, “So I’m Chinese and I don't speak
> Spanish perfectly. You don't have to act that way.” Today, China is also loaning
> money to Spain and has more influence in the world. The Spanish should be more
> aware of this.\textsuperscript{70}

He continues with resignation and disappointment: “I don't know if I will ever be fully accepted
[by the Spanish]. I've known some of my neighbors for more than a decade. Whenever we meet,
I can just tell by the look on their faces that they do not think of me as an equal.”\textsuperscript{71} One of the
more unusual points here is his connection of how he is treated with China’s position in the
world. While recognizing that China may have once been the “sick man of Asia,” his comment
implies that its ascendancy today demands respect and a concomitant change in Spanish attitudes

\textsuperscript{68} Respondent S11, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, July 3, 2008.
\textsuperscript{69} Respondent S15, personal interview, Elche, Spain, July 5, 2008.
\textsuperscript{70} Respondent S34, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 6, 2011.
\textsuperscript{71} Respondent S34, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 6, 2011.
and behavior. In a way, this comment harkens back to Chairman Mao’s declaration on October 1, 1949, the founding date of the People’s Republic, that China had “finally stood up!”

While similar sentiments have been documented in other studies, we must also keep in mind that they rarely stay constant and in fact, vary considerably with swings in the economic and political climate. In short, my respondents recognize that shifts in Spanish attitudes towards them are more the byproduct of specific dynamics and circumstances than the expression of primordial differences. This is exemplified by the current economic downturn and the concomitant uptick in inspections of Chinese businesses. An older Qingtianese man sees revenue as the key motivation: “I think the inspections have to do with the economic downturn in Spain. Chinese businessmen have more cash on hand so the inspectors are bound to try and get their hands on some of that money.”

An owner of a bazaar store in Madrid describes his experience in the following way:

The inspectors are trying to make money for the government. Recently I was given a €4600 fine. They took one of the shirts I sell and analyzed it in a lab. They said that the actual percentage of component materials did not match up with what was shown on the label. There was 1% less cotton and 1% more polyester. It's such a small amount. Maybe their instruments were just slightly off. I asked the lawyer about what to do about this and he said to pay first and then try appealing – what good is that? Once that money goes to government offices, I'll never see it again. Who ever heard of the government paying back money to an ordinary citizen? The legal system is not very good here. It doesn't deter people from stealing.

By contrast, others view the inspections more positively. A jewelry store owner in Santa Coloma (outside Barcelona) explains: “I think having some inspections is good. No country can handle so many illegals – it’s not stable. So many Chinese illegals also make the rest of us who are legal look bad.”

When comparing Spanish and Chinese officials more broadly, many Chinese are

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72 Respondent S33, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 6, 2011.
73 Respondent S50, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 17, 2011.
impressed by their commitment to duty, as was the case with a Wenzhounese mobile phone shop owner:

Spanish officials are not as corrupt -- 99% are good. When my friend was taking his driving test, he tried to bribe the examiner but he was reported and fined afterwards. He was banned from taking the test again. So after that incident, driving instructors all tell students that they should not try to bribe the examiner. I also know another person who was caught for driving without a license. When he tried to give the policeman €1000, he too was reported and fined.75

These divergent perspectives illustrate how astute the migrants have become in analyzing the reasons behind supposed cultural conflict.

For many migrants, their daily interactions with native Spaniards have prompted more reflection rather than recrimination. A Wenzhou native who owns a shop in Manises believes that attitudes are changing:

I haven't felt much discrimination. The government is actually quite friendly – and they have to be now because China is loaning Spain so much money. The people seem to be in the middle. There are some who are nice and some who are not, but most people don't seem to care one way or another.

I think slowly there has been more mutual understanding between the Spanish and Chinese. Many Spanish did not like to eat Chinese dishes, for example. But now, when they go to a Chinese restaurant, they've all figured out that some of the tripe dishes are very good. They didn't want to try it at first but after they did, they liked it and now they are some of their favorite dishes. I think it just takes some time for many of these misunderstandings to break down.76

An arts shop owner in Madrid, a native of China’s Fujian province, echoes this sentiment:

The Spanish are tolerant people. Many are interested in learning more about Chinese culture, although these people are usually better educated and wealthier. In my calligraphy classes, the Spanish students are very serious – they once complained to the municipal government that more classes on calligraphy should be scheduled because the subject is very complex and they needed more sessions in order to understand its more subtle aspects.77

On the contrary, the Chinese often feel embarrassed by their brethren and their habits. As a

75 Respondent S6, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, July 1, 2008.
76 Respondent S47, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, April 13, 2011.
77 Respondent S66, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 23, 2011.
Wenzhounese grocer puts it: “the Chinese also have bad habits. People still spit in the street and even if some people want to change, with everyone else doing it, no one will. Good people can go bad based on what others are doing.”

A young Wenzhounese woman in her early 20s could barely contain her exasperation when speaking of other migrants:

Chinese people can be very uncouth. When they sit on the benches in the plaza, they take up all the space and don’t share with others. No wonder the Spanish complain. A neighbor of mine put a blanket out on her balcony to dry but didn’t notice it was dripping all over the shop sign below. I ran over and told her to move her blanket. I don’t want Spanish people to think we are all like this.

Eerily, their assessments parallel those made by the Qing era reformer Liang Qichao during his first visit to New York. Nonetheless, what is evident is that migrants are relying more on their direct experience and less on stereotypes in determining their views of natives and themselves.

To what extent have these dynamics affected Chinese willingness to take Spanish citizenship, a major marker of integration? Here too we mostly see ambivalence and a strong pragmatic bent. For Chinese businesspeople who shuttle frequently between Europe and China especially, Spanish citizenship is inconvenient, but not necessarily problematic in terms of identity. A young Qingtianese woman states that “we [she and her husband] don't want Spanish citizenship. We came here to work. If we took Spanish citizenship, it would be such a hassle each time we go back to China. It might be good to have Spanish citizenship if you want to go to places like the US, but it's not useful to us.”

Another emphatically declares:

I won't take Spanish citizenship. A lot of my friends call people who give up their Chinese citizenship "traitors." All the Chinese who are now Spanish citizens regret making the change; they think it's too troublesome when they go back. They have to apply for visas and are not treated very well. But with a Spanish passport, it is a lot easier to visit the UK, the US, and of course, other EU

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78 Respondent S7, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, July 2, 2008.
79 Respondent S17, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, July 8, 2008.
81 Respondent S71, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, April 24, 2011.
countries.\textsuperscript{82}

Others sit on the opposite side of the spectrum. Although he had only lived in Spain for seven years when I first interviewed him, this Fujianese man saw citizenship in terms of equality:

I want Spanish citizenship so that I don’t feel like a second-class citizen, even though the Spanish may not think I’m truly Spanish. But it’s more for me and how I feel. It’s not just about convenience, as helpful as having a Spanish passport may be. I want to establish roots here now that my family is here as well—I’m going to be buried here.\textsuperscript{83}

For a young woman who arrived in Spain when she was ten years old, being away from the “old country” for a prolonged period of time has made reorientation towards her adopted newly homeland easier. As she confides, “I have Spanish citizenship now but I don’t feel it’s so different from holding a Chinese passport. I do go back to Wenzhou occasionally but I’m more used to it here; I’ve been away so long that I’m not used to being in China anymore.”\textsuperscript{84}

Contrary to popular perceptions, none of these responses suggest that the Chinese oppose social incorporation or view it as an impossibility. In fact, the vast majority of first generation Chinese I interviewed believed that it was only a matter of time before their children would be more integrated into Spanish society. One Wenzhou woman, the mother of respondent S17, jokes that her children have already assimilated: “My kids are just like foreigners (laowai). They certainly speak Spanish better than I do and they are also more used to the customs here. They can eat bread all day and not have a problem (laughs). My daughter complains that when I cook Chinese food, there is smoke everywhere. She thinks it gets too messy.”\textsuperscript{85} Another young woman who works in a legal services office as an administrative assistant all but concludes that social integration is a function of time spent in a specific environment. She explains:

\textsuperscript{82} Respondent S43, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, April 12, 2011.
\textsuperscript{83} Respondent S1, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, June 29, 2008.
\textsuperscript{84} Respondent S12, personal interview, Valencia, Spain, July 4, 2008.
\textsuperscript{85} Respondent S18, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, July 8, 2008.
When my brother speaks to me, he speaks in Spanish. My parents sometimes chide us and say we should speak in Mandarin. Even though he came when he was nine, he can’t really write in Chinese anymore and he slowly losing his ability to read Chinese as well. It’s really hard – all his friends are Spanish. All my relatives think he will become like a laowai [foreigner or non-Chinese].

One of the most progressive Chinese fathers not only sees incorporation as inevitable, but equally important, as desirable:

My son is 14 and at the top of his class. Of all the shopkeepers here, I'm the most willing to spend on my children's education. All the others spend their money on expanding their shops or opening more of them or even buying houses for their kids. What good is that? I'm not running this business so that my son can take over the operation when I retire. Instead, I want him to get a good education and do something even more important...

If we [the Chinese community] are going to make a breakthrough will have to rely on the second-generation. I have ideas but I'm limited by age and language. My kids aren't – they were born and raised here. They totally understand Spain as a society and the Spanish way of thinking. They'll be the ones to do the things we can't.

Like the Chinese immigrant experience in other parts of the world, most notably North America, the Chinese experience in Spain may be on the cusp of yielding new hybrid forms of ethnic and social identity. Allowing such identities to evolve organically may, in fact, accelerate rather than obstruct the emergence of stronger bridges between the Chinese and Spanish. A young Fujianese man in his mid-twenties who helps run his family’s watch shop in Madrid notes:

Chinese people should maintain their language and culture, but it doesn't mean we should not learn the ways of the Spanish either. Take me, for example. I've been here for 12 years, went to school here speak the language fluently. In some ways, I'm very Spanish. When I went back to China this year for the Spring Festival [New Year], I didn't feel entirely comfortable – I felt there was some distance even though the surroundings were familiar and fun. One Chinese person I met on the plane said, "You don't seem Chinese – don't forget your Chinese heritage!"
But there are many good things about both cultures – why can't we try to adopt the best of both? I don't feel like I am completely Chinese or completely Spanish.

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86 Respondent S21, personal interview, Barcelona, Spain, July 9, 2008.
87 Respondent S60, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 20, 2011.
88 Respondent S75, personal interview, Madrid, Spain, April 25, 2011.
Although this may not accord exactly with the demands of policymakers for complete integration, it nevertheless underscores how dramatically Chinese identity in Iberia has been reshaped in roughly a generation’s time. It also suggests that policies designed to elicit allegiance to the state have rather limited reach and that the locus of identity formation is shifting to the migrants themselves.

Conclusion

This rather loose comparison of the Chinese experience in Italy and Spain suggests first and foremost that things are not as they appear. Although ethnic tensions have escalated in recent years in both Italy and Spain, they are not simply the result of some cataclysmic “clash of civilizations.” While acknowledging that cultural differences do indeed exist between the Chinese, Italians, and Spanish, this essay argues that more fundamental and structural causes underlie the friction between these groups. The pace, scale, and manner of Chinese emigration to Italy and Spain have combined to exacerbate existing problems – chief among them are demographic decline and economic redevelopment – and create new, unanticipated challenges like the much ballyhooed issue of “integration.”

Closer examination of local level dynamics especially reveals that the situation is far more complex and fluid than media and government reports suggest. In schools, cafés, and businesses, the Chinese are interacting with and cooperating with the Italian and Spanish counterparts. Certainly, misunderstandings exist and have, in fact, led to hurt feelings, arguments, and even violence. Nevertheless, my interview data reveals that such incidents are overblown and that the Chinese community is, in fact, learning to adapt to living in Italy and
Spain. Such findings seem remarkable perhaps because it is easy to forget that the Chinese communities in Italy and Spain are little more than a generation old.

Scholars and policymakers alike must remember the enormous progress that the Chinese communities in Italy and Spain have made over the last 25 years. As shopkeepers, restaurateurs, and traders, they have encountered and learned from people from all walks of life. To be sure, the road has been bumpy as well, with misunderstandings and even conflict breaking out over accusations of unfair competition. Nevertheless, it is clear that within the interstices of formal institutions and structures, considerable informal change is taking place and even gaining momentum. Second generation Chinese in Italy and Spain – Chinese-Italians and Chinese-Spaniards – are now coming of age and poised to serve as a possible bridge between their parents’ generation and Italy and Spain, the only real homes they have ever known. As the American philosopher John Dewey once observed, “in America, the hyphen connects instead of separates.”89 Such a view should renew our hopes for the eventual inclusion of the Chinese into an increasingly multicultural and multiethnic Italy and Spain.