ROGHI E SUCCESSO IMPRENDITORIALE
PRATO,
I MIGRANTI CINESI
E IL MERCATO MONDIALE DELLA MODA

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IHEDATA, FIRENZE, 31 MARZO 2014
On 1 December 2013, in the industrial district of Prato, Italy, seven Chinese migrants died in a fire that swept through the building where they worked and lived.

This calamity stirred up NATIONAL OUTRAGE IN THE PRODUCTIVE REGIME OF THE CHINESE MIGRANTS in Italy.
Narrative on the productive regime of the Chinese

narrated

AS A WORKING REGIME AND A MODE OF EXPLOITATION

‘WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS’
创业年代
Legend of Entrepreneurship
李立群 殷桃 迟蓬 张译 靳东 张佳宁
Center of the story is a fairly prosperous family which emigrates from Wenzhou to Tuscany. After reverses in the family’s fortunes, the Chinese businessman’s daughter, young Amy, winds up owning a successful clothing shop in the textile city of Prato.

Problem is that along the way Amy clashes with a Prato manufacturer so seriously that, according to a journalist, Prato makes a “brutta figura” (丢面子). The Prato town council did not appreciate this.
the Chinese Consul general proclaimed ‘the CHINESE GOVERNMENT’S newfound desire to change the brutal exploitation of workers that has been Chinese factories’ modus operandi in Prato for the last 15 years’ (White 2013)
Paroxysmal narrative on the institutions’ role

the international press – echoing the dominant Italian narrative - reports the

‘Italian officials’ inability to persuade the Chinese government to address the growing crime problem, the unsafe factories...’ in Prato (White 2013)
The narrative

China

- the sending country-

instead of Italy

- the place where the industries contracting to Chinese suppliers are located-

should manage and put an end to the working regime of the Chinese migrants in Italy
A different analytical approach

Migrants’ ‘economic emplacement’
(Glick Schiller and Caglar 2013)

Migrants and the locality shape and mould each other
My unit of analysis

NOT the ‘ethnic’ group per se
BUT

highlighting THE STRUCTURAL FACTORS at work and their constant interaction with Chinese migrants’ agency
The economic emplacement of the Chinese migrants is the result of the intersection of Chinese migrants’ agency with

1) changing structures of production, demand and distribution of textiles and clothing, globally

2) the legal regimes of Italy that regulate migration flows, the industrial production and the working and housing conditions

3) the degrees at which regulations are enforced by authorities at the local level in Italy or left as a threat but not enforced
Chinese migrants emplacement in Italian ID is linked to reactions to the shocks of globalization

- LARGE FIRMS: **offshoring**, mainly in central and eastern European countries

- SMALL FIRMS: not able to relocate production abroad. They managed to keep the costs down mainly by attracting **low-skilled migrants**
Not (only) as workers but as self-employers

- They open their own contracting workshops
- ONLY CO-NATIONALS as workers
- In most workshops both employers and employees WORK AND LIVE in the workshop premises.
Since the late 1980s

- Chinese supplier workshops have been received with a hearty welcome by the clothing firms in Italian IDs

They OFFERED CONDITIONS OUTCOMPETING ALL PREVIOUS PRODUCTIVE REGIMES
Dynamic relationship between migrant labor and the repositioning of IDs within globe circulating processes of capital and labor in the last decades.
Chinese mode of production against the backdrop of globalized regimes of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989 and 2010):

‘time and space compression’ have called forth a reorganization of labor markets with new forms of labor regulation, including outsourcing and employment of temporary, part-time, and seasonal workers’
Chinese mode of production against the backdrop of globalized regimes of flexible accumulation

Mezzadra and Neilson 2013:

- ‘INTENSIFICATION’, or the tendency of labor to ‘colonize the entire life of laboring subjects’
- ‘HETEROGENIZATION’, ‘or the fragmentation of legal and social regimes that organize labor resulting in the creation of new kinds of production

Ceccagno 2007, Compressing personal and family life
The crucial role of labor mobilities

labor mobilities are central to understanding the division of labor in the contemporary globalizing world
Reconfiguration of the productive space in the workshop

Sleep in arrangements

Reduction of costs and added flexibility
Benefits offered by the sleep in workshops

- RE-ATTRACT CONTRACTORS INTO THE IDS

- ‘IN SITU OFFSHORING’: cheap workforce, externalization of costs of production, and a different attitude towards labor protection without entailing the geographic re-allocation of the production
A further, more extreme RECONFIGURATION of the productive space

Inter-firm level: workers’ short-term mobility
Bargain conditions offered to manufacturers are chiefly the result of an unbounded reconfiguration of the space through an innovative use of stasis and mobility.
Reconfiguration of the space of production

- It is the sleeping regime that makes possible the workers short-term inter-firm mobility, a further, more extreme reconfiguration of the space
This is a reconfiguration of space where the space consists of the dotted line that unites many Chinese-run workshops needing *instant* workers for processing *instant* orders in the highly perishable *instant* fashion industry.
sleeping regime + short term inter-firm mobility regime

Are the unique way in which the Chinese migrants’ stitching workshops have embraced and interpreted the fast fashion imperatives
No political or labour institutions at the national or local level have tackled in an unambiguous way the extreme labour regime in Chinese contracting workshops.

The system of law enforcement may undermine itself **WHEN THE COSTS OF POLICING THE RULES RISK TO BECOME MORE A BURDEN** on the industry concerned than adopting a more lenient position (see Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999).
Clothing manufacturers in Italian IDs highly benefit from the Chinese contracting workshops’ productive organization.
Why is it then that in Prato Chinese migrants entrepreneurship is under attack ??????
Complementary industries, that are not integrated

Chinese are active in the CLOTHING INDUSTRY where they first operated supplier firms and later also manufacturing firms.

Italians are mainly active in the TEXTILE INDUSTRY.
2007: ‘Pact for security in Prato’

signed by the Mayor of the left wing local government and representatives of the Prato province, the Tuscany region, and the Italian Ministry of Interiors
The pact addresses and adopts measures against

- 1) urban degradation;
- 2) criminality and deviant behaviors;
- 3) Chinese enterprises
The document claims that TOO MANY Chinese businesses are active in Prato and they often operate off the book. Therefore they bring to the city security problems that need to be addressed with specific measures:

1) SELECTIVE inspections on an ethnic basis
2) Fines so HIGH that many were not able to pay
A new DISCRIMINATING LOGIC emerges:

A **DIVIDE** is created and **institutionalized** between

**NATIVE ENTREPRENEURS** whose business enterprise is legitimate and supported by the institutions, and

**MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP** that is transformed in a security concern.
Strong symbolic actions in Prato

- **soldiers** patrolling the streets
- policemen assisted by **police dogs**
- and **police helicopters** repeatedly flying over the inspected firms

These symbols remind people of the created isomorphism of migrants’ free enterprise and criminality.
How could it happen that at a certain historical moment problem fields so different such as urban degeneration, criminality and Chinese businesses are put together as a security threat to the locality???
in order to decode a ‘historically particular apparatus’ we should focus analytical attention on historical contingencies, or particular, situated events that alter- or sustain - the status quo
MID 2000s
1st historical contingency

DRASTIC CHANGE
IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY
AND
DRASTIC DOWNWARD POSITIONING
OF THE CITY
From a thriving one-industry textile ID to an impoverished city

- A textile center since the Middle Ages
- A one industry city till recently
- 1950-1980: the booming years of the textile industry, contributing to the international success of the Italian fashion
Shifts at different scalar levels by the mid 2000 bring about a crisis of the textile industry

- Global competition from low labor costs countries (MAINLY CHINA)

- End of MFA

- Introduction of EURO >> puts an end to protectionist measures based on devaluation

- Changes in the FASHION markets: 1) wool is no more in fashion, 2) integrated T&C chains are preferred, 3) growing power of retailers
in the last ten years, textile firms have declined from 5,800 to around 3,000, the number of workers has been cut by half, and a 1.6 billion turnover has been lost.

The performances of the Prato ID are now the worst in Italy, with a 20% reduction of the per capita added value from 2008 to 2013.

THE CRISIS HAS PLUNGED THE CITY INTO A PERSISTENT STATE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY.
• Edoardo Nesi depicts the entrepreneurs in Prato – and in Italy - as those that by now are on the ‘loosing side, those who have realized, over the course of just a few years, that they have been left behind by history. The ... raving ones, the furious ones, the ones who yearn for the past’ (Nesi 2013)
Chinese-run fast fashion firms in Prato
Rise of the Chinese as CLOTHING entrepreneurs

- They have been able to jump en masse from the position of contractors to the role of final-good firms that contract the stitching phases to co-national suppliers.

- They have established almost from scratch the largest low-end fast fashion industry that attracts buyers from Europe and beyond.

- Garment production represents one third of the total turnover and export in Prato.
By the mid-2000s it was clear that the textile and clothing industries were going in opposite directions:

- the garment industry was THRIVING
- the textile industry was SINKING
Why should a thriving industry be under attack?

Why is Chinese migrants’ entrepreneurship criminalized in Prato and not in other Italian IDs?
In Prato Chinese migrants have occupied the supply chain in fast fashion.

They are contractors and manufacturers.
As ENTREPRENEURS in the clothing industry, they have been able to directly take advantage of the competitive conditions offered by co-national suppliers and the opportunities for global upstream sourcing thus reducing the advantages for natives.
Contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship is a struggle over production of wealth and legitimacy.

- Stakeholders became aware that the new global dynamics did not favor in the ID the interests of the native industrialists in the core industry of the district.
• Prato is a case in which the downscaling of the city negatively reverberates on the Chinese-run fast fashion centre

Chinese migrants’ affluence has been narrated as a threat to the established order, and therefore action aiming at downscaling their activities has been taken deliberately
December 2013: a new historical contingency
December 2013:
Fire in a Chinese fast fashion firm in Prato
2014: A new SECURITY policy: focuses on workplace security

- **ALL** Chinese businesses will be inspected within three years
- Effort to **open a dialogue** while starting inspecting the businesses
- A **step by step approach** that only focuses on workshops security measures

BUT ......
CRITICAL POINTS

1) The divide remains Selective checks: only targeted to Chinese businesses

2) It touches upon a crucial competitive advantage of the Chinese labor regime

THE MOBILE EMPLACEMENT (sleeping regime + workers short-term inter firm mobility)
A new challenge to the Chinese migrants entrepreneurship

What will happen if and when the mobility regime’s competitive advantage is lost ??????
Interessi contrastanti tra gli italiani

• Imprenditore abbigliamento: ‘ci aspettiamo che molti di loro se ne vadano’
• Proprietari di appartamenti e fondi
• Importatori di tessuti da Cina e Turchia
• Commercianti
Another critical point of the new policy

‘ci sono malviventi che vengono nella nostra fabbrica a prendere i macchinari, ci lasciano un numero di telefono per chiamarli: dicono che ci restituiranno i macchinari in cambio di 3.000-4.000 euro. Ma noi non guadagniamo abbastanza per ricomprarceli’
Si chiede collaborazione e legalità'

MA

non si collabora a risolvere i problemi legati alla legalità' che i cinesi incontrano
Sono diventati l’epitome del migrante ricco
RICCHI COME GRUPPO, NON COME INDIVIDUI

Ricco + migrante = ossimoro nella cultura italiana
TENDENZE CONTRASTANTI

• I CINESI SONO (PERCEPITI COME) ARRICCHITI

MENTRE

• GLI ITALIANI SI IMPOVERISCONO
‘Prato insicura’

• Luna Chen writes:
  
  ‘I am not surprised that I got robbed in the very center of Prato while I was walking with three friends. After all, all my Chinese friends in Prato have been robbed at least once in the last years and I do not see why I should be the exception! On the contrary, I am surprised that I came out of it with only one scrape on my knees, nothing more. I’m really lucky!’ (Luna Chen).

• Angelo Hu protests that the Chinese are fed up of being considered the walking automatic teller machine of the city. Bai Junyi laments the lack of attention of the local authorities that seem to consider it the problem of a ‘foreign body’, not pertaining to the city.
Prato as THE FIRST CASE of open and institutionalized contestation of migrant entrepreneurship

Migrants’ contribution to cities’ economy is contested because they cannot reverse the city downscaling
New global working regimes: the Foxconn model

- FOXCONN in SOUTHERN CHINA
- FOXCONN in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia and Turkey