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MADE IN ITALY MADE IN CHINA MADE IN PAKISTAN MADE IN PRATO

Prato is an Italian city whose population is around 20% foreign-born, 17% Chinese. Chinese people began migrating to Prato in the 1990s, largely from Wenzhou, a southwestern province of China whose people are popularly stereotyped as industrious and entrepreneurial. They initially took up work in the Prato's textile industry, but as that stagnated due to the outsourcing of supply chains (paradoxically, oftentime to China), they started opening their own fast fashion factories out of vacant, cheaply rented industrial buildings. Over the next decade, many more Chinese migrated to work in them. From 2001 to 2010, the number of Chinese-run clothing manufacturing firms nearly doubled, from 1,688 to 3,364—though numbers can be hard to track, as many firms are illegal.

Although the workers in Prato's Chinese-run factories are low-paid, labor in Italy is relatively more expensive than it is in China, Vietnam, or Bangladesh, or any of the other countries better known for fast fashion manufacturing. The extra costs, then, are offset by the added value of the "Made in Italy" labels stitched to each garment. These labels connote old world craftsmanship rather than the realities of the factories' cheap,



All images by the author.

migrant, and often illegal labor: around 2013, Prato's authorities estimated that up to two-thirds of the Chinese community did not have legal residency.

But even before the arrival of Chinese workers in the 1990s, Prato's once-thriving Italian-run textile factories employed migrants from the countryside and the poorer Italian south under similar precarious conditions. In 1978, *Elle* compared this version of Prato to India; in 1980, *Le Monde* called it the "Hong Kong of Italy;" both evoking "Asianness" as an evocative signifier for the toiling of the textile industry. Today's Chinese-run factories are different not so much in their working conditions, but in how the garment trade's globalization is no longer just a metaphor. Producing a "Made in Italy" garment involves the cross-continental travel of labor, fabric, and other resources.

According to researcher Meilun Xue, a "Made in Italy" label invokes the false ideal of "a singular, uncompromised product, whose identity is confined within one set of national borders." In doing so, "it denies its own potential for an authority composed of difference." From 2019-20, I moved to Prato for a research

fellowship. I was curious to see what the "potential" of such a recent, yet concentrated community might look like, how future generations of Chinese Italians in particular might create homes among five-euro pleather jackets and the foreign, nationalist mythology of the label. Or was there only a cynical story to be told, about making flimsy, temporary fast fashion in pursuit of economic mobility and survival?

My friend Marisa is an Italian-born Chinese teen who studies fashion design at the local arts high school. Her parents are elementary school-educated migrants from Wenzhou who run a fast fashion factory in Prato. Most of Marisa's friends are also children of Chinese factory owners, expected to eventually work for the family business. Marisa helps out on Sundays; in the meantime, when she isn't in school or studying, she hangs out with her friends at bubble tea cafes in Prato's Chinatown, shooting pool, and playing cards like the popular Chinese game "Fighting the Landlord," named after the real wave of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution.

Marisa's parents' factory is located in the industrial district of Macrolotto 1. Unlike the

cobblestoned alleys of the historical center, Macrolotto 1 is a grid of wide, quiet streets lined with rectangular factories. Many factories have English or English-adjacent names like "Ice Tricot," "Kimy Love," and "Special Man." My favorites were "Pretty Wind" and,

simply, "KEVIN." In the "Wenzhou model" of industrial entrepreneurship, even larger, legal factories are small—under ten employees—and family-run, and specialize in a particular piece of the production process, like cutting or sewing. Or making buttons, like "2000





Bottoni,” which has a sign with buttons for 0s.

Macrolotto 1 also has strip malls of Chinese restaurants and casinos, and simple, Khrushchyovka-style apartment buildings, where laundry flutters on the balconies. But these places exist only to fleetingly feed, entertain, and house the people who otherwise spend twelve hours a day, seven days a week, at the factories. Many factories have their own full kitchens, where group meals are cooked from Chinese vegetables purchased at roadside trucks. Some have sleeping areas as well, though this has declined since a 2013 fire killed seven people in the middle of the night, leading to increased regulatory enforcement.

Owners and workers alike spend long hours at the factories, though of course, with varying responsibilities, under varying conditions. Marisa’s parents do mostly client-facing and office work. Her mother also designs the clothing, based on images from the Internet. This all happens in the front of the factory, which functions as a showroom and warehouse, filled with racks of seasonal fashion. Manufacturing happens in the back. At Marisa’s family’s factory—and many others, as China’s growing economy

drives fewer and fewer people to emigrate for work—Pakistani workers use industrial cutting machines to slice fabric into strips wider than sidewalks.

On a walk in a residential neighborhood on the opposite side of Prato from Macrolotto 1, I met an older Chinese woman named Li, who brought me to the factory where she works and lives. We went because I had asked if there was food in the area, and she invited me home, and I couldn’t refuse—out of curiosity, out of shame, out of the way these feelings fed off each other. In the illegally converted house, five or six Chinese workers ran sewing machines in the garage among piles of cloth, spools of colorful thread, and bags of “Made in Italy” labels. A folk song played tinnily on a small radio. The Chinese owner, wearing a (knockoff?) Gucci belt that matches the seat covers in his car outside, walked around to give instructions but also worked the machines himself. The following day, he drove Li to a doctor’s appointment for a finger she injured on the job. For dinner, we all ate a quick, home/factory-cooked meal of rice and stir fry. The owner cheerily encouraged me to eat more.

In Prato, familial relationships between Chinese people can

cross class lines: between myself (a Chinese American researcher) and Li; between owners and workers. I mean "familial" with both its positive and negative connotations: I experienced generosity and community, but there's also codependence and obligation. As immigrants and compatriots in a largely monoethnic—and xenophobic—country, Chinese in Prato are bonded by speaking the same language, shopping at the same grocery stores, and supporting each other in the absence of official resources. Furthermore, many owners have been workers in the past, and many workers dream of opening factories in the future. Such mobility isn't uncommon: after all, Marisa's parents have elementary school educations, while their children plan to go to college. But there are also lifelong workers like Li, who is older and single, and has no family—*actual* family—in Italy to help with the capital and labor required to run a business.

Huarenjie is a social networking app for Chinese in Europe. It functions as a sort of Craigslist: with classifieds, personals, chatter. In the winter I was in Prato, someone asked: "Owners! Workers! Please identify yourselves." Commenters had no patience for such simplistic identity politics.

—"There's a third category, people who work for themselves, both owners and workers"

—"Just look at how many rich and poor people there are in the world"
—"Idiot"

Most of the growing group of African and South Asian immigrant workers in the fast fashion industry are young single men, without family and ethnic networks. They loiter in the historical center's piazzas; older Chinese women caution me about them in caring, racist whispers. At the same time, perhaps having fewer ties to begin with facilitates assimilation into Italian society, or at least to those limited segments accepting of working class migrants.

At a feminist protest, I met an Italian woman organizer and her husband, a Malian refugee. They participated with their roommate, an Ivorian refugee named Tim. I told him that I was interested in the Chinese community in Prato.

"Interesting? I wouldn't call it that." He explained that he knew many African workers who resented their Chinese bosses.

"Yes, I think that the Chinese both exploit and are exploited," I answered diplomatically.

He laughed. "I don't know any Chinese that are exploited."

Later, he rescinded these comments. But understandably, the most visible Chinese people are the successful ones—those individuals with flashy cars, (real?) bags, (real?) watches. In January 2020, police seized 30 million euro in cash from two Chinese individuals at Rome's airport. When I logged onto Huarenjie, angry comments on the news included:

—"Use this money to house refugees"

—"Too much money why don't they share some with us poor masses"

—"These people buried alive their hardworking countrymen"

SI Cobas is an Italian syndicalist trade union with a chapter in Prato. As of this writing, they have been striking with African and Bengali workers of Texprint, a Chinese-run industrial printing house in Macrolotto 1, for over eight months, since January 18, 2021. Texprint workers are asking for an end to twelve-hour shifts seven days a week, higher wages, and safer working conditions. While I was in Prato in winter 2020, I attended a SI Cobas-organized protest against a national decree suspending a asylum. Many of the workers SI

Cobas supports are refugees. Nigeria, Pakistan, the Ivory Coast, and Bangladesh are among the countries with the highest number of refugees in Italy. There are few if any Chinese refugees; operating a factory requires frequent travel between China, where fabric tends to be sourced, and Italy. Most Chinese people, even second-generation Chinese youth like Marisa, plan to eventually return to China, to where they already send most of the money they earn.

I arrived at the protest twenty minutes after 4, the stated start time listed on Facebook. At the meeting point outside a train station Italians and Africans and South Asians both intermingled and spoke their own languages among themselves. Interracial couples held hands and banners. I was alone, and the only Chinese person I saw; I also had purple hair. I felt awkward and out of place. Various people tried selling me leaflets. I purchased one titled *RESISTENZA* in red brush-stroked WordArt, with a hammer and sickle in the corner.

As the crowd began marching, it attracted bystanders, including Chinese people. There was a young man in a (real?) Canada Goose jacket recording on his

phone. The march passed by a familiar Chinese-run cafe that had offered me off-the-menu fried rice in my first week in Prato. Its ornate buildings were glowed red from the banners, flags, and setting sun. A South Asian protester stood on top of a column, as if he had usurped a statue. I approached a Chinese man recording the bullhorn speeches, not too far from me in the crowd, to ask if he understood the speeches, if he knew what the protest was for, like I was trying to understand myself. He didn't, so I explained what I knew. "Oh," he said. Shortly after, he left. I did, too.

In the days after, I dug on Huarenjie for any news or thoughts on union actions at Chinese-run factories. I found only an older post about a SI Cobas strike the previous summer, of Pakistani workers at a Chinese-run industrial laundromat. Commenters said:

—"The owners have a very strong background... In a few days there won't be any issues"

—"Eventually there won't be anyone giving them food, they'll be begging from Italians"

—"Try not to hire Pakistani or Bangladeshi workers"

—"If not for the union behind this they wouldn't dare"

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 10% of the Chinese community has left Prato. Italy's repeated lockdowns, in contrast to China's better managed, if not authoritarian, response, hurt the fast fashion industry. In 2020, around 500 Chinese residents of Prato applied for food assistance.

I had planned to be in Prato for nine months, until July, but my fellowship terminated ahead of schedule in March, when the virus came to Italy through Lombardy, 300 kilometers away. Many Italians had feared that the Chinese would be the first to bring the virus, through Prato. Hearing horror stories from relatives in China experiencing the then-epidemic firsthand, Chinese people were even more fearful of this possibility. As early as February, restaurants and stores closed in an unofficial, community-imposed lockdown. "If you go outside, people will talk," a friend told me, though she continued to attend her job working at a fast fashion warehouse, where I could no longer visit her. Chinese people also helped (and gifted a bit off of) each other. In the days leading up to my departure, many WeChatted to ask if I could buy masks for them, or if I needed to buy some from them.

While this immediate, coordinated response evidenced the close-knit nature of the community, the pandemic and subsequent exodus—coinciding with the decline of the Chinese workforce in favor of other international workers—reinforced the truly globalized nature of Prato's Chinese-run fast fashion industry. Unlike in countries with more established diasporic communities, like the United States, in Prato the Chinese may leave before they assimilate. This means that "Made in Italy" consists in neither a mythological, essentially Italian craftsmanship, nor a multicultural ideal.

Instead, as neatly and curiously oxymoronic as Prato's phenomenon of Chinese-made "Made in Italy" garments is, it gives way to an even more complicated story implicating Pakistan and Nigeria and Bangladesh and elsewhere, in which labels and their meanings are contingent on the shifting material realities of this bigger and bigger world.

