

# Chinese Tales of Italy<sup>1</sup>

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Chinese migration to Italy has a history of about a hundred years, even though it became a numerically relevant phenomenon only during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When leaving China today, new migrants bring along a set of expectations that have an impact on their adjustment to the target country. After a brief presentation of existing research on Chinese migrants' perspectives on Italy, I highlight some common themes that emerge in Italy-based Chinese ethnic press and also in some works belonging to Sino-Italian literature. I then present the results of a study on the same topic carried out in Wenzhou-Ouhai in summer 2011. Besides six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in the areas of origin of Chinese in Italy, I participated in two group interviews with two families, the family of a returned migrant (*guiqiao*) and that of a relative of migrant (*qiaojuan*), about their ideas and judgments on Italy. Emphasis is given to economic and legal aspects, while criminality and dishonesty of Italians are especially emphasized. The myth of Wenzhoueseness also plays a bigger role than what is observed in similar contexts in Italy, filtering the narrative about Chinese in Italy.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora, *guiqiao*, wenzhou model

## INTRODUCTION

While there is general agreement on the impact that migration has on the development of a transnational Chinese culture, the main focus of recent debate on this topic centers on the relationship between Mainland China and its periphery, while less has been published on the formation of new local hybrid cultures that arise during this process in Europe. In order to start investigating the different values, ideals and expectations that play a role in the formation of a new Sino-Italian culture, it is helpful to assess what ideas about Italy new migrants bring to the game when they first arrive in the host country.

Since the great majority of Chinese first generation migrants in Italy come from southern Zhejiang (over 80%), I carried out six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in the Ouhai-Wenzhou area (Southern Zhejiang) during the summer of 2011. Daily observations and stories about Italy that I gathered on the field show that there are some shared views among Chinese first generation migrants in Italy that contribute to a common discourse about Italy, familiar to those who live in Italy, to those who returned to China and even to those who have never lived in Italy at all.

What needs to be taken into account when approaching the perspective people in Wenzhou *qiaoxiang* areas<sup>2</sup> have about Italy is the pervasiveness of the discourse about Wenzhoueseness on one side and the perception of Europe as a whole, and how it is in

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2 Areas of origin of Chinese migrants.

some ways connected to Wenzhoueseness, on the other (on similar issues see Li, 1999). Wenzhouese are described as “extremely peculiar” by common people, by media and by a whole subgenre of very popular reportage works devoted specifically to the characteristics of Wenzhouese (among many others see Gao, 2007; Yang, 2010; Ren, 2011; Zhou, 2011). In this respect, one of the most defining characteristics attributed to the Wenzhouese is that of always searching for the best deal (*nali you Wenzhouren nali you shichang*, Wenzhouese are where the market is); this common idea nurtures a concept of Europe as a homogenous item where the migrants can move around perpetually, looking for a favorable environment. This attitude obviously hinders the process of rooting into any of the specific European subcultures for the first generation and it needs to be taken into account when trying to map the formation of a new Sino-Italian culture, whose main actors are the Italian born ethnic Chinese.

#### PREVIOUS WORKS ABOUT CHINESE PERSPECTIVE ON ITALY

Since there is yet no published work on how Italy is perceived by Chinese migrants in their motherland, here I present the few existing works dealing with the image of Italy as seen by those Chinese living in Italy.

A pioneering work on this topic is *Italian Chinese* (Ceccagno, 1998), in which the author reports parts of six interviews with Chinese immigrants in six short paragraphs titled *Italians as seen by Chinese*. The topics touched include differences and similarities between Italians and Chinese in public behavior, man/woman relationships, religion and family life.

Next published work that reports some data about the perception of Italian society by Chinese immigrants is *Exclusion and integration* (Berti, 2000). This volume presents the results of a research carried out mainly through a questionnaire submitted to immigrants from different areas with over 50 Chinese respondents. Questions dealt with various themes and some elicited a judgment on the cultural values of the host society.

In 2010 a collection of papers about Chinese migration to Italy previously published in English with the title *Living outside the walls*, came out in Italian (Johanson, Smyth, & French, 2010). One of the papers included in such volume (Tarantino & Tosoni, 2010) analyzes the representation in the Italian-based Chinese ethnic press of a conflict involving Italian police and Chinese immigrants that took place in Milan in 2007.

Another published study was carried out by Cidis<sup>3</sup> (2011) in Rome on racial prejudice against Chinese immigrants. A questionnaire was submitted to 100 Chinese women, who were asked to express their opinion about Italians in general terms and then specifically about the attitude of Italians towards Chinese.

The most recent and detailed work on the subject stems from a research carried out through 48 in-depth interviews with people of Chinese origin in Italy (Fazzi, Martire, & Pitrone, 2012). The topic of the interviews was specifically the perception and conceptualization of Italian culture and society. Sub-topics included judgments on Italian family, school, institutions, politics, working philosophy, lifestyle, man/woman relationships, con-

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<sup>3</sup> Cidis, Centro Informazione Documentazione e Iniziativa per lo Sviluppo (Center for Information, Documentation and Initiative for Development) is a no-profit association based in Rome, active in the field of migration.

cept of friendship, customs and so on.

A work about themes and contents of Italian-based Chinese ethnic press is included in a collection of papers about Chinese migration (Santangelo, 2006), but it does not present data about migrants' attitudes towards Italy. Results of research on second generation ethnic Chinese in Italy have also been published (Ceccagno, 2004; Cologna & Breveglieri, 2003; Pedone, 2006) but, despite the fact that they occasionally give some insight about the perception of Italian society by the subjects, they are to be considered aside since subjects are mainly bilingual and bicultural and henceforth have very different backgrounds than their parents.

Apart from some specific aspects, all the above-mentioned works agree on some views that appear to be shared within the Chinese population in Italy. As we will see some of these views also emerged from the fieldwork in China (namely the lack of public safety and the tendency to cheat and take advantage of others attributed to Italians). Overall the answers of the subjects in Italy tend to indulge more on the observation of daily behavior of Italians and on individual virtues (or lack of them) of Italian people, while the comments received during the fieldwork in China referred mostly to the Italian society and system in general terms and how they respond to Chinese immigrants needs.

In the next paragraph I will briefly present the above-mentioned shared views of Italy as they emerge in the research published in Italy, in Sino-Italian literature and in the Italian-based Chinese ethnic press.

#### ITALIANS IN THE PAGES OF SINO-ITALIAN LITERATURE AND ETHNIC PRESS

There are a couple dozen works (mostly novels or short stories) written by authors of Chinese origin who have lived in Italy that can be considered the first bulk of a blooming Sino-Italian literature (Pedone, 2011). The analysis of some of these works can help in mapping the image of Italy as it is perceived by first generation immigrants<sup>4</sup>.

An analysis carried out on a selected corpus of four novels and five short stories published by authors of Chinese origin in Italy stressed the presence of some reoccurring themes, the shared views mentioned in the previous paragraph (Pedone, 2012). Similar remarks about Italy and Italians are also found in the Italian-based ethnic press, especially in the magazine *Cina in Italia* (China in Italy)<sup>5</sup>, a bilingual monthly magazine edited by author and journalist Hu Lanbo, especially devoted to life of Chinese immigrants in Italy. This magazine, compared to the rest of the ethnic newspapers, gives more space to the readers, who very often publish in it their view about their host country and their stories of migration<sup>6</sup>.

As anticipated, the themes that occur in this kind of spontaneous data collected in Italy deals more in detail with the judgment on the individual behavior of Italians, compared to the comments gathered during the fieldwork in China which focus on Italian society as a whole. On the other hand most of the views on Italians that emerged from the analysis of

4 In defining Sino-Italian literature I adopt an open approach such as Yin (2000), including both works in Italian and in Chinese. This is necessary in order to include all works by first generation migrants (not proficient in Italian) who live in the country.

5 The magazine has a different name in Chinese, *Shijie Zhongguo*, World China.

6 For an overview on Italy-based Chinese press see Santangelo (2006).

literature and ethnic press are similar to those reported by the studies presented in the previous paragraph.

The Italian family, when compared with the Chinese family, is judged as not equally stable. Most sources find the reason for such frailty is in Italian male behavior and Italian individualism in general. For instance, some writers tell stories of Italian husbands who only care about their own benefit and neglect that of the couple or of the family (among others Ying, 2008; Zhai, 1999). Some comments stress an unnatural dependence of grown-up Italian men on their mothers, which is also considered a cause of instability in the family, as it is male chauvinism (among others Hu, 2009; Zhai, 1999).

In daily relations Italians are seen as exceptionally warm and friendly by most sources, nonetheless many observe that this openness is often perceived as excessive (for example Ying, 2008), some perceive it as a sign of superficiality, and a consequence of a general tendency to not take anything seriously (among others Long, 2009). On the same note, several Chinese sources see Italians as lazy, not capable of hard work, excessively prone to indulge in food, vacations, expensive clothes and the likes (Huang, 2009; Cidis 2011; Fazzi *et al.*, 2012).

Connected to the observed individualism and perceived ineptness to commit to any shared project (e.g. marriage), is the observation of a lack of civic sense and little respect for public places and goods (Liu Ruting, Shi Kedong, & Wen Chengde, 2008). As some observers point out, this is also why the police in Italy are not reliable and the streets are not safe (Jin, 2006; Deng, 2008).

In many writings by Chinese in Italy there are complaints about how Italian police do not enforce the law firmly enough. The whole public sphere appears as unreliable (too much bureaucracy, constant changes in laws and regulations, little care for crime) and many denounce that they do not trust Italians, for they often try to steal from Chinese or take advantage of them, even public officers (Jin, 2006; Yi, 2007; Hu, 2007). This aspect was also relevant for the respondents during my fieldwork in China and it shows how such information is deemed crucial for the success of the migration project to Italy.

What the Chinese praise about Italians is their generosity and quickness to befriend with others, although this is also interpreted as a symptom of their refusal to take anything seriously (in relationships, in work, in school, in politics and so on). On the other hand in ethnic press, in Sino-Italian literature and in some of the aforementioned studies, some Chinese immigrants praise Italian school as being especially open and warm to children of foreign origin and find public healthcare, and Italian public welfare in general, excellent and better in concept and realization than that in their country of origin (Hu, 2009; Weng, 2008; Ruo, 2011; Cidis, 2011; Fazzi *et al.*, 2012).

This is the overall portrait of Italy and Italians as seen from people of Chinese origin when in Italy. In the next paragraphs I will present the results of the investigations on similar themes carried out in the areas of origin.

## METHODOLOGY

In July and August 2011 I carried out about six weeks of fieldwork in Wenzhou, in Ouhai district. Ouhai is one of the three districts within the Wenzhou urban area (the others being Lucheng and Yongjia). It is the largest of the three (more than 600 km<sup>2</sup>) but also the least

densely populated, as it includes large portions of cultivated fields as well as mountainous areas. Ouhai is home to many bigger factories of nationally famous brands (mostly light industry: lighters, glasses, locks etc. along with leather goods and textiles) but it also features many family run factories, or smaller scale factories that very often produce goods to be exported abroad.

Besides spending time in observations of the area and exchanging opinions and impressions with a number of local citizens who have friends or relatives abroad (a situation extremely common in this area), I was also able to utilize the suggestions of two key persons: Prof. Yan Xiaopeng (Wenzhouese, dean of the College of International Cooperation at Wenzhou University) and Wang Qingjun, an MA student in the psychology department at Wenzhou University. Prof. Yan, who has published several articles on Wenzhouese diaspora to Italy (e.g. Yan & Zhang, 2010; Yan, Guo, & Pan, 2011), helped me construct questions for in-depth interviews, get contacts, carry out interviews and provided discussion on results and interpretations. Qingjun, besides taking part in the interviews, spent more than an hour every day discussing my impressions from the fieldwork for the whole duration of my sojourn.

For data collection I used ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth unstructured interviews. Besides observation of life in Wenzhou-Ouhai and occasional exchanges with locals<sup>7</sup>, I was introduced by Prof. Yan to a group of five migrants and relatives of migrants. We had two different meetings that took place at the subjects' homes. The atmosphere was very familiar and to some extent the meetings could also be considered to be focused group discussions because different people (especially Prof. Yan) took part in the discussion. Nonetheless it was mainly the owner of the house that answered my questions, while the others would just comment. In the interviews I adopted a biographical approach, topics being history of self, Italian experience, judgments about Italy and the Italian society.

The first meeting was attended by Mr Xia, two other people who have relatives in Europe, Prof. Yan, Qingjuan and myself. The second meeting was attended by Mr Liao, his wife, Mr Xia, two other people who have relatives in Europe, Prof. Yan, Qingjuan and myself. Despite that everyone was encouraged to speak up during the meetings, it was mostly Prof. Yan, Mr Xia, Mr Liao and myself who lead the conversation. Nonetheless the other participants took part in the exchange by adding occasional comments, nodding, helping rephrase or the like.

The two main respondents have very different backgrounds, one is a *guiqiao*, a returned migrant, while the other is a *qiaojuan*, a relative of migrants. The different experiences with migration, along with the differences in status, prove how some concepts and interpretations of life in Italy are objects of common narrative throughout the Wenzhou *qiaoxiang* population.

## DIFFERENT FAMILIES, SIMILAR TALES

### Xia 'aocun

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<sup>7</sup> During my permanence in the area I engaged in casual conversations with six migrants who live in Italy and were back to Wenzhou for summer vacation. Four of them were with their children and I found out they lived in Italy because they would call their children by their Italian names. The other two worked in stores in downtown Wenzhou.

The two families live in the small village of Xia'aocun, in Chashan, Ouhai. Of its total population of about 30,000, 8,000 are migrants. Roughly 4,000 live in Italy, 2,000 in France and the rest in over 20 different countries in Europe (mostly the Netherlands, Spain, Greece and Eastern Europe, while almost none in the UK and very few in Germany)<sup>8</sup>. As many similar *qiaoxiang*, that developed with the contribution of remittances of migrants abroad, Xia'aocun does not have a real center but it is formed by a few streets, mostly roughly paved, that cross cultivated fields. On such streets, in a rather dispersed manner, there are several private mansions built by overseas migrants. Each of these mansions belongs to a single family of migrants, they are three or four stories tall and their shape is quite often a mix of traditional Chinese elements, such as *dougong*<sup>9</sup>, adorned gates, occasional glazed tile roofs, together with western elements such as neoclassical colonnades, domes, steeples. The result is very peculiar and it clearly expresses a status of wealth (fig. 1).



FIGURE 1 Mansions in Xia'aocun

Besides these kind of independent buildings the streets are delimited by stripes of three story bare cement buildings divided in single apartments. The façade of this kind of buildings is very simple without any decorative item whatsoever. Street level apartments often host small local business or small family run factories (fig. 2).

<sup>8</sup> These approximate data were given by one of the subjects, here Mr. Xia, who is the president of the League of the returned overseas Chinese of the Chashan area (Wenzhoushi Ouhaiqu Chashanjiedao guiguo huaqiao lianhehui).

<sup>9</sup> Typical Chinese interlocking wooden brackets.



FIGURE 2 Common Apartments in Xia'aocun

Rich mansions, factories, lower class condos, occasional Christian churches, open air food carts and restaurants fill the dusty paths that unexpectedly cross the cultivated fields in this area, also characterized by a massive presence of channels, rivers and ponds (fig.3), perfectly providing, in a glance, the dream of emancipation from the field or the street to the mansion, which has fuelled the hopes and ambitions of many migrating families up (see Li, 1999).



FIGURE 3 A View of Xia'aocun

## The Tale of Mr. Xia

Mr Xia<sup>10</sup> is a local authority and a very respected and admired individual within the local community. He owns one of the most impressive mansions on the street and has important positions in five different *huaqiao*<sup>11</sup> associations both in Italy and in Wenzhou-Ouhai<sup>12</sup>. The walls within Mr Xia's villa are covered with red banners embroidered with golden characters and given to him as a token of gratitude for help received. In the years, Mr Xia has helped many fellow countrymen in many ways and contributed, among other things, to fund an elementary school. It is evident that he is a man of great social status in Xia'aocun. "I love cappuccino!" declares Mr Xia at the beginning of the meeting and kindly offers his stash of Italian dehydrated cappuccino to all the guests. In his fifties, Mr. Xia, as another participant to the meeting who is back from Europe as well, wears snow-white pants and bright colored shirt, in a fashion that, according to my informants, is very unusual in China for a person that age, but it is common among overseas Chinese.

He confesses he does not speak much Italian, despite the fact that he had lived in Italy for over 20 years. He arrived in 1989 in Rome but soon moved to Bari, in southern Italy, and started selling lighters on the street. During his permanence in Italy he moved to Naples and then back to Rome again, without really rooting anywhere. He tells us he took any job that was available to a Chinese in Italy: he started as a peddler, then became a dishwasher, worked in a restaurant, became a convenience store owner in Bari, opened a clothing store in Naples then dealt with leather goods in Rome and finally became an importer from China. He insists that life was very hard for him and that he earned everything that he now has with unspeakable sacrifice: "I started as a peddler, do you understand what that means?"

Mr Xia has three daughters, two of them today have their own store in Rome and bought an apartment there, while the youngest (the only Italian born) moved to Beijing to attend high school and college. According to Mr Xia, she decided to go to China to avoid the morally questionable behavior of her Italian classmates, too keen on smoking, sexual intercourse and drug consumption.

*The Point of View on Italy*

The most evident observation about Italy is that its economy is plunging down, making it a less and less desirable target for Chinese migrants. Italy is judged mostly on terms of chances it gives or does not give to Chinese migrants to earn some money.

In Wenzhou *qiaoxiang* whenever asked about personal knowledge of Europe the interviewees would without exception immediately talk about how high the wages are that people can earn there. (Li, 1999, p. 185)

In the words of Mr Xia there is a sense of reproach against Italians mixed with a cer-

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10 Names of respondents are fictional.

11 *Huaqiao*, overseas Chinese, is usually used to refer to first generation migrants. The term *huayi* is often preferred for the following generations, while *huaren* refers to ethnic Chinese in general. The distinctions among the terms are sometimes blurred.

12 *Yidali Luoma daye laijinchukou maoyi jituan, Luoma Zhejiang huaqiao huaren lianyihui, Ouhai Wenzhou huaqiao huaren lianyihui, Wenzhoushi Ouhaiqu guiguohuaqiao lianhehui, Wenzhoushi Ouhaiqu Chashanjiedao guiguo huaqiao lianhehui.*

tain Wenzhouese pride. He explains how Italians lost an opportunity to enjoy profit from Chinese migrant importers when they imposed a new abnormally strict set of regulations for custom clearance in Naples harbor, causing all the Italian-based overseas Chinese importers to move their business to Spain through Barcelona harbor. In Mr Xia's eyes Italians partly deserve the current economic situation, while Chinese migrants do not find Italy as a desirable destination anymore. He tells us from 2010 to 2011 over 60% of the Chinese migrants who were in Italy moved their businesses to new countries, especially to Africa, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: "On flights to Italy from Wenzhou today you only see grandmas and grandpas who go visit those relatives who migrated years ago, new migrants go elsewhere". In Mr Xia's view, Italy has started issuing countless rules and regulations against Chinese since 2006; only those migrants who already had stable activities by then or the few who have low expectations stayed, many Wenzhouese entrepreneurs left searching for better occasions in virgin lands.

The opinion that Italians are shortsighted about the advantages brought to the country by Chinese enterprises have a counterpart in the discourse about Wenzhouese capacity of creating wealth from nothing, without ever giving up and without ever rooting anywhere; "Wenzhouese cast their eyes on the world as a whole" (*Wenzhouren de yangguang mianxiang quan shijie*) says Mr. Xia. The only tie that seems unshakable is that with the native village (on Chinese mobility see Nyri, 2010).

Another comment on Italy refers to the life of Chinese immigrants there. Life is incredibly hard for Chinese migrants in Italy, repeats Mr. Xia. Working hours are impossible (an average 18 hours a day in Mr Xia's words) and while only a few years ago migrants in Italy could accumulate some wealth through hard work, now, the economic crisis affected also those profits gained through hardships. On the other hand, in Mr. Xia's eyes Italians look for a scapegoat to blame for the economic crisis and often find it in Chinese migrants. He thinks Italians could never work as much as Chinese migrants, "They are not hard workers".

When asked more about Italians Mr Xia's first observation is that Italians are dishonest. He finds them inclined to cheat and swindle and proves his judgment by telling a few episodes in which different Italian business partners betrayed him, running away with his money or simply not giving back money they had borrowed from him. The overall picture is that of a people who would rather take the easy way of cheating than work hard to earn money. This opinion along with the complaint about the groundless rules and regulations gives a portrait of a rather unfair society where justice is not for all.

It is not surprising then that the few good things about Italy are completely incidental. Mr Xia likes the delicious food, the foamy cappuccino he brought back from Rome, and the beauty of cities. Compared to China streets are cleaner, traffic is more controlled and people stand in line in public offices. These are the few good remarks after 20 years of life in Italy for Mr. Xia.

#### The Tale of Mr. Liao

Mr. Liao does not have a business card, he does not like to attend to public meetings or take official positions in the local community. He is an old fashioned man, living a simple life, almost in a traditional manner, and he is very proud of that.

Mr Liao's apartment is not far away from Mr. Xia's mansion, on the edge of an unpaved road that crosses a huge cultivated field. The one where Mr. Liao lives is not a tall building, his family owns two stories in a white cement house. "This is a traditional Wenzhousese house. It was built in the late seventies. It's one of the oldest building in the area", Mr Liao says proudly. On the side of the apartment there is a small factory, very similar to those seen in Prato<sup>13</sup>, or anywhere the Wenzhousese entrepreneurs settle down. In this context these kinds of factories are considered a symbol of local entrepreneurial spirit, a sign of development and modernity. Some of them have big colored signs outside that advertise the kind of goods that are produced within, the contact numbers and the countries (mostly European) that they have deals with.

The interior of the house is also very traditional. The walls are almost empty. There are only a few traditional paintings hanging and a large Mao Zedong portrait in the hall, something very rarely seen in Chinese cities today. The furniture is also traditional Chinese and the whole atmosphere is rather peculiar for today's China, as the apartment seems frozen in time. The general impression is of humbleness but also of great dignity. There is a little backyard, typical of traditional Wenzhousese houses, where Mr Liao and his wife grow flowers and plants. The white wooden gate that faces the yard is decorated with two simple red paper scrolls (*duilian*) that say: "May the plum flower display its five petals and the bamboo leaves celebrate our numerous children"<sup>14</sup>.

Mr Liao sits by his wife and sips his tea while he tells his story. He wears simple grey clothes and leather sandals, his wife wears black. They are in their sixties. He barely speaks Mandarin, he can only speak Wenzhousese, a dialect that is commonly said to be comprehensible to only Wenzhousese themselves in the whole country.

Mr Liao retired after a life of hard work, he never moved abroad because he loves his life in China too much. He prefers a simple life and has never felt attracted by the possibility of better earnings. Not if the price is leaving China and living a hectic and hard life as his daughters do.

Mr Liao has four daughters and they all went to Europe looking to strike it rich. Two of them live in Italy, in Naples, one in the Netherlands and one in Belgium. Even his sister lives abroad, she is a businesswoman in Rome. Like Mr Xia she imports Chinese goods to Europe. His daughters in Italy have lived there for ten years and they now own a factory. He visited them only once for a few days. His idea of Italy is based on that short experience, on what he hears from his daughters and sister and from what is commonly discussed within the *qiaoxiang*.

### *The Point of View on Italy*

"Italy is rich. That is why we want to go there", Mr. Liao says candidly when asked about what he knows about Italy. Later on, he corrects his statement, saying that Italy is not as rich as it used to be, but it still represents a good chance to earn some money for migrants.

In Mr Liao's view, Italy is more developed than China but that is only because it started

13 Prato is a town in Tuscany, Italy. It has the highest percentage of Chinese people in the country.

14 *Meihua kai wufu, zhuyue qing san duo*. The five petals of a plum flower symbolize longevity, wealth, health, good virtue and a peaceful death.

developing earlier. He thinks the pace of Italian development is too slow; actually he believes there is no more development, while China is developing very fast and it soon will surpass Italy “in ten years maximum”. According to Mr. Liao, this is why many people are now leaving Italy. China changes constantly so it can adapt to the world, while Italy is always the same and this is why it stays behind. “Today’s China is completely different from that of ten years ago”, observes Mr Liao, “while Italy did not change much”.

Besides prosperity, what evokes Mr. Liao’s praise is the fact that Italy is cleaner and less polluted than China, something his daughters always complain about when they visit him. He admits that air is better in Italy and there is not as much dust and pollution as there is in China; at the same time he stresses that the reason for this difference in quality of air is again in the different stages of development in which the two countries are. Mr Liao is sure that Italy was not always this way and he is also positive that once China has reached full development, there will not be need to pollute the air anymore and the climate will be better as well. The remarks expressed by Mr Liao about slow development in the West compared to China, and the topic of pollution as a transitory phenomenon aimed to catch up with the wealthy western countries, are part of a common discourse that has been influenced both by official positions in the past and by public opinion on the pages of popular Chinese magazines, newspapers, tv shows and blogs.

Mr Liao thinks the most evident positive aspect of Italy, compared to other more developed western countries, is that it gives Chinese migrants a chance to gather some money. He adds that the price for that is hard work, something his daughters always complain about. He tells how even though they already reached a rather high economic status, they still work every day and eat out every meal to look after their business. Mr Liao thinks he could never live such an hectic life, but his daughters like it more than life back home. He mentions that it is a Wenzhouese thing to feel alive through earning ones living, chasing an always higher goal, never staying idle. Nonetheless he confesses he could never live in Italy, “but maybe it’s only because I’m old”. As already seen for Mr Xia, the judgment on Italy is seen only through the perspective of Chinese workers and the advantages it offers to them.

“I heard from my daughters that seafood is good in Italy, but Wenzhouese seafood is famous nationwide, how can you beat that?”; food, along with good air and the possibility for Chinese to get rich, is the other positive aspect of Italy, while the most evident negative aspect is criminality and immorality. Mr Liao knows that there is a lot of delinquency in Italy. His daughters have been robbed several times and their bags have been snatched on the street, while in China “when Mao was alive, we would not even lock our front door”<sup>15</sup>. Italy is unsafe in Mr. Liao’s imagination, criminality is rampant and moral sense is corrupted. In his tale Mr Liao’s insists on a point only briefly touched by Mr Xia when talking about his younger daughter: Italians are often morally depraved, they engage in sexual intercourse at an early age and often commit adultery. Rape is a common crime in Italy, according to Mr

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15 On 01/04/12 a Chinese migrant and his nine month old daughter were murdered in Rome during a robbery. The event had enormous media coverage since the Italian president went to visit the surviving mother at the hospital and over 10.000 people of Chinese origin from all across Italy gathered in memory of the two victims. It is expected that the idea of Italy as unsafe will be even more widespread than before in the country of origin after this sad event.

Liao, while life in Wenzhou is safe, slow and simple; it does not give the same chance of emancipation to youngsters and it is repetitive and predictable maybe, but for this family it is by far preferable to that in Europe.

### CONCLUSIONS

There is a common discourse about Italy that is traceable in opinions of Chinese migrants in Italy, in the Italy-based Chinese ethnic press, in Sino-Italian literature and in the comments of *qiaojuan* and *guiqiao* in the areas of origin.

Italy is defined as a country rich in beautiful buildings and art, a country in general terms more developed than China (although not for long), in which the cities are clean, the weather is very pleasant and the air is not polluted. Italians are deemed friendly and warm, but also superficial, unreliable, immoral, not capable of any commitment, irrationally dependent on good food and sex. Overall Italians are considered weak-willed, lazy, unable to sacrifice for future goals, but also lovers of “good life”; this, in Chinese migrants eyes, pushes them to be inclined to cheating and prone to criminality. The observed scarce respect of laws and authorities gives Chinese migrants an image of unsafety. Italians do not have civic sense and even police is not trustworthy. The excessive flexibility of rules and regulations is condemned as being a sign of poor resolution, but the weakness of legal controls and the tendency to tolerate illegality has also made Italy a favored country of migration in the past (Li, 1999).

Similarly, for Chinese in the areas of migration within China, the qualities and shortcomings of Italy are almost exclusively defined in relation to their influence on the migration project. Fieldwork showed how the discourse on Wenzhoueseness is also relevant in the conceptualization of the host country as a mere temporary setting for migrant businesses:

People in Wenzhou’s *qiaoxiang* consider getting rich in Europe an opportunity reserved only for them; some even feel it is their common destination or birthright (Li, 1999, p. 190).

It is to be noticed that there is a certain difference in judgment according to whether the subjects express their ideas when in Italy or when in their hometown. Casual conversations with Chinese migrants visiting home during the fieldwork and the in-depth interviews report openly harsh judgments on Italy that are rarely found in data gathered in the host country.

For the most part, the oldest children of Chinese immigrants in Italy are only in their twenties, and thus the values and interpretation of the host country of their parents surely have an impact on their identity formation. Future directions of study on the subject of formation of local hybrid cultures in European countries of Chinese migration will have to take into account, among other factors, the influence of first generation views and opinions of such countries and how they differ or match with those of the following generations.

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