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# Fistful of Tears”: Encounters with Transnational Affect, Chinese Immigrants and Italian Fast Fashion

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## [“Fistful of Tears”] Encounters with Transnational Affect, Chinese Immigrants and Italian Fast Fashion

*Abstract:* In the *made in italy* fast-fashion sector, the ultimate flexible workers are Chinese migrants, whose parenting practices include circulating children back to China. This paper draws on collaborative research in Prato, Italy, to grasp how Chinese families and individuals encounter the Italian state and negotiate the terms of transnational capitalism. The project innovates an *encounter ethnography* framework to guide research. This paper investigates the dialectic between economics and affect. Chinese immigrants’ desires to make money are situated in three structural encounters, each at a different level of scale: the Wenzhou regional model of economic development; a Central Italian small-firm environment connected to the *made in italy* brand; and global restructuring of the textile and clothing industry. These encounters structure migrant experiences. Underlying sentiments expose how families cope with the demands of globalization, particularly their work in a sector demanding long hours and a fast production schedule. Adjusting to garment work is expressed as a “fistful of tears”; a decision to circulate children into the care of relatives back home is said to be “the only solution”. This paper uses the concept of “global household” (Safri and Graham 2010) to examine the transnational dispersal of kin networks and migrants’ reliance on the affective circuits of those networks. They illuminate, as Marshall Sahlins (2000) observed, how “capitalist forces are realized in other forms and finalities”, as a result of local cultural practices such mediating global systems.

*Keywords:* Transnational, Family, Economic anthropology.

In the *Made in Italy* fast-fashion sector, the ultimate flexible workers are Chinese migrants. Their flexibility assumes particular forms that speak to the contours of global dynamics and local work characteristics. This paper draws on three years of collaborative research, from 2012-15, in Prato, Italy, to grasp how families, institutions, and communities negotiate and cope with the terms of globalization (Bressan, Krause 2014). The project innovates an *encounter ethnography* framework to guide research into the dialectic between sentiments and economics.

So often as scholars report on the structural adjustments of capital and shifts to flexible accumulation (Harvey 2005; Ong 1999) they fail to consider «sentiments as forces of production» (Yanagisako 2002:7). Besides shaping the dynamics of firms such as those Yanagisako studied in Northern Italy, such sentiments are dispersed and travel from points of destination to places of arrival and back again (Ma Mung 2004; Coe 2014). Even in the context of more recent transnational joint ventures, Yanagisako noted the persistent significance of kinship sentiments among Italian family firms that enter into collaboration with Chinese entrepreneurs. The ironic twist to the story is that, as she puts it, «the agents of Western capitalism - namely the Italian capitalist families - aspire to enrich and develop a cultural logic that does not fit comfortably into evolutionary models of capitalism» (Yanagisako 2013: 82). To understand sentiments as forces of production, I ground sentiments in structural encounters. This paper asks how encounter ethnography, and specifically structural encounters, can help make sense of contrasting sentiments of bitterness as a form of social suffering and of “high-mindedness” as a sign of social success.

This paper situates Chinese immigrants’ aspiration to migrate and make money in three structural encounters, each at a different level of scale: a Chinese regional approach to economic development known as the Wenzhou model; a local Italian environment of small firms connected to the *made in italy* brand; and a global restructuring of the clothing industry. These encounters shape migrant experiences and reveal the complex meanings and practices

behind what would appear to be unbridled exploitation and social suffering, on the one hand, and a universal quest for money, on the other (Holmes 2013).

A historic textile district in the Province of Prato hosts what is claimed to be Europe's most concentrated overseas Chinese community. Transnational migrants produce low-cost items for the fast-fashion industry in the context of family firms. Chinese firms based in Italy also enter into subcontracting relationships with Italian artisan firms who contract directly with luxury brands (Giannini 2014). More than 4,800 Chinese-owned firms are registered with Prato's Chamber of Commerce<sup>1</sup>.

Prato and its environs have witnessed regional, national, and transnational in-migration during the past seventy years. The first two phases resulted in permanent transplants. A first phase of migration came on the heels of World War II, as Tuscan peasants abandoned the rural countryside. Residents with such roots make up about 30 percent of Prato's population. A second phase of migration occurred during the boom of the 1960s, as people from the Deep South left behind diverse peasant agriculture, bringing Southern habits and dialects, and experiencing quasi Jim Crow-style discrimination as they sought housing and employment. People of southern Italian heritage, long stigmatized in the Italian imagination as inferior, now make up about 12 percent of Prato's population (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2009). In a third phase, especially since the 1990s, transnational migrants have come onto the scene. They comprise about 17 percent of the population in the city and 15 percent in the province. The majority originates from China, with most born in Wenzhou of the province of Zhejiang (83.4 percent), or Fujian (13.2 percent). These migrants view southern Europe as a «frontier of highly developed economies» (Pieke 2004:2). Unlike the old migrants, new immigrants are non-citizens and typically incur debt to enter the European Union. Like the old migrants, they bring networking and labor strategies moored in a family model (Bagnasco 1992; Ceccagno 2009, Denison et al. 2007; Lem 2010).

Prato serves as an ethnographic laboratory of globalization. Our team interviewed more than 40 immigrants, primarily parents who worked in fast fashion and had experience circulating their young children between China and Italy. Interviews were conducted in the language of the speaker's preference, typically either Mandarin or the dialect of Wenzhouese, though on several occasions Italian. Recruitment occurred in encounter sites such as Prato's immigration office as well as the hospital pediatric ward. About half of the interviewees were firm owners and half were workers. Ethnographic fieldwork involved my being present in Prato for a total of 220 days over eight trips between 2012-2015. Along with my bilingual research assistants, I conducted participant observation in the pediatric ward of a hospital where Chinese parents brought their infants for check-up visits. I also attended numerous encounters sponsored by official government entities, such as municipalities or schools in the province, as well as civil society cultural organizations.

### *Encounter Ethnography*

In the legacy of anthropological scholarship, much has been written about encounters. The term is useful because it emphasizes experiences or processes that are at odds with one another, as in the phrases «colonial encounter» (Asad 1973), «development encounter» (Escobar 1991), «intercultural encounter» (Sahlins 2000), «clinical encounter» (Ferzacca 2000) or even «fieldwork encounter» (Borneman, Hammoudi 2009). Rather than leave encounters to the realm of theory, I conceptualized *encounter ethnography* as a methodological framework to guide the investigation. Ethnographic research revolved around several sites of encounter: 1) encounters concerning child migration and return; 2) encounters related to local production sites and global forces; and 3) encounters involving public places, meetings, and events. The method is designed to highlight and access jarring epistemological moments as when expert and subjugated types of knowledge collide. The project exposes how such instances play out on the ground between institutions and migrants as well as between ethnographers and their «subjects». Research design places encounters at the center. This allows us to focus on power-laden clashes

<sup>1</sup> As of 2012, there were 4,830 firms registered with the Camera di Commercio of Prato (which includes seven communes in the province) in the name of entrepreneurs of Chinese nationality. Some 3,379 individual firms were registered in the category of Confezione di articoli di abbigliamento; confezione di art. in pelle e pelliccia, or Production of articles of clothing, leather and fur, with the vast majority being clothing.

between dominant and subordinate economies, epistemologies, social practices, and moral orientations.

The method expands on Nina Glick Schiller's critique of mainstream migration studies, which she accuses of perpetuating «methodological nationalism», in which a byproduct of scholarship is that national identities get constructed against and at the expense of migrants. This often happens when ethnic groups remain the unit of analysis. As an alternative, Glick Schiller has proposed "locality analysis", an approach that places migrants and local residents in a shared conceptual framework. This amounts to rescaling the analysis. As such, it underscores the ways migrants are agents in «reshaping localities» and «turns our attention to the relationships that develop between the residents of a place and institutions situated locally, regionally, nationally, and globally, without making prior assumptions about how these relationships are shaped» (Glick Schiller 2014:46). This edited collection focuses on global migration in its inter-regional, international and transnational variants, and argues that contemporary migration scholarship is significantly advanced both within anthropology and beyond it when ethnography is theoretically engaged to grapple with the social consequences and asymmetries of twenty-first century capitalism's global modalities. Drawn from settings across the globe, case studies explore the nuanced formations of class and power within particular migration flows while addressing. Migrants, therefore, become actors within larger global forces. These forces are often capitalistic but, as a close look at the case of Chinese migrants demonstrates, the forces are not limited to capitalist ones. The forces and social relations also articulate with and are in opposition to values and strategies that Massimo de Angelis refers to as "other-than-capitalism": «In the last three decades, an abundant literature has developed that theorises and documents this 'other-than-capitalism,' this relational field in which not commodity and money, but commons, gifts, conviviality, affects as well as traditional forms of oppression such as patriarchy are the prime shapers, makers and breakers of norms of social relations, the prime context of value and meaning creation» (De Angelis 2007:35). Examples of non-capitalist practices among overseas Chinese cut-and-sew workers and entrepreneurs range from housing accommodations and wage systems to childrearing practices. More will be discussed on those themes below as I trace how sentiments can best be understood when they are connected to structural forces that collide and shape experience.

### *Fistful of Tears*

In Prato's Little Wenzhou, with its public signs that warn "no spitting", above a garment workshop and a wholesale store, Peng pulled himself out of bed. His mother-in-law had woken him up. He was dragging. The night before, he worked into the wee hours. It was a typical rhythm, but one he had more or less adapted to over the years.

Peng had come to Italy alone and angry as a nineteen-year-old teenager. In Wenzhou, he was a badass. He was fighting at school every day. His father sent him abroad as an education of sorts to fix his adolescent troubles. It took a year to leave, waiting for the visa, working through people who made the arrangements. His father had paid \$25,000 (160,000 RMB) for him to be "smuggled" in. The debt belonged to Peng. He finally made the trip in 2006. He didn't have to climb mountains like some. Rather, he flew into Europe under the pretense of «making a business trip». Technically, he was traveling on a thirty-day tourist visa. It would take much longer than that to pay off the debt.

Peng went from his initial destination of Greece, where he stayed with his hometown neighbors' relatives, to Italy, where he connected with a cousin. In Prato, he got a job in a factory owned by an aunt from his hometown. He didn't know how to make clothes but soon found himself sitting hours on end at an industrial sewing machine, taking cut pieces of fabric and stitching them into whole garments. In China, he had once tried the work but then ran away after a week. He had done a lot of running as a youth. In Prato, he said, he couldn't run away.

«There's really no choice after you come here, you can only make clothes here, there's nothing else you can do». Plus his visa had expired and he had nowhere else to go.

«Fistful of tears», he said, recalling his initiation into working in the fast-fashion sector. «When I was learning, I felt disheartened, I lay in bed and cried at night». He was slow, and people scolded him. He wasn't learning fast enough. He explained that after people scolded him he felt wronged and uncomfortable, but he couldn't say a thing. «I can't talk about my feelings». He learned skills from his aunt. In general, she was his teacher and treated

him well. «But in a context of work, things are different».

After that initial difficult period, he described life as “smooth”. Peng met his future wife, Lily, working side-by-side in the factory. The next year, in 2007, his father and her father opened their own factory, and two years later, in 2009, he and Lily bought it. In September 2010, Lily gave birth to their son and eight months later, in May 2011, Peng recalled, they found themselves terribly busy and unable to take care of their son. He asked Lily to send the infant back to China and asked his parents to quit their jobs to care for the baby. It all came to pass.

At the time of the interview, in December 2012, Peng hadn’t sewn clothes for two years. He stocked goods, allocated them, and sorted them. He managed the movement of orders outside of the factory, whereas Lily tended to the inside. Compared to China, the opportunities in Prato were much greater. But there had been sacrifices.

«To be honest, I came here to earn money, and I am getting older”, and then he added emphatically, “I used my youth as exchange for money, not my labor».

### *Structural encounters*

Behind Peng’s exchange of youth for money, and inside that fistful of tears, dwells a world: a world of regional structures and sentiments that collide with a globalized local context. Indeed, if we were to only interpret this as a quest for money, we might jump to the conclusion that Chinese migrants come merely to make money, and that as they move into adulthood and become parents - as so many do - that they circulate their children back to China for purely economic reasons. If that were the case, why would parents so often join a chorus of “inevitability?” Why would they describe sending their children to China as the “only solution?” These responses were frequent in our interviews with Chinese migrants living and working in Prato. Economic calculations are in the mix - relying on kin back home may be cheaper - but reducing their practices to this repeats the dominant refrain so common among resentful and, at times, xenophobic residents of Prato: that the Wenzhou migrants came only for the money. Tuning to “affective circuits” (Cole, Groes-Green 2016) allows other motivations to surface and tell a different story. It provides a tactic to ground encounters between global dynamics and local work characteristics and to understand the complexities of this profound encounter. This tactic also can put into the service of revealing that the global marketplace, as an outgrowth of neoliberal policies and ideologies, does not merely produce a coherent or unified set of ideas, as Aihwa Ong has observed (Ong 2006), but rather produces varied rationalities and regimes that end up being remarkably heterogeneous, particular and unexpected.

Chinese migrants in Prato admit that they came for the money, but they lament how hard it was to make that money. Attention on affective spectrums writes against bottom-line, utility-driven chrematistic logics and, in other words, avoids arriving at social-science insights at «bargain rates» (Sahlins 2000:421). As Marshall Sahlins cautions, “the capacity to reduce social properties to market values is exactly what allows capitalism to master the cultural order” (ibid.) Here, I suggest that tending to sentiments enables understanding of how capitalist forces and Western goods, such as the cutting and sewing of trendy clothing *made in italy*, get «realized in other forms and finalities”, even “incorporated as indigenous powers» (Sahlins 2000: 418-419). These other finalities may take the form of affect related to making money, global households, or cross-generational reciprocities. Considering transnational encounters, I argue for a need to push Sahlins’s concept of “their own system of the world” and recall that those systems may be fragmented and ever-changing due to diasporic interpenetrations and mediations.

*Peng:* People from Wenzhou are different, if they earn 1,000 this month, they want to earn 1,200 next month.

*Fangli:* So is it because people from Wenzhou are insatiable? Or are they high-minded?

*Peng:* High-minded and dissatisfied.

### *The Wenzhou model*

The adjectives “high-minded” and “dissatisfied” carry with them a world. To understand that world, I trace the roots to Wenzhou, a municipality and prefecture in southeastern Zhejiang Province, located at the midpoint of China’s eastern coast. Estimates are that as many as 90 percent of Chinese migrants in Italy have roots in Wenzhou

(Pedone 2013:69)<sup>2</sup>. Both a municipality and a prefecture, Wenzhou includes under its jurisdiction a territory with a population of 9 million residents. The area has a unique history in twentieth-century China and a particular resonance in terms of overseas Chinese. A ring of mountains, a coastal port, and land shortages played a role in shaping particular modes of survival and innovation.

Geographer Kok Tan describes an area of 6.3 million people of whom only 0.37 million lived in the city and the rest were scattered across nine counties. Put another way, a rural population of 5.93 million in 1986 accounted for 94 percent of the prefecture's total population. In "old China" those ratios meant "acute" land shortages and earned it the reputation as a place of «three plenties: plenty of thatched huts, plenty of people being forced to sell their children, and plenty of famine-stricken beggars» (Tan 1991:221).

These "plenties" resulted in a good deal of suffering and a significant surplus of rural labor. The hardship also gave rise to a host of adaptations. According to Tan, the indigenous people of Wenzhou resolved the land-shortage problem through various means. They became known for rural handicraft industries and as traveling vendors and traders. They cultivated acumen as artisans, service providers, and entrepreneurs. The networks developed through these practices gave rise to a particular form of economic activity largely based in households. Wenzhouese became resourceful at cultivating networks. By the time the People's Republic of China came to power in 1949, the Wenzhouese were well known as wanderers, merchants, and artisans throughout China and even overseas (Tan 1991).

In Wenzhou of the new China, the entrepreneurial spirit became formidable. In light of the Communist Revolution, people from Wenzhou became infamous for their defiance. They stubbornly ignored the central government's initiatives under Mao, specifically regarding economic reforms. Officials viewed them as insubordinate. The political scientist Alan Liu notes that «the entire province suffered from serious political discrimination under Mao, due partly to Zhejiang's being the home province of Chiang Kai-shek» but also due partly to the fact that the «Maoist collectivization program, which required Wenzhouese to stay put and farm, went against the grain of craftsmen and long-distance traders» (Liu 1992:698). As punishment, Wenzhou residents did not typically benefit from central government investments. As the Mao era came to a close, the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping shifted to a pragmatic style. December 1978 witnessed a watershed event: at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party the country's leaders embraced the so-called Four Modernizations - agricultural, industrial, national defense, science and technology. This established a pathway for economic «emancipation» (Pedone 2013:61). The new goals initiated a market-oriented economy that would pave the way for increased participation in a global economy (Pedone 2013:70-71; Tan 1999:222; Zhao 2013: 9-10). The new plan did something else, too. It cast the economic activities of Wenzhou in a new light. Wenzhou was no longer seen as a territory of insubordinate ne'er-do-well wanderers and petty capitalists<sup>3</sup>. Instead, the official view was that Wenzhou would serve as one model for economic development.

The Wenzhou model refers to a prevalent way that people in Wenzhou have organized their economic activity. The model is famous among globalization scholars, particularly those interested in the role of regional economies in the rise of China in the global economic landscape. The geographer Y. H. Dennis Wei defines the model as a «distinctive pathway to industrialization and economic development in China» (Wei 2011:239). The model is best known for small-scale family businesses typically clustered together, according to a principle of «one township—one product—many operations» (Tan 1991:219), see also (Wei 2011:243). Specialized towns emerged with focused production on commodities such as buttons, zippers, badges, lighters, shoes, or knitted bags, to name a few<sup>4</sup>. The model in Wenzhou contrasts with other areas known for different models. Local yet state-directed, collectively owned enterprises at the level of town and village characterize the Sunan model; by contrast, the

2 See also Liu (, who observed that Wenzhouese made up 83% of all Zhejiang immigrants in Europe (1992:697). Tomba placed the estimate at 90% of Chinese in Tuscany being from Wenzhou (1999:281).

3 Tan notes that two later policies were particularly favorable to the people of Wenzhou: a 1982 policy permitted peasants to conduct private trade and a 1984 policy opened urban centers to peasant households (1999:223).

4 Liu (1992:702) cites a 1984 study of merchandise that Wenzhou sales agents carried with them: hardware and appliances (28%), polyacrylic-fiber clothing (22.5%), plastic bags (18.5%), aluminum badges and placards (7.5%), fabrics (7.5%), buttons and watchbands (5.5%), etc.

Pearl River Delta model relies on externally driven industrialization and urbanization with frequent leveraging of foreign direct investment as a key feature.<sup>5</sup>

Recall, Wenzhou was a land of “three plenties”. For many peasants whose lives were plentiful with misery, rural industrialization allowed a pathway to make a living. In the 1980s, nonagricultural production began to surpass agricultural work. As historic practices of artisanship and trade transformed, the people of Wenzhou became competent at finding and filling market niches. They became known for hard work. They were driven.

As migrants left their homes, whether their destinations were within China or abroad, they brought skills with them. They made use of their *guanxi*, their social networks and relationships, wherever they went. To varying degrees, they replicated the Wenzhou model abroad. They are infamous for spreading Chinese-style commerce across the globe. Nanlai Cao points to three prominent features of this reform-era development: «private enterprise, moral contingencies, and aggressive global business outreach» (Cao 2013: 86). They are known as global go-getters. They are also known for conversion to Christianity. Even so, whether migration is to Paris or Prato, the freedom to practice religion appears to play a small role in their motivations to migrate to the West. Cao found no connection between their faith and their decision to migrate. «Most migrate with the dream to get rich» observes Cao of Wenzhou migrants in Paris. The same has been said for Wenzhou transplants elsewhere in Europe.

The driving forces of economic development have primarily been in private enterprises centered on household production. Debates continue about the model’s features and origins. Some authors write about the model as though it sprang from China’s economic reforms, in the late 1970s. Others draw attention to preexisting circumstances and practices. The versions that offer a historical perspective are the most illuminating in terms of understanding Wenzhou’s success both at home and abroad. These discussions parse how historic institutions adapted to modern conditions. Liu<sup>6</sup> describes the Wenzhou success formula «as a combination of ‘three M’s’ - mass initiativeness, mobility, and markets - and ‘one I’ - interstices». In practice these translate to driven people who run household industries or work as sales agents. This formula seems to follow the migrants wherever they go.

Leaving the homeland was not a welcome act during the first three decades of Socialist China. It was forbidden. The mechanism for policing population movement within the People’s Republic was a household registration system known as *hukou*. Two major divisions distinguished between urban and rural residents. The government prohibited people with a rural status from migrating to cities. If rural dwellers left the countryside anyway, they would find themselves in a tough situation: «Their rural residential status denied them access to state-subsidized foodstuffs, housing, employment, and other essential services reserved for urbanites only» (Zhang 2001a:182). These migrants who ignored official policies became known as the “floating population”. The term captured their status as floaters in the metaphoric sense that they were not connected. In practice, the consequences were concrete. This class of citizens did not enjoy typical rights. Government policies considered certain migrants as “illegal”. Sanctioned discrimination stemmed from the household registration system itself. The type of residency permit that the government issued to any given household therefore played a heavy role in the household members’ collective fates. The post-Mao era relaxed policies toward migration, but the label stuck. By 2000 the anthropologist Li Zhang estimates that there were some 100 million people in the category of “the floating populations”. These rural transients typically left villages and moved to cities in search of work and business opportunities. Observes Zhang: «The floating population consists of people with diverse socioeconomic and regional backgrounds, but their primary goals are the same: to get rich by migrating to the cities» (Zhang 2001a:182).

In Beijing, Wenzhou residents in the 1980s established an enclave in a marginal farming area and eventually it evolved into a famous migrant settlement known as Zhejiangcun. At the time, Beijing’s residents faced severe shortages of clothing. Wenzhou migrants jumped on the opportunity. They focused on the manufacture of low-end garments, including leather jackets, popular in Beijing at the time (Jeong 2014; Zhang 2001b). A standout feature of the Zhejiang settlement in Beijing, according to labor historian Luigi Tomba, was a “complete economic system of production, trade and services” (Tomba 1999:286).

<sup>5</sup> Jeong (2014:334), Wei (2011:237). Tan (1991:212) indicates that by the late 1980s there were “about a dozen major specialized towns scattered throughout Wenzhou”.

<sup>6</sup> Liu (1992:699-700); see also Pomeranz (2000).

As the migrants made their way to the Region of Tuscany, they initially settled in the sprawling industrial outskirts of Florence and set to work in the leather industry. Whether they migrated as families or engaged in chain migration (Tomba 1999), many eventually set up small household-based firms. As of 2009, some 3,379 small garment-sewing firms were registered in Prato's Chamber of Commerce. Firms in Prato therefore appear to have surpassed the 2,500 garment-sewing enterprises registered with the Wenzhou Clothing Business Association registered in China<sup>7</sup>.

### *The Made in Italy model*

Chinese migrants have come to dominate the small-firm landscape of economic activity in Prato, particularly those in garment and sweater production. When Chinese migrants first arrived in the environs of Florence, they found themselves in a strikingly similar environment in terms of the small-firm household-based workshops so common to Wenzhou. Tomba (1999:285) has gone so far as to note, «The economic and social conditions of industrial districts in Tuscany fitted the Chinese, steeped in the Wenzhou tradition, like a glove». The glove metaphor is hardly a stretch. Central Italy's postwar boom became famous for its small firms. A mode of regional development emerged in which about 90 percent of firms were small to medium sized. It was so swift and transformative that observers from economists to historians and journalists came to describe it as an economic miracle.

Historically, what eventually became the success of the *made in italy* "brand" was attributed to small- to medium-sized family firms lauded for their flexibility in meeting work demands. The small-firm model evolved in stark contrast to the large-scale industrialization of the Italian North and the corrupt underdevelopment, state-assisted landscape of the Italian South (Bagnasco, Sabel 1995; Blim 1990; Della Sala 2004; Economist 2005. See also Lazzeretti 2003). This alternative earned it the moniker of "Third Italy", known for decentralized production. In other words, production moved from big factories with brutal conditions, often resulting from pressures to speed up assembly line work, to microenterprises with semiautonomous industrial artisans. Given the context of light industry, it was not too difficult for production to decentralize, that is, shift from big parent factories to small subcontracting firms. Imagine landscapes scattered with family-run workshops nestled beneath clay tile-roofed residences in which kitchens sit tucked into adjacent rooms.

The proliferation of small manufacturing firms was, according to sociologist Ian Taplin, «one of the most remarkable features of post–World War II economic growth in Italy» (Taplin 1989:410) (see also Bagnasco 1992). Cost advantages were notable. Some aspects of production were informal, known as "lavoro nero", meaning part of an underground economy, in that certain activities were beyond the reach of taxation and other costly controls. Small-firm outsourcing typically relied on unwritten contracts - a less-celebrated feature of the informal economy but one that was essential to Prato's "miracle".

The model became the «darling of neoliberal development theorists», according to anthropologist Michael Blim (Blim 1990). Firms were adaptable and spontaneous in terms of production due to their size (small) and their form (family run)<sup>8</sup>. In the 1970s, the neo-Gramscian, pro-labor Left had a different take on decentralization: they suspected this development strategy was designed to quell labor unrest, reduce labor costs, and enhance profits. Blim's analysis, as well as those by Sabel and Becattini, offered a nuanced picture, tracing linkages between family enterprises and durable elements of indigenous social formation (Sabel 1989, Becattini 2001).

This «indigenous social formation» became key to the *made in italy* system. The historic sharecropping system, *mezzadria*, once a pervasive form of land tenure in north-central Italy, after the war witnessed a full-scale exodus that by the 1960s had left the rural landscape «in ruins» (Gaggio 2011:98). The organizing principles, however, did not disappear. Instead, they underwrote the new enterprises - though in surprisingly contrasting ways. The old organizing principles had both conservative and radical tendencies.

<sup>7</sup> The data derive from 2009 annual records. Wei 2011:243 cites data from the apparel industry in Wenzhou Municipality from 2008 (Caserta and Monticelli 2010: 14).

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion and a comparison, see also Dunn 2004: 60-69.



On the conservative side, as the historian Dario Gaggio (2011:95) notes, «Classical *mezzadria* was imagined for centuries as a partnership between a landlord, who provided most of the capital necessary for agriculture, and the head of a peasant family, who contributed his labor and that of his relatives». The partnership, though, was hardly one of equals, and within the family its members did not have equal say. Hierarchies prevailed. Distance was structured. The landlords, who frequently held a noble title, did not manage the farms themselves. They hired a middleman, the infamous *fattore*, to oversee the peasants. Hence, rigid hierarchies prevailed both within the family and between the family patriarch and the patron.

On the progressive side, protest to these hierarchies was already brewing when the Nazi-Fascist occupation occurred in 1943–44. Tuscan sharecroppers were well positioned to support the antifascist partisans, who tended to find themselves on the opposite political side of their wealthy landlords. Peasants participated widely in the Resistance, and this had a number of far-reaching consequences, including Nazi-led retaliation in the form of several infamous massacres as well as tragic partisan deaths related to dangerous acts of resistance<sup>9</sup>. A long-lasting consequence manifested in the bonds between peasants (as well as day laborers) and Left political organizations, namely, the Communist Party. As migrants arrived from the Italian South to partake in Prato's economic "miracle", they also joined political movements. These were volatile years, years in which democratic communism was a real possibility. Labor struggles were visceral and even violent.

This history was crucial to the small-firm character of the *made in italy* economic reality. On the one hand, these features generated the crisis and light industry along with eventual labor unrest. That same labor unrest in many ways contributed to the small-firm reality. On the other hand, features of peasant ethos and family cohesion underwrote these new enterprises. The economist Giacomo Becattini describes tensions on the order of a "peasant protest, particularly by women and youth, not so much against the countryside itself as against the rigidity of the pecking-order in the family and against their close economic dependence on its older male members" (Becattini 1998:83). The sons and daughters of former peasants particularly objected to the rigid patriarchal family form. Their objections fueled a desire for autonomy, relatively speaking, particularly vis-à-vis individuals' self-assertion in monetary matters. People rejected sharecropping and turned to industry. But the old peasant ethos was stubborn particularly in terms of networks grounded in old-world habits of patron-client relations, secrecy, trust, and reciprocity.

### *Global Restructuring*

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper situates Chinese immigrants' aspiration to migrate and make money in three structural encounters. This section moves to the third level of scale, that of global restructuring of the apparel industry. The textile and clothing industry is iconic in terms of globalization. The hands of Chinese people have come to play a hugely important role in making clothes that people the world over wear. As one geographer puts it, «the most significant change in the global map of production is the spectacular rise of China since the launch of reforms in the late 1970s» (Wei 2011:237). Particularly notable are changes since the 1990s. Various measures point to China's formidable role in the apparel industry. Most impressive is its share of global apparel exports, including footwear: 10 percent in 1990, 23 percent in 1995, and 30 percent in 2007. Remarks Wei (2011:2040): «a miraculous rise in the global market».

Hardly "miraculous" but nevertheless distinctive has been Italy's trajectory. The *Economist*, drawing on the widely used Trade Performance Index, reported in 2013 that «Italy has remained the world's top ranking exporter in textiles, clothing, and leather goods» (London 2013). This makes Italy distinctive for developed economies. Characteristics of this "distinctive trajectory", dating to the 1970s, include Italian clothing and textile firms' resistance to moving offshore and instead a commitment to increase domestic output, expand exports, and stave off «import penetration» (Dunford et al. 2013:8). Italy has been unusual compared with other economically advanced countries in that it remained competitive for a long time in the textile and clothing industry, a "traditional"

<sup>9</sup> The Casa del Popolo in Carmignano is named 11 Giugno 1944 in honor of the day when four young partisans died after bombing a Nazi train loaded with explosives en route to Prato and its textile factories (Contini 1997).

industry in which emerging economies typically specialize (Dunford et al. 2013:22).

Despite Italy's lofty ranking, other lenses suggest a different story. Italy's textile and clothing output peaked in 1995. The landscape of textile and clothing production has changed radically. Imports from China have risen from just 5.7 percent in Italy's peak production year of 1995 to 30 percent in 2010. A team of economic geographers' analysis of industry data demonstrates that Italian firms, employment, and overall value have all declined. Between 1981 and 2007, the total number of establishments decreased by more than half as did the number of employees. Yet striking differences exist within the industry; some sectors shrank while others grew. Those same geographers cite Prato as a case in point. In the decade between 2001 and 2011, the number of textile enterprises more than halved, from 6,372 to 3,079. Jobs declined as well, from 38,658 to 18,700. Yet the garment sector, historically smaller in Prato than textiles, witnessed an increase from 4,117 to 11,000, and the number of enterprises from 2,168 to 4,504. Their explanation is relevant: «The growth of the clothing sector, though, was almost entirely due to the growth of small Chinese enterprises» (Dunford et al. 2013:10).

Indeed, many Italian firms have not been able to cope well with globalization. To stay competitive, textile and clothing establishments had to either be large enough to take advantage of trade agreements that eliminated quotas and encouraged global outsourcing in the quest for "efficiency wages" or be lucky enough to have specialized in high-end fashion, the most resilient of the *made in Italy* sector. Italian exports have relatively high unit values, as calculated in euros per kilogram. It is not surprising that wealthy countries are the most common destination of Italian exports. The global financial crisis, however, rocked the resilience of high fashion as the demand for designer clothes and accessories declined, for example, in Japan, the United States, and the UK. The distinctive trajectory of Italian textile and clothing in the end has a great deal to do with the symbolic value of the *made in Italy* brand<sup>10</sup>. The lower one travels on the Italian fashion ladder, the less significant is the value for the industry. By the 1990s, firms at the low end of the clothing market had «virtually disappeared from the Italian scene» (Dunford et al. 2013:20). The exception in Prato was the sweater-making niche, which also was all but phased out among Italian firms by the late 1990s, at the tail end of my 22 months of dissertation fieldwork, including six months working first in a sweater factory and then a sweater-finishing firm in the Province of Prato (Krause 2005).

Meanwhile, the low end of ready-made wear was undergoing a radical transformation that has evolved into so-called fast fashion. This mode of production and distribution has become the primary strategy for retailers to get wearable goods into the hands and onto the bodies of consumers. Despite production chains that have gone global and sourcing that extends across vast distances that span national borders, designs and inventories change constantly. The fast-fashion model targets new consumers with a reputation for being fickle. Fast fashion is thus known for inexpensive fashion-forward clothing. Inventories tend to be limited to keep stock moving. Retailers have found in fast fashion a winning formula to push costs down and profits up. Notes the apparel organizational sociologist Ian Taplin: «Firms such as Inditex (Zara), Topshop, H&M, Uniqlo and Forever Twenty One built their brands by targeting young people who were fashion conscious but income scarce». Such retailers are known for spotting trends, copying designs, and churning them out to meet demand (Taplin n.d.:4, Reinach 2005).

If ready-made wear represented the democratization of fashion, fast fashion is the fantasy of democracy and equality. On the consumer end, fast fashion enables and promotes flexible identities through its economy of constant choice. On the producer end, it reflects flexible work regimes that making fast fashion requires. These are very different sides of the same coin. They have very different meanings. The flexible consumer conveys a positive image. It's fun to change it up. Consumers like change. And they like those changes to be economical. H&M has the recipe - they have the trendiest of things, and as anthropologist and fashion consultant Simona Segre Reinach notes, they are «the fastest of them all» (Reinach 2005:47). No wonder the quick and handsome soccer player David Beckham became H&M's model of choice for Superbowl XLVIII.

The other side of the coin reveals a different meaning of flexibility. It requires that workers work when there is work. They have to be available. They have to work long shifts, up to 16 or 18 hours, when there are orders to fill - those trendy items flying off store shelves. They have to work nights and squeeze in sleep during the day. They have to sew in workshops without temperature controls, making for a dank and cold environment in the winter and a

10 Such differences in price points contradict typical laws of supply and demand; economists refer to these as Veblen goods (see Chase, in Veblen 1934). My thanks to Scott Nelson for referring me to this reference.

blistering hot one come summer. And they are often constrained to send their babies thousands of miles away to have others care for them. Making clothes has been a labor-intensive industry as long as there have been owners in search of a profit and workers in search of wages. It has also long been an “imperfect industry”, in the words of fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle, based on exploitation and relations of inequality (Entwistle 2000: 212).

### *Sentiments and Structures*

Chinese migrants in Prato did not typically brag about get-rich-quick schemes but more commonly lamented how hard it was to make money. There were busy times and slow times, the cost of living was high, and there were endless ways to spend money. The fast-fashion small-firm phenomenon and the sentiments that circulate do so within structural encounters. The history of Wenzhou itself looms large, a homeplace whose residents have developed vast overseas networks and a keen awareness of opportunities. Taking advantage of those opportunities comes with pressure. Not doing so comes with stigma. The anthropologist Minghuan Li, who worked with Chinese migrants both in the Netherlands and Wenzhou, describes a strong “overseas consciousness” that circulates back and forth between Wenzhou and non-Wenzhou destinations. The consciousness leads many in Wenzhou to view getting rich in Europe as a sort of “special opportunity”; those without such opportunities are viewed as lacking in resourcefulness whereas those who do not take advantage of their opportunities and do not go abroad risk being ridiculed as “lazy or strange”. As Li summarizes, «They believe “getting rich in Europe” is their common destination» (Li 1999:194).

High-mindedness relates to profound desires for mobility. An «overseas consciousness» (Li 1999) animates new sentiments that *appear* to mimic rationalities of global capitalism. These affects and their circulation, however, are more than they appear. As Peng’s fistful of tears dried, as he spoke of sending money back to his father, he emphasized filial respect and reciprocal relations extended transnationally. His own journey of migration involved contrasting sentiments of bitterness as a form of social suffering and of “high-mindedness” as a sign of social success.

The quest for mobility has a particular character when placed in the context of the global household, «an institution formed by family networks dispersed across national boundaries” (Safri, Graham 2010:100). It is essential to recognize the character of this fast economy as hybrid (Yang 2000). Noncapitalist relations of reciprocity shoot through it. Reflecting on what she had gained and what she had lost from migrating, Ju pointed to generational advance: «Yes, there’s an advantage. We have managed to earn a little money, we have brought it to my mother, as though one generation is finally earning a little something, right?»<sup>11</sup>.

Everywhere does not always produce the same, flat, homogeneous inevitability<sup>12</sup>. Yanigisako takes an important step in writing against an idea of a monolithic model of “Western capitalism” (2002:25). Meta-economic categories can be particularly stubborn. This project aims to trouble such capitalocentric models (Gibson-Graham 2006). Geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham use the term *capitalocentrism* to raise awareness of how discourse that privileges capitalism «has now colonized the entire economic landscape and its universalizing claims seem to have been realized”. To «destabilize capitalist dominance», they take seriously diverse economic activities, noting that much economic activity can be classified as noncapitalist (gifts, barter, self-employment, cooperatives, volunteering, informal economy), and that it matters for understanding the world as it is and for what it might be in the future.

Along these lines, the anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang seeks to halt misguided representations of “monolithic global capitalism”. To this end, she coins the term *economic hybridity*. Yang draws on her field-based research in the small towns and rural areas of Wenzhou in southeastern coastal China to describe how people experience what is often glossed as global capitalism as they renew remnants of noncapitalism. She bears witness to the interweaving of a centralized state socialist economy, transnational capitalism, a revitalized premodern

<sup>11</sup> Mother, interview n. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Local people may be incorporated into the world system, but they may also do so for their own purposes. Sahlins cites Codere (1950:82) who had summarized an extensive study of official documents: “it is as though Kwakiutl were able to exploit the new culture to their own ends” (Sahlins 2000:449).

market economy based on household production, and a ritual economy. Yang's purpose is clear: to challenge the trope of capitalist penetration and assumptions about how diverse social formations get absorbed into a global economy. Putting on a lens of economic hybridity allows a different glimpse of a transforming territory.

Attention to affective circuits illuminates why workers are driven, why they sacrifice their youth for money, why they circulate that money, or why parents may send their infants and children far from migrant "home". All told, such practices rely on and activate systems of reciprocity across kin, create networked bodies across territories, and secure affective bonds across generations. Following the flow of sentiments and grounding them in structural encounters reveals much about local work characteristics. It allows for avoiding bargain-rate, just-in-time interpretations that workers are merely duped by their own self-exploitation. Much more remains to be written and explored on the value of networked bodies, reciprocity, and affective circuits that underwrite the über-flexible production of fast-fashion and the transnational social relations that it requires and enables.

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