

Contemporary Italian Novels on Chinese Immigration to Italy

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Introduction

Published in 2006, Roberto Saviano's best seller, *Gomorra: viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra* opens with the macabre image of the frozen cadavers of Chinese immigrants being shipped from Naples to China in containers.¹ This is where "i cinesi che non muoiono mai" end up, as Saviano elaborates in an eyewitness account by a crane worker (11). In *Gomorra*, silence and invisibility, characteristic of Chinese illegality in Naples, are metonymic of the Camorra, the book's main object of inquiry. The year 2010 saw the publication of another best seller, Edoardo Nesi's *Storia della mia gente: la rabbia e l'amore della mia vita da industriale di provincia*, recipient of the prestigious Premio Strega.² Nesi makes causal links between the failure of the Italian textile industry in Prato and exports from China and Chinese immigrant textile and garment businesses in Italy. The notoriety of these two books is largely owed to their scandalous depictions and sharp criticism of social malfunction in Italy, including political corruption, lack of governmental incentives for enterprises, a vast underground economy, and extensive organized crime. Both authors, and Nesi in particular, account for these social malaises by examining the impacts of Chinese immigration to Italy and Chinese global business.

These two books are part of an outpouring of Italian novels since the mid-2000s that place Chinese immigration to Italy, or Chinese immigrant characters, at the center of their narratives. Of the novels that take place in Milan, three are noteworthy: Marco Wong's *Nettare rosso: storia di un'ossessione sessuale*, Luigi Ballerini's *Non chiamarmi Cina!*, and Gabriella Kuruvilla's *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*. Trieste is the border city par excellence in *Amiche per la pelle* by Laila Wadia, while Antonio Scurati sets the imaginary Chinese community of his *La seconda mezzanotte* in Venice, and former policeman Maurizio Matrone sets his crime novel, *Piazza dell'Unità*, in Bologna. Mario Pasqualotto's story of second-generation immigrant teenagers, *L'estate delle falene*, takes place in Umbria. Prato provides the backdrop for Nesi's *Storia della mia gente*, *L'età dell'oro*, and *Le nostre vite senza ieri*, as well as for Piero Ianniello's *Via della Cina* and Yang Xiaping's *Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia*. Pincio Tommaso focuses on Rome in both *Cinacittà: memorie del mio delitto* and *Pulp Roma*, while Hu Lanbo also selects Rome as an essential backdrop in *Petali di orchidea*. Pina Varriale's novel for children, *L'ombra del drago*, is set in Naples. These narratives by no means constitute an exhaustive list of an ongoing trend.³

¹ Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra: viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra* (Mondadori, 2006). In this essay, page numbers will be put in parentheses and will refer to the cited editions.

² Edoardo Nesi, *Storia della mia gente: la rabbia e l'amore della mia vita da industriale di provincia* (Bompiani, 2010).

³ Marco Wong, *Nettare rosso: storia di un'ossessione sessuale* (On-demand e-book, 2010 and Compagnia delle Lettere, 2011); Luigi Ballerini, *Non chiamarmi Cina!* (Giunti, 2012); Gabriella Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene* (Laterza, 2012); Laila Wadia, *Amiche per la pelle* (E/O, 2007); Antonio Scurati, *La seconda mezzanotte* (Bompiani, 2011); Maurizio Matrone, *Piazza dell'Unità* (Marcos y Marcos, 2011); Mario Pasqualotto, *L'estate delle falene*

This literary trend is remarkable because of the large quantity of novels that have appeared since the mid-2000s indicating Italians' extensive and intense experience with Chinese immigrants. In comparison, prior to the mid-2000s, Mohsen Melliti's *I bambini delle rose* and Gao Liang's *Il cavaliere delle nuvole. Alla ricerca dei «Perché» della vita* are the sole examples of Italian novels about Chinese immigrants.⁴ Moreover, when compared to relevant French literature regarding Chinese immigrants, these Italian novels are published within a strikingly concentrated time period and provide a rich diversity of authorial perspectives.⁵ With an estimated count of 500,000 in 2005, France has the largest Chinese migrant community within the European continent.⁶ Literature on Chinese immigration to France, by authors mostly of Chinese origin, has witnessed an extended period of publication, from the 1980s to the present.⁷ In contrast, the authors writing on this subject in Italy are European Italians, Italians of Chinese origin (Sino-Italians), Chinese immigrants, and Italians and immigrants of non-European and non-Chinese origins, all of whose texts have been published in less than a decade.

Currently, there is no systematic study of this Italian literary trend.⁸ With few exceptions, scholars have not investigated cultural representations of Chinese immigration to Italy in any depth. In this essay, I survey for the first time some of the most meaningful novels by men and women who pioneered this literary trend. My primary aim is to examine the ways in which authors of various socio-cultural backgrounds address the interconnections of narrativity, social

(Einaudi ragazzi, 2011); Edoardo Nesi, *L'età dell'oro* (Bompiani, 2006); Edoardo Nesi, *Le nostre vite senza ieri* (Bompiani, 2012); Piero Ianniello, *Via della Cina* (Mauro Pagliai Editore, 2012); Yang Xiaping, *Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia* (Idest, 2011); Pincio Tommaso, *Cinacittà: memorie del mio delitto efferato* (Einaudi, 2008); Pincio Tommaso, *Pulp Roma* (Il Saggiatore, 2012); Hu Lanbo, *Petali di orchidea* (Barbera Editore, 2012); Pina Varriale, *L'ombra del drago* (Einaudi Ragazzi, 2011). Novellas by Chinese immigrant writers entered the literary competitions Eks&Tra, Parole sopra l'Esquilino, and Concorso Lingua Madre. I exclude *Rometta e Giulio* (I Canguri/Feltrinelli, 2001) by Jadelin M. Gangbo and *Non toccare la pelle del drago* (Oscar Mondadori, 2003) by Giuseppe Genna because of the scope of my essay. For a further list of this literature, see Valentina Pedone, "L'Italia nella letteratura sinoitaliana," in *Come ci vedono e ci raccontano. Rappresentazioni sociali degli immigrati cinesi a Roma*, eds. Maria Concetta Pitrone, Fabrizio Martire, and Gabriella Fazzi (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2012), 44-45.

⁴ Mohsen Melliti, *I bambini delle rose* (Edizioni Lavoro, 1995) and Gao Liang, *Il cavaliere delle nuvole. Alla ricerca dei «Perché» della vita* (Edizioni Paoline, 1997).

⁵ During the 1920s, a small number of Chinese immigrants moved from France to Italy in search of job opportunities. The precise number of these immigrants is not available, but is likely in the hundreds. Daniele Cologna, "Chinese Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Italy: Strengths and Weaknesses of an Ethnic Enclave Economy," in *Asian Migrants and European Labour Markets: Patterns and Processes of Immigrant Labour Market Insertion in Europe*, eds. Ernst Spaan et al. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 268.

⁶ Estimates are culled from Yun Gao and Véronique Poisson, "Exploitation of Chinese Immigrants' Vulnerabilities in France," in *Concealed Chains: Labour Exploitation and Chinese Migrants in Europe*, ed. Gao Yun (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2010), 57 and Pierre Picquart, "Les migrants de la diaspora chinoise," *chinoisdefrance.com*, accessed September 29, 2012, <http://www.chinoisdefrance.com/migrants-chinois-chine.html>. There are no official statistics available for the ethnic origins of immigrants in France. I thank Ileana Chirila for this information.

⁷ Notable examples include Chow Ching Lie's *Concerto du fleuve jaune* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980); Ya Ding's *Le jeu de l'eau et du feu* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); René Han's *Un chinois en Bourgogne* (Paris: Perrin, 1992); François Cheng's *Le Dit de Tianyi* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); Chow Ching Lie's *Dans la main de Bouddha* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2001); Shan Sa's *Les conspirateurs* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005); and Ling Xi's *Été strident* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2006). I am grateful to Sophie Croiset and Ileana Chirila for this bibliography.

⁸ For a very brief introduction to this literature, see Valentina Pedone, "Nettare rosso di Marco Wong," *associna.com*, last modified May 3, 2011, <http://www.associna.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=866>. For the notion of Italy in Italian-language novels and novellas written by Chinese immigrants, see Pedone, "L'Italia nella letteratura sinoitaliana."

concerns, and cultural identities. I show that these novels reinforce or contest the meanings of specific issues (e.g., bicultural identities of second-generation Chinese immigrants and the Chinese mafia in Italy) as well as the rhetorical strategies in media and cinematic representations of Chinese immigrants in Italy (e.g., an ethnocultural approach to interpreting texts) following the protest in Milan's Chinatown in 2007, which has inspired a spate of cultural representations of Chinese immigrants in Italy.⁹ While all the authors I analyze react to the prevailing social perceptions of Chinese immigrants in Italy, significantly, Yang and Hu challenge the pejorative depictions by their more prominent Italian counterparts by providing self-assured counter-hegemonic discourses. At times, however, immigrant writers run the same risks as Italian authors when adopting an ethnocultural approach. My analysis of these authors' rhetorical strategies and engagement with specific literary genres (e.g., the "New Italian Epic" and the crime novel), in which the nexuses of historical narrative, social critique, and ethics are featured, shows that these novels rehearse and reshape received social perceptions regarding Chinese immigrants in contemporary Italy.

Contexts

Why has there been an acute desire by authors of diverse backgrounds to narrate Chinese immigration to Italy in literature since the mid-2000s? Some of the reasons are demographic, social, economic, and political. Currently, Chinese immigrants comprise the fourth largest migrant community in Italy after Romanians (969,000), Albanians (483,000), and Moroccans (452,000).¹⁰ In the early 2000s, undocumented Chinese residents were estimated to represent 15 to 20 percent of the total Chinese migrant population in Italy.¹¹ According to the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* and ISTAT, the number of registered Chinese residents in Italy swelled from approximately 60,000 in 2000 to almost 210,000 in 2011.¹² Thus, both the visibility of Chinese immigrants and their participation in Italian civic life have increased dramatically during the past decade. The Chinese have also been the most entrepreneurial migrant group in Italy during the past two decades.¹³ Since the 2000s, enterprises and factories owned by Chinese immigrants in Italy as well as those in mainland China have been in direct competition with Italian businesses. Although collaboration and competition among the three are dynamic, with no one-sided gains or losses, the overall economic success of China and Chinese immigrants contrasts starkly with Italy's general economic stagnation. According to The World Bank statistics, while in 2000 China and Italy had a GDP of almost 1.20 and 1.10 trillion U.S. dollars respectively, in 2011 China reached 7.32 and Italy only 2.19.¹⁴ Although the global financial crisis that began in 2007 had a significant impact on both countries, its effects were significantly

⁹ Gaoheng Zhang, "The Protest in Milan's Chinatown and the Chinese Immigrants in Italy in the Media (2007-2009)," *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 22.

¹⁰ ISTAT, "Popolazione straniera residente in Italia 2011," 3.

¹¹ Antonella Ceccagno, Renzo Rastrelli, and Alessandra Salvati, *Ombre cinesi? Dinamiche migratorie della diaspora cinese in Italia* (Rome: Carocci, 2008), 91.

¹² Antonella Ceccagno, "New Chinese Migrants in Italy," *International Migration* 41, no. 3 (2003): 195 and ISTAT, "Popolazione straniera residente in Italia 2011," 3.

¹³ Ceccagno, "New Chinese Migrants in Italy," 189.

¹⁴ "GDP (current US\$)," *the World Bank*, accessed September 29, 2012, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

more detrimental to Italy, which lacked the governmental interventions and capital that China was able to muster, to cite only one salient difference. As Italian stores were flooded with Chinese imports and Italian jobs threatened by local Chinese competitors, anti-Chinese sentiments boiled quickly and forcefully. Political entities of diverse ideologies seized on the perceived state of emergency engendered by China's rapid rise, as well as on the influx of foreign immigration to Italy, in order to influence their electorate shares. The regionalist political party Lega Nord, for example, has made immigration a central trope in its electoral strategy, arguing for the preservation of a Padanian identity to the exclusion of all immigrants.

Journalism, television, cinema, and the Internet, which record and analyze social changes in real time, have also contributed to the recent flurry of literary depictions. A significant example are the cross-media representations of the first and violent protest of Chinese immigrants against the Italian police in Milan's Chinatown in 2007. In the aftermath of the protest, during 2007-2008, a pronounced interest in overseas Chinese criminal organizations led to the publication of several popular journalistic books examining the Italian case.¹⁵ From 2008 to the present, numerous fictional and documentary films have engaged with specific issues related to Chinese immigration to Italy that first emerged from the news media during the protest.¹⁶ With varying degrees of influence, all of these representations have had an impact on the interactions of Chinese immigrants and Italians in the social sphere. I have argued that the Italian and Chinese immigrant media of various political leanings contributed significantly to the cultural articulation of Chinese immigrant identities in Italy during and after the protest.¹⁷

The acute cultural awareness of the impact of Chinese immigrants on Italian society that is evident in these media created a very favorable environment for the production of relevant literature. Most of these novels were published after the protest in 2007, many between 2010 and 2012. By and large, they deal with the same themes and strategies in cultural representations of the 2007 protest, including the perceived lack of communication between the Chinese community and Italian society, a gendered and racialized bias against the Chinese, and real or perceived Chinese illegality and organized crime. Indeed, most of the novels I analyze not only constitute the most recent cultural texts focused on Chinese immigration to Italy but also refer back to the 2007 protest and pre-2007 representations of Chinese immigrants. The treatment of these representations with some degree of historical depth enhanced the publishing prospects of each of these narratives. While independent houses published Wong, Yang, and Hu, Einaudi and Bompiani published books by Pincio and Nesi. This situation recalls the flurry of Italian migration literature in the early 1990s following the 1989 assassination of the South African refugee Jerry Essan Masslo. Regarding that context, Armando Gnisci attributes the phenomenon to the desire of the Italian cultural industry to offer readers a literary interpretation of the dramatic increase of immigrants in Italy during that period, which he calls a "problema

¹⁵ See Fabrizio Cassinelli's *Chinatown, Italia* (Reggio Emilia: Aliberti, 2007); Lidia Casti and Mario Portanova's *Chi ha paura dei cinesi?* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2008); and Giampiero Rossi and Simone Spina's *I boss di Chinatown. La mafia cinese in Italia* (Milan: Melampo, 2008).

¹⁶ Important films include *Questa notte è ancora nostra* (Paolo Genovese and Luca Miniello, 2008); *Cenci in Cina* (Marco Limberti, 2009); *Giallo a Milano: Made in Chinatown* (Sergio Basso, 2009); *Miss Little China. Sudano, piangono, sognano. L'Italia dei cinesi* (Riccardo Cremona and Vincenzo De Cecco, 2009); and *Io sono Li* (Andrea Segre, 2011).

¹⁷ Zhang, "The Protest in Milan's Chinatown and the Chinese Immigrants in Italy in the Media (2007-2009)," 22-23.

drammatico locale-mondiale importante e conflittuale.”¹⁸ By the same token, by the late 2000s there was a steady niche market for fictional narratives of Chinese immigration to Italy.

By the mid-2000s, novelists concerned with the Chinese case were able to draw from an extensive, fifteen-year tradition of literature about immigration to Italy. The second-generation Sino-Italian author Wong and first-generation Chinese immigrant writers Yang and Hu write independently in Italian, unlike the first published immigrant authors who co-authored their works with Italian journalists and writers.¹⁹ They thus have more in common with other immigrant writers such as Younis Tawfik and Gëzin Hadjdari and second-generation, native-Italian writers such as Igiaba Scego and Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo. Being highly educated, Wong, Yang, and Hu share very little of the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of typical first-generation Chinese immigrants in Italy.²⁰ In migration literature, including narratives that depict the Chinese migrant community, there is often a rift between the educated migrant writers, who sometimes possess a degree in literature, and the persons who migrated for economic reasons that these writers depict.²¹ As is the case with other literature on migration in Italy, European Italian writers have also published novels on Chinese immigration to Italy, some of which, like Nesi’s book, appealed to a large readership in Italy.

Specific extra-literary factors give rise to themes in narratives focused on Chinese immigrants in Italy that distinguish them from those of other immigrants in Italy. Unlike North African immigrants, Chinese immigrants in Italy lack an acute sense of European colonialism, given that the most ambitious Italian colonial intervention in China consisted of a concession territory in Tianjin from 1901 to 1947. In contrast to Muslim immigrants in Italy, religious difference is not commonly perceived as a problem for Italian and Chinese bi-cultural couples, possibly because Christianity is embraced by a considerable number of Chinese overseas. If most Eastern European and South American immigrants in Italy possess a set of cultural codes and values largely shared by Italians, the Chinese bring with them an altogether different cultural tradition. As the Chinese are the only numerically significant East Asian migrant community in Italy, they are ethnicized, orientalized, and gendered in very specific ways, which draw on the long history of Sino-Italian cultural exchanges.

With few exceptions, most migration literature in Italy, including that focused on Chinese immigration, is novelistic. One reason is the genre’s accessibility to a larger readership, a vital factor in the proliferation of migration literature.²² Another possible reason is the novel’s ability to maintain a high level of hybridized narrative forms, which is necessary for representations of complex migratory dynamics. The most significant aspect of literary hybridization in the novels I discuss is the cross-fertilization between fictional and documentary elements, which often allows the authors to take an unusually clear-cut stance regarding Chinese immigrants in Italy.

¹⁸ Armando Gnisci, “La letteratura italiana della migrazione,” in *Creolizzare l’Europa. Letteratura e migrazione* (Rome: Meltemi editore), 89.

¹⁹ These immigrant authors and their Italian collaborators are Mohamed Bouchane with Carla De Girolamo and Daniele Miccione; Salah Methnani with Mario Fortunato; Pap Khouma with Oreste Pivetta; Saidou Moussa Ba with Alessandro Micheletti; and Nassera Chohra with Alessandra Atti Di Sarro.

²⁰ For information on the typical situation of Chinese immigrants in Italy, see Cologna, “Chinese Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Italy,” 267, 270, 272, 276-7, 279, and 281.

²¹ Jennifer Burns, “Outside Voices Within: Immigration Literature in Italian,” in *Trends in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2007*, eds. Gillian Ania and Ann Hallamore Caesar (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 150.

²² Jennifer Burns considers it problematic to identify a specific progression or consolidation in the literary concerns and genres in migration literature in Italy. Burns, “Outside Voices Within,” 138.

Unsurprisingly, these novels pertain to self-consciously socially engaged literary genres such as the autobiographical novel, the crime novel, the novel for adolescent intercultural pedagogy, and the so-called “New Italian Epic.”

As autofiction, *Petali di orchidea* tells the edifying story of a successful Chinese immigrant woman in Italy, which is intended as a parable for other Chinese immigrant women. In *Storia della mia gente*, Nesi relates his personal story in order to illustrate a pan-Italian crisis. As autobiographical novels draw on real-life episodes for literary recreation, the interface between fictional and non-fictional elements is an important location from which to examine the nexus between personal and national histories.

In *Cinacittà*, *Piazza dell’Unità*, and *Amiche per la pelle*, the focus on Chinese organized crime in Italy draws on the conventions of the crime novel, a genre whose immense popularity among the general readership owes partially to its function as a prime site for social criticism in Italy since the 1980s.²³ More specifically, as Lucia Rinaldi observes, crime fiction is “a vehicle by which to acknowledge and discuss the relentless process of change in urban and sub-urban spaces and their inhabitants’ new worries and anxieties.”²⁴ These three novels articulate Italians’ anxiety about Chinese immigration to Italy during the 2000s from the perspective of the ongoing criminalization of immigrants in Italy.

Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia and *Non chiamarmi Cina!* were written as intercultural pedagogical texts for adolescents and their educators. The social need for textbook-like novels on Sino-Italian encounters accounts for the impressive number of documentary elements in these two books. This particular literary strain boasts over a hundred titles between 1991 and 2011.²⁵ According to Lorenzo Luatti, frequently these books are written as autobiographical novels or fables and legends, initially used in Italian schools and gradually serving a general readership. Luatti also notes that, when compared to migration literature for adults, these books emphasize education and intercultural understanding rather than literariness.²⁶ Somewhat exceptional, Yang’s and Ballerini’s novels are noted for their literary merits as well as for their pedagogical function.

Although *Nettare rosso*, *Storia della mia gente*, and *Piazza dell’Unità* are by no means novels that can be neatly grouped under the heading of the “New Italian Epic” (NIE), it is useful to approach specific aspects of these texts from this perspective. Coined by the writer Wu Ming 1, NIE encompasses a set of shared features in Italian fiction since the 1990s that combines literary and non-literary materials in order to account for current social conditions that are examined through historical knowledge.²⁷ NIE narrates and analyzes social reality with an acute

²³ Giuliana Pieri, introduction to *Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. Giuliana Pieri (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 4.

²⁴ Lucia Rinaldi, “Bologna’s *noir* Identity: Narrating the City in Carlo Lucarelli’s Crime Fiction,” *Italian Studies* 61, no. 4 (2009): 123.

²⁵ Lorenzo Luatti, “Scrittori migranti nella letteratura italiana per ragazzi. Cronologia delle opere,” *vanninieditrice.it*, last modified 2009, http://www.vanninieditrice.it/agora_scheda.asp?ID=614&categoria=bibliografie and Lorenzo Luatti, “Libri per bambini e ragazzi che raccontano l’immigrazione in Italia. Selezioni delle più recenti uscite (2009-marzo 2011),” *vanninieditrice.it*, last modified 2011, http://www.vanninieditrice.it/agora_scheda.asp?ID=906&categoria=bibliografie.

²⁶ Lorenzo Luatti, “La ‘nuova’ letteratura migrante per ragazzi: somiglianze e differenze con quella rivolta agli adulti,” *el-ghibli.bologna.it*, last modified 2010, http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_07_30-section_6-index_pos_13.html.

²⁷ Wu Ming 1, “New Italian Epic. Memorandum 1993-2008: narrativa, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro,” *carmillaonline.com*, last modified April 23, 2008, <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2008/04/002612.html>.

awareness of self-criticism, a distinguishing feature of postmodern novels. Claudia Boscolo defines NIE as follows:

A UNO (unidentified narrative object) is a novel that, like a reportage or an essay, produces testimony from local documents (newspaper articles, historical documents, legal documents, letters). However, contrary to reportage, the specificity of these “narrative objects,” as part of the evolution of the novel, lies in the “narrative” translation they operate on the documents, that is, the way documents are fused into the story and turned into fiction.²⁸

The hallmarks of NIE include such rhetorical and stylistic elements as parataxis and lyricism as well as the theme of the recovery of memory.²⁹ Saviano’s *Gomorra* is often cited as exemplary of this literary trend. Equally important are the representational ethics of these novels. Like NIE writers, Wong, Nesi, and Matrone examine the historical origins of urgent contemporary social problems in Italy and propose literature as both a means of communication and an analytical tool that is an alternative to the media.

The question remains as to where the authors have obtained information on Chinese immigration to Italy. The news and entertainment media constitute the primary resource for these authors, as for the general public. Other sources include the authors’ personal observations and interactions with immigrants, as well as accounts obtained from Italian and immigrant informants. A third source pertains to Italian sociological and anthropological studies of Chinese immigration to Italy that emerged forcefully during the 2000s. Most of these studies were published during the mid-2000s and particularly after 2008, an indication of the impact of the 2007 protest.³⁰ These studies, many of which are general-reader oriented, provide a rich array of descriptions of Chinese immigrants’ lives in Italy, with a particular concern for the Chinese mafia.³¹ In a striking parallel, the novels I examine describe the typical migratory trajectory of first-generation Chinese immigrants and devote considerable narrative space to second-generation Chinese immigrants. All the novels mention, and some feature, the Chinese mafia. To be sure, the availability of these academic studies on the market is a different matter from their circulation among a specific group of readers, such as the authors I discuss. However, detailed descriptions in some of these novels point to information that can be gleaned only from these academic studies, or from their conclusions reworked in various mediated forms, such as feature stories in the press and reports by immigrant intercultural associations in Italy. Such sources would have been easily accessible to these authors, as opposed to reports from police investigations and proceedings of criminal trials that also contain detailed information on Chinese immigration, but which would have been available only to a select few.

In the following four sections, I discuss novels set in Milan, Prato, and Rome, which have the most numerous Chinese communities in Italy, and, to a lesser degree, those set in Bologna

²⁸ Claudia Boscolo, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010), 3.

²⁹ Claudia Boscolo, “The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010): 28.

³⁰ For an introduction to Italian sociological studies on Chinese immigration to Italy, see Massimo Introvigne, “Tra speranze e paure. L’immigrazione cinese nella letteratura sociologica,” in *Cinesi a Torino. La crescita di un arcipelago*, eds. Luigi Berzano et al. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), 31-54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

and Trieste. I have two main comparative perspectives. I juxtapose works of European Italian and immigrant writers in order to examine literary consensus and debates about the same themes, including Chinese immigrant identity negotiation, Italy's challenges in the age of economic globalization, and the Chinese mafia in Italy. In order to show the symbolic and social significance these novels convey, I examine and compare Sino-Italian intercultural, intra-Italian and intra-Chinese, Italian and Northern European, and intra-immigrant authorial perspectives.

Interracial Desires and Intercultural Negotiations in Milan: Nettare rosso and Non chiamarmi Cina!

During the 2000s, the visibility of Chinese immigrants in Milan rose significantly, building on its status as the Italian city with the oldest Chinese migrant community, established in the 1920s. Many Chinese immigrants obtained permits to stay in Italy thanks to the amnesties issued during the 1990s and 2000s. In 2011, Milan was home to almost 18,900 Chinese immigrants, thereby hosting the largest Chinese community in Italy on official record. In that city, only Filipinos (circa 33,700) and Egyptians (circa 28,600) outnumbered the Chinese.³² The presence of Chinese immigrants in Milan is widespread throughout the city and not confined, as many believe, to the area around Via Sarpi and Via Canonica, which serves as their service and commercial center.³³ Since the 1990s, Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in Milan have been active in the service sector, like their colleagues in Rome; both differ significantly from those investing in textile and fashion factories in Prato.³⁴ It is reasonable to assume that working in the service sector intensifies interactions between Chinese immigrants and local Italians and immigrants of other ethnicities.³⁵ The 2007 protest in Milan's Chinatown was a watershed moment in the history of these interactions.

Marco Wong's *Nettare rosso: storia di un'ossessione sessuale* (2010 and 2011)³⁶ and Luigi Ballerini's *Non chiamarmi Cina!* (2012) constitute literary renditions of an intense period of complex social processes and experiences following the 2007 protest. Both authors are concerned with a few common themes that they interpret similarly, including interracial romances between Italian men and second-generation Chinese immigrant women, bicultural identities of second-generation Chinese immigrants, and the transmutability of interracial desires and intercultural negotiations. By depicting the stereotypical views of Chinese immigrants and Italians toward one another, these novels produce a highly realistic, and sometimes sophisticated, assessment of both cultural perspectives in a single narrative space. In particular, their depictions of socially disappointed second-generation Chinese immigrant women provide a window into the

³² The Peruvian immigrant population (circa 17,700) came close. For purposes of comparison, I use available statistics from the beginning of 2011. ISTAT, "Popolazione straniera residente in Italia," 2011, 4.

³³ Statistics from 2006 show that the first four residential areas in Milan with a large number of Chinese residents were Niguarda-Bicocca-Comasina, Fiera-Bovisa-Gallaratese, and Stazione Centrale-Loreto-Via Padova-Viale Monza, and Duomo (including Milan's Chinatown). See Daniele Cologna, "Il caso Sarpi e la diversificazione dell'imprenditoria cinese," in *Un dragone nel Po. La Cina in Piemonte tra percezione e realtà*, eds. Rossana Cima et al. (Turin: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2008), 5-6.

³⁴ Cologna, "Chinese Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Italy," 262.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 275-76.

³⁶ I use the book's on-demand version from 2010. The extended paperback version was published by Compagnia delle Lettere in 2011.

affective and psychological aspects of everyday Sino-Italian interactions. The intercultural perspective that derives in part from the authors' backgrounds contributes significantly to a literary rethinking of second-generation Chinese female migrant subjectivities.

Nettare rosso is a tour de force description of Luca's psycho-sexual and racialized obsessions with Stefania through depictions of his encounters with a few other women, most importantly Silvia, a Chinese immigrant born in Italy. The novel opens with an episode concerning interracial eroticism: as Luca and Stefania vacation in Thailand, a Thai girl kneels before him pouring a red fruit juice, which she serves him. Luca feels as if he is transformed into "un Dio pagano adorato da una sua fedele, e lei è la vestale di un antico rito, l'ancella che porta il suo tributo al padrone" (7). The same image of erotic subjugation and sexual adventures is repeated several times in the novel. Following Stefania's decision to leave Luca, this image is split into two dimensions. The red nectar symbolizes the erotic-psychological dimension and the Italian viewpoint, while the "Oriental" girl represents the exotic-realist dimension and the Chinese immigrant viewpoint. Wong pursues these two dimensions in turn, so as to accentuate the contrast between Luca's Orientalization of Silvia and her rejection of it.

The novel focuses on the erotic-psychological dimension up to Luca's meeting with Silvia. While on a date, Luca is aroused erotically by the sight of the red trace left by a racing Ferrari in a video clip and by a dash of strawberry juice dripping from a glass. He stalks a female motorist, driven by "un legame forte, che rimane e può guidare le tue decisioni, irrazionalmente ma inequivocabilmente, come un nettare rosso che scende dentro un bicchiere" (65). In the course of his extramarital affair with a psychoanalyst, he reads Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. He then dreams about receiving sadistic punishment from two professors who will not issue his university degree because one of them turns out to be the psychoanalyst's husband and the other is disgusted by Luca's sexual-sadistic relationship with Stefania, her niece. Raffaello Ducceschi illustrates some of these sexual positions for the book, which are based on the Indian treatise *Kama Sutra*. Eventually, Luca's "fissazione" with the red nectar comes to a momentary end following an encounter with Silvia (102). The red nectar reappears only at the end of the book when Stefania assumes the role of the Thai girl pouring a red hibiscus tea for Luca on their trip to Egypt.

In stark contrast to the psycho-erotic dimension that concerns only Italian women, the "Oriental" girl embodied by Silvia conveys Wong's stand on exoticism in some of the book's strongest realistic descriptions from a Chinese immigrant perspective. Wong aptly critiques the prevalence of stereotyping Chinese immigrant and Italian populations as one of the most common modes of intercultural socialization. Silvia is a student at Bocconi University who has a part-time job in her parents' restaurant. When Luca asks why the Chinese are little integrated in Italian society, Silvia argues, "[È] la società italiana che non mi accetta, io sono nata in Italia ma non ho ancora potuto prendere la cittadinanza italiana" (99). When asked about the supposed closure of the Chinese community to the outsiders, Silvia challenges Luca to assess his own prejudice: "[T]u non hai idea di quanti ragazzi italiani vogliono farsi una 'cinesina' manco fossimo delle figurine da collezione. E tu, mi sa, non fai eccezione" (99). Silvia's gendered attitude is revealed later in clearer terms, as she refers to Luca as a "tipico bamboccione italico" (100) and asks why none of the women he dates seems to be the right one. She provides a sharp commentary on Luca's courtship and fetishization of "Oriental" women: "Tu non mi rispetti per quello che sono, ma stai cercando qualcosa o qualcuno che si conformi ad un modello tuo, inesistente in realtà" (119). What Luca seeks can only be found in Stefania's masquerade as an "Oriental" girl, as the conclusion of the novel also confirms. *Nettare rosso* mocks the

stereotypical transformational story of the Western male in search of a sexual adventure with a non-European woman, but who will ultimately end by professing his true love for a Western woman. Indeed, Wong cites the European invention of “Oriental” exoticism as one of his motivations for writing the novel.³⁷

Silvia’s existential and emotional realism with regard to interracial and intercultural dynamics is a central theme of *Nettare rosso*. In a key episode, Silvia becomes aware of her own struggle with “whiteness” as she and her white friends meet a Filipina girl. Reflecting on her friends’ insulting comments on the Filipina’s somatic aspects, Silvia observes: “Io con loro non stavo cercando di integrarmi con altri, volevo essere assimilata, trasformarmi in qualcosa che in realtà non ero, diventare la Barbie bionda della mia infanzia” (119). With respect to Luca’s courtship, this episode reveals to Silvia that her previous conception of herself as a non-white Italian is as pure a fantasy as Luca’s projection of the image of the “Oriental” girl onto her. If this episode accentuates Silvia’s Chineseness, the dates arranged for her with the Chinese sons of her parents’ friends accentuate her Italianness. Silvia questions the viability of intercultural efforts and interracial relationships in terms of her bicultural upbringing: it is not easy for her to find the right companion because she has been “cresciuta tra due culture” (101).

The novel’s realistic tone intensifies during a debate among Italians and second-generation Chinese immigrants in Prato in which Silvia and Luca participate. As this episode represents the memory of a recent historical past, Wong’s authorial operation recalls what Dimitri Chimenti has referred to as the grafting process of NIE literature in addressing realism.³⁸ The fictional characters Luca and Silvia emerge from Wong’s text to intersect with the reality of the Chinese migrant community in Prato and are subsequently reconsigned to their novelistic world. As the characters temporarily become witnesses to a real-world debate, Wong contends with the misrepresentations of Chinese immigration to Italy in the media, in particular the “miti e leggende metropolitane e non [si basi] su un’analisi seria della realtà” (109). The debate concerns the supposed money laundering by the Chinese in Prato as presumably orchestrated by the Chinese mafia. With the fanfare of a sensationalizing and unqualified vocabulary reminiscent of the media language in a typical Italian newspaper, an Italian character states: “Prato vive una situazione di emergenza, con i suoi quarantamila clandestini. I dati sui trasferimenti di valuta ci indicano che vi sono ogni anno 4 miliardi di euro che vengono illegalmente trasferiti all’estero da Prato, un fiume di denaro che viene controllata dalla mafia” (109). Wong delegitimizes this discursive violence through a Chinese speaker, who asks the listeners simply to do the math for themselves in order to show the impossible ratio between the average salary of an immigrant and the supposed amount of money laundering.

Issues related to Chinese illegality, money laundering, and the mafia in this debate are the same ones that were highlighted in the media following the 2007 protest. It is conceivable that the presence of relevant cultural resources in the novel derives from Wong’s real-life activities in the Chinese immigrant community: He served as the editorial director of *It’s China*, a bilingual monthly magazine published in Italy, and as the honorary president of AssoCina, the longest running association of second-generation Chinese immigrants and one of the first second-generation immigrant associations established in Italy. Wong knew about relevant academic studies on Chinese immigration to Italy, as his own autobiographical essay figures prominently

³⁷ “Nettare rosso”: storia di un’ossessione sessuale di Marco Wong,” *C6.tv*, last modified January 26, 2011, <http://www.c6.tv/video/11251-nettare-rosso-storia-di-unossessione-sessuale-di-marco-wong>.

³⁸ Dimitri Chimenti, “Unidentified Narrative Objects: Notes for a Rhetorical Typology,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010): 47.

in one such study.³⁹ His comments on AssoCina's online forum and his short essays on the migrant condition in Italy published on his personal website further illustrate his familiarity with critical debates on Chinese and other immigration to Italy.

The juxtaposition of Italian and Chinese immigrant viewpoints in *Nettare rosso* is in keeping with Wong's bicultural identity. Luca and Silvia both serve as alter egos of the author himself, a point raised in numerous book reviews.⁴⁰ Wong is explicit about his sense of living between Italian and Chinese cultures.⁴¹ Born into a first-generation Chinese immigrant family who owned a leather-manufacturing workshop in Bologna, Wong learned Mandarin Chinese as an adult. His career has been largely focused in the sector of telecommunications.⁴² Marketed as the first novel by a Sino-Italian author, *Nettare rosso*, with its dual perspective, appeals to Italian audiences already well disposed toward migration literature on other cultures. This is particularly so because many in Italy believe that future Sino-Italian mediation will rely on the bilingual and bicultural abilities of second-generation Chinese immigrants.⁴³ Yet, as *Nettare rosso* reveals, it is complicated for these subjects, as for Silvia, to live comfortably in both cultures.

Ballerini's *Non chiamarmi Cina!* carries this thinking forward in a high-school teenage romance. It is worth noting that in Italy many, including Ballerini, consider schools the ideal places to promote intercultural education in favor of the social integration of young migrants.⁴⁴ Ballerini is a practicing psychoanalyst in Milan with a specialization in child and youth development. His writings and activities often engage with these themes and include novels and manuals for young adults and their educators, as well as writing workshops for elementary and high schools. These experiences prove beneficial in his exploration of the nuances of his characters' psycho-cultural identities. The Chinese immigrant viewpoint in *Non chiamarmi Cina!* also stems from his conversations with a Chinese immigrant girl who responded to his call for informants for the book (141-42). Written in lucid prose and published by Giunti, Ballerini's novel/diary is positioned as a novelistic manual for intercultural pedagogy targeted at adolescent readers and their educators.

Despite the differences in target audiences, the thematic and narrative parallels between *Nettare rosso* and *Non chiamarmi Cina!* are striking. As in Wong's novel, *Non chiamarmi Cina!* is told from the perspective of the Italian male protagonist, Toto, whose obsessions are soccer and a Chinese girl named Rossana. Toto's interracial desires for Rossana, like those of Luca for Silvia, are first manifested in his fascination with her physical features and related romantic associations: "La trovo davvero grandiosa, di una bellezza rara e strana. C'è qualcosa di speciale nei suoi occhi [...] sembrano capaci di guardare lontano [...] Sono occhi strani, non tristi ma nemmeno felici, mille volte più intensi di quelli delle ragazze che ho conosciuto finora. Esiste in lei un non so che di misterioso che mi attrae e poi è tremendamente carina" (17). As Toto

³⁹ Marco Wong, "Il tuo destino in uno sguardo," in *Il vicino cinese: la comunità cinese a Roma*, ed. Valentina Pedone (Bologna: Nuove Edizioni Romane, 2008), 141-52.

⁴⁰ Marco Wong, "La genesi di *Nettare rosso*," *marcowong.it*, accessed October 2, 2012, <http://nuke.marcowong.it/NettareRosso/tabid/81/Default.aspx>.

⁴¹ Wong, "Il tuo destino in uno sguardo," 142.

⁴² Marco Wong, "Biografia," *marcowong.it*, accessed October 2, 2012, <http://nuke.marcowong.it/Biografia/tabid/56/Default.aspx>.

⁴³ Jeffrey E. Cole and Pietro Saitta, "Final Remarks: Italy, Dreams of a Monochrome Society?" *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011): 529.

⁴⁴ "Consigli di lettura per i ragazzi: Luigi Ballerini," *bol.it*, accessed October 2, 2012, <http://notizie.bol.it/2012/06/22/luigi-ballerini/>.

fragments and fetishizes Rossana's eyes, his use of Italian becomes reminiscent of fourteenth-century Petrarchan love lyrics, an indication of his unrealistic infatuation.

Rossana's bicultural identity becomes the focus of her intercultural negotiations with Toto. Like Silvia, despite her birth and upbringing in Italy and her declared allegiance to Italian culture, Rossana is not an Italian citizen. She resents Italians who call her "Cina" for short, which strengthens her desire to stand out among a supposedly unidentifiable mass of Chinese immigrants. "Rossana non si sente straniera in Italia, si sente straniera in via Paolo Sarpi, che in teoria dovrebbe essere casa sua. Se è così, è tutto ribaltato, un mondo alla rovescia" (48). She feels "tremendamente in gabbia" at the Chinese school on Saturdays. Having to work in two places for her family, she is witness to many Sinocentric attitudes. Rossana's existential condition is tied to her hybridized cultural identity. Like Silvia, Rossana is frustrated because "per i cinesi sono troppo italiana e per gli italiani sono troppo cinese" (71). In her Chinese circle, Rossana's loyalty to Italian culture is stronger than Silvia's: "Così quando sono a casa devo difendere il mio essere italiana: io sono nata qui, vivo qui, ho amici di qui. Sento che è questo il mio posto, è questa la mia cultura" (110). Like Silvia, Rossana intimates that many Italians fail to acknowledge the Italianness of second-generation Chinese immigrants whose cultural allegiance is to Italian culture rather than to Chinese culture. Meanwhile, Rossana defends herself against Italian stereotypes and must learn to "riaffermare ogni volta che io sono cinese e non voglio vergognarmene" (111). As a victim of the Italians' legal and cultural recognition of difference, Rossana falls back on her Chineseness in the face of an imminent identity crisis.

Like Wong, Ballerini also focuses on the parallels between the Italians' stereotypes of the Chinese, and vice versa, to problematize the ethnic and national identities of second-generation Chinese immigrants in Italy. With a fair dose of suspense and exaggeration, Toto's observation of Milan's Chinatown seems to be taken directly from the media:

Via Paolo Sarpi, *Chinatown*. Un universo dentro Milano, riparato e sconosciuto ai più. [...] Esiste come un sottile e invisibile limite che, se superato, è capace di trasformare all'istante i sorrisi in occhiate minacciose, la naturale gentilezza del negoziante in ostilità aperta verso una curiosità che non viene apprezzata, piuttosto temuta con sospetto e tenuta lontana. (45-6)

A similar kind of mystification of the Chinese is manifest in Toto's observations of the crowds at a Chinese wedding in Rossana's restaurant, as he imagines seeing characters in the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. While the Chinese masculinity embodied by these male figures appeals to Toto because of the victory of good over evil, as is often depicted in those movies, the distance kept by Rossana and Silvia from Italian men is indicative of a largely negative reception of Italian masculinity and sexual behaviors by Chinese culture. From Rossana's perspective, the typical Italian man is abrasive and inconstant. Men have made sexual insinuations to her and have asked her for a massage service in her bar. Romance would also distract Rossana from her self-perceived duty to repay the sacrifices her parents made for her, obsessed as they are with monetary profits. When Rossana decides to break up with Toto because he plans to spend three years in Zurich in a professional soccer-training program, she cites the city's distance from Milan as the reason that he will forget her, to which he protests vehemently against her tunnel

vision of his life. Surely, this is Rossana's way of broaching with him the subject of the distance between "due intere civiltà" (122), which makes her romance with Toto seem impossible.

The cultural allegiance of Silvia and Rossana is fluid and responsive to social circumstances ranging from home and school to the workplace. Although both novels point to the restrictive legal boundaries of the imagined Italic community, they create reasonably permeable social and cultural liminal spaces for Silvia and Rossana in which they are capable of being critical of both Italian and Chinese cultural regimes. Both Wong and Ballerini stress the processes through which their Chinese immigrant characters come to identify with home (Chinese) and destination (Italian) cultures. As such, their depictions give nuance to recent sociological studies on second-generation Chinese youth. One study conducted in Rome shows that these immigrants are developing "an identity model that mostly leans toward the Chinese in-group, even though it also is affected by the youth model spreading in the big cities of China and in other Chinese communities abroad, a model of transnational Chinese youth, almost untouched by the culture of the host society."⁴⁵ An earlier study on Chinese immigrant teenagers in Prato, however, suggests that this conclusion is only partially valid, as do the two novels.⁴⁶

The Sino-Italian intercultural approach represents one branch of literary depictions of Chinese immigrants in Italy. It is very likely that this is the perspective that Italian readers committed to intercultural pedagogy and mediation would expect from this literature. Good publishing opportunities for both books further indicate the timeliness and market value of this perspective. As I turn to literature on the Chinese community in Prato, I focus on perspectives that examine diversities internal to both Chinese immigrants and Italians with regard to Chinese immigration to Italy. This focus provides insights into specific issues that are commonly underestimated or downplayed in an intercultural approach.

Italian Industry and Chinese Romance in Prato: Storia della mia gente and Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia

Unlike the two novels analyzed in the previous section, Chinese immigrant and Italian perspectives are not juxtaposed obsessively in Edoardo Nesi's *Storia della mia gente* (2010) or Yang Xiaping's *Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia* (2011). Instead, these texts provide insight into intra-Italian and intra-Chinese immigrant dynamics. While Nesi focuses on dissenting opinions among Italians about Italy's participation in the globalized market, Yang examines the dynamics between Chinese immigrants born in Italy and those who have only recently migrated to Italy. Yang's uses of an intra-Chinese perspective, Chinese cultural specificity, and an ordinary woman as the Chinese feminine ideal contrast with Nesi's emphases on an Italo-centric perspective, Italian and European cultural generalization, and an everyman as the Italian masculine ideal. However, despite the differences between Nesi's Italian and Yang's Chinese perspectives, both authors depict characters based on ethnocultural conceptualization.

The rhetoric of the Chinese invasion in Prato has social and cultural origins. In 2011, Prato had the second largest Chinese community in Italy on official records, with 11,900

⁴⁵ Valentina Pedone, "As a Rice Plant in a Wheat Field?: Identity Negotiation among Children of Chinese Immigrants," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011): 493.

⁴⁶ Antonella Ceccagno, *Giovani migranti cinesi: la seconda generazione a Prato* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004), 71-8.

registered residents.⁴⁷ Scholars estimate that illegal Chinese immigrants in Prato account for 15-20 percent of the city's entire Chinese migrant population, while reports from police operations on illegal Chinese businesses estimate 43 percent.⁴⁸ Therefore, Prato is very likely the Italian city with the highest Chinese population. During the 2000s, the Chinese were also the dominant migrant community in Prato, where approximately 15 percent of the entire population was foreign-born in 2011.⁴⁹ The extremely high concentration of Chinese immigrants in a relatively small provincial town such as Prato dramatically contributed to their visibility. As one of the most important textile production sites in Italy, Prato employs a significant number of immigrants. During the 1990s, the majority of Chinese immigrants in Prato manufactured ready-to-wear and leather garments and bags for Italian suppliers, including big fashion houses. Since the 2000s, Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs have become involved in the entire production process in the textile and garment sectors, thereby competing with, and eventually outcompeting, a large number of Italian enterprises.⁵⁰ Seeking other ways to be successful, some immigrant entrepreneurs also began to fill their orders in China and then import merchandise to Italy.⁵¹ All of these production practices raised questions of how to redefine the "Made in Italy" label and to address the conflicts between local Italian textile and garment artisans and internationalized major Italian fashion houses. These conflicts of business interests in Prato received extensive coverage in Italy's leading national newspapers and weeklies throughout the 2000s. Starting in late 2010, there was also unusually sudden and intense global media attention on these conflicts.⁵² These accounts conferred a great deal of importance on the phenomenon of Chinese enterprises in Prato, as the media tended to equate Chinese immigration in Prato with that in Italy as a whole, and, moreover, to view the Prato case as emblematic of a pan-European situation. This media event has causal links with Nesi's autofiction/socio-philosophical treatise *Storia della mia gente*, published in April 2010.

The thrust of Nesi's thesis is that the failure of small- and medium-size Italian enterprises during the 2000s can be attributed to two factors: First, the imprudent decisions made by certain incompetent politicians to plunge Italy into the open market; and, second, the invasion of small-size Chinese immigrant enterprises on Italian soil. In *Gomorra*, Saviano had already argued the latter proposition by using first- and third-person eyewitness accounts. He blames Chinese factories for outcompeting the Italian factories that once produced medium-quality merchandise, which he argues has resulted in: an increase in robbery, the Camorra's exploitation of Neapolitan

⁴⁷ ISTAT, "Popolazione straniera residente in Italia," 4.

⁴⁸ Antonella Ceccagno, Renzo Rastrelli, and Alessandra Salvati, "Exploitation of Chinese Immigrants in Italy," in *Concealed Chains: Labour Exploitation and Chinese Migrants in Europe*, ed. Gao Yun (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2010), 120, 130.

⁴⁹ Ufficio di Statistica, "Tab. 1.9—Comune di Prato—Cittadini stranieri per cittadinanza dal 1995 al 2010" (2010), accessed January 10, 2013, http://allegatistatistica.comune.prato.it/dl/20090924105506396/tab1_3.pdf and Ufficio di Statistica, "Tab. 1.1 – Comune di Prato – Popolazione italiana e straniera residente a fine anno dal 1995 al 2010" (2010), accessed January 10, 2013, http://allegatistatistica.comune.prato.it/dl/20090924103235853/tab1_1.pdf.

⁵⁰ Ceccagno, "New Chinese Migrants in Italy," 198.

⁵¹ Antonella Ceccagno, "L'epopea veloce: adeguamenti, crisi e successi dei nuovi migranti cinesi," in *La Cina che arriva. Il sistema del drago*, ed. Giorgio Trentin (Naples: Avagliano, 2005), 191.

⁵² A partial list of significant news coverage includes the following: John Hooper, "Made in Little Wenzhou, Italy: The Latest Label from Tuscany," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2010; Philippe Ridet, "Made in Italy à la chinoise," *Le Monde*, November 4, 2010; Thomas Schmid, "Die Chinesen kommen," *Die Zeit*, February 5, 2008; Rachel Donadio, "Chinese Remake the 'Made in Italy' Fashion Label," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2010; and Nina Burleigh, "Italian Jobs, Chinese Illegals," *Bloomberg Businessweek Magazine*, November 3, 2011.

youth as drug dispatchers, and the inferior working conditions of the remaining Italian textile factories forced to accept capital from the Camorra. Nesi comes to a similar conclusion by examining his own entrepreneurial experience in a textile factory in Prato that went out of business in the early 2000s. The character, “Nesi,” can be largely identified with the author Nesi, who has accentuated his insider position in Prato’s textile industry in many interviews.⁵³

The persuasiveness of Nesi’s thesis among the Italian and international readership is contingent on the effectiveness of his authorial approach to a particular tension: one between the protagonist-author’s personal experiences and the national history or story of the Italian people. Nesi turns individual and personal events into collective knowledge by way of Italo-centric generalizations. Asserting such Italo-centrism, the text opens with a description of Nesi the character as a prodigious, hard working, and cultured Italian entrepreneur and writer. As he begins his apprenticeship in the family business, he proves capable of inventing clever tricks to accomplish dull tasks despite his inexperience. Soon he makes business trips to many countries. Nesi claims with pride that industriousness and a good system were enough for entrepreneurs like himself to be successful in Italy in that period. Literary persona is next on Nesi’s agenda as he describes himself as an aspiring writer-in-training. His efforts in both entrepreneurship and literature not only win the envy and admiration of his fellow entrepreneurs, but also serve as a gateway for him to correspond with several notable writers. In fact, the narrator is motivated by Fitzgerald’s *The Love of the Last Tycoon* in his attempts to “provare a scrivere *la mia storia e quella della mia gente*” (38, original italics), returning on more than one occasion to the notion of “*la storia meravigliosa mia e della mia gente*” (152, original italics). Crucially, Nesi views his creative energy as exemplary of an Italian genius shared by his compatriots. He discovers that he barely needs to prepare for public speeches and is able to simply begin to “parlare, evidentemente attingendo a una specie di riserva segreta di parole e idee che dev’essere sepolta dentro di me (Nesi)” (74). He thus exhibits a trait further reflected in his musings on the unique artistic spirit and genius of the Italic people since the Renaissance. Nesi’s juxtaposition of good, creative Italians and bad, destructive Germans reinforces these generalizations.

Indeed, generalized formulations of personal and national character traits are intended to further validate the connection between Nesi’s own story and that of his people. The first and one of the most notable examples of this link can be found in the use of generalizations through parallel syntax in a passage containing twenty-three lines written as a single sentence:

E così, oggi, nel momento storicamente più difficile del tessile pratese, e dunque italiano e dunque europeo, mentre continuano a giungermi le notizie dei fallimenti ...; mentre sui giornali locali ...; mentre le centinaia di artigiani che fecero grande e speciale la nostra filiera tessile ...; mentre ogni anno *migliaia* di persone perdono il posto di lavoro nella mia città ...; mentre ormai anche gli sconosciuti si avvicinano a me ..., io non riesco a non sentire quasi ogni giorno una specie di vuoto struggimento (37-8, original italics).

With each “mentre,” the author amplifies the magnitude of the crisis, from news he hears firsthand to that which he reads in local newspapers, from the artisans in his textile factory to

⁵³ Antonello Piroso, “Intervista a Edoardo Nesi,” XXVI Convegno di Capri dei Giovani Imprenditori di Confindustria, last modified 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wf-MSpRe3R4>.

people in his city, and eventually to complete strangers. This structure adds considerable rhetorical weight to the main clause of the sentence, in which he considers the crisis in Prato as Italian and European by default. From the perspective of NIE, this paragraph, and Nesi's text in general, draws on the kind of prosody and orality typical of the epic, a genre historically linked with self-representations of collective experiences.⁵⁴

These generalizations gain force as Chinese immigrants serve as the scapegoat for the crisis in Prato, a process exemplified by the chapter entitled "Subito." In it, Nesi describes Chinese sweatshops in Prato and fixates on the supposed economic illegality of all of the city's Chinese immigrant enterprises. These two themes were prevalent in news media and sociological studies before and around the time of the publication of *Storia della mia gente*. Such intertextual references could not be lost on the reader. The character Nesi's participation in a police raid on a Chinese sweatshop in Prato in "Subito" in fact draws on the author's personal experience.⁵⁵ Whereas Saviano in *Gomorra* stresses the orderliness of a similar kind of sweatshop in Terzigno, near Naples, Nesi details their disorder. His rhetoric about Chinese immigrants in Italy could not be more stereotypical and alarmist. Compared to a "formicaio" (104) and to a "conigliera" (107), the windowless sweatshop serves as a makeshift workplace/dormitory. Nesi charges that this "imitazione di vita e di lavoro" (106) and "poverissimo simulacro di proprietà, di casa" (107) give the immigrants no right to "marchiare i propri cenci *Made in Italy*" (106), since such "rags" are equally counterfeits. The alienation of these immigrants, whose survival resembles a "resistenza bestiale" (108) to the outside, Italian world is also a result of their lack of Italian linguistic capabilities and their recourse to computers to connect with their families in China. Nesi is convinced that these immigrants are living proofs of an ignorance cultivated by their government that encourages a survivor's adaptation to the "mostruoso sfruttamento" of their Chinese employers (112). These reasons are sufficient to inspire paternalistic feelings of pity in the reader, Nesi believes. Regarding the policemen in the raid, Nesi's argumentative tone becomes angrier. He wonders why in their faces "non c'è rabbia, non c'è disprezzo, non c'è freddezza" (112), even as they know that the Chinese "invasione" is rampant (110):

Eppure come si fa a convivere con un'illegalità così diffusa e così evidente, praticata da migliaia di persone tutte appartenenti a un unico gruppo etnico che della nostra legalità, quand'anche la conosce, se ne infischia altamente? [...] Finché queste persone entreranno in Italia da fuorilegge, da fuorilegge vivranno." (111)

Having established the illegality of all the Chinese immigrant enterprises by describing only one police raid, Nesi goes on to argue in favor of "il regalo che l'Occidente del XX secolo [...] consegna al mondo, l'estrema sintesi di tutto ciò che è riuscito a costruire" (113), which is a principle with which "*noi occidentali*" would all agree, namely, "la nostra legislazione del lavoro" (112). With textual dexterity, Nesi pieces together disparate arguments about Chinese illegality, Italian police authorities, and legal regulation with a thin conceptual coherence and much less methodological rigor. Surely, he disdains academic coherence and rigor. It is the

⁵⁴ Boscolo, "The Idea of Epic and New Italian Epic," 20.

⁵⁵ Simone Visentini, "Intervista a Edoardo Nesi," *mangialibri.com*, accessed October 2, 2012, <http://www.mangialibri.com/node/9584>.

fanfare of popular nationalism and visceral hostility toward non-Western cultures that appeal to him. Italo-centric generalization proves to be an effective tool to achieve that textual force.

If in “Subito” Nesi seeks to spur Italians to anger with regard to their indifference vis-à-vis unfair Chinese competition and ineffectual Italian law enforcement, in subsequent chapters he urges them to take action to ameliorate their economic and existential conditions. The person to lead such a potential social transformation is an action-oriented, anti-authoritative, and anti-rhetorical masculine Italian everyman, like Fabio, who appears in the chapter titled “Incubo.” Fabio’s story further contributes to Nesi’s authorial operation of turning individual experiences into collective knowledge. An industrious worker who has no professional ambitions, Fabio is a family man in his fifties. Having been laid off from a company for which he has worked for decades, he is resentful of having to “invecchiare alla fine di un’era dell’abbondanza” (116-18). Such thoughts are further exacerbated by his sense that Chinese immigrants are stealing Italian jobs. He meets such an immigrant, Zhu, a university student who migrated to Italy at a young age and was educated in Italian schools. Wearing brand-name clothes, he drives a car. By chance, as Fabio lowers his torso in front of Zhu in order to pick up the money he has dropped, suddenly he becomes acutely aware of the symbolic weight of his subjugated posture. Making matters worse, Zhu accidentally steps on Fabio’s hand. Guided by the “vento di una rabbia e di un’impotenza che gli covavano dentro da anni,” Fabio curses and pushes Zhu (126) and seems intent on striking him again, when Zhu, believing himself to be a victim of Italian racism, defends himself and unintentionally injures Fabio. Another Italian everyman nearby joins the fight, seriously injuring Zhu, but is in turn violently assaulted by a group of Chinese immigrants armed with a hammer and an awl. The tools recall the heavy metal bar Nesi keeps in his car but never uses. This violent end suggests that Chinese immigrants in Italy succeed by cheating and violence. In the book’s final chapter, Nesi addresses the impact of the story of Fabio and Zhu, who are metonyms of Italians and Chinese immigrants, against the backdrop of a public strike in Prato in 2010. The gigantic national flag used during the parade not only symbolizes the magnitude of the serious recession of Prato’s Italian textile industry but is also meant to indicate the national scale of the Italians’ demand for greater government protection of small-size enterprises.

Nesi’s favorable depiction of a popular demonstration against the Italian state is in keeping with his mockery of the ineptitude of Italy’s governing class, in particular politicians and economists. According to Nesi, this class’s authoritative rhetoric, which illustrates its miscalculation about Italy’s place in globalization, has led the country to its doom. In the chapter “Scuotere i cancelli,” Nesi first attacks the Italian liberal economist Francesco Giavazzi for ardently embracing globalization at the cost of small-size enterprises in Italy, ignoring the opinions of people like himself who is “forse l’ultimo e il più giovane dei conservatori, e dunque il peggiore” (54). Nesi goes on to explain how Italy would not have entered the global market had the deliberations been based on “puro pragmatismo” and not “ragioni ideologiche” (56), offering critiques of economic policies of Romano Prodi, Silvio Berlusconi, and Mario Monti. In the chapter “Il sistema Italia,” Nesi decries the economists’ “arroganza intellettuale” (134) and the politicians’ mismanagement of economy and their “gigantesco complesso d’inferiorità” (138) in relation to Northern European countries, two factors that have left Italy underprepared for international trade competition. Nesi strikingly compares the failure of Italian economists to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. He suggests that although some may have intuited the danger after the first plane hit, they still decided to “*dar retta all’autorità, alla voce di uno sconosciuto che arriva dall’interfono e vi dice di non farvi prendere dal panico e di rimanere ai vostri posti*” (69, original italics). It follows that Italy is in need of new leaders,

“esperti, duri, capaci,” who know when to act instinctively, having absorbed the teachings of Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, and Machiavelli, but not having actually read them. Nesi’s distrust of the authority, rhetoric, and intellectualism of Italian politicians and economists is the logical foundation of the populist, commonsensical, and practical approach taken by an Italian everyman to save small-size enterprises from failures.

Several conceptual parallels between *Storia della mia gente* and *Come due farfalle in volo sulla Grande Muraglia* suggest that Yang consciously challenges Nesi’s book. In *Storia della mia gente*, the representations of Chinese immigrants are schematic, with the exploited worker and the spoiled university student being the only two types. Unlike the Italian characters, virtually none of these characters’ backgrounds or thoughts is fleshed out; except for Zhu’s bias against Italians’ racism toward Chinese immigrants, itself a stereotypical depiction. Yang, instead, develops her Chinese characters by examining the dynamics between Jasmine’s Italianized Chinese immigrant identity and Dalin’s mainland Chinese identity. Indeed, the clear distinction between the two Chinese identities provides the vital narrative drive that makes possible Jasmine’s conversion to her Chinese self.

Yang’s book recounts the love story of Jasmine, born and raised in Prato by first-generation Chinese parents, and her husband Dalin, who migrated to Italy from China at the age of sixteen. Adopting an ethnocultural approach, Yang goes to great lengths to compare the newlywed couple’s contrasting habits in Prato. For dinner, Dalin hopes to cook “pollo lesso con brodo, insieme a bambù e funghi neri profumati cinesi, o branzino saltato con salsa di soia e servito con cipolline verdi,” while Jasmine wants “un minestrone con le verdure, poi una pizza capricciosa da dividere in due” (18). While Dalin watches Chinese-language television programs and calls his old friends in China, Jasmine talks about fashion shopping in Florence with her Italian girlfriends. Jasmine is more Italianized than Wong’s Silvia and Ballerini’s Rossana, although she feels “una certa nostalgia, una certa malinconia o un certo richiamo antico” (34), which her Italian life is unable to sate. Jasmine’s innate Chineseness recalls Nesi’s Italian genius, further revealing the ethnocultural assumption of Yang’s novel. To facilitate negotiations between the couple’s cultural identities, Jasmine’s mother urges her to become more aware of the different cultural environments in which they were raised and the length of time each has lived in Italy. Indeed, the mother provides historical depth to the diversified Chinese community in Prato in her accounts of the migratory trajectory of older generations, including herself, from Wenzhou to Beijing, and then to Italy.

The transmutation of Jasmine’s sense of identity is a metaphor for the historical transformation of Italy that resulted from mass immigration. Prior to her trip to China, Jasmine compares herself to a banana that is “gialla fuori ma bianca dentro come i bambini bianchi, perché la mia pelle è gialla come la tua, ma dentro di me avevo una mentalità molto italiana, anzi molto italianizzata” (32, 34). At the end of their trip, Jasmine insists that Dalin call her by her Chinese name because she feels Chinese just like him. While *Storia della mia gente* is keenly concerned with the threats posed by immigration to Italian authenticity and a stable, masculine *italianità*, Yang’s novel depicts a Chinese female subject and her mobility from a multiculturalist perspective on Italy’s future as a nation. Insofar as Yang treats Jasmine’s identity change in order to signify Italy’s current negotiations with mass immigration, the novel can also be read through

the prism of the tradition of Italian women's writing that has emerged during Italy's transformational historical moments.⁵⁶

Yang's examination of the historical dimension of intra-Chinese diversity is enhanced by depictions of specific Chinese cities and cultural details, a practice antithetical to Nesi's tendency to generalize Prato's experiences into an Italian or European trend. Many passages set in Beijing during the couple's trip to China read like a tour guide. This is intentional as the book is written for Italian-speaking readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture, including second-generation Chinese immigrants like Jasmine.⁵⁷ The most telling example of the contrast between Nesi's generalization and Yang's specificity can be found in the ant imagery used by both writers. Yang contests Nesi's comparison of the Chinese sweatshop in Prato as an anthill by revealing the metaphorical subtleties of ants in the Chinese cultural tradition. In one instance, Yang contrasts a crane with ants as a means of juxtaposing Italian individualism with Chinese communal collaboration. Upon seeing the Great Wall, Dalin recalls: "in Italia mi dicevi che ti sentivi così diversa dalle altre persone, come un cigno né bianco né nero senza il suo amato lago." Jasmine replies, "Beh, adesso siamo uguali, come due formiche che devono cercare il cibo, vivere nella comunità, collaborare insieme, sollevare il peso del lavoro e costruire qualcosa durante il percorso della vita" (46). Later, Dalin compares the laborers who constructed the Great Wall during the Qin dynasty to ants: "i poveri muratori brulicavano ai piedi e sulle cime della montagna come formiche" (64). Unlike Nesi's use of the anthill to evoke the disgusting and claustrophobic immigrant sweatshop, Yang speaks sympathetically about migrant slaves who work against a vast natural landscape. Toward the book's end, Jasmine reveals that "anche se mi sento piccola come una formica, [...] ti potrei aiutare a fare i conti, contattare i clienti italiani e a scegliere i modelli di abbigliamento" (78). The affective dimension of the ant as an industrious, collaborative, and yet independent worker reverses the related imagery in Nesi's book almost entirely. Yang's depiction of a specific Chinese immigrant woman recalls what critics have seen as the desire for immigrant writers to emerge from unspecified masses in the first Italophone autobiographies.⁵⁸ Such representation also explicitly questions the validity of Nesi's construction of an Italian everyman embodied by Fabio.

By tracing a female genealogy from Meng Jiangnu to Jasmine, Yang's depiction reverses Nesi's masculinist perspective. By creating a narrative parallel between Jasmine's trip from Prato to Beijing and Meng Jiangnu's travel to the Great Wall in search of her husband, Yang negotiates Jasmine's identity vis-à-vis another Chinese woman rather than an Italian man, a process quite different from those narrated in Wong's and Ballerini's novels. Meng Jiangnu travels a great distance, arriving at the Great Wall only to find out about her husband's death. Not long afterwards, following her own death, their souls are metamorphosed into butterflies that fly uninhibited away from the Great Wall. In all likelihood, Yang projected some of her own life as a migrant in Italy since 1988 onto the story in her novel. Yang seems to posit her readership as second-generation Chinese immigrant young women in search of an edifying model. The parallels among Yang, Meng Jiangnu, Jasmine, and potential second-generation Chinese women illustrate what Graziella Parati has identified as a strategy of talking back to Italian culture in

⁵⁶ Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson, "Re-Thinking the Politics and Practice of Life Writing," in *Across Genres, Generations and Borders*, ed. Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 4-5.

⁵⁷ Apart from ancient Chinese poetry, the Chinese-language part of this bilingual volume is clearly a translation of the Italian text.

⁵⁸ Graziella Parati, introduction to *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration Literature in Italy*, ed. Graziella Parati (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 17.

cultural products by immigrants in Italy.⁵⁹ Yet Yang's and Nesi's ethnocultural processes are similar. In order to argue for Italian authenticity, Nesi constructs the image of an everyman. Yang does only a little better by appealing to a trite female archetype common in Chinese literature. Meng Jiangnu is like the other legendary Chinese women presented in Yang's two previous bilingual anthologies of Chinese folklore, and exemplifies the traditional Chinese female virtues of dignity, industriousness, purity, domesticity, docility, respectfulness, and intelligence.⁶⁰ These figures tend to have magical transformational powers that enable their occasional transgressions from the largely restrictive and normative Chinese patriarchal social conventions.

Yang uses the story of Meng Jiangnu to expose the dehumanizing effects of the personal wealth and careerist ambitions of certain Chinese immigrants, a view shared by Wong and Ballerini. At a metaliterary level, the legend of Meng Jiangnu comments on the current world economic order in which, enslaved to work, people have little time for their families and emotions. Meng Jiangnu's husband is recruited as a migrant laborer to construct the Great Wall, which functions as a "frontiera" and "confine" (74), according to a series of classical Chinese poems Yang cites. Meng Jiangnu's subsequent story by the Great Wall are evoked in the novel's last image of Jasmine and Dalin, who run freely on the Great Wall. Through the use of the legend of Meng Jiangnu, Yang's pronounced optimism enlivens the personal and social dramas of Chinese immigrants in Prato in the literary space previously dominated by Nesi's book.

In the next two novels I examine, Pincio and Hu treat identity transformation and the dehumanization of globalizing forces in greater detail and with greater intensity. In order to accomplish this, both authors approach these dynamics from an intra-European perspective, comparing Rome to Copenhagen and Paris. Although this perspective accentuates the charged meanings of Italy's location in Southern Europe and the longstanding Orientalization of Italy, these novels are not prominently concerned with comparing emigration from Italy with immigration to Italy. Northern Europe only triangulates the bipolar dynamics between Italy and China.

Decadence and Ascendance in Rome: Cinacittà and Petali di orchidea

Similar to those in Milan, Chinese immigrant businesses in Rome are concentrated in the tertiary service sector that employs the city's fourth largest immigrant group, with an official population of 12,000 in 2011, thereby making it the third largest Chinese community in Italy according to official records.⁶¹ During the past decade, import-export firms gradually became the most attractive route to success for Chinese immigrants, with Rome being the center of this industry in

⁵⁹ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 12.

⁶⁰ Yang Xiaping, *La cenerentola cinese: fiabe della Cina antica e contemporanea* (Campi Bisenzio: Idest, 2003) and *Il serpente bianco* (Campi Bisenzio: Idest, 2008).

⁶¹ ISTAT, "Popolazione straniera residente in Italia," 4. Other migrant communities in Rome with headcounts over 10,000 on official record included the Romanian (72,500), the Filipino (29,000), the Polish (13,100), the Peruvian (11,600), and the Ukrainian (10,800).

early 2000s.⁶² What makes Rome different from Milan and Prato is its status as the most important Italian city to have hosted high-profile Sino-Italian cultural events and to have served as a focus city for better-organized Chinese immigrant cultural activities. Founded by Hu Lanbo in Rome in 2001, the magazine *Cina in Italia* currently prints a bilingual edition that serves both Chinese immigrant and Italian readers. *Ouzhou Lianhe Shibao/Ouhua Italy*, which is the oldest and most widely circulated Chinese-language newspaper in Italy, has had its headquarters in Rome since 1996.⁶³ The year 2004 saw the screening of one of the first documentary films about Chinese immigration to Italy, Gianfranco Giagni's *Un cinese a Roma*. AssoCina, the most important second-generation Chinese immigrants' association and one of the first organizations by second-generation immigrants in Italy generally, was formed in Rome in 2005. In 2006, Italy's first Confucius Institute opened in Rome, one of the first of its kind established in Europe. One of the first Italian fiction films on Chinese immigration to Italy, the comedy *Questa notte è ancora nostra*, set in Rome, was released in 2008. In 2009, Rome awarded honorary citizenship to the Dalai Lama, to the chagrin of the Chinese Central government. During 2010, a series of inter-governmental cultural events entitled "L'anno culturale della Cina in Italia" took place mostly in Rome.

Under these circumstances, Tommaso Pincio's *Cinacittà* (2008) and Hu Lanbo's *Petali di orchidea* (2012) offer contrasting interpretations of the Chinese community in Rome, giving rise to a situation of literary debates about immigration similar to that described between Nesi's and Yang's books in the previous section. In terms of literary history, *Cinacittà* provides by far the most definitive, and largely negative and schematic, novelistic depictions of Chinese immigrants in Rome by an Italian writer, just as *Storia della mia gente* does for Prato. *Petali di orchidea* offers the only strong alternative perspective on Chinese immigrants in Rome, which is by and large a positive one that emphasizes the variety of Chinese experiences there. It is important for the purpose of the current essay to investigate the ways in which *Petali di orchidea* can be read as a reaction, or at least a contribution, to an adequate understanding of specific themes aspects foregrounded in *Cinacittà*. These themes are principally three. Rome, emblematic of national decadence in Pincio's novel, is the future for Hu's character. Pincio's unnamed Italian protagonist undergoes a masculine identity crisis as he contemplates relocating to Copenhagen or Northern Italy to reinvent himself. In contrast, Hu's female character transforms herself from a student in Paris to a prominent cultural figure among the Chinese immigrants in Rome. While Pincio's stand on Chinese immigration to Rome is semantically ambiguous because of his postmodern style and his attempts to simulate events orchestrated by the presumed Chinese mafia, Hu is explicit about the contributions made by her community to Rome, in an autobiographical novel that seeks to set the record straight. To be sure, these three themes pertain to the larger genre-related agendas and specific authorial concerns of *Cinacittà* and *Petali di orchidea*, whose literary merits should not be discussed solely in terms of specific points of contestation. However, given Hu's previous antagonistic comments on relevant chapters on Chinese immigrants in Saviano's *Gomorra*⁶⁴ and her declared intentions to open a dialogue on Chinese culture with Italian readers through the book,⁶⁵ as well as her literary choices that I will

⁶² Ceccagno, "L'epopea veloce," 191 and Valentina Pedone, "La parabola dell'import-export cinese a Roma: ascesa, apogeo e decadenza della capitale europea del commercio cinese," in *Osservatorio Romano sulle migrazioni*, VI Rapporto, ed. Caritas (Rome: Anterem, 2010), 232-40.

⁶³ I follow the English title of the newspaper as it is used by the newspaper itself.

⁶⁴ Hu Lanbo, "Perché i cinesi non muoiono?" *Cina in Italia*, 47 (2007, 1/2), 52-54.

⁶⁵ Hu Lanbo, introduction to the Chinese-language version of *Petali di orchidea*, *cinainitalia.com*, last modified April 28, 2013, <http://www.cinainitalia.com/4/2013/0428/68.shtml>.

explain more fully below, it is certain that Hu intended *Petali di orchidea* to serve as a corrective to negative depictions of Chinese immigrants in *Cinacittà* and similar ones in other novels and from the media.

As a crime novel, *Cinacittà* is written as the memoir of an unnamed Italian man, the novel's protagonist, who allegedly murdered a Chinese prostitute, Yin. However, the Italian protagonist is convinced that it is Wang, a mysterious Chinese mobster and Yin's boss, who used Yin to seduce him and eventually led him to commit the crime. Though the professions of the Chinese characters in the novel are not explained, their workplace, a go-go bar, is assumed to be a cover for both prostitution and human trafficking and smuggling. *Cinacittà* is set in Rome during an unspecified year in the future, in which Chinese immigrants are the majority of the Roman population. As most Romans have already migrated north because of the intolerable Roman heat, the Italian protagonist ponders a potential relocation to Lambrate, near Milan, or to even as far north as Christiana, in Copenhagen. Scattered memories and musings of the protagonist about these events constitute the bulk of Pincio's novel.

If *Storia della mia gente* celebrates Italo-centrism, *Cinacittà* is a thinly disguised mockery of Roman-centrism. While Nesi bemoans the decline of Italian industry in order to spur the Italian everyman to action, Pincio attributes the decadence of Rome and Southern Italy to the locals' ignorance and indolence. As "l'ultimo dei veri romani" (6), Pincio's Italian male protagonist is "un animale raro in mezzo a migliaia di bestie cinesi tutte uguali" (7). Tropes from ancient Roman mythology and Romantic literature add to the satirical effect of the narrator's self-proclaimed authentic Roman-ness. He then condemns the "tratto distintivo dell'autentica romanità" which is the "sublime ignoranza" of the Roman citizen: "niente lo commuove, nulla lo smuove. È una pietra in una città di pietre" (12). The sources of Pincio's vision of Roman moral indolence include Alberto Sordi's and Alberto Moravia's works.⁶⁶ Like Nesi, Pincio interprets these characteristics as Italian, stating that "il fatto è che stavo scrivendo un romanzo sulle nostre paure. [...] La diffidenza nei riguardi dello straniero non è che un riflesso della neonata ossessione per la sicurezza."⁶⁷ Rather than demonize Chinese immigration to Italy, Pincio intends his mockery of Roman narcissism to help conserve Roman authenticity. Writing the Italian self through the other is a tactic used in Nesi's book as well.

Cinacittà, like *Storia della mia gente*, proposes that the economic and emotional crises of a middle-aged Italian man, as well as the Italy he embodies, are caused by China's economic ascendance and unfair competition. Pincio's male protagonist is marked by resignation, ineptitude, and impotence. Having failed to get married or distinguish himself in his job, he approaches "il viale del tramonto della mezza età senza nemmeno provare a prendere in considerazione la possibilità di un riscatto" (22). A "fallito" and "sperperatore di esistenza," not unlike Marcello in Fellini's film *La dolce vita* (228), he is assailed by existential anxiety and the "sensazione di essere destinato a una brutta fine" (31). He believes that his destiny illustrates the trope of death in Rome, which is "scritto nel codice genetico di questa città" (27). Soon his masculine insecurity is translated into impotency. He identifies with Jake, the impotent man in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and begins to fetishize Yin's breasts, pose, boots, white skin, and silence that only intensify his impotence. His physical inflictions on Yin are also masochistic insofar as he compares his struggle to survive in the art world to that of the prostitutes in the

⁶⁶ Andrea Consonni, "Intervista a Tommaso Pincio—seconda parte," *lankelot.eu*, last modified November 15, 2010, <http://www.lankelot.eu/letteratura/pincio-tommaso-intervista-tommaso-pincio-parte-seconda.html>.

⁶⁷ Tommaso Pincio, "Come è nato Cinacittà," *tommasopincio.com*, last modified 2008, <http://www.tommasopincio.com/lanterna2.html>.

Chinese go-go bar. He even thinks that “da qualche tempo ero uno sfaccendato, ma prima mi ero fatto il culo. [...] pure dai cinesi dovevo farmi inculare?” (261). To defend his misogyny, he promptly attributes his violent tendencies to the globalization that has ruined his personal wealth, to the pleasure he derives from hitting Yin, to the need for an outlet for his eccentric artistic creations, and to the influence of watching Japanese pornographic and horror films. The inaction and ineptitude of Pincio’s character parallel many of those of Nesi’s Italian everyman, both of whom ultimately resort to violence.

Pincio is more concrete than Nesi on the ideal place for Italian male rejuvenation, namely Northern Europe. A friend advises him to move to Christiana in Copenhagen, “una sorta di micronazione popolata solo da hippy e un sacco di cani” (130), because Rome “era così lontana dal resto dell’Europa civile e produttiva che oppio, prostituzione e altri illeciti affari potevano svolgersi tranquillamente alla luce del sole” (133), a reference to the aggravation of this situation by the Chinese. On the last page of the book, the narrator alerts his Northern European neighbors to the danger of imminent Chinese immigration:

La gente del Nord se ne sta beata al fresco, convinta che quel che succede nella rovente Cinacittà non li riguarda. Vi sbagliate, cari amici del Nord, inclusi voi hippy di Danimarca che andate in giro a piedi nudi come bambini. Vi sbagliate di grosso. Voi nemmeno immaginate di cosa possono essere capaci i cinesi. Sanno fare molto di più che sputare in terra. Lo dico per esperienza. In guardia, gente del Nord. Hai visto mai che un giorno si stufano di Roma e si trasferiscono in massa dalle vostre parti? Voglio vedervi, poi, a combattere con persone tipo Wang e il signor Ho. State accorti, per l’amor di Dio. (335)

The repetition of “gente del Nord” and “Vi sbagliate” gives rhythm to the paragraph, and the use of the second person plural imperative reinforces the narrator’s firm tone of voice. Pincio’s direct address to Northern Europeans is all the more poignant because of its sense of fatalism.

In *Cinacittà*, the exclusive origin of this fatalism is none other than the Chinese mafia. Indeed, Pincio’s book makes the most unrestrained and negative comments on Chinese immigrants in recent Italian literature through a description of the Chinese mafia. Calling the Chinese “barbari del terzo millennio” (80) and “il popolo più materialista dell’universo conosciuto” with “uno spiccato senso del brutto” (81), the Italian protagonist charges that “ovunque nel pianeta, le Chinatown sono gironi infernali dove i cinesi si divertono a scannarsi tra loro arricchendosi alle spalle di noi occidentali. La romana Cinacittà è il non plus ultra, la bocca di Lucifero” (92). To be sure, there is nothing intrinsically unethical in fictionalizing Chinese criminal groups in Italy in literature. Sociological studies have brought to light specific case studies that illustrate the dynamics among Chinese immigrant enterprises, human smuggling and/or trafficking, and prostitution.⁶⁸ In particular, the success of some Chinese immigrant enterprises in Italy can be attributed in part to forced labor controlled by Chinese criminal individuals or groups.⁶⁹ Although some credence is due to the news media in Italy that deal with this issue, it is worth considering the term “mafia” as a misnomer typical of the sensationalizing language of the press. Sociologists have cautioned against projecting data from isolated cases of

⁶⁸ Ceccagno, Rastrelli, and Salvati, *Ombre cinesi?*, 129-33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

Chinese immigrant criminal groups in specific Italian cities onto cases elsewhere.⁷⁰ Once we establish the undisputed social presence of Chinese immigrant criminal groups in Italy, the crucial questions to ask become what Pincio intends to accomplish with the literary representations of the Chinese mafia, and especially, how Chinese immigrant writers react to his novel and similar depictions in other Italian texts.

The polemic first arises when the obsession with the Chinese mafia in relevant media and literary representations appears to intentionally insult the national and ethnic identities of Chinese immigrants. This point has already been raised in response to Saviano's *Gomorra* as Chinese immigrants questioned the social reasons behind Italian literature's apparent need to frequently associate Chinese immigration to Italy with the Chinese mafia.⁷¹ To illustrate this conviction in the public opinion, *Cinacittà* draws on the style of investigative journalism to even greater extent than Saviano does in *Gomorra*. Allusions to the Chinese mafia pervade the narrative premise and details of *Cinacittà*. The core story is a veiled narrative of criminal dealings, although the word "mafia" is hardly used. One notes the dubious provenance of the large sum of money stolen by the Italian protagonist from Wang, which serves as the catalyst that leads to Yin's death and to the Italian protagonist's imprisonment. The money is a crucial narrative premise of *Cinacittà* because it is in jail that the Italian protagonist writes the memoir that becomes the book. However, the provenance and circulation of this money are obscure. What job does Wang have that is so lucrative? Why does Wang leave the money in a place where the Italian protagonist can see and steal it? Why does Yin never speak a word to the Italian protagonist, in Italian or in Chinese? What are her real motives for protecting the Italian protagonist from Wang? A wealth of narrative details also points to Chinese organized crime. Together with a hotel worker who has the air of a killer, the Chinese landlord unfairly demands fees for a repair that the Italian protagonist does not request. The narrative recounts that Chinese immigrants use underground garages against regulations in order to evade property taxes. According to the Italian protagonist, the Chinese wish to lynch him for killing one of their women even though she is a prostitute, or to burn him alive like a heretic simply because they are a vindictive people, a national trait confirmed by Wang. Like Xian in *Gomorra*, Wang is the insider and conveyor of Chinese illegality. Pincio confirmed in an interview the stereotypical view of the Chinese as the most materialistic people on earth, which he said he learned from a Chinese person.⁷² Both *Gomorra* and *Cinacittà* contrast Chinese and Italian reactions to illegal activities in order to illustrate legal normality and anomie: while the Chinese characters remain matter-of-fact, the Italians are either curious or stunned.

The Italian male protagonist's intensely racist and masculinist thoughts and actions in regard to the Chinese immigrants are matched only by his acutely ironic self-awareness of them. Pincio takes pains to ensure that the dream-like incoherence of the protagonist's articulations about the Chinese mafia is correlated to his status as a prisoner with memory problems, who deals with post-crime trauma by way of mythopoesis. The protagonist does not believe in any claims of truth conveyed by the press in Rome because the Chinese manipulate it. If a poverty of imagination characterizes the media, Pincio suggests, then the protagonist's fecund imagination about the Chinese mafia is no less problematic. *Cinacittà* is a postmodern study in reality and

⁷⁰ Ibid., 133, 136.

⁷¹ "Gomorra: i cinesi morti trasportati nei container," *associna.com*, last modified December 30, 2006, <http://www.associna.com/modules.php?file=article&name=News&sid=449>.

⁷² "Intervista a Tommaso Pincio," *Einaudeditore*, last modified November 4, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y EaINf7rvY>.

possibilities, according to Pincio's conceptualization of this book: "non era di verità che avevo bisogno, bensì di una buona ragione per osare con l'immaginazione, e la perenne decadenza di Roma lo era."⁷³ In the end, Pincio's postmodern rhetoric creates a narrative ambiguity that renders his stand on the Chinese immigrants in Italy elusive.

The polemic is not limited to Pincio's equation of Chinese immigration to Italy with the Chinese mafia in the novel's narrative, which is complicated by postmodern irony. It also pertains to his tendency to justify the novel's semantic ambiguity by putting it side by side with metaphorical stories and artworks, an authorial operation that often offers a rationale for criminal Chinese dealings and its accompanying and intentional vagueness to the Western outsider. For instance, the protagonist claims that while a distinct divide between reality and dreams exists for Westerners, the Chinese view the entire world as existing only in the midst of clouds, like those in a Chinese watercolor painting. This detail justifies the dreamlike quality of the confessions of the Italian protagonist in the bulk of *Cinacittà*; he believes himself to have been drugged by Wang. He even suspects Wang of having orchestrated the premeditated murder of Yin by maneuvering his personal failings. Through an allegorical story, the narrator explains how "le manovre oscure si celano nella luce del giorno" (311), alluding to the Chinese immigrants' camouflaged illegal activities. Further complicating the matter, the author refers to Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical paintings as his stylized statues and architecture are meant to provide a key to understanding Yin's enigmatic pose and mutism, although the exact connection is never elucidated for the reader. Finally, it is the bizarreness of Mao's sexualized superstition as narrated in Li Zhisui's book, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician*, that gives the Italian protagonist the idea to put his confessions into writing for posterity while in jail.

The semantic incompleteness of all of these associations is intended as a reinforcement of the Italian protagonist's claim that the authentic meanings of certain actions of the Chinese are too recondite for Westerners to grasp. Pincio seems to imply that an interculturalist approach to Chinese immigration to Italy fails because of a fundamental cognitive impossibility. In its stead, a socio-criminal approach makes the phenomenon comprehensible to an Italian sensibility, because of Italy's extensive dealings with its own organized crime. Thus, Pincio's approach in the novel bears a resemblance to a specific sociological and criminological approach that makes an analysis of Chinese criminal organizations central to understanding Chinese immigration overseas. Despite scholarly interrogations of the validity of this "socio-criminal" interpretive method, police investigations of Chinese criminal activities and relevant media coverage in Italy still use it extensively.⁷⁴

Cinacittà rehearses many of the pejorative Italian discourses on the Chinese community by intersecting them with the Orientalist discourse of Rome in the European imagination. A central mission of *Petali di orchidea* is clearly to undo the discursive violence enacted by *Cinacittà*. While I do not wish to underestimate Hu's achievements as a novelist to have constructed an edifying story of an immigrant woman, specific aspects of the novel indicate a reaction to Pincio's postmodern novel. Hu's book, a fictionalized account of her entire migratory trajectory, consciously addresses the flattened and stereotypical representations of the average Chinese immigrant in Italy in *Cinacittà* and other similar depictions. The internal diversity of the Chinese immigrant community in Italy as depicted in Yang and Hu's novels, as well as in specific case studies in sociological literature, is meant to correct Pincio's premises in a counter-

⁷³ Pincio, "Come è nato *Cinacittà*."

⁷⁴ Ceccagno, Rastrelli, and Salvati, *Ombre cinesi?*, 143.

hegemonic discourse on the same subject.⁷⁵ Hu has every reason to believe that Pincio's depictions are at best one-sided distortions of the multilayered social reality of Chinese immigrants in Italy. Like Wong and Yang, Hu's background is vastly different from that of the Chinese immigrants depicted by Pincio and Nesi. Raised in an intellectual family in Beijing, Hu is highly educated, having obtained her doctorate in French literature in Paris. She moved from Paris to Rome after marrying an Italian, which considerably facilitated her integration. Moreover, the array of Sino-Italian cultural events occurring in Rome during the 2000s explains in part Hu's shared concern with Yang about diversifying the image of Chinese immigrants in Italy in the cultural sphere. While Yang's approach addresses the dynamics between first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants, Hu makes a clear distinction between socially disadvantaged immigrants and educated first-generation Chinese immigrants. Both authors, however, examine gender dynamics that concern Chinese women.

The entire migratory trajectory of Hu's almost heroic female Chinese character reveals the multifaceted life of this intellectual/dancer/journalist/entrepreneur/author. Her character is in many ways the antithesis of Pincio's man in his midlife crisis. However, because Hu draws on her experience as a young woman in Paris for her professional activities in Rome, Northern Europe remains a symbol of youthfulness and vitality for her as well. Critics note that certain first-generation immigrant writers in Italy do not consider themselves as having a clear national and cultural identity.⁷⁶ This applies to Hu's character as she holds an intercultural and culturalist view of China-Italy relations triangulated by Paris.

Central to Hu's formulation of her character's identity as a young woman is a comparison with other women in artistic and erotic contexts. With virtually no descriptions of her life as a student of literature, the bulk of the book's section set in Paris centers on Hu's part-time jobs as a dancer in a Chinese dance company and as a French-language tutor. During her first public performance in the style of the Tang Dynasty, contrary to her initial intention to impersonate the imperial consort Yang Guifei whose sensual beauty is legendary, Hu keeps thinking about her own life, including episodes of her past and "la nostalgia per la patria, l'amore per gli altri e per la vita" (39). During a strip show, upon seeing the breasts of French women for the first time, Hu reflects on female beauty and her fortune to be a woman. This thought makes her ponder her sexual relationships, and this section ends with her sexual encounter with Jean, a Frenchman. Indeed, it is in Paris that Hu was "in continuo fermento di idee e di impressioni, e contemporaneamente in continua maturazione" (42).

In an account of a road trip from Beijing to Paris, Hu singles out a few episodes involving iconic male travelers that make her maturity as a woman possible. The presentation in vignettes of Hu's intercultural encounters on this trip clearly recalls Marco Polo's *Il milione*. It is not difficult to see the authorial play on female/male, cultural diplomat/merchant, and East-to-West/West-to-East, with which Hu elevates the importance of her trip to that of Polo's. Hu also evokes the Long March undertaken by the soldiers of the Red Army of the Communist Party of China in 1934, as well as the travels of the legendary Chinese monk Xuan Zang to India, in order to accentuate the arduousness of her own journey. In Iran, however, the illusion of Hu's self-identification with these male figures becomes evident, as she is made to obey the dress code reserved for Iranian Muslim women. Characteristic of Hu's all-embracing view of social matters, she starts to muse on the "destino delle donne di tutto il mondo: nei secoli, le donne avevano lottato per l'emancipazione, battendosi senza sosta per ottenere l'uguaglianza" (133). The drastic

⁷⁵ Ibid., 134-35 and 139-40.

⁷⁶ Parati, "Introduction," 23.

contrast between Hu's feminine experiences as a woman in Paris and in Iran reaffirms her determination to reverse her grandmother's prediction in Beijing about her limited social value as a woman. As the trip draws to a conclusion, Hu congratulates herself on being able to accomplish such an enterprise as she approaches the age of thirty. This serves as a token of her identity as "una cinese fuori del comune" (146). Hu's concerns with female genealogy and her reliance on male models for identity construction recall similar themes in Italian women's autobiographies.⁷⁷

As a married woman in Rome, Hu keeps referring back to Paris and Beijing to make sense of her change of status from a young woman to a mother. If Paris signifies youthful female creativity and sexual experimentation for Hu, Rome means nurturing the younger generation and caring for the older generation. She is now certain that "Ovunque fossi andata, qualunque fosse stato il mio status, sarei stata una bravissima madre" (158). Many examples of her maternity follow in several chapters, notably including her interactions with her sons in "La mia famiglia," her mother and grandmother in "Tre generazioni di donne," her mother-in-law in "Tramonto," and several young Chinese immigrant women in "Tre figlie adottive."

Concurrent with Hu's change of female roles are her shifting professional ambitions. Her interests in literary and artistic self-expressions are eventually replaced by her social engagement as an intellectual and a journalist aiming to ameliorate the representations of Chinese immigrants in Italian society. It is here that the reader gets the clearest sign of Hu's conscious reactions to the pejorative depictions of Chinese immigrants in *Cinacittà* that synthesize many similar media and fictional representations. Hu repeatedly declares her intention to put the intellectual and creative stimuli gained in Beijing and Paris to practical use for the Chinese immigrant community in Rome. A memorable episode clarifies some of the reasons behind Hu's change. She cites three factors that motivated her to found the magazine *Cina in Italia*: A Chinese immigrant woman's nostalgia for her country, a determination to serve Chinese immigrants who do not speak Italian well, and a mission to promote positive aspects of China and the Chinese immigrant community in Italy in order to counter negative Italian media representations. Characteristically, she attributes her "responsabilità verso il mio paese e verso i miei genitori" to her social status as a Chinese intellectual immigrant (160). Hu's sense of responsibility is likewise emphasized in a conference organized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which she lectured on the success of Chinese immigrants in Italy by elucidating the significance of the protest in Milan's Chinatown in 2007 and by arguing in favor of a culturalist approach to intercultural understandings. Hu's situation is very different from the isolation and invisibility of female migrants as depicted in certain Italian works of fiction, for example that of Pincio's Yin.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the author's tendency to glorify the many detailed stories about her commitments and efforts points to the narrative energy necessary to argue in favor of the values of a migrant woman, and an intellectual at that, in a patriarchal and foreign society that has produced works such as *Cinacittà*.

The fact that Hu's book does not speak directly about the Chinese mafia is in itself an act of defiance against the overemphasis of this issue in *Cinacittà* and *Gomorra*. Instead, *Petali di orchidea* assumes the important role of educating an Italian audience about the migratory trajectory and social integration of Chinese immigrants in Rome, which, more generally, is a specific social function of autobiographies in migration literature in Italy. Hu's focus on her

⁷⁷ Graziella Parati, *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women's Autobiographies* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 4-5.

⁷⁸ Parati, *Migration Italy*, 67-69.

character's progressive growth from a humble student to a prominent cultural figure refutes Pincio's reluctance to give historical depth to his Chinese characters. Toward the end of the novel, Hu is clear about the contributions of each city to her identity transformation:

Durante i cinque anni in cui ho studiato a Parigi, Parigi mi ha detto che dovevo vivere in modo romantico, con impegno, da sola. Nei ventuno anni in cui ho vissuto a Roma, Roma mi ha detto che dovevo vivere con determinazione fino a raggiungere gli obiettivi più alti. Nei vent'anni di infanzia e gioventù, Pechino mi ha detto che dovevo vivere amando gli altri, che dovevo salvare l'umanità. (248)

With such an unabashedly grandiose statement and a text filled with stories to prove it, Hu's is perhaps the most ambitious novel to have been published in Italian by a Sino-Italian or Chinese immigrant writer. It is a world apart from Pincio's obsession with the Chinese mafia.

A particular narrative energy characteristic of Hu's and Yang's novels concerns the use of storytelling to elucidate a moral inspired by Chinese culture and philosophy. This literary device is often couched in terms of the intellectual and cultural contributions made by immigrants to Italian society. The best examples of these intercultural explanations contrast dramatically to the semantically ambiguous intercultural associations in *Cinacittà* that aim to simulate the vagueness of the Chinese mafia. The chapter "Tramonto" shows how the Confucian concept of filial piety serves as the guiding principle for Hu as she cares patiently for her mother-in-law who suffers from shingles. The relevant philosophical idea is clearly explained: "Fin dall'antichità in Cina il rispetto per gli anziani e l'amore per i bambini è tradizionalmente un alto valore morale, in particolare la pietà filiale verso gli anziani; c'è una frase che recita 'delle cento virtù la pietà filiale è la prima'" (201). During her battle with breast cancer, Hu uses popular Chinese sayings to explain the positive value of adversaries, including "i veri sentimenti si vedono nei disastri" (232) and "se nel disastro non sei morto, arriverà la grande fortuna" (240). Both Hu and Yang provide literal translations of Chinese cultural concepts into Italian, accompanied by a story in order to clarify their metaphorical meanings. This confirms what Gnisci considers the migrant writers' need to use Italian as the primary language of communication because of their target audiences.⁷⁹ More importantly, this practice allows both authors to create new meanings within the Italian linguistic and cultural system about specific Chinese cultural and philosophical concepts, despite the constant risk of slipping into an ethnocultural explanation of the issues at hand from a Sinocentric perspective.

All things considered, it is difficult to determine whether *Cinacittà* is intended as an anti-Chinese piece, as *Storia della mia gente* clearly is, or as a mockery of such textual violence which in truth uncovers Italian insecurities. What is certain is that together with *Gomorra*, *Cinacittà* constitutes an important intervention in the literary debates on the Chinese mafia in Italy, against which subsequent novelists felt compelled to react, even as subtly as Hu does in *Petali di orchidea*. In ways that differ significantly from Hu's book, the two novels I analyze next explicitly address the Chinese mafia, reshaping the boundaries of relevant literary debates.

⁷⁹ Gnisci, "La letteratura italiana della migrazione," 76.

Unity/Fragmentation, Other Voices from Bologna and Trieste: Piazza dell'Unità and Amiche per la pelle

Chinese migrant communities in Bologna and Trieste are very small compared to the other three Italian cities analyzed so far: approximately 2,400 in Bologna (2009 statistics) and 1000 in Trieste (2011 statistics), with employment mostly in retail and in restaurants.⁸⁰ Bologna is renowned in Italy for its leftist administration, and its image as a haven for hedonism and a champion of multiculturalism is exploited in Maurizio Matrone's *Piazza dell'Unità* (2011). As the border town par excellence in Italian culture, Trieste has a long history of irredentism and conservative Italian nationalism, which Laila Wadia's *Amiche per la pelle* (2007) reworks in addressing Italian national identity in the age of mass immigration. These two novels provide an intra-immigrant authorial perspective that concerns the interactions among Chinese immigrants, immigrants from other countries to Italy, and Italians. By positing Italy as the nexus of Chinese and other non-Italian cultural systems and practices, more than the intra-European perspective, this perspective emphasizes Italy as a site for multicultural negotiations.⁸¹ By strategically using fragmentation and unity in the themes and structures of their novels, Matrone and Wadia redefine the parameters of the literary debates on the Chinese mafia previously set down by *Gomorra* and *Cinacittà*.

As a mystery novel, *Piazza dell'Unità* employs several interlaced narrative threads to address criminal interactions among mostly second-generation teenage immigrants and Italian policemen. The literary genre and subject matter are familiar to Matrone, who was previously employed as a police officer responsible for juvenile crimes in Bologna. According to Luca Somigli, who analyzes the proliferation of crime fiction set in Bologna, which has become a premier Italian city for this genre, the privileged perspective of authors like Matrone focuses on “the individual dramas of those who are caught in the aftermath of a criminal act.”⁸² Such dramas in *Piazza dell'Unità* are intricate if not bewildering. Distinct but continuous narrative threads featuring quite a few characters in different areas in Bologna are spliced and intersected with one another. Characters who have no connections with one another meet by chance and perspectives in the novel shift constantly, as the text involves a free-style combination of direct speech, indirect speech, and free indirect speech. Third-person narrative, second-person dialogue, and first-person interior monologue are undifferentiated in the text except for their content. Orality is the dominant narrative mode. All these peculiarities reflect Matrone's intention to simulate actual police cases. The intentional omission of a narrator accentuates the need for readers to seek out unifying narrative elements.

⁸⁰ “Cittadini stranieri a Bologna. Schede tematiche sulle nazionalità più diffuse. 8. Cina,” *comune.bologna.it*, last modified 2009, http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/piancont/Stranieri/StudiStranieri/Stranieri_aBo/2012/pdf/Scheda_stranieri_CINA.pdf; “Demografia, Annuario Statistico 2011,” *retcevica.trieste.it*, last modified 2011, <http://www.retcevica.trieste.it/new/stats/annuario.asp>; and “La comunità cinese a Trieste. Dinamiche imprenditoriali tra ristoranti e ‘pronto moda,’” *Quaderni del Dipartimento di Economia, Società e Territorio, Università di Udine*, no. 55/05 luglio 2005. http://www.dest.uniud.it/dest/quaderni/c_cinese.pdf.

⁸¹ Although the intra-immigrant perspective is dominant in these novels, there are plenty of depictions of interactions between immigrants and Italians. By focusing on the intra-immigrant perspective, I do not suggest a social segregation or polarization between immigrants and Italians in these novels.

⁸² Luca Somigli, “The Mysteries of Bologna: On Some Trends of the Contemporary *Giallo*,” in *Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. Giuliana Pieri (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 83.

The novel's fragmented narrative goes roughly as follows: Schen Li, a second-generation Chinese immigrant, is madly in love with a classmate in her high school, Mohammad, a second-generation Moroccan immigrant. She depends on him for sex and drugs. Threatened by Mohammad's sexual relations with their Albanian classmate, Schen Li seeks revenge. She receives help from Tsa Li, her sister, to feign having been raped by Mohammad. As the case is not resolved quickly, Tsa Li manages to capture Mohammad and cut off his penis. Michel, a medical student from Burkina Faso who prostitutes himself to an Italian couple, witnesses both scenes. The male reproductive organs of Mohammad and Michel are repeatedly described as potent. In contrast, a Romanian teenager, Nicolaj, dreams of enlarging his small penis while watching Michel during his paid sexual encounters. Nicolaj prostitutes himself to homosexuals in the same area of the city as Michel. Later, Elena, a gypsy girl who is a sexual slave to her uncle in a camp, pretends to help Nicolaj with his penis enlargement using a magical lotion. While Schen Li is infatuated with Mohammad, Tsa Li is indifferent to the romantic advances of Roman, a Moldovan teenager. Roman meets Edoardo, a professional pickpocket from Ecuador, and consoles him as he cries for his lost money near a grate. The space underneath the grate is occupied by a sweatshop owned by Tsa Li's family, where a boy works among other adults. He migrated from China to Italy with his mother and has not been above ground for a prolonged period of time.

A plastic bag containing five thousand euros ties together some of these narrative threads. This is the money that Michel earned from prostitution. Nicolaj robs Michel and is then tricked by Elena. Elena's uncle finds the money accidentally and keeps it. Edoardo pickpockets Elena's uncle but, during a police chase, the money falls through the grate and winds up in the hands of the Chinese boy and his mother, providing them with the hope of being able to leave the sweatshop. These immigrants' craving for money and their Machiavellian ways of obtaining it allow Matrone to criticize capitalism and the pervasive commodification of sex in Italian society. Another unifying device is the policemen's abuse of violence, power, and discipline with regard to nearly all the immigrants in the novel, a particular concern of Matrone's.⁸³ A cop beats up Mohammad when he fails to produce his identification documents. Two policemen molest Schen Li sexually. An unnamed female cop, convinced that Schen Li's rape has connections with the Chinese mafia, confronts her father. Upon entering the room, she yells "[F]ermi tutti polizia che se no vi ammazzo maledetti cinesi," and "immediatamente dopo mani femminili abili ed esperte la mettono KO senza farle un graffito" (226). In all three instances, violence is put to a stop thanks to external surveillance: the young policeman is afraid that someone might have filmed their abuse of Mohammad; the two policemen stop their sexual harassment to make a call to their headquarters; and the female cop is apprehended by the Chinese who inform her about their high-ranking friend at the local police authorities.

The most significant unifying narrative element is the Chinese mafia. It is the implicit force that undergirds events ranging from Schen Li's scheme to punish Mohammad, to the little boy and his mother's plan to leave the underground sweatshop. *Piazza dell'Unità* gives the most dramatic and traumatic literary rendition of the Chinese mafia among all the novels examined here. Compared to *Gomorra* and *Cinacittà*, the novelty of Matrone's book is the intersection of perspectives of the Chinese characters and the Italian policemen. Given the novel's focus on intra-immigrant dynamics, descriptions of the mafia are mostly articulated by the Chinese themselves. The dubious literary effects of this authorial practice are manifest in the following

⁸³ Ibid., 83.

example. In her family restaurant, fed up with Italian men who greet her in mockingly bad Italian, Tsa Li thinks to herself:

I signori non sanno nulla dei traffici illeciti del padrone del ristorante. [...] I signori non sanno niente della mafia cinese, conoscono a malapena quella italiana, ma non hanno idea di che cosa significhi veramente. Pensano che sia una cosa da film, robe che succedono in Sicilia, a Napoli, in America. Non sanno nulla della camorra o della n'drangheta, né di tre cavalieri dai nomi improbabili che se li conoscessero si farebbero una sonora risata e penserebbero che la mafia sia davvero una farsa, una pagliacciata, solo folklore, come questi cinesi che li servono che sembrano usciti da un teatro. I signori non sanno niente di niente, sono stupidi, superficiali, inferiori persino. (62)

Although these are the words of the Sino-Italian Tsa Li, who, according to Matrone, is the more Chinese of the two sisters, her perspective is decidedly Italian. There are a series of unqualified affirmations in this first-person interior monologue: Would the Chinese view their businesses as “traffici illeciti”? Would the Chinese use “mafia” to refer to activities that are illegal in the Italian context but perhaps not in another context? Would the Chinese be aware of films on those Italian criminal organizations? Would the Chinese describe their restaurant as a theater and organized crime a farce? Would Chinese immigrants, having experienced police raids on their businesses, think that an average Italian is not aware of Chinese illegal activities through the news media?

Even if one admits that the Italian side of Tsa Li allows her access to all of these perceptions, this monologue is still problematic for its literary effects. For a reader who is unaware of the critical debates on Chinese criminal networks in Italy, but who learns about their criminal activities from the media, this paragraph gives the impression that the Sino-Italians, that is, the insiders, confirm the existence of the Chinese mafia. Such reasoning intensifies when the unnamed policewoman alerts the reader that she has had first-hand working experiences with the Chinese mafia back in Milan. This statement builds on Matrone’s past employment as a policeman, who insists that many of the “grotesque” elements in his novel are based on facts, while others are created for effects.⁸⁴ Moreover, a separate section on the little boy and his mother’s migratory trajectory from China to Italy is replete with references to illegal Chinese connections. Such descriptions of Chinese victims at the hands of their own countrymen, who are members of the Chinese mafia, further validate the fictional reality through a pathos that is familiar to the Italian reader, namely the struggle of the underprivileged against the authorities.

Episodes that concern immigrant victims of other ethnicities at the mercy of the Chinese mafia reinforce the sense of its pervasive criminal influence. The most gruesome of such depictions involves Tsa Li’s removal of Mohammad’s penis as revenge for her sister, a detail that recalls a similar story in *Cinacittà*. Among the many sensational effects that *Piazza dell’Unità* intends to capture, the most shocking is its representation of sexual acts in at once clinical and vulgar terms. But nothing prepares readers for this description:

⁸⁴ Achille Corea, “Maurizio Matrone intervistato da Achille Corea per BOL al Salone del Libro di Torino,” last modified May 19, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpFgsFy2rao>.

(Tsa Li) Afferra tra il pollice e l'indice la cappella del pene a mo' di pinza e la tira verso l'esterno mentre con l'altra mano stringe l'elsa della spada facendola roteare in alto sopra la testa come un guerriero che si prepara alla battaglia, come un boia pronto a decapitare l'attributo del marocchino. Mentre la lama rotea per un tempo che sembra infinito, gli occhi di Tsa Li si riempiono di sangue nell'attesa di insozzarsi quel tubino nero che indossa, il suo primo trionfo. (233)

The narrative draws on Turandot as the prototype for Tsa Li as she is “la sovrana che impartisce ordini indiscutibili” (231), who is “pratica e soprattutto spietata” (234). Her men delight her by calling her a “capa, una specie di imperatrice.” Her emasculating power brings depictions of male impotence and the crisis of masculine identity in *Storia della mia gente* and *Cinacittà* to a tragic but spectacular crescendo.

Compared with *Piazza dell'Unità* and *Cinacittà*, Wadia's *Amiche per la pelle* offers a very different interpretation of the Chinese mafia, using it as an inventive, and even subversive, device to question Italian legislation on immigration. This situation, however, does not imply that Wadia had a better understanding of the Chinese mafia than the other authors. Five families live in the same building on Via Ungaretti, a fictional street in Trieste: the Chinese Fongs, the Albanian Dardanis, the Bosnian Zigovics, and the Indian Kumars, as well as signor Rosso, the only Triestine. Wadia's book describes the sociability patterns of this multicultural community, focusing on the interactions among the wives and their families' housing crisis. The perspective of the narrator, Shanti Kumar, parallels that of Mumbai-born Wadia. In the first half of the novel, references to Mrs. Fong, nicknamed Boccio di Rosa, are limited to rather stylized, if not stereotyped, depictions. She is unable to pronounce the Italian “r” correctly. Her facial expressions seem flat to Shanti, who cannot tell her age. Chinese immigrants in Trieste provide for themselves mostly within their own community, Wadia observes. The Fongs are using the basement quarters of the building to house illegal Chinese immigrants, who are “neo-schiavi in attesa di conoscere la loro destinazione finale in qualche fabbrica clandestina nel nordest” (65). Wadia goes on to write in a manner reminiscent of the news media language:

I Fong non sono nemmeno i padroni del loro ristorante, come abbiamo sempre creduto. Sono dei semplici disgraziati come noi, ricattati dalla mafia cinese, schiacciati da un debito gigantesco contratto per pagarsi il viaggio dalla Cina all'Italia, costretti a lavorare tutta la vita al ristorante per una paga da fame e con l'obbligo un giorno di farci lavorare anche i figli. (66)

This passage indicates that the plight of the typical Chinese immigrants in Italy was known among other immigrants during the mid-2000s. Possible sources for Wadia are Italian-language news materials and social interactions with the Chinese, as the descriptions seem to be conditioned by an Italian rather than a Chinese immigrant perspective. Notably, the association of first-generation Chinese immigrants with the Chinese mafia is quite generic and clinical, contrary to later relevant fictionalization in *Piazza dell'Unità* and *Cinacittà*.

Wadia's novel approaches certain Chinese activities normally considered illegal in the Italian context from multiculturalist and feminist perspectives. Depictions of the Chinese mafia in Italy take a curious turn in *Amiche per la pelle* that distinguishes them from representations in *Piazza dell'Unità*, *Cinacittà*, and *Gomorra*. As the owners of the Chinese restaurant where the Fongs work have purchased the building in cash, the tenants no longer need to worry about eviction and may continue to pay the same rent "a patto che nessuno riveli alle autorità che nelle cantine e nell'appartamento vuoto del primo piano c'è un gran viavai di musci gialli" (123-4). The residents happily accept this condition despite the obvious breach of Italian regulation. Previously, in reply to their Italian teacher Laura's question about how the tenants obtain hot water for showers, since all of the building's utilities are "fuori norma," the immigrant women vouch for the legitimacy of their expedients in their respective countries (89). Here and elsewhere, Wadia repeats her overarching thesis that the solidarity among immigrant women from developing countries is a catalyst for achieving small, but great, things. The women meet to learn the Italian language and culture in the hopes of better integration, despite their differing linguistic proximity to Italian, which creates hilarious situations for them. They despise their husbands for being unwilling to improve their linguistic and cultural assets. In an interview, Wadia evokes the notion of "transculturalism" to account for her decision to reside in Italy.⁸⁵ For her, integration goes beyond cultural assimilation to mean cultural negotiation in the form of the immigrants' questioning of core Italian cultural values. Wadia creates a literary space in which Italian cultural attitudes and legal measures regarding immigration to Italy are debated and indeed overturned. This authorial practice is illustrative of the view of Marie Orton and Graziella Parati that "migrants' writings supply an alternative rhetoric that places migration outside the realm of protectionist discourses that demand regulations and boundaries."⁸⁶ In *Amiche per la pelle*, Chinese illegal activities are no longer considered as part of concerted Chinese mafia operations. Instead, it is a narrative detail that Wadia uses to promote multiculturalist and feminist solutions to settle legal conflicts between Italians and immigrants.

Wadia's transcultural perspective on immigration to Italy works well with Trieste, in an effective contrast of the unity of the tiny multicultural community with the city's fragmentary geopolitics. In accounting for the Triestines' apparent close-mindedness when dealing with people from out of town in general, and with immigrants in particular, Wadia relates how Trieste is still ambivalent toward its historically multiethnic communities in relation to its distance from Italy in the social and cultural imagination. Her example concerns an elderly couple's conversations in Triestine dialect: "A noi va ben gaver gente istruida qua. Volemo gente brava, non vu cumprà. Voi vi lave, quei altri spuzza. Porta malattie, bestie" (77). Referring to the difficult process of nationalization in Trieste after Italian Unification, the novel suggests that the present refashioning of Italian identity based on citizenship in the era of mass immigration is equally fraught with conflicts and reconciliations. Wadia's choice of Trieste illustrates what Parati calls "the right of migrants to access and appropriate a location of culture in which they bring to the surface the inner tensions of the already multilayered local culture."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Carlotta Caroli, "Intervista a Laila Wadia. L'ironia come arma di istruzione di massa," donna.immigrazioneoggi.it, accessed October 19, 2012, <http://donna.immigrazioneoggi.it/25062011/primopiano/wadia.html>.

⁸⁶ Marie Orton and Graziella Parati, introduction to *Multicultural Literature in Contemporary Italy*, eds. Marie Orton and Graziella Parati (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 13-14.

⁸⁷ Parati, *Migration Italy*, 71.

Moreover, the depiction of unity and fragmentation in *Amiche per la pelle* makes the tiny immigrant community one of the many microcosms in Trieste, nothing particularly eccentric or exceptional. Social closure or not, the building-community resembles the city it inhabits. Even such a vastly different novel as *Piazza dell'Unità* shares the method of microhistory employed in *Amiche per la pelle*, given that Matrone's novel also entertains a multiplicity of perspectives on a web of events. Wadia's novel is a compelling example of Parati's observation that much more than texts with sociological value, migration literature in Italy has the ability to imagine change as these authors create new meanings in contemporary Italian culture while occasionally drawing on local Italian contexts.⁸⁸

Conclusion

In this essay, I provide the first extensive scholarly survey of a representative group of contemporary Italian novels that place at their center Chinese immigration to Italy or Chinese immigrant characters. By analyzing these novels within their socio-historical and literary contexts, I have contended that they either reinforce or destabilize the specific thematics and rhetorical strategies made popular by the news media following the protest in Milan's Chinatown in 2007. In depicting Chinese immigration to Italy, these authors convey their specific anxieties and hopes about the transformation of a worldwide economic order from local and regional to international and globalizing contexts, as well as how this change impacts individual cultural identities. Contemporary China and Italy are the preferred case studies for these authors to examine such dynamics. Literary concerns of *italianità* and citizenship for immigrants in Italy, the Chinese mafia and Italian police authorities, and Italian masculinity and Chinese femininity provide windows into the often conflictual, but always dialogic, interactions between Italians and Chinese immigrants in recent years.

I have also argued that through these novels Chinese immigrant and Sino-Italian writers compete with their more prominent Italian counterparts by using similar, specific conceptual devices to approach the same subject matters in specific cities. The resulting interpretations of these writers depart drastically from those of their Italian counterparts. In most cases, this situation illustrates the dynamics between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. I have shown this by using a comparative framework that investigates Sino-Italian intercultural, intra-Italian and intra-Chinese, Italian and Northern European, and intra-immigrant perspectives. As these debates often center on the tensions between the novels' non-fictional and fictional components, my analysis draws on recent scholarship on woman's autobiography, the crime novel, fiction for intercultural pedagogy, and NIE in Italy. I have proposed that as these literary genres intervene in historical narratives from an ethical perspective in order to critique contemporary Italian society, all the novels articulate, or contend with, received social perceptions of Chinese immigration to Italy, while a few also carve out new paths toward Sino-Italian relations.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 102.

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