

## Extract from *Semi di tè* (Tea Seeds) by Lala Hu

Translated by Alice Fischetti and Celine Tan



Fig. 1. Front cover of *Semi di tè* (2020).  
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The first cases in Bologna, the city where Ningyuan lived, appeared a week following reports from Lombardy and Veneto. Ningyuan had closely surveyed the epidemic since the lockdown in Wuhan. He kept a close eye on media sources, regularly consulting blogs and accounts of Chinese friends. News of increased infection rates and a rising death toll in the outbreak's epicenter had deeply shaken him. He felt helpless before the images and videos that ceaselessly appeared on his phone, wondering what he could do to support the local population.

In January, he'd considered raising funds to donate roughly a thousand hazmat suits to one of Wuhan's main hospitals treating COVID-19, but the idea proved complicated in practice. Bureaucratic procedures were lengthy, and the Italian government had halted flights to and from China to counter the risk of contagion. Ningyuan and other volunteers chose to instead donate the suits to a healthcare service in the Veneto region. His efforts were then redirected to an awareness project, an aesthetic and social initiative he later proposed to artists in the art collective to which he belonged.

Ningyuan was originally from the southern Chinese province of Fujian. He arrived in Italy in 2012—he, too, as a *liuxuesheng*<sup>1</sup>—to attend a two-year painting specialization program at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, a decision prompted by the nation’s rich cultural and artistic heritage. His years in Perugia were remarkably formative, yet in nearing the end, Ningyuan longed to express his artistry through alternate forms. In 2014 he moved to Bologna to enroll in a two-year sculpture program at the Academy of Fine Arts; despite delaying his completion of the program, he has not left the city since.

It was the vitality, the life, of the Emilian capital that conquered him. Ningyuan launched cultural exchanges between the city’s many migrant communities, social collectives, and a wide range of scholars from different fields. In creating installations and performances with local ties, his artistic production took a site-specific turn, rooting him evermore deeply to the Italian context. In 2017, he founded an art collective for university researchers and scholars meant to examine Italian society and cultural exchanges between Europe and East Asia: exhibitions, theatre workshops, and film forums recounting social change and conflicts as they unfolded—all intended to move debates amongst participants towards the active production of new imaginaries.

In 2019, the collective chose Prato for an on-site investigation. Ningyuan believed the city reflected changes taking place on a global scale; the arrival of the first Chinese migrants in the nineties had coincided with the emergence of fast-fashion global giants, and as a consequence, the slow demise of local tailors. In their place, small, Chinese-owned ready-to-wear factories had proliferated. They were, for the most part, family businesses that grew rapidly, so much so that they encroached on the textile district of Prato—in part due to lower costs of labor. The working conditions of the Chinese factory workers, however, were tough and with few legal safeguards. This came to a head in 2013, when a textile factory warehouse where Chinese workers lived and worked caught fire, resulting in the deaths of seven people. The city of Prato could no longer feign the nonexistence of its invisible workers.

This urban transformation, beyond addressing the industrial district, also concerned the city’s demographics. In 2020, residents of Chinese descent comprised around ten percent of the 195,000 inhabitants of Prato, a historically tense coexistence that perhaps reached its turning point in the 2019 local elections. That year, for the first time, two people of Chinese descent were elected district council members. This was a historic event, one that signaled the rise of representation for Chinese residents, as well as more effective means for mediating the diverse voices of the city of Prato.

It was for these reasons that Ningyuan chose the Tuscan city for a project to be carried out by Chinese and Italian artists and researchers. Prato was an ideal site for analyzing ongoing migratory movements and existing immigration policies. At the same time, the city would also stimulate new forms of cultural integration, as well as a reassessment of the existing textile industry. The project was to function as an interdisciplinary laboratory, a sort of collaborative container for artists and scholars. This too, like other projects, was interrupted by COVID-19.

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<sup>1</sup> The term for “foreign exchange student” in Chinese.

How might a collective creative space emerge in the absence of physical presence? How to account for mutual proximity when soliciting such reflections from afar? In an attempt to reach affected populations in Wuhan, Ningyuan thought to create a digital platform that would fuse the dissemination of informative content with practices of social critique. He named it “Decameron.” The period of isolation in Wuhan, however, exceeded the ten days of Boccaccio’s work, instead becoming that of a quarantine.<sup>2</sup> The project consequently took on the name “4xDecameron:” the Decameron, fourfold. Just as news began to spread of outbreaks in Codogno and Vo’, related accounts surfaced on Chinese and Italian social media platforms, where a group of volunteers supporting the collective selected and developed content to publish in both languages. The group was composed of *liuxuesheng*, second generation Chinese born in Italy, young Italians, and also Chinese residents in China, for the most part in their twenties and thirties, who all drew from film, poetry, and art in its broadest sense.

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<sup>2</sup> The Italian term “quarantena” indicates a period of forty days.