



CITY  
MAKING  
& GLOBAL  
LABOR  
REGIMES

*Chinese Immigrants and  
Italy's Fast Fashion Industry*

Antonella Ceccagno



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*To Birbi, Nea, and Lea*  
*(in order of appearance)*  
*and*  
*to the memory of my friend Renato*

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# Introduction

## 1.1 PROLOGUE

*And there is nothing – absolutely nothing – which the people of Prato cannot turn into a profit, beginning with the rags that arrive at Prato from every part of the world. They come from Asia, Africa, both the Americas, Australia: and the filthier, viler, sleazier and more flea-ridden these rags are, the more precious they seem in the eyes of a people that has learned how to enrich itself out of the refuse of the whole earth. [...]*

*The history of Italy ends up in Prato and in rags [...] and not just Italy's [...] but flags of all nations, uniforms of generals and privates of every army, and priests' cassocks, prelates' breeches, cardinals' purple robes, judges' gowns, policemen's and gaolers' tunics, bridal veils, yellowing lace and babies' nappies. [...] It's Prato where everything ends up: the world's glory, honor, piety, pride and vanity. (Malaparte 1964: 66)*

## 1.2 ISSUES: PRATO AND ITS MIGRANTS IN A CHANGING WORLD

With its 191,000 inhabitants, Prato is a mid-sized city in Tuscany, Italy (Statistica Prato 2015a). Prato has become famous for two reasons. First, it is a well-known success story in the literature on industrial districts worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Prato is where the main features of the typical Italian industrial districts (IDs) reach their highest intensity, so much so that it has been described as an 'exemplary case' (Becattini 2001).

Second, Prato has become one of the areas in Europe with the highest Chinese population density, and the place where the Chinese migrants have been able to develop the largest low-end fast fashion center in Europe almost from scratch (Ceccagno 2003a).

Until the late 1980s, Prato was essentially a one-industry town whose economic lifestyle and economic well-being had been dominated since the Middle Ages by wood processing and textile manufacture (Fantappiè 1981: 238). As the above excerpt from the 1964 book *Those Cursed Tuscans* by the famous Italian writer Curzio Malaparte shows, Prato's wealth has been built on rags. Since the early nineteenth century, in Prato, rags were collected and compressed to allow fabrics of every type to be spun at competitive prices. Steady demand for this product secured Prato's reputation as an ingeniously industrial urban center (Pratoartestoria 2014).

In the 1950s, as Tuscan sharecroppers from the rural countryside and later Southern Italians migrated to the city, Prato witnessed intense growth and experienced a textile manufacturing boom that lasted until the 1980s (Mannucci 1982; Lorenzoni 1981). The city's landscape became 'dotted with dozens and dozens of companies [...], all of them growing steadily and all of them intertwined in a system of production' that was 'insanely fragmented but incredibly efficient' (Nesi 2012: 20) (Fig. 1.1).

Everything has changed in Prato with new processes impacting the global fashion industry, especially since the 1980s.

This study investigates and critically analyzes the changes that the city of Prato and the Prato industrial district have undergone in the last decades as a result of global dynamics.

In the mid-1980s, the specter of deindustrialization and socioeconomic decline loomed menacingly on the horizon. The textile industry, which for over 30 years had prospered on the production of carded wool textiles, faced a drastic drop in demand for these products.

During this period, spinning and weaving firms faced massive closures. The local textile industry was able to make a partial comeback in the 1990s by scaling down the production system, including the number of firms and the workforce, and moving away from regenerated wool of low to medium quality, to producing wool and other fibers of medium to high quality (Dei Ottati 2014). Another crucial strategy consisted of outsourcing less profitable phases of production, mainly to Eastern Europe (Dei Ottati 1996, 2009), following a pathway adopted by many firms in other Italian districts. Unlike some other Italian districts, however, Prato has not delocalized manufacturing on a large scale.



Fig. 1.1 Map of Prato, Italy

A further strategy of the textile firms in Prato consisted of attracting migrants as workers, mainly originating from Albania, Morocco and, later, Pakistan. Concurrently, the clothing manufacturing firms in Prato were attracting Chinese migrants as contractors.



However, these measures proved insufficient to guarantee the local textile industry's recovery and comeback: in the mid-2000s, the district experienced its worst economic crisis, when employment and exports declined dramatically. From 2001 to 2012, textile exports were halved, a reduction that indicates the 'collapse of the entire economy of the area' (IRPET 2013: 13). The number of textile firms has declined from 5800 to around 3000, the number of workers has been cut by half, and a €1.6 billion turnover has been lost (Pieraccini 2012).

While the downward spiral started well before the 2008 crisis, a double-dip recession began in 2008 and was characterized by a sharp reduction in exports from 2008 to 2009, and a second recession in 2012–2013 that originated from a fall in domestic demand. In the early 2010s, the performances of the Prato district were the worst in Italy, with a 20 percent reduction of the per capita added value from 2008 to 2013 (IRPET 2013: 15).

Thus, due to increased global competition in textile products, Prato has moved from the position of a wealthy industrial center manufacturing high quality textiles that contributed to the international success of Italian design to a disempowered city whose textile industry is experiencing its worst economic crisis to date (Santini et al. 2011).

In the last years, the social atmosphere in Prato has become tense. Today the city is exhausted and characterized by a state of crisis that it is unable to address.

Chinese migrants started arriving in Prato in the late 1980s and their number increased dramatically over time, from 500 registered individuals in 1990 to around 16,000 in 2014 (Statistica Prato 2015b). Twice that many Chinese people are estimated to be living in the city below the radar, even though these numbers should be handled with care.<sup>2</sup> This makes it home to one of Europe's largest Chinese populations.

Prato is one of the smallest provinces in the country and has the highest ratio of Chinese immigrants to locals (ISTAT 2012).<sup>3</sup> It also has the highest ratio of foreign businesses in the country (CCIAA Prato 2014). More precisely, Prato has the highest number of Chinese individual firms among all the Italian provinces: in 2010 they made up 11.5 percent of the total (Villosio 2011: 121), 85 percent of which are apparel manufacturers (CCIAA Prato 2014). This percentage makes Prato the primary manufacturing center for Chinese-run apparel firms in Italy.

This study addresses the question of processes of urban restructuring and rescaling. It tackles the question of Chinese migrants' contribution to reshaping the district/city of Prato. It assesses Chinese migrants' role as

agents of global and local processes that reposition Prato within the global hierarchies of economic and political power (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011a). Moreover, it highlights the constant intertwining of migrants' efforts to forge a space of their own with changing priorities and historical legacies of the locality. It thus addresses the question of how and to what extent migrants contribute to change the future of the city.

In Prato, Chinese migrants have been able to enter and succeed in the apparel industry, that is, not in the district's core business, which is the textile industry (Ceccagno 2003b; Toccafondi 2005).<sup>4</sup> The local textile and clothing industries are only partially integrated as the textile industry mainly produces high-to-medium quality fabrics and the clothing industry mainly serves the low-end fast fashion market. Moreover, starting in the 1990s, with a move unparalleled in the rest of the country, Chinese migrants in Prato have been able to jump into the position of final-good firms.

Prato is therefore an ideal place to explore migrants' role in the global repositioning processes of previously thriving industrial districts that are hit hard by global competition.

Within the framework of the driving forces that have contributed to attract migrants from China to Italy and Prato, and to enhance their propensity toward entrepreneurship, my study assesses the reasons behind Chinese entrepreneurs' spectacular success as clothing manufacturers in the quintessential Italian district and their growing role in the Italian fashion industry in general.

Not only the modes of economic and social emplacement of the Chinese migrants, but also the effects of the ongoing economic crisis and the resulting turbulent socioeconomic situation need to be addressed to capture the complexity of the dynamics unfolding in Prato. Stiff competition between Italy and China has occurred in the productive sectors in which Italy was once a world leader. Moreover, Chinese competitive practices are perceived in Italy as 'asymmetrical' because they involve 'comprehensive social, environmental, and currency dumping' (Fortis 2005). These perceptions and their effects on Prato as a city and an industrial district are addressed in this study since they result in the conceptual conflation of China (as a fierce competitor) and Chinese migrants in Italy (as successful entrepreneurs) into a single, dangerous challenge hanging over the Prato district. As a result, struggles are fought, pacts are shaped into policy, and Chinese entrepreneurship is criminalized.

A central aim in my research is to trace the development of choices, events, and the discursive flows in the locality over time. It is in fact by

singling out the moments of rupture and continuity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Feldman 2011a) that it is possible to unveil the dynamics conducive to the contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship and wealth in the district.

While focusing on Chinese migrants' interactions with the city of Prato, Chinese migrants are by no means the unit of analysis of this study. The research addresses the structural factors at work and their interaction with the migrants' agency as well as the local stakeholders' agency. It shows that the Chinese migrants' working regime in Prato is the result of a host of dynamics unfolding at multiple scales, including: (i) demands for labor originating from China, (ii) changing labor regimes in a globalized world, (iii) the legal regimes of Italy, (iv) the degrees to which regulations are enforced by authorities or left as a threat but not enforced, (v) changing structures of production, demand, and distribution of textile and clothing, globally and locally, and (vi) the narratives that have developed around these shifts.

To do so, the analysis brings together topics usually separated out as migration studies, labor studies, and urban studies. Drawing from conceptualizations developed in these different realms, my work undertakes to address overlapping dynamics unfolding at multiple scales. While manifesting themselves in the local setting, these dynamics are not confined to and thus cannot be analyzed by only referring to the local or even the national.

### 1.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

A body of literature has informed and influenced my mode of analysis. My framing of the dynamics between Chinese migrants and the city of Prato is guided by those conceptualizations that move beyond the dichotomies between the global and the local, the national and the urban, natives and migrants, and mobility and stasis. I also distance myself from those conceptual approaches that only focus on cultural features of migrants as an explanation for their modes of incorporation.

Also, I explicitly distance myself from the approach that has prevailed in Italy in the aftermath of the fire in Prato that killed seven Chinese migrants in December 2013, according to which the responsibility for the tragedy should be blamed on the 'Chinese productive regime'. I shed light on the multiple links connecting Chinese workshops with local final firms, and a host of other local and non-local actors. Even more crucially, I show that the modes of production adopted in the Chinese contracting businesses are

indissolubly intertwined with the imperatives of the globally restructured fashion industry. Essentially, the widespread adoption of the fast fashion production strategy has urged a drastic reconfiguration of the spaces of production, and the life of workers in the network of Chinese contracting businesses. Thus, the emerging new working regime in the Prato clothing industry is intimately linked to the global restructuring of production.

Building on critical labor studies, I show that labor in Chinese workshops is reinvented and reconfigured in ways that overcome previous labor arrangements to increase productivity and profit.

### 1.3.1 *Heterogeneity of the Global*

It is by now common wisdom that we live in a noticeably more interrelated world than we did some decades ago. Multilayered linkages influence our life both in terms of meanings and in terms of materiality. These connections transcend both sociopolitical and disciplinary territories.

The distinctive feature of the so-called spatial turn in social sciences and humanities has been the claim that ‘space matters’ and that locality, territory, and scale are crucial concerns that provide a privileged angle for understanding capital in the era of globalization (Massey 1984, among many others).

David Harvey (1989) has put forth the ‘time-space compression’ concept which points to the fact that goods, capital, information, and people can move across the Earth’s surface more quickly than ever before and, in the process, geographically distant places are ever more linked together. The ways in which this interconnectivity is coming about is an interesting subject of research given that, as highlighted by many scholars, capitalism and the geography of the global economy is spatially uneven.

Of central importance is the conceptualization on the emergence of flexible processes of capital accumulation less dependent on national economic structures (Harvey 1989). Harvey (1982) argues that capital entering or exiting different localities creates or destroys successive waves of spatial fixes. This concept has been taken up by scholars that have highlighted the global processes of uneven development of different regions, conditioned by their positionality in relation to these processes (for an overview of the debate on the dialectics of global-local relations in production networks’ embedment processes, see Rainnie et al. 2011, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

Heterogeneity and geographically uneven development of capitalism are based on the contradiction between two opposing tendencies within capital itself. As argued by Smith (1984), on the one hand accumulation does occur in particular places with their histories, geographies, people, and social formations. On the other hand, capital must remain potentially mobile, as it needs to ‘dis-embed’ itself from one place if opportunities arise in another place. As a result, some places see deindustrialization while others enjoy inward capital investment. In this way, non-local dynamics combine with existing local differences to produce unique outcomes. Localities, however, are not only different from one another: they may be unevenly and casually linked with each other, as what happens in one place may impact what happens in those to which it is connected by lines of stakeholders’ control, flow of capital investment, or streams of migration (Rainnie et al. 2011). Thus, according to Castree and his colleagues (2004), place relations construct unevenness in their wake and operate through the pattern of uneven development already laid down.

This requires that analytical attention be focused on layered histories and uneven geographies of capital investment and disinvestment in specific places (MacKinnon 2012: 234).

Brenner (1999) argues that processes of de- and re-territorialization that is, the reconfiguration and rescaling of forms of territorial organization such as cities and states, constitute an intrinsic moment of the current round of globalization (see Brenner and Theodore 2002).

These are crucial issues for grasping the dialectics of global/local relations as they can be observed in Prato. My study, in fact, shows that what happens in the city and industrial district is relationally connected with other places, industries, and dynamics. Furthermore, I show that Chinese migrants’ entrepreneurship in the Prato clothing industry is connected with the process of capital disinvestment and devaluation in the Prato textile industry as dilapidated factory buildings and workshops abandoned by the textile entrepreneurs have been rented to the newly arrived Chinese contractors entering the clothing industry. In line with Brenner (1999), it can be argued that Prato is a case where capital’s restless transformative dynamics have rendered its own historical local precondition in the textile industry far less crucial, while inducing a wave of restructuring with the rise of the clothing industry; thus, reactivating the production of value.

### 1.3.2 *The Methodological Approach to the Global-Local Nexus*

The issue of the relationship between the global and the local has been at the center of the debate in many and different disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and urban geography; and has also emerged in debates on social science fieldwork methodology.

Particularly important for the purposes of my study is to capture the interplay of global and local forces as it becomes visible in the locality. This is why I value those scholarly approaches suggesting that a central task of ethnography should be to study the particular without being engulfed and constrained by it (see Burawoy 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Feldman 2011a, b; Sider 2005).

Burawoy (2000) emphasizes that ‘social processes at the site of the research should be located in a relation of mutual determination with an external field of social forces’. Further, he stresses that what we understand as global emanates from the very agencies, institutions, and organizations ‘whose processes can be observed first-hand’ in the locality under study (Burawoy 2001: 150).

This approach is also adopted by Miraftab (2014), who suggests that scholars should frame the global and the local relationally. She argues that we should eschew an approach that sees localities as mere sites in the global restructuring of capital and should instead recognize the interconnections and multi-directionality of the global-local relationship.

Feldman (2011a) proposes a ‘nonlocal ethnography’ so that the primary object of study can be shifted from location-specific practices to policies, discourses, and practices that exist beyond the locality and shape it. Comaroff and Comaroff (2003) point out the risk of misrecognizing the global forces and their interaction with local dynamics when ethnographic work privileges the local.

Gerald Sider suggests that to develop a broader perspective, historic anthropology should ‘develop new conceptual tools for describing and analyzing the characteristic way in which localized systems of inequality take shape simultaneously separated from, in alliance with, and in opposition to larger systems of domination and exploitation’ (Sider 2005: 173).

Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011a) suggest focusing analytical attention on dynamics taking place at multiple scales so that the relationship between the trajectories of the cities and their positioning within broader networks of power can be unveiled.

These authors, as well as others such as Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003), Amelina and Faist (2012), point out that until recently scholars have been unable to theorize the mutuality of the global and the local, and have remained entangled in the national scale. They term this approach as ‘methodological nationalism’ or a research orientation that deals with social processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation states.

In my analysis of Prato, I strive to adopt the approach advocated by these authors. My study takes into account forces and dynamics taking place at multiple scales—global national, and urban—and I discuss how they are intertwined. Thus, a relatively small place like Prato opens windows onto larger processes of political transformation. A great value of local research lies in the fact that small-scale transformative processes may more easily illuminate the large-scale ones (Silverman and Gulliver 2005).

### *1.3.3 The Nation State’s Role in Dynamics Involving the Global and the Local*

This work also engages with the issue of the position of the nation state in the dynamics involving the global and the local. It addresses the increasingly complex relations linking, and to a certain extent opposing, capital and the state on the one hand, and their relation with and impact on the locality on the other.

Contemporary capital, characterized by regimes of flexible accumulation and new forms of flexible labor, negotiates the expansion of its frontiers in ways that include but also transcend nation states. For instance, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 22) argue that ‘in a world where market rights are increasingly independent of the territorial configuration of power, the processes constituting labor markets are themselves increasingly delinked from the nation state’. Likewise, Sassen (1999: 193) points out that economic globalization implies ‘the creation of new legal regimes and legal practices [...] that have the effect of replacing public regulation and law with private mechanisms and even bypass national legal systems’.

Labor mobility is one of the principal means by which capital exercises control over labor. Control of labor mobility is one key stake where the expanding frontiers of capital intertwine with national political and legal sovereignty.

The nation state remains the political point of reference from the point of view of power configurations and their articulations with capital-labor relations. Moreover, the national frame, to a certain extent, is pivotal in the

encounter between migrant labor and capital, as it imposes territorial and legal borders—that can, however, be uneven within the national territory. By policing their borders, nation states engage in a process of politically and legally shaping and reshaping their labor markets (see Harald Bauder 2006 cited in Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 101). However, an analysis of the forces that shape migrants' emplacement cannot be contained within state institutions and actors (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013: 499).

My research strives to show the concrete ways in which dynamics shaped by capital and the state unfold in Prato and impact on the city and the location of Chinese migrants in these processes. I clarify the ways in which the Italian state matters in reshaping the labor markets through its legal regimes that regulate migration flows, industrial production, and working and housing conditions. State power can also be observed in the high degree of arbitrariness with which regulations are enforced by authorities or left as a threat but not enforced.

Building on the conceptual approaches described above, in this study I address industrial and migration policies at the national and local scale within the larger framework of global forces active in forging new ways of capital accumulation, and their outcomes in terms of the creation of a new labor regime. I point to the crucial role of borders that are increasingly found not only at the edge of the national territory but also in the middle of political and entrepreneurial spaces. In Prato, for instance, borders have been created that institutionalize a divide between native entrepreneurs, whose business enterprise is legitimate, and migrant entrepreneurship that is criminalized.

Thus, I intend to stress the relational constitution of the city and industrial district of Prato in the production of global processes (Burawoy 2001; Miraftab 2012).

In sum, this study addresses the issue of the dynamic interactions between sovereignty (be it national or local) and more flexible forms of global labor regimes. The chapters of this study shed light on the tensions, struggles, pacts, and policies as observed in Prato in the decades from the late 1980s to the early 2010s as the result of an interpenetration of dynamics unfolding at multiple scales.

Finally, I situate the structural changes mentioned above within migrants' subjective effort to forge a place of their own in the Italian fashion areas and within different forms of dispossession experienced by many of the actors in this study, including those of migrant background and those that consider themselves natives.



### 1.3.4 *Locating Cities and Migrants*

As far as cities are concerned, urban geographers have proposed a novel approach that focuses on the way in which structural transformations of the capitalist economic system engender different spatially determined social relations. They have addressed the systemic breakdown of established forms of urban life and the subsequent proliferation of social, political, and discursive struggles to create a transformed neoliberal urban order (for example, Brenner and Theodore 2002). Cities have been depicted both as incubators of neoliberalism's political and ideological strategies and as places of resistance to it (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 375–376).

The issue of the positioning of different localities within global processes of uneven development is crucial for understanding Prato and its positioning as the result of structural changes in the global fashion industry.

Historically, however, urban geographers addressing the global aspects of urban restructuring have left in the dark the role of migrants in the remaking of cities. Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011b) address this shortcoming and undertake to reconceptualize the object of migration studies in reflexive terms.

Research has highlighted that local histories and policies, together with the relative positioning of cities within hierarchies of uneven power, structure the opportunities and pathways for business and employment for migrants and non-migrants in specific places (Rath et al. 2011; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013). This new approach implies that

*none of the spaces of migration urban, regional, national, transnational can be viewed as pre-existing or static frames for social life, as mere arenas within which social relations are positioned or enclosed. Instead, all such spaces are seen as being produced and coproduced through the very social relations under investigation.* (Brenner 2011: 37)

Following these approaches, I stress the importance of a multi-scalar analysis of the processes that weave together to create the peculiar history of Prato, a city at the same time battered by global shifts and where a new structure of opportunities has emerged.

Yet, Prato is by now an impoverished city.

Glick Schiller and Çağlar's (2009, 2011c) conceptualization of migrants as scale-makers is useful for understanding the trajectory of Prato.

The authors posit that some cities are upscaled and others are downscaled in the competitive processes of repositioning that are global in their reach. They suggest that studies of migrant pathways of incorporation in cities that find themselves disempowered and relatively impoverished within global restructuring could contribute to a new and different analysis of the relationship between migrants and cities.

Their work provides a conceptual framework within which the crisis of the textile industry and of the entire collectivity in Prato can be better analyzed.

Prato is an exemplary case that yields new insights into the interplay of scales in the complex dynamics between migrants and locality. In this study, I show that Chinese migrants actively contribute to the competitive repositioning of Prato, influencing the work market, the real estate market, and the district economy in general.

This notwithstanding, the case of Prato is far from being a straightforward case of migrants contributing to the comeback of a declining city. Any assessment of the role of migrants in the process of repositioning of the Prato district case appears far more controversial and therefore nuanced than in other localities. In Prato, in fact, migrant entrepreneurship has been under attack for long.

### *1.3.5 Diversity of Labor Within a Diverse Capitalism*

My study gives centrality to labor, a much neglected but crucial dimension of the fashion industry. It shows how the success of the Italian fashion industry is intimately connected with the lives and working regime of Chinese migrants in Italy.

Critical studies tackle issues pertaining to labor that are of crucial importance for this study: the diversity of labor, labor mobility, and the exploitation of the so-called ‘noneconomic factors’ (Tsing 2009) as a means to extract value.

Anna Tsing (2009: 149) contends that the global rush to outsource is not only the result of new communication technologies and new financial arrangements that make it easy to move money around, but also stems from the enhanced mobility of labor. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: x) argue that within the world system of global capitalism, the composition of ‘contemporary living labor [...] is more and more crisscrossed, divided, and multiplied by practices of mobility’.

The issue of mobility as produced, channeled, and shaped by ‘regimes of mobility’ is discussed by Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013). These authors argue for a ‘regimes of mobility’ approach where the relationships of unequal power are constantly highlighted in contests where different forms of mobility and related stasis are constructed and negotiated.

Thus, building on the studies that highlight labor diversity and labor mobility as one crucial aspect of the more recent forms of accumulation, and on the ‘regimes of mobility’ approach, in the chapters of this book I highlight the regime that shapes the socioeconomic mobility of Chinese migrants in Italy, and show that they take place through and are propelled by, dialectic dynamics between individuals’ aspirations and the capital accumulation push to create ever more flexible productive conditions within emplaced economic networks (Harvey 2006).

Moreover, critical labor studies highlight the diversity of labor. As much as ‘the genius’ of capitalism spread is anchored in its ability to incorporate contingencies without forming a single, homogeneous structure (Tsing 2009: 152), labor with its contingent articulations, exhibits a globally interconnected intrinsic diversity. This also emerges from Rainnie and his colleagues’ (2013: 192) analysis of labor in small firms within the commodity chain. The authors pinpoint that the specific articulations between the local and the global contribute to shape the extent and character of social agency in each place in which the nodes of any commodity chain are located. Thus, they hold, any investigation of labor under capitalism should start from an analysis of the organization and control of the labor processes in concrete settings. The reason why is that the dynamics vary tremendously from setting to setting, depending on how firms and workers are spatially embedded within them and how they respond to pressures beyond the immediate locality.

Thus, a growing number of scholars speak out in a plea for moving away from homogeneity and determinism in approaching the analysis of the labor process, particularly in small firms. Their approach fits nicely into the peculiar modes of Chinese workforce exploitation in the Italian fashion districts on the one hand, and the way in which the clothing industry in Prato has developed in ways that are significantly different from those prevailing in other fashion areas in Italy, on the other.

Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 23) state that the heterogenization of the global space forces territories and actors into unexpected connections that facilitate processes of production and exploitation. They capture the

diversity of labor and its unfixedness in their ‘multiplication of labor’ theory. They argue that labor is multiplied in terms of intensification, diversification, and heterogenization. Intensification consists in the tendency of labor to colonize the entire life of workers in ways that are more pronounced than before. Profitability is obtained through increased productivity, more flexible hours, and the payment of lower wages. Moreover, the concept of labor intensification also captures the intertwining of productive and reproductive labor. I have shown elsewhere that compression of personal and family life has been a prominent feature of the first generation Chinese migrants’ economic inclusion in Italy (Ceccagno 2007).

Diversification consists of the development of new kinds of labor and different kinds of production that follow a constantly expanding system of needs. Additionally, labor positions are multiplied both in terms of tasks and skills and in terms of legal conditions and statuses. Furthermore, labor is heterogenized. This concept refers to the fragmentation of legal and social regimes that organize labor. Such a heterogenization of labor is mirrored and fostered by the flexibilization of labor laws.

Interestingly the concept of heterogeneity of labor questions the capacity of national borders to circumscribe homogeneous economic spaces. Mezzadra and Neilson (2008: 3) argue that this implies both an ‘*explosion* of established nation state geographies’ and ‘an *implosion* that forces seemingly discrete territories and actors into unexpected connections that facilitate processes of production and labor exploitation’. Corollary to this is the presence of particular labor regimes across different global and local spaces. As a result, the division of labor should ‘be considered within a multiplicity of overlapping sites that are themselves internally heterogeneous’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2008: 4).

Thus, it becomes clear that when focusing on labor issues the local-global nexus and the way this is entangled with the power of nation states need to be addressed.

The critical approaches to labor described above provide valuable insights for grappling with the complexity of the presence of Chinese migrants in Prato and other Italian industrial districts and connecting it with ongoing general processes of creation of new forms of labor and new types of work in a global labor market. These conceptualizations help place my research in the framework of the contemporary shifts in the spatiality of capital, and highlight the commonalities of worker insertion in the global labor market. The dynamics unfolding in Italian industrial clusters, in fact, while unique, can be analyzed as one of the many and creative

ways in which newer modes of production are devised to extract value from labor. In the Italian districts, as in other localities, value is extracted by exploiting the gaps between different labor regimes and the holes and contradictions within existing national or local labor regimes.

### 1.3.6 *A Chinese Labor Model?*

Studies conceptualizing migrant entrepreneurship as ethnic entrepreneurship are biased toward social and cultural features. They tend to focus on inter-group cultural and social capital as crucial tools making it possible for some national groups to reach the position of entrepreneurs more frequently or more quickly than other national groups.

Explanations for the degree of success often stress the ability of individual entrepreneurs to tap into in-group resources in terms of human, cultural, and financial capital. Thus, the emphasis is only on migrant agency. The determining role of global dynamics, regimes of mobility, and labor regimes are often relegated to secondary importance. Structural opportunities and constraints are downplayed and, as a result, migrant entrepreneurs are often described as living and working in an institutional, economic, and social vacuum.

The limits of this approach are highlighted by some scholars.

Kloosterman et al. (1999) explicitly propose the ‘mixed embeddedness’ model, or an approach that combines agency and structure. These authors clarify that political and economic institutions are crucial in understanding the obstacles and opportunities available for entrepreneurs to start and operate their businesses. While acknowledging the importance of immigrants’ social networks, this approach stresses the embeddedness of the migrant agency in wider economic, political, and institutional structures.

Pecoud (2000) questions the approach that reifies cultural and ethnic differences. Questioning Light and Gold’s (2000) account of ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’, he argues that in this approach, ‘only non-whites are “ethnic” and rely on “ethnic” resources. White workers who, to a large extent, have similar practices, are not “ethnic” simply because they belong to the majority’ (Pecoud 2000: 456).

Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) point out that many transnational studies tend to focus on ethnic groups as the central unit of analysis, thus reproducing the assumption of a homogeneous shared culture within groups. Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009, 2013) make a plea for a scholarship that does not rely on an ethnic lens to study migrant practices, socialities,

and identities. They argue that research should move beyond the ethnic lens: scholars should reject methodologies and analyses that make unquestioning use of the ethnic group as the primary or exclusive unit of study.

In this research, I take on the challenge of analyzing the mode of emplacement of the Chinese migrants in Prato without analyzing the migrants as an ethnic community. Instead, I shed light on the multiple, overlapping social, institutional, and economic networks in which Chinese migrants participate. I go as far as to explore and discuss the very practice of employing co-nationals only and the resulting productive regime as shaped by the interests of multiple actors.

By refusing to cast migrants from another country as ethnics, I am able to investigate when, why and how a specific productive regime that taps into some specific factors has become salient for the Chinese migrants active in Italy and for the productive organization of Italian fast fashion.

By bypassing the ‘ethnic’ approach it becomes possible, I argue, to unveil the mechanisms of a working regime where only co-nationals are employed and show that they are linked to the global capital transformations and the ability of the supply chains to find ever newer ways of generating profit.

In this study, I will therefore focus on the Chinese migrants’ use of ‘ethnicity’ in the workplace as both an opportunity and a constraint at the same time. Moreover, I will also shed light on the ways in which all sorts of people, not only people of migrant background, deploy frames of action that reinforce the ethnicization of Chinese migrants.

Practices of ethnicization and discourses that reinforce an ethnicized approach to the contribution of Chinese migrants to the Italian fashion industry will be situated within the dynamics that have been unfolding globally, nationally and locally since the mid-1980s.

#### 1.4 CRITIQUE OF THE EMPIRICIST APPROACH TO FIELDWORK

Some authors problematize the cultural turn in the social sciences. They argue against the cultural approach to knowledge that had gained supremacy in the early 1980s and plead for a change in the methodological approaches to research and modes of producing knowledge in social sciences (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Abu-Lughod 1991, among others).

Field is under scrutiny, as it is the ‘privileging of statics over dynamics, of supposed local expressive universes over translocal social connections’ (Kalb and Tak 2005) and the turning away from the social and political.<sup>6</sup>

Fieldwork is explored in new ways. Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Comaroff and Comaroff (2003), Feldman (2011b), Burawoy (1998), and Kalb and Tak (2005) contest the idea of immersion into one place as the basic characteristic of ethnography. They criticize traditional ethnography’s ‘empiricist anxiety’ (Feldman 2011a: 376) and the centrality of participant observation.

These authors point out that often ethnographers reduce ‘the object of study to the object of observation’ (Trouillot 2001: cited in Feldman 2011a: 377). Jean and John Comaroff (2003: 153) speak out against the ‘unrelentingly positivist’ spirit of most anthropologists and criticize the *a priori* privilege enjoyed in anthropology by ‘any knowledge derived at first hand by proximity to natives’.

Thus, they propose a reformulation of the fieldwork tradition. They suggest decentering and de-fetishing the concept of ‘the field’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), and demoting it to just one element in a multistranded methodology for the construction of a situated knowledge. This way, ethnography becomes a strategy for diversifying and making more complex ‘our understanding of various places, people, and predicaments through an attentiveness to the different forms of knowledge available from different social and political locations’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 37). Thus, anthropological knowledge can coexist with other forms of knowledge and the new task becomes to forge links between different knowledges. Feldman (2011a) argues that as long as it makes use of the two pillars of displacement and contingency, ‘nonlocal ethnography’ could prioritize any method for attaining knowledge that suits the particular research design.

These authors contend that, while fieldwork continues to be considered a major part of anthropological methodologies, data should be collected eclectically from a number of disparate sources including documents, interviews, statistics, participant listening (Feldman 2011b), media coverage, popular novels (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003), observing the activities of governing elites and analyzing public discourses (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) that help to elicit information and viewpoints and to study discourses and practices.

This multistranded methodology is the approach that I have adopted for my research on the dynamics unfolding in Prato. In addition to participant observation and interviews, my fieldwork includes the use of different sources such as interviews, analysis of policies and public meetings, statistics, media reports, soap operas, movies, and novels, among others.

One central source of materials has been my unique experience as a participant observer in Prato for 12 years. I will discuss this below.

## 1.5 A UNIQUE FIELD

My fieldwork in Prato can be divided into two distinct experiences; the first one covers the years from July 1994 to January 2007, and the second, five years later, stretches from June to September 2012; from December 2012 to March 2013, with some further meetings, interviews, and feedback in the period September–December 2014.

### 1.5.1 *The Years 1994–2007*

In 1994, I was one of four persons who envisioned, founded, and operated the Center for Immigration Research and Services in Prato (Center), connected with the local government's Social Policy Office. The Center's aims were (1) to provide services to migrants both in direct and indirect forms, for instance by developing projects in schools, vocational courses, and the like; (2) to conduct research on the issue of migrants' socioeconomic inclusion in the city, and (3) to offer consultancy to local government on issues involving the migrants, the city, and on policies to be adopted. Moreover, some of the persons working at the Center conducted or participated in research projects funded by European, national, and local institutions.

I acted in the capacity of research director as well as the director of services.

In this capacity, meetings and consultations were routinely organized with national and local government leaders and officials, union leaders, employers' associations, researchers, and journalists. I have been in regular contact also with police headquarters. Interactions with these persons and institutions have helped me to gain first-hand insights into the ways in which they frame the issues that are at the center of this research work.

For more than 12 years, I supervised and participated (two days per week on a regular basis) in the provision of services to migrants. I have



discussed the implications of many cases with social workers and lawyers providing consultancy to migrants at the Center. In addition to this, for one and a half years, in 1997 and 1998, I worked one afternoon a week together with a lawyer at the Center with the double role of acting as a Chinese-Italian interpreter helping to tackle legal and labor problems which had social implications.

The people working at the Center were natives and first generation migrants from Albania, China, Morocco, and Pakistan. My migrant colleagues often provided information on events and offered their personal accounts of the ongoing dynamics and narratives developed among the migrants and institutions with which they were in contact.

The materials collected during the years at the Center consist of (1) minutes of meetings with representatives of institutions and associations; (2) minutes of cases analyzed with social workers and lawyers, and (3) statistical data (Ceccagno 1997a). I have tapped into these partly unused materials to shed light on the central questions of my study and to put the dynamics taking place in Prato into a historical perspective.

In the same years, I had an uncountable number of unstructured conversations with migrants. These could be conversations with people I met while walking down the street, or during my participation in social events in which I had been invited to take part, or simply while eating at a restaurant. Prato is a small place and people who had first met me at the Center often offered feedback on their life when we next met.

In addition, I have conducted between 200 and 250 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese entrepreneurs and workers in the framework of research projects funded by different institutions.

All these sources disclosed a range of relationships that develop between migrant employers and workers, husbands and wives, parents and children, and between natives and migrants, and migrants and local institutions.

I consider this working experience at the Center to be my own participant observation. I am aware that this unique experience is different from participant observations conducted in different places and positions; for instance, by working in a migrant-run workshop. Working together with (migrant) workers as the object of one's study is a form of participant observation often reported by social science researchers (for example, Burawoy 1998; Pun 2005). While participant observation in a workshop could bring first-hand knowledge on the dynamics of the workplace, I am convinced that my 12 years of work at the Center provided an interesting point of observation, that is, it was the ideal place for understanding how migrants and the city mutually constitute the local.

### 1.5.2 *More Recent Fieldwork*

The aim of my more recent fieldwork was to understand and explain variations and, in particular, to comprehend differences over time. I was interested in analyzing the effects of the contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship and the ‘hidden crisis’ experienced by the Chinese-run fast fashion center at the end of the 2000s that resulted from the combined effects of the 2008 crisis and the inspections and fines levied on Chinese businesses (Ceccagno 2012).

The fieldwork included participation in a series of events: quasi-theatrical representations of the conflicts in the city that revolve around Chinese migrants, conferences where natives discussed the ‘Chinese issue’, and open public assemblies where first generation Chinese migrants were invited by the authorities to learn about the modes and timings for an enhancement of a new policy specifically aimed at Chinese businesses to enable them to abide by the new requirements for workplace safety. I interviewed Prato residents, including native-born and immigrants, offspring of migrants and second-generation entrepreneurs, authorities and members of non-profit groups, extras in a Chinese tele-drama, and members of a theater group.

## 1.6 CONSTRUCTING COMMONALITIES: MY POSITIONALITY AS A RESEARCHER AND A SERVICE PROVIDER

Abu-Lughod (2000) argues that a social scientist’s positionality, or position within larger political-historical complexes, is inescapable. I am aware that my own positionality affects my work, data generation, and analysis.

When working at the Prato Center, my positionality was crucial in many of the following aspects: (1) as a provider of services to migrants; (2) as a researcher and, to a certain extent, as an opinion maker—as I was often interviewed by the international, national, and local media; and (3) as a consultant to the local government. Below I will address the first two while the third will be addressed in the next section.

*Vis-à-vis* the migrants to which services were offered I was in a position of power, albeit limited. As I worked within the local government, I could give more or less attention to the cases that were brought to my attention. Additionally, I could, at least in principle, put in motion different departments within the city’s (or even national) institutions that in turn could solve the problems identified by migrants.

Usually, in my conversations at the Center, I had a threefold aim as follows: (1) to focus on problems brought to my attention so that, hopefully, they could be tackled; (2) to adapt my message to what I perceived as being a listener's interpretation of events at that moment, to their background, and their emotional state; and (3) to condense and shape the content and emotions that emerged from many interactions in a way that helped me to make sense of which problems were brought up by the majority of those coming to the Center and to convey the issues to the institutions in a way that could bridge their interpretation of events with the interpretations offered by migrants.

Those involved expected that we could solve their problems, and in many cases, especially in the first years, people also came to the Center because they were overwhelmed by feelings connected with the multiple forms of displacement they were experiencing.

Thus, on the one hand, my positioning enabled me to become aware of problems, dreams, and frustrations that are not easily captured, as well as to talk with people that are not easily reached by most researchers, such as the most dispossessed workers or pregnant women who were removed from workshops and were in search of somewhere to live.

On the other hand, interactions with people with a migrant background were rife with emotions. Emotions circulated in the conversations where migrants narrated the multilayered forms of displacement they experienced and sometimes I was overwhelmed by their intensity, a condition that I have tried to describe elsewhere (Ceccagno 1997b). Thus, it was *also* through my understanding of and unplanned participation in the personal emotions in migration narratives that I gained insight into the complexity of the process of displacement involved with migrants' experiences of leaving home and moving into a new society.

Users of the services offered by the Center varied in accordance with different historical contingencies. As a rule, employers would come to the Center and ask for help more frequently than workers, with male employers coming to the Center more frequently than women employers as male employers mostly took charge of their workers' bureaucratic procedures; however, the reverse applied in times of amnesties, that is, workers would come to the Center in large numbers and would air their anger or desolation at the many obstacles for legalization that were created by their greedy employers and dubious native accountants.

My position as someone with a quasi-institutional role facilitated rapport in some cases, while, I imagine, hindered trust in others. Overall, however,

given the reputation gained by the Center as a place where efforts were made to tackle social issues, migrants, as well as natives, exhibited a high level of trust in the Center's operators.

Some Chinese scholars claim that Chinese migrants in Italy exhibit strong distrust toward non-Chinese researchers and posit their privileged position as Chinese researchers in enabling them to 'ease their [Chinese interviewees] distrust and carefully encrypt their personal information' (Lan and Zhu 2014: 160).

My experience shows that this is not necessarily true. Nowicka and Ryan (2015) offer a more reflexive analysis of both the advantages and limits of fieldwork conducted among participants sharing the same national background as migrants. For instance, they show the salience of age and the specific experiences associated with stages in the course of life when establishing a rapport and trust with participants regardless of nationality or ethnic background. Burawoy (2003: 669) insist that

*field work is a running interaction between ethnographer and participant. It involves a self-conscious recognition of the way embodiment, location, and habitus affect the ethnographer's relations to the people studied, and thus, how those relations influence what is observed and the data that are collected.*

When I interviewed Chinese migrants in Prato, it was through a process of constructing and deconstructing commonalities that the interviewee and I were able to create temporary conversational bridges that we could walk across. The trust needed in the interview emerged mainly from my knowledge of many of the ongoing dynamics, my long-term experience, and linguistic competency. Additionally, in an urban context where the dominant narratives did not value migrant contribution to the city, often the interviewees hoped that I could report the events in a different way. Moreover, the trajectories of life in some cases created unexpected commonalities between the interviewee and myself that brought us together and helped our interactions.

## 1.7 THE COMPLACENT ETHNOGRAPHER

Burawoy (1998) stresses that as a participant in sites invested with power struggles, competing ideologies, and hierarchies the ethnographer is trapped in the networks of power. The ruling ideology presents the interest of the dominant class as the interest of all. Discordant voices

are silenced. The risk for the ethnographer is to become complacent. Thus, the challenge is to try to make explicit the effects of power that are usually not easily visible, such as domination, silencing, and normalizing. This approach to fieldwork knowledge stresses that in the process of knowledge production ethnographers make choices on what to bring attention to and what to silence. Burawoy (1998) points out that the ethnographer should be aware that they create a landscape for silenced parts in their production of knowledge and should be on the lookout for repressed voices and ready to reframe their theories to include these new voices.

As mentioned before, I was hired as a consultant and worked for 12 years for the Prato local government. Like many other researchers, for years the field was my main source of income, thus the issue of complacency as a risk for the researcher fully applied.

Less than two months after starting work at the Center, I had already met with many owners of clothing businesses who complained that the local police regularly came to their workshops and appropriated garments as an exchange for not inspecting them. I called the local police and asked for an explanation. That was the moment when I learned that I was irrevocably implicated in the world I was studying and could never be neutral.

Over time, I came to notice the paradox of some local politicians or members of local institutions proposing a narrative on the Chinese migrants as rapacious users of district resources while striking private advantageous deals with the Chinese migrants.

By working at the Center and meeting an uncounted number of Chinese migrants eager to tell their stories,<sup>7</sup> I became more and more aware of the Chinese employers' many and different forms of exploitation of undocumented workers and how vulnerable they were to exploitation. I also learned of the unlawful pact among significant numbers of Chinese employers and natives that exploited amnesties by offering high priced fake contracts, fake employment, and fake flats (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008; Ceccagno et al. 2010). The narratives of workers were often different from those of their employers.

It was against this background, where the locality and the migrants molded and shaped each other in increasingly complex ways, that I came to realize that the cohesive social *milieu* and cooperative working relations celebrated by scholars in the Prato district did not apply to those 'fresh off the boat'. As researchers, the other founders of the Center and I were becoming more and more 'sensitive to the constructed nature of historical narratives' (Burawoy 2003: 672).

In the first years, the views proposed by the Center's researchers did not conflict with the local government's official narrative: to the contrary, as pointed out by Campomori (2005: 240), the local government inputs from the Center were considered to be 'increasing the local administration's problem solving capacity'. Later, for a certain period of time, as a new and more confrontational approach to the Chinese migrants was emerging among local stakeholders in Prato, the Center's analyses, which were in conflict with the local government's public stance on migrants, were tolerated.

In the first half of the 2000s, researchers at the Center were the first to try to question the concept positing the disembeddedness of the Chinese working regime from the locality, and to highlight the dangerous dynamics among and between the migrants, local society, and institutions (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008). Next, in early 2007, the Center was closed.

## 1.8 CHAPTER OUTLINES

The study is structured into eight chapters.

In this introductory chapter, I have laid out the scope of the problematic and conceptual frameworks for my research. I have also discussed the fieldwork methodology on which this work relies and my own positionality as a researcher.

Chapter 2 engages with the issue of the dynamic relationship between global shifts, especially those affecting the global fashion industry and the positioning of Italian industrial districts in relation to these processes. It provides an account of the distinctive trajectory of the Italian fashion industry nationwide. It sheds light on the ways in which globally and nationally constituted practices concurred to drastically change the Italian fashion industry and engender a crisis for the Italian industrial district model that had previously been celebrated as a production model in Italy and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

In Chap. 2, I explain the dynamics that concurred to attract migrants into the Italian fashion districts, shedding light on the role played by the migrants in the drastic restructuring of the industry. I thus illuminate the way in which Italian IDs have become linked to other places to which they became connected by lines of streams of migration.

The chapter brings together topics such as the changing structures of production, demand and distribution of textile and clothing globally

over time; the evolution of Italian districts from model alternatives to the Fordist model to socioeconomic entities overwhelmed by global shifts; the regimes of mobility in Italy, and the way in which they channel migrant participation in the labor market so that they fit the needs of the relevant industries; and demands for labor originating from China in a context of changing global labor regimes. The chapter thus lays the foundation for understanding the modes of migrant inclusion within processes and dynamics resulting from the mutual constitution of the global, national, and local in the context of the fashion industry.

Chapters 3 and 4 situate Prato in relation to several actors at different scales. They address the dynamics behind the growing role of the Chinese as entrepreneurs in the Italian fashion industry and their spectacular success as garment manufacturers in a quintessentially Italian district. They explain why Prato has been the first fashion district where relatively dispossessed Chinese migrants have settled and why Prato is the only place in Italy where, over time, Chinese entrepreneurs have been able to jump into the position of being manufacturers. They highlight the spatialities and temporalities of the processes and link processes of migrant inclusion with the concurrent processes of restructuring of the global textile industry and their effects on Prato.

These chapters—as does my entire book—show that the Chinese-run low-end fast fashion center in Prato is not a ‘deterritorialized’ working regime, alien to the Italian work culture, as the media contended in the aftermath of the fire in Prato in December 2013 that killed seven Chinese. To the contrary, these chapters show the many ways in which Chinese migrants’ pathway of emplacement in Italian industrial districts and the development of a low-end fashion center in Prato are intertwined with the crucial transformations engendered by forces acting at multiple scales. Thus, they contend that urban variation in Prato is closely intertwined with the possibilities and pathways of migrant emplacement through entrepreneurial activities.

In particular, Chap. 3 focuses on the peculiar way in which the migrant agency interacts with global forces in shaping the unique pattern of emplacement of Chinese migrants in Prato. It highlights the process of replacement whereby newly arrived Chinese migrants opened their workshops in the very factories abandoned in those same years by native industrialists. It also shows the many advantages offered by the Chinese contractors to the final-good firms, and highlights the process of replacement of native contractors.

It emphasizes that the opportunity structure that has emerged and is analyzed in the locality is not merely a local structure of opportunity—and not even a national one.

Chapter 4 focuses on the ability of first generation Chinese migrants to access *en masse* the role of final-goods entrepreneurs and sheds light on the drivers for success of the Chinese low-end fast fashion center in Prato. It argues that the Chinese-run fashion industry in Prato concurred in transforming Italy into a European hub for low cost garments.

Next, the chapter documents the connection of the local clothing industry with the upstream sourcing areas in China and Turkey and downstream buying wholesalers in many European capitals. It thus traces the development of a global low-end clothing production network with Prato as the focal point.

Chapters 5 and 6 propose a novel analysis and conceptualization of the elements at the core of the Chinese-run contracting business competitiveness.

They discuss the features and implications of what I call ‘the mobile regime’ (Ceccagno 2015), a new, highly exploitative working regime that over time has become the dominant mode of production for Chinese migrants in the fashion manufacturing industry. Thus, a new dimension is added to the different forms of migrant employment.

The introduction of this new form of employment, and its underlying conditions are addressed and analyzed as stemming from and influencing actors at multiple intersecting scales.

In particular, Chap. 5 documents and discusses the radical reconfiguration of the space and time of production within Chinese-run businesses, at both the intra- and inter-firm levels, through the complementary use of intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility. The chapter assesses the multiple ways in which the arrangements based on stasis and those based on mobility are interdependent. It shows that the mobile regime plays a crucial role in the organizational pattern of production and thus contributes to shape a unique productive regime that outcompetes by far the pre-existing productive regimes.

This productive regime perfectly fits the needs of the Italian fashion industry as it enables workshops to respond instantly to the fast fashion imperatives.

Thus, this chapter assesses the central role played by Chinese migrants in the extraction of profit.



In Chap. 5, I also present and discuss data on the job demand and supply market involving Chinese migrants, focusing on Prato but also taking into consideration other fashion districts. I provide new evidence on the actual functioning of the mobile regime and underscore the complex, flexible, and ever-changing architecture of the network of Chinese-run workshops.

A vast imbalance emerges between demand and supply, which is particularly striking for skilled workers. This evolution can be linked to the drying up of migration avenues in China and the declining attractiveness of jobs in manufacturing among Chinese migrants in Italy.

This imbalance, coupled with improved living and working conditions and more enticing salaries offered to skilled workers by potential employers, makes plausible the employers' claims indicating a shift in the balance of power between employers and skilled workers.

Many scholars adopt a culturalist approach in their analysis of the Chinese migrants' inclusion in Italian fashion districts. Distancing myself from such an approach to migrant entrepreneurship has enabled me to gain new insights into the use of ethnicity that I explore in Chap. 6.

Instead of using the categories of nationality and ethnicity as a means for fixing people to groups and places, I focus on processes and trajectories and connect them with the imperatives of flexible accumulation and the production regimes they engender in the fashion industry.

I approach the issue of ethnicity by dwelling on the structural factors that bring about an exacerbation of ethnically constructed working relations and, therefore, social relations. Essentially, I discuss the Chinese-only workforce employed in Chinese contracting businesses in Prato and elsewhere in Italy not as an ethnic way of doing business, as many do, but as a process of compression of workforce diversity within the network of Chinese contractors introduced to further smooth the processes of production.

I wish to further clarify this concept: By arguing that a process of compression of the workforce diversity is at work I do not intend to challenge the diversity of labor as theorized by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013). To the contrary, I acknowledge the emergence of new forms of labor. What I suggest in Chap. 6 is that compression of the workforce diversity through ethnicization is one possible way to increase productivity. This, ultimately, confirms the diversity of labor conceptualization as it suggests that the compression of the workforce (ethnic) diversity is one of the possible ways in which labor is diversified. It also highlights this working regime as con-

stituted in relation to conditions conjured up by different forces taking shape in specific contexts.

In Chap. 6, I point to another crucial condition adopted in relation to the mobile regime: the multilayered process whereby social reproduction is outsourced so as to avoid hindering the productive flexibility required by fast fashion. I show that as far as Chinese contracting workshops in the Italian fashion industry are concerned, the places of production and those where social reproduction is outsourced constitute relationally.

Thus, I argue, the restructuring of production is based on a double restructuring of the human factor, namely the global restructuring of social reproduction and the compression of the workforce diversity through ethnicization of the workforce. These are the twin pillars supporting the mobile regime adopted by Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry. Thus this chapter brings to light the *sine qua non* underlying new forms of (migrant) workforce employment.

Recently, the mobile regime and the twin pillars on which it rests are contested in Prato but not elsewhere. I tackle this issue in Chap. 7.

In Chap. 7, I assess the shifting positioning of Prato within global hierarchies of economic power over time and address the issue of the city rescaling.

I focus on the parallel development of the textile and clothing industries in Prato and show that they have followed diametrically opposed trajectories. While the textile industry is devastated by shifts in the global fashion industry, the clothing industry is favored by the same dynamics and thrives. The coincidence of the two trends, I argue, overshadows the role of Chinese migrants in rescaling the city. Moreover, I argue that Chinese migrants can only partially contribute to city rescaling. In fact, even though as agents of global and local process that reposition Prato and its industries they have become crucial players in the European low-end fast fashion, it is unlikely that they will fully balance the crisis of the core industry in the Prato district.

In 2007, a policy was adopted in Prato. On the grounds that the Chinese migrants bring to the city security problems, this policy criminalized Chinese entrepreneurship and paved the way to a series of selective inspections and heavy fines against Chinese businesses.

In Chap. 7, I address the question of the hegemonic discourse in Prato analyzing the ways in which it frames the interpretation of the role of the Chinese in the city and industrial district. I focus on narratives of social change in Prato by natives and migrants, namely how the local institutions

and stakeholders frame the situation resulting from the mass migration of Chinese immigrants to the city as well as how the Chinese migrants perceive and narrate their role in the city as entrepreneurs.

I also explore the impact of industrial district scholarship in forging the hegemonic discourse in the locality. This aspect of the dynamics shaping the city has largely been neglected. Being embedded in local dynamics, ID scholars are part and parcel of the much celebrated industrial district cohesive social milieu. They contribute to shaping the hegemonic discourse.

This chapter argues that the development of a dominant narrative that depicts the Chinese migrants as detrimental to the locality has been instrumental in devising and implementing an aggressive policy against Chinese entrepreneurship. Prato is the only place where migrant entrepreneurship has been associated with deviance and urban degeneration, and therefore criminalized.

This is mainly because local stakeholders in the core industry deal with dynamics that are transnational in scope as if they were local. As a result, the stakeholders who have criminalized Chinese entrepreneurship are convinced that by fighting against the new pathway of capital accumulation in the clothing industry they can restore their previous wealth and political legitimacy. I argue that this is the crucial limit of the anti-Chinese policy enacted in the 2000s in Prato.

The final chapter concludes this study.

## 1.9 PRATO AND THE ITALIAN FASHION INDUSTRY IN AN ERA OF FIERCE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

Prato has recently become a hot topic discussed worldwide, involving aspects such as the destiny of small industrial districts in developed countries and the future of the ‘made in Italy’ fashion industry in an era of fierce international competition.

My work focuses analytical attention on the layered history of capitalist expansion, disinvestment, and devaluation in the city/district showing that Prato is an ideal place for observing the ways in which capital disinvestment and devaluation in one local industry, that is, the textile industry, has, to some extent, made room for investment and accumulation in the clothing industry (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

This research analyzes the success of the low-end fast fashion industry with its center in Prato in connection with the concurrent process of downscaling in the textile industry, which results in the impoverishment of

a large share of the local population in the framework of economic crisis and gloomy atmosphere that has prevailed in Italy in the last decade.

It strives to account for the multilayered ways in which the divergent pathways followed by the Prato textile and clothing industries are imbricated with dynamics that pertain to shifts in the global fashion industry and to the multiplication of labor at the global scale; to processes of down-scaling of once thriving industrial centers; to migration, industrial, and labor policies as devised by the states and enforced or ignored in each specific locality.

This study offers an explanation of the dynamics, political choices, narratives, and the processes of inclusion and exclusion in Prato in relation to forces that concur in the constitutions locally, nationally, and globally. If the locality's trajectories are analyzed with this approach, the dichotomy between people of migrant background and those that consider themselves as native becomes much less relevant.

New forms of labor, that have had political and social disruptive effects in cities with legacies of Fordist modes of production, in Prato have been relatively smoothly grafted into pre-existing customs and values typical of the Italian industrial districts, at least in the first years.

Yet, somehow paradoxically, Prato, the very place that back in the 1970s inspired the creation of the neologism 'submerged economy' (Fiori 2014), is now the only place in Italy where migrant entrepreneurship, which brings one step further a deregulated approach to entrepreneurship, has first been criminalized and is now patrolled.

By shedding light on the interests of the different stakeholders in different places and how they are played out, as well as by deconstructing the rich tapestry of narratives that make up the dominant discourse and construct the social reality, this work strives to untangle the dynamics involved in the place-making of Prato.

## NOTES

1. The Prato industrial district includes 12 municipalities in the provinces of Prato (Prato, Cantagallo, Carmignano, Montemurlo, Poggio a Caiano, Vaiano, Vernio), Pistoia (Agliana, Montale, Quarrata) and Florence (Calenzano and Campi Bisenzio). With a population of more than 300,000, it covers a 700 square meter area. The boundaries of the district were set by the Tuscany Region in 2000, following the national law 140/99 on the Italian districts (Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani 2015).

2. On the one hand, Chinese with residence permits in Prato are only part of the larger number of Chinese migrants living in the locality. In fact, in Italy a foreigner holding a so-called ‘permit to stay’ issued in one locality is free to live and work in cities different from the one where the document was issued. Additionally, undocumented Chinese migrants also live in the area. Thus, the actual number of Chinese citizens living in Prato may be significantly higher than the number of Chinese residents. On the other hand, estimates of the number of Chinese migrants working in Prato may be inflated for political reasons by those who want to show that there are too many Chinese migrants in the district (Ceccagno 2012).
3. Data for 2010.
4. In discussing the development of Prato’s Chinese-run fashion Center, the distinction between the textile and the clothing sectors is crucial. In the English language, the words ‘apparel’ and ‘textile’ are sometime conflated. In Italian IDs they have very different meanings. Apparel only refers to clothes, textile refers to fabrics. Moreover, I use the words final-good firm and manufacturer with the same meaning.
5. As the body of literature on socio-spatial theories within the diverse disciplines of the social sciences is vast by now, here I only mention those general concepts that can be useful for the purposes of this study.
6. As discussed above, some authors emphasize that when studying the particular we should avoid being engulfed and constrained by it (Burawoy 2000; Comaroff, and Comaroff 2003 among others).
7. A document prepared by the Center in 1999 gives an idea of the number of migrants using the services offered by the Center: ‘During 1998, 1769 people made use of the Center’s services. 3025 visits were made and advice sought 4.537 times. Most consultancy services related to the requests were made for legalization following the promulgation of Law 40/98’ (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 1999: 29).
8. Sellar (2007) illustrates the national and international debate on the Italian industrial districts.

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# Globalization and Its Impact on the Italian Fashion Industry

## 2.1 PROLOGUE

*Try to imagine a product that for thirty years never needs to be changed. Imagine a company that only manufactures that product and whose one problem, if it has any problem at all, is that it can't keep up with the demand of a market that is so strong and vast that the threat of competition is not worth worrying about. Imagine being able to set your watch by the punctuality with which invoices are paid ten days from receipt, never a protest, never a deduction for unjustified complaints, never a bankruptcy, with checks pouring in with the morning mail in pastel-hued, square format envelopes. Zero expense for research and development, trade fairs, advertising, or fashion consultants. Eliminate the very concept of warehouse overstock. Laugh till your belly aches at the idea of having to hire an outside executive to take over the work that you are perfectly capable of doing yourself. And now try to imagine an entire city based on the textile industry, dotted with dozens and dozens of companies just like ours, all of them growing steadily and all of them intertwined in a system of production that is insanely fragmented but incredibly efficient, made up of hundreds of microcompanies, many of them family-run, each of them working in an intermediate phase of the production and supply chain [...] But the best thing about it, the truly fantastic thing, is that you didn't have to be a genius to rise to the top, because the system worked so well that even dimwits made money, as long as they were willing to work, even idiots could make money, as long as they dedicated every minute of their days to their work. (Nesi 2012: 19–20, 130–134)*

*Who can say whether there was ever a moment, an hour, a day when we reached the apex of our economic lives and, from that day forth, our dreams became chimeras, our successes privileges, our future an imaginary quantity? Who can say whether it's possible to point a finger and indicate a date we can remember and tell our sons and daughters about, saying that this was the day when everything that had always run smoothly suddenly started to go wrong?*

*Still, I can try.*

*It's just a matter of rummaging through one's memories. During the 1990s, right before China became a member nation of the WTO and its products were allowed to flood the markets of the West like a raging river spate, our politicians traveled the world with smiles on their faces signing agreements that would ultimately undermine Italy's prosperity [...].*

*They said that the opening of the Chinese market would be doubly advantageous to us Italians, because as soon as they emerged from poverty and had a few yuan in their pockets, what's the first thing the Chinese would rush to buy? But of course, Italian style: our products, the best of the best of world styling and taste, as we could see from the proliferation of Ferrari dealerships and Italian designer boutiques in China, full-fledged bridgeheads for the future landing of the entire Italian national industry in what would soon become the largest and most significant market on earth! [...]*

*And, of course, they were wrong.*

*Because things didn't go the way they said they would: the Chinese didn't rush out to buy Italian style, they hurried out and produced it themselves [...].* (Nesi 2012: 130–134)

## 2.2 THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL FORCES

The excerpts in the prologue are from *Story of My People* by Edoardo Nesi (2012), the first nonfiction book to win the Strega Prize, Italy's prestigious literary award. There is dismay and anger behind the author's question '*when everything that had always run smoothly suddenly started to go wrong?*'.

Edoardo Nesi narrates the descending trajectory of Prato's textile industry. He was by birthright a manufacturer of fine woollens. He was bred to take over the textile business that his grandfather and great-uncle began in the 1920s in Prato. Nevertheless, his career as entrepreneur stopped well ahead of the retirement age. As he avows in the book, he was among the lucky ones that in the 1990s managed to sell their factories. Later on, buyers could not be found and many other textile entrepreneurs in Prato could only close down their business after a long period of agony.

Edoardo Nesi's book is a virulent and nostalgic attack against globalization and China that has changed a previously idyllic Prato and Italy. The book is rife with multiple connotations: Prato stands for the local textile industry and is interchangeable with Italy; China stands for the Chinese manufacturing industries with particular reference to the textile and clothing industries, and is interchangeable with the Chinese migrants running stitching workshops in Prato (see also Zhang 2013).

This chapter undertakes to situate the decline of the textile industry in Prato in the context of global shifts underway since the early 1980s.

Moving away from the dichotomy between global and local, and building on the debate on the spatial unevenness of capitalism and the geography of the global economy discussed in Chap. 1, in this chapter I show how dynamics that pertain to the global combine with the national and local peculiarities to produce specific outcomes.

Furthermore, I focus analytical attention on the layered histories and geographies of the devaluation of Italian industrial clusters and the fashion industry, as well as the effects of this process on the existing socio-economic articulations of the locality.

Moreover, I show how Italian industrial districts have become connected to other places by streams of migration. By doing so, I attempt to provide an explanation for what kind of globally constituted practices concurred to drastically change the Italian fashion industry and attract migrant labor into Italian productive clusters. I link migrant modes of settlement in the Italian fashion industry with the forces acting at different geographical scales.

The transformations addressed in this chapter have taken place since the 1980s. Until the end of the 1970s, geographically fragmented labor markets were largely organized on a national basis, and mainly insulated from international competition (Harvey 2010). In the Italian fashion industry cost advantages were obtained by outsourcing manufacturing operations to micro-enterprises clustered in industrial districts and later in domestic peripheries in the south where a vast labor reserve could easily be found (Dunford 2006).

However, starting from the end of the 1970s everything changed.

In the 1980s, a series of pressures had already started unsettling the national order of labor markets. As pointed out by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 103), the *'emergence of multiple and more porous borders within and between labor markets, the growing prevalence of lateral zones of labor mobility and exchange, the desperate search for new flexible and just-in-time migration schemes, the efforts of capital to play off the*

*unequal opportunities for labor mobility within different regions against each other – all of these [...] are part and parcel of the repositioning and reorganization of labor markets<sup>2</sup>.*

The Italian fashion industry, hit by global changes that upset the established modes of production, was forced to undertake a series of drastic changes. Harvey (2010) points out that in the 1970s and later, offshoring to more docile labor pastures proved helpful for capital as did the availability of immigrants and undocumented workers. In this chapter, I show that from the 1980s, the Italian fashion industry adopted both strategies, each with a series of implications. I locate the participation of Italian fashion firms clustered in industrial districts in the global rush to play off globally unequal opportunities within the context of a national fashion industry with its strong peculiarities.

Most Italian textile and clothing manufacturing takes place in industrial districts.

In this chapter, I first focus on the particular productive organization of industrial clusters with their very flexible production methods and highlight the high levels of embeddedness of the industrial districts production modes in the social and institutional contexts. I highlight the factors that facilitated the industrial districts success until the mid-1970s, and those that have pushed them to undergo restructuring from the 1980s onwards.

I then shed light on the concomitant process whereby the Italian fashion industry, that had enjoyed a prominent international position, had to react to the global restructuring of the industry. A traditional industry such as the fashion one, despite facing global challenges and being forced to undergo crucial shifts, still remains central to the Italian economy. Thus, an economically advanced country still retains a high degree of international competitiveness in an industry in which emerging economies came to specialize and to reach a leadership position. Today, Italy remains a net exporter of fashion items. However, with the exception of high end fashion, from the mid-1990s, the capacity of the Italian fashion industry to compete internationally diminished and a sharp decline set in from 2001.

The alterations in the global trade architecture impacting on Italian textile industry include the rise of China as a powerful competitor; the restructuring of distribution chains with the consequent growing power of global retailers; and the emergence of global fast fashion strategies. The chapter elaborates on these alterations and describes the different restructuring options available for large firms who could afford manufacturing offshoring and small firms which, mostly, could only rely on migrant labor.

The nation state, to a certain extent, is pivotal in the encounter between migrant labor and capital. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue that in the contemporary global order borders serve not simply as devices of exclusion but as technologies of differential inclusion. Border reinforcing shapes the conditions under which border crossing is possible.

The nexus between flexible accumulation and migration regimes is also highlighted by Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013). These authors introduce the ‘regimes of mobility’ analytical concept where the term regime ‘*calls attention to the role both of individual states and of changing international regulatory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility*’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013: 189).

In this chapter, as well in the following ones, I follow the methodology offered by these authors that connect laws, regulations, and practices of immigration control with the global reorganization of labor markets. I point at the role of the Italian national immigration frame as playing a pivotal role in the encounter between migrant labor and capital.

This chapter reworks the existing analyses on industrial districts by showing how the impact of globalization on Italian fashion industry and the migration dynamics are intimately connected to each other.

Scholars have analyzed the challenges faced by the Italian IDs in the last decades and their profound structural and organizational transformations (see Whitford 2001 for an outline and a discussion of the debate in Italy). Additionally, a vast literature has been produced on the evolution of the Italian fashion industry, offshoring practices, and their impact on the productive clusters (see for example Rabellotti 2001; Rullani 2003; Micelli and Corò 2006, among others).

However, the role played by migrants in the restructuring of the fashion industry has been mainly overlooked, even though extensive use of a migrant workforce was as crucial as offshoring practices for the restructuring of the fashion industry. Especially the role of those migrants that have been included as contractors for small and very small final firms in industrial clusters has been missing in most analyses.

This work connects the restructuring of the Italian fashion industry with immigrant policies in Italy, and with the timing and modes of emplacement of the Chinese migrants in Italian fashion districts.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the global flexible accumulation drive and the shifts it has engendered since the early 1980s, together with the way in which the Italian state and its industries have reacted to these shifts, concurs as much as the migrant agency in shaping the unique pattern of emplacement of Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry.

### 2.3 SMALL FIRMS IN INDUSTRIAL CLUSTERS AS A NATIONAL POLICY

In its 30-year Golden Age (1945–1975), Italy, along with other relatively developed capitalist economies in Europe and East Asia, experienced unprecedented fast economic growth. The industrial districts have been crucial protagonists of this growth.

Industrial districts are agglomerates of small firms mainly specializing in light industries that grew from the end of the Second World War onwards, outside of the main areas of modern industry, in the central and northeast regions of the country (Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Friuli, and Trentino-Alto Adige). They are located in small towns or ‘urbanized countryside’ (Sforzi 2003: 36) (Fig. 2.1).

Collectively, these areas have been termed ‘the third Italy’ (Bagnasco 1977) in opposition to the Fordist industries in the northwest, mainly Turin, Milan and Genoa, and the underdeveloped and subsidized south. They were characterized by strong trade and craft traditions and were located in a dense tissue of small towns.<sup>2</sup>

Italian industrial districts have taken shape as the direct result of national industrial policies specifically tailored to the promotion of small businesses. While other advanced economies over time have tended to increase industrial concentration and to move into sectors and methods with a higher technological content, the Italian productive system has followed a different pathway. Essentially, since the end of the Second World War, the national legislation has favored productive decentralization in nonmetropolitan areas, conferred advantages to craft businesses as opposed to large industries, and thus stimulated the growth of small and very small firms (Dunford and Greco 2006). More specifically, Italian legislation has conferred financial and legal advantages to craft businesses.<sup>3</sup> For example, they ‘pay less tax, incur lower social charges, pay lower fees to Chambers of Commerce, have special rights in cases of bankruptcy and have fewer obligations in relation to written accounts than other enterprises’ (Dunford and Greco 2006: 164).

Over time, national policies in Italy continued to favor production located in industrial districts. Law 317 enacted in 1991 to define and support industrial districts formally moved them into national industrial policy (Becattini 2001: 125; Whitford 2001). Law 140 enacted in 1999 provided financial support for ‘homogeneous productive systems’<sup>4</sup> (thus including firms that did not fit into a stricter definition of industrial districts) through the mediation of regional administrations. Small firms located in the industrial districts were discussed as a touchstone for policymakers



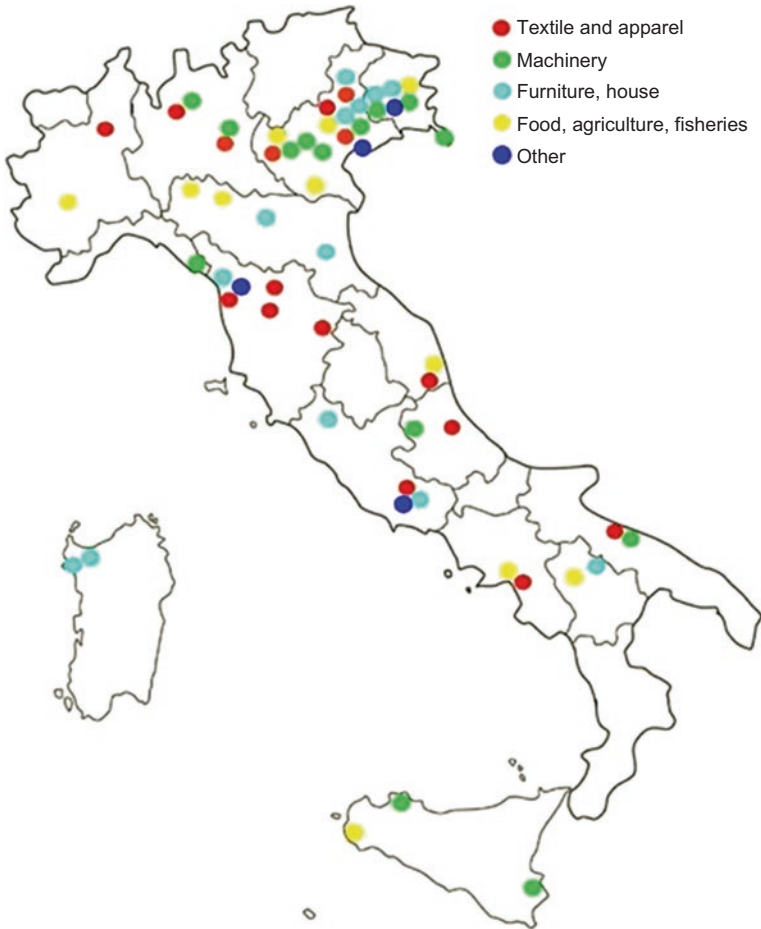


Fig. 2.1 Italian industrial districts

Source: Federazione dei Distretti Italiani. <http://www.distretti.org/mappa-dei-distretti>

looking for ways to revive the laggard economy of southern Italy (see for example Trigiglia 1999, cited in Whitford 2001). Law 23 of December 2005 introduced special fiscal, administrative, and financial taxation for industrial districts explicitly aimed at supporting this form of productive organization, with its small and craft firms, and defend them from global competition (Fondazione Luca Pacioli 2006).

In their analysis of the Italian industrial policies from the 1930s to the 1970s, Longoni and Rinaldi (2010) show that the Italian state carried out an artisanship policy on a scale that was unparalleled in Europe. The same approach to entrepreneurship characterizes Italy in more recent times: in 2007, while subsidies to small and medium enterprises represented about 10 percent of the total amount of state aid in the EU27, in Italy the share was 37 percent (Carmignani and D'Ignazio 2011).

Thus, an extraordinary fragmented productive landscape has been and still is a central feature of the Italian industrial landscape.

Italian IDs mainly specialize in the production of fashion (textiles, eye-wear, shoes, and sportswear), home furnishing (furniture, glass, and ceramics), food, and engineering (ISTAT 2006, 2015). Industrial districts active in the fashion industry include textile and clothing (27 percent), shoes and leather goods (12.1 percent) and home furnishing (17 percent). They made up 56 percent of the overall production in Italian IDs in 2011 (ISTAT 2015).

In recent years, the importance of industrial districts on the overall Italian economy has decreased. In 2011, the Italian Statistics Institute has singled out 141 productive districts, while there were 199 in 1996 (ISTAT 1996).<sup>5</sup> They comprised around 25 percent of the overall Italian productive system and one third of the workforce active in manufacturing in 2011, while in 1999 they had contributed 43.3 percent to the Italian total manufacturing exports, and their weight in terms of total Italian manufacturing had reached 45 percent (ISTAT 2015).<sup>6</sup> The lesser central role of industrial districts is inextricably linked with global restructuring in manufacturing industries.

## 2.4 THE ITALIAN INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS AS AN EXEMPLARY PRODUCTION MODE

In the mid-1970s, Italian scholars started to account for the economic success of Italian industrial district areas. By the 1980s, the Anglophone scholarship followed in their footsteps and praised 'Third Italy' as a new model of organization of economic activities able to overcome the limits of large enterprises in the Fordism paradigm. Italian IDs, it was argued, with their small firms specializing in a range of products that reflected the shift to economies of scope, were to be considered one of the primary examples of post-Fordist production (Piore and Sabel 1984). Soon, scholars touted the so-called 'Marshallian Industrial Districts' (Becattini 1979) as an exemplar

of a possible production model for the future (see for instance the Prato district, discussed as the ‘exemplary’ industrial district in Becattini 2001).

Key competitive advantages of industrial districts have been identified in the development of a locally specialized labor market where different phases of the production are fragmented across a multiplicity of firms with a vertical disintegration of tasks; and in strategies of innovation by adapting to ceaseless changes, rather than trying to control them. Another competitive advantage was the presence of economies external to the single firm but internal to the district (Pyke et al. 1990). In fact, as Marshall showed, the concentration of small enterprises, each specialized in one segment of the production in a small area, offered some advantages: (1) specialization itself permitted the realization of some economies of scale, (2) the concentration of people engaged in the same business encouraged the diffusion of knowledge, and (3) to a certain extent, services and infrastructures were shared. Additionally, the existence of a dense mosaic of small firms permitted the manufacture of small volumes, short lead times, rapid delivery, and fast adaptations to market conditions (Piore and Sabel 1984; Dunford and Greco 2006). Adaptation to changing market conditions was of paramount importance at a time when the mass market was becoming less important and production less standardized and more diverse. In some productive sectors, such as the fashion industry, economies of scope were becoming as important as economies of scale.

The literature on industrial clusters stressed the relevance of physical proximity between suppliers and buyers for economic advantage (Pyke et al. 1990). Coordination mechanism and innovation processes were facilitated by face-to-face interaction. In his description of the Prato industrial district, Giacomo Becattini (1998: 67) states:

*When the textile machine producer and their client exchange comments, criticism and special requests, each of them is convinced that they are only acting in their own interest. In actual fact, both of them are cooperating in raising the district's overall productivity. When the district members by repeated practice strengthen local ethical conventions or the business language, they create public assets that lower transaction costs for all the district members, to the disadvantage of the non-members.<sup>7</sup>*

With his conceptual approach that applied Marshall's arguments to the study of Prato, Becattini (1975, 1978, 1979) was the most prominent proponent of taking the industrial district as an overall system and productive community. He argued that industrial districts were communities of firms

and people and therefore their emergence required a change in the unit of analysis: from the firm and the industry to the local district community. This approach paved the way for the emergence of a vast literature dealing with the social, cultural, political, and institutional foundations of the district model. Analyses focused on social norms and values, political sub-cultures, associationalism, trust, institutional density and performance (see Whitford 2001).

In particular, the locally rooted cooperative attitude of all the actors operating in the industrial districts was singled out as playing a crucial role in the success of the districts. ID scholars thus started highlighting Italian industrial districts as entities where a mixture of competition and collaboration characterized the relationships within and between entrepreneurs and skilled workers. On the one hand, firms competed with one another for markets. On the other hand, they cooperated mainly through the exchange of ideas, the sharing of knowledge, and the pooled use of specialized resources. The theorists of industrial districts (for example Becattini 2001; Dei Ottati 2005, among many others) have highlighted that cooperation was based on the existence of relations of trust. Formal contracts, which raised transaction costs, were infrequent. Trust, they argued, was rooted in the existence of regular personal contacts, common political and cultural values, and shared norms. With an experience of repeated informal contracting, trust prevailed among local actors, they argued, and it was the source of confidence that contracts and agreements would be respected, and transactions would proceed smoothly.

According to some prominent scholars (Becattini 1990; Brusco 1999; Dei Ottati 2005), a key feature of the industrial district was the respect for the implicit norms of reciprocal cooperation, or the ‘code of the district’. The ‘code of the district’, it was argued, heavily contributed to the proper functioning of the district processes of division of labor between firms and generated competitive advantages for its members. The observance of the ‘code of the district’ was central to the process of learning and circulation of information.

A code of this type had ‘the character of an institution that fosters behavioral regularity’. Rules implicit in the ‘code of the district’ derived strength from the fact that the behaviors they prescribed corresponded to ‘that which is the most economic and social advantageous’ and therefore were self-enforcing (Dei Ottati 2009: 28).

The ‘code of the district’ as a regulatory mechanism enforced in a productive cluster operating as a communitarian structure lost most of its

strength when faced with the new challenges imposed by globalization. The issue of a ‘code of the district’ rooted in the local history and in a sense of membership that creates a divide between those inside and those outside, was brought up again for public discussion in Prato decades later, in the late 2000s, when the Chinese migrants were accused of bringing to Prato their own ‘code of the district’ (Dei Ottati 2009). I will discuss this issue in detail in Chap. 7 when addressing the contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship in Prato.

Moreover, a thick local institutional fabric has emerged as a key factor in generating and reproducing competitiveness in industrial districts (Amin and Thrift 1992). In addition to regional and local government, locally-based institutions included entrepreneurial and worker associations providing services to their members, credit cooperatives in which local artisans underwrote each other’s loans to lower interest rates by reducing default, strong networks of local banks lending cheaply on the basis of an extensive knowledge of clients’ trustworthiness, and local technical schools providing the needed skills (Brusco and Righi 1989; Whitford 2001). Research has highlighted the role of civic pride and the efficiency of the local public administration in proactively creating a cohesive socio-economic milieu and restricting the forms of competition to those favoring innovation (Piore and Sabel 1984).

## 2.5 LIMITS OF THE DISTRICT MODEL IN THE GLOBAL ERA

In the 1980s, industrial districts started losing momentum and Italy’s relative economic performances deteriorated. The weakening of Italy’s trade position was most marked in fashion and household goods, and other so-called ‘made in Italy’ sectors (Dunford and Greco 2006).

Scholars started pointing at the constraints standing in the way of the further development of the district model and showing that underlying societal conditions had been overlooked in most previous literature. Dunford and Greco (2006) highlight the dependence of the model on social legislation that encouraged the growth of micro-enterprises and on economic conditions that had provided for relatively low wages and the depreciation of Italy’s currency. Repeated recourse to devaluation, in fact, had made Italian manufacturers more competitive in the international arena, and difficulties arose as Europe’s monetary union, with the introduction of the euro as the single currency, closed off the possibility

of further currency devaluations in Italy. The limits of industrial clusters, therefore, were exactly the conditions shaped by state (and regional) policies that had given strong encouragement to cost-reducing strategies characterized by high labor intensity, simple technologies, and comparatively low productivity.

Difficulties were also associated with generational change. Dunford and Greco (2006) argue that after three decades of development, many businesses in IDs started facing acute labor shortages, not least as a result of the reluctance of the new generations to follow in the footsteps of their parents (see Corò and Rullani 1998; Hadjimichalis 2006; Ceccagno 2012, among many others).

The embeddedness that had previously been prized as one competitive advantage of industrial districts turned out to be a disadvantage in a global era. Uzzi (1997) proposed the ‘paradox of embeddedness’ arguing that local networks may limit the competitiveness of single firms as well as of whole networks due to ‘overembeddedness’ (see Chiarvesio and di Maria 2009: 1190). In a global era, in fact, relevant knowledge inputs growingly come from outside the district and are related to the firm’s ability to explore the opportunities that the global arena can provide.

Essentially, the crisis of the Italian productive clusters systems stemmed from the loss of competitiveness they experienced in a global era, due to the reasons discussed above. Among the limits of the traditional Italian territorial clustering of vertically disintegrated firms are an excessively fragmented productive structure that in a global era hampers the ability to coordinate action and to be consciously strategic, and dramatic scale disadvantages in marketing (Whitford 2001). In 1990, Trigiglia, a scholar and protagonist of the creation of the national discourse on industrial clusters, pointed out that the new dynamics engendered by globalization somehow exceeded the range of action and competence of authorities active in industrial districts (Trigiglia 1990: 182). Issues of technological research, marketing, training, and export services could not be solved locally. Thus, problems of economic scale and their impact on IDs had become apparent already in the late 1980s.

In sum, in a context of epochal shifts in world supply and demand and in the global labor market, the roots of Italy’s competitive weakness lay exactly in those factors that had previously led to its particular pattern of specialization: its path of industrial development involving the growth of micro-enterprises specialized in traditional sectors and located in districts situated outside of the main industrial areas of the country (Dunford and Greco 2006).

Most of the smaller firms in industrial districts were unable to cope with the sweeping global changes and many of them just closed down, as the many textile entrepreneurs to which Edoardo Nesi's book, in the prologue, refers.

In the next section, I will describe the shifts in the global fashion industry, their impact on the Italian fashion industry and the way in which firms in Italian fashion districts have reacted to these changes.

## 2.6 GLOBAL SHIFTS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

The textile and garment production, once a major industry in industrialized countries, has experienced sharp decline in the USA from the mid-1970 and in France and the UK in the 1980s, with a large part of the production moved offshore.

Italy has followed a different development pattern in that it has increased domestic output, expanded exports and tried to resist import penetration. Thus, Italy has remained a major player, although its prominence has declined in the twenty-first century. In 2001 Italy accounted for 8.2 percent of world textile and 7.2 percent of world garment exports, making it the world's third largest exporter of textiles (after China and the USA) and the second largest exporter of clothing after China (Dunford 2006). In 2012, the sector still constituted 30.9 percent of the total EU27 turnover and represented 27.6 percent (although it had been 37.3 percent in 2006) of EU27 textile and clothing firms (Sistema Moda Italia 2014).

In Italy the fashion industry still remains central to the national economy. In 2000, the textile and clothing industries alone accounted for almost 11 percent of Italian manufacturing value added. In 2012, they represented 9.6 percent (10 percent in 2006) of the total turnover of the manufacturing sector, 14.2 percent (11.4 percent in 2006) of manufacturing employment, and contributed to 9.3 percent of commercial surplus (Sistema Moda Italia 2006, 2012). If leather and shoes that also concur to make up the Italian fashion industry are included, the weight of the sector is much higher.

Italy is therefore different from other economically advanced countries in that it has strived—and to a certain extent it still strives—to retain international competitiveness in a traditional industry such as fashion.<sup>8</sup>

Below, I address three major global shifts in the fashion industry: the rise of low labor cost competitors, the restructuring of the distribution chain, and the emergence of a global fast fashion.

### 2.6.1 *China as a Powerful Global Competitor*

One crucial global change affecting the performances of the Italian fashion industry has been the sharp increase in fashion goods import from countries with lower labor costs. From 1974 to 2004, the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA)<sup>9</sup> assigned quotas to textile and clothing imports in major consumer markets. This allowed smaller-scale producing countries to be competitive in the global market. In 2005, the vanishing of the MFA put an end to the protectionist barriers set up by advanced countries and made it possible for countries with lower production costs to further increase their exports.

In particular, China emerged as a powerful global competitor, especially after its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.

When in January 2005 all quotas for WTO members were removed, quota-constrained lower-cost countries such as China and Pakistan were able to challenge Italian and other developed countries' producers in their domestic and international markets. Gereffi and Frederick (2010) argue that China is the clear winner by far in the global apparel export race over the past 15 years: between 1995 and 2009, China's share of global apparel export rose from 22 percent to 41 percent (see Table 2.1).<sup>10</sup>

China is also the market leader in apparel imports to the EU-15 (Table 2.2). An analysis of the trends in the EU-15's source of apparel imports over time shows that 24 percent of the total EU-15 apparel imports in 2009 originated from China, up from 9.6 percent in 2000. The next three top exporters in 2009 were Turkey (6.3 percent), Bangladesh (4.7 percent), and India (3.9 percent) (Gereffi and Frederick 2010).

While China was gaining ground globally, in Europe the textile and clothing industry was losing ground. In the textile and clothing sector,

**Table 2.1** World apparel export: the role of China (values in \$US billions)

	<i>China</i>	<i>World</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1995	24.0	158.4	15.2
2000	36.1	197.7	18.2
2005	74.2	277.1	26.8
2007	115.2	345.8	n.a.
2008	120.0	361.9	33.2

Source: Adaptation from Gereffi and Frederick (2010)



**Table 2.2** China as an apparel exporter to EU-15 in 1996, 2002, and 2008 (values in \$US millions)

	<i>Value</i>	<i>Percent of China's export to the world</i>
1996	2,467	9.9 percent
2002	4,672	11.3 percent
2008	28,760	23.9 percent

Source: Adaptation from Gereffi and Frederick (2010)

**Table 2.3** Apparel employment trends in Italy

1971	370,000
1981	414,000
1991	415,000
2005	265,000
Percent change 1970–2005	–28.4

Source: Adaptation from Doeringer et al. (2009)

160,000 jobs were lost in the EU 15 in 2004 and another 164,000 jobs in 2005. In the same year, clothing sector output declined by 8.4 percent. In 2006 sales improved, yet job losses and a decline in the number of companies continued (Dunford et al. 2013).

In the same year, employment in the Italian garment industry was 28 percent below its 1970 level (Table 2.3).<sup>11</sup>

Dunford and his colleagues (2013) argue that the rise of China and the fall of Italy in textile and clothing production are linked as increased Chinese competition heavily contributed to drive down the number of enterprises, output, and employment in Italy. A massive jump in imports from China to Italy has been registered starting from the mid-1990s. Imports of textiles rose from 5.7 percent in 1995 to 21.5 percent in 2010; clothing imports rose from 11.8 percent to 30.2 percent in 2010, with a steep rise in 2005 and 2006. Figure 2.2 shows the geography of Italian clothing imports in the years 1988–2012.

Clothing imports from China were very low unit value goods. This is in line with the prevailing trend according to which Italy tends to export items with relatively high unit values and import items with lower unit value. However, in the 2000s, the unit value of Italy's imports from China and even more from Turkey has increased. Dunford et al. (2013: 15) argue that this reflects the growing specialization of these economies in higher end items and 'the squeezing out of Italy's domestic manufacturers'.

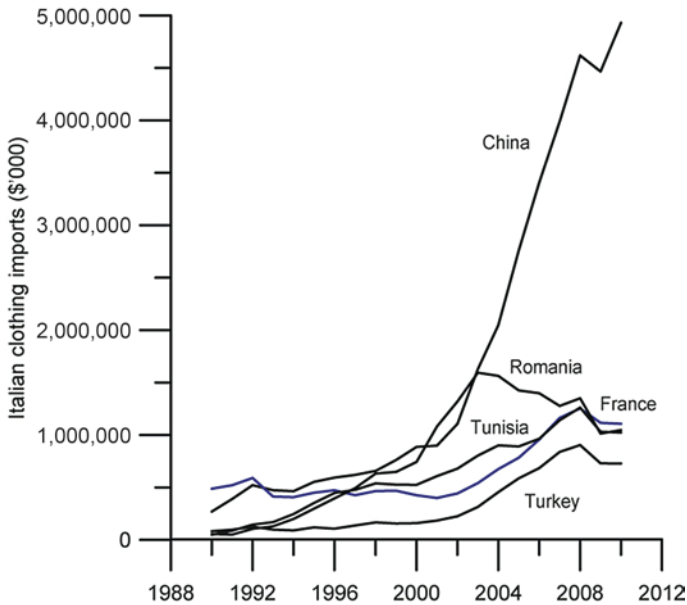


Fig. 2.2 Geography of Italian clothing imports, 1988–2012

Source: Dunford et al. (2013)

Two other crucial shifts affected the Italian fashion industry and contributed to trigger the restructuring of the value chains: the transformation of the distribution system and the emergence of fast fashion strategies.

### 2.6.2 *Changes in the Distribution Order*

A big shift has taken place in the last decades in the fashion distribution order. By now, the most valuable activities in the apparel value chain are not related to manufacturing *per se*, but are found in the design, branding, and marketing of the products.

These services are subject to strong potential economies of scale, as design and advertising costs can be spread over a larger volume of sales. They are also subject to simultaneous as opposed to sequential economies of scope, as the costs of advertising and marketing can be spread across a range of fashion products such as clothes, shoes, and eyewear. These scale and scope economies confer competitive advantages on large groups (Dunford 2006).

In the past, a relatively powerful clothing industry sold clothing to a distribution sector mostly composed of wholesalers and small and medium retailers. Today, design, branding, and distribution activities are increasingly in the hands of a small number of lead firms, which are large global retailers and brand owners in the apparel industry. In most cases, these lead firms outsource the manufacturing process to a global network of suppliers and are able to put the upstream part of the chain under growing pressure (Dunford 2006; Gereffi and Frederick 2010).

Overall, the system has therefore changed from one that was producer driven to one that is customer driven, where the customers are large distributors/retailers (Dunford 2006). The ability to drive supply chains has thus shifted the power from manufacturers to retailers, now able to dictate ordering and delivery schedules and to shift the distribution of value added in their favor.

In the current distributive order in the apparel industry, there are different types of actors, including the traditional independent retailers, large department stores and specialized chain stores.<sup>12</sup> The mix of retailing segments varies greatly among countries. Findings in Doeringer et al. (2009: 7) show that independent retailers are no longer significant in the United States where large retail chains now dominate the markets and exercise considerable economic power within clothing supply chains; in the UK specialty stores (including retailers such as H&M) have the largest share of the retail clothing market, followed by mid-market variety stores such as Marks & Spencer. France is cited as the extreme example of the effects of new retailing trends on national garment industries. In the 1980s, new mass market specialty chains, such as Camaieu and Etam, specializing in short-cycle products have revolutionized clothing retailing by outsourcing production and thus being able to offer fashionable-looking garments at relatively modest prices.

Until recently, Italy has represented the major exception to the US and European pattern in that it did not experience the rise of mass merchandizers and new specialty chains that in other Western countries heavily contributed to a change in sourcing practices and an increase in imports. In Italy, independent retailers remained the single most important retailing segment, although with a decreasing market share: almost 66 percent in 1993, 56 percent in 2000 (Dunford 2006) and 48 percent in 2008 (Doeringer et al. 2009). Specialty chains such as Benetton and Max Mara and large department stores such as Coin have been gaining market share but accounted for less than 20 percent each of clothing sales in 2005.

In Italy, the existence of a strong independent retail sector provided a buffer against import penetration until the 2000s. However, recently Italy too has experienced entry by large and aggressive mass market retailers. Large distributors already established in other European countries were able to gain a growing foothold in the fashion industry in Italy. This process of passive internationalization has taken place with the arrival on the Italian scene of large distributors such as Swedish H&M, Spanish Zara, and French Etam. These distributors take charge of design and the purchase of semi-finished products thus taking over functions traditionally performed by manufacturers. In addition, differently from the past, they specify product characteristics and prices for suppliers in global supply chains. Dunford et al. (2013: 21) point out that these distributors establish two types of supply chain: short and agile chains with geographically and culturally close suppliers, so that logistics' costs and time to market can be decreased; and global chains created to reduce costs and maximize margins in which the fashion content is often reduced.

The growing concentration of retailing, the increasing purchasing power of distributors, and the shift from producer- to buyer-driven value chains have had a strong impact on the Italian national scene. Dunford (2006) argues that these factors have placed many Italian enterprises and regional economies under threat.

According to Tokatli (2008), international retailers of clothing are the key drivers of the globalization in the clothing industry: they fuel globalization via global sourcing thereby contributing to the flight of manufacturing jobs from the West (also see Gereffi et al. 2005).

### 2.6.3 *The Emergence of Fast Fashion*

Fast fashion is a business strategy developed in Europe to serve markets for people who want trendy and relatively inexpensive clothing. The key ingredient of fast fashion is the ability to track consumer preferences quickly and to identify potentially popular new designs through daily proximity to fashion markets, fashion images, and fashion makers.

Fast refers to design, sourcing, production, and marketing. In fact, design capability is coupled to supply chains that are required to quickly obtain fabrics, manufacture samples, and start marketing products with far shorter lead times than those of the traditional production calendar.

In the past, garments were produced in a programmed way. Firms with a programmed or semi-programmed calendar established the collection

well in advance of the sales season and programmed their production based on the order received. Fashion firms used to produce two main collections a year: spring/summer and autumn/winter (Bigarelli and Solinas 2003). Programmed and semi-programmed firms still exist but, more recently, a growing number of brands began competing against each other for market share by introducing more lines a year at lower costs. The number of collections has increased and a larger number of products are offered to drive sales. A fast fashion industry has thus emerged that adopts a faster and more flexible production strategy in order to reduce the time to market.

Financial outlay on forward orders is thus reduced and decisions about the fashion items can be delayed until much later in the season. In order to quicken the productive process, fabrics are kept in a greige state (unbleached and undyed) so that design choices among colors, fabric finishes and trimmings can be made at the very end of the production process (Doeringer 2012).

Thus, dyeing and finishing occupy a crucial position in the fast fashion mode of production, one that highly increases flexibility of the production line. In Chap. 4, I will show that in Prato the Chinese migrants have become the owners of dyeing and finishing firms exactly because this makes it possible for the fast fashion producers to quickly react to shifts in the perishable fashion market.

Additionally, delivery times are drastically reduced. In this way, fast fashion producers are able to react to the market quickly and deliver ‘on-trend’ items (Siegle 2011).

New production and marketing strategies have been honed, with fashion items produced in smaller batches, quickly replaced by newer models limited in number that quickly disappear from the shops’ shelves to make room for new entries.

‘Faster’ and ‘more flexible’ have therefore become the pervasive catchwords in the textile and clothing industries, including to a certain extent, the high end and luxury market, once allergic to the word ‘fast’. Some luxury fashion brands now offer lower priced lines under their own sub-brands and in general they are also working more ‘seasonless’ than before (Memic and Minhas 2011).

With the emerging of fast fashion, the historic split between cheap mass products creating value from economies of scale and more expensive customized products has been significantly reduced. Researchers argue that this trend will continue and become the main production mode in the next decades with a mass personalization of low-cost products on demand (Foresight 2013).<sup>13</sup>

The emergence of fast fashion strategies is crucial for understanding the economic emplacement of Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry. In fact, one of the key drivers of their success as contractors lays in their ability to interpret the imperatives of fast fashion through a dire restructuring of the space and time of production. This will be the subject of the next chapters.

## 2.7 THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE VALUE CHAIN BY OFFSHORING

In the past, Italian firms had been able to obtain cost advantages through the outsourcing of manufacturing operations to micro-enterprises, in particular in industrial districts and later in domestic peripheries in the south where contractors ready to accept low pay could be easily found. Starting from the late 1980s, in response to the shocks of globalization, larger Italian clothing manufacturers undertook the restructuring of the supply chain first by replacing domestic contractors with overseas contractors and later through foreign direct investments, mainly in Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) (Graziani 1998). They were thus able to mobilize labor through offshoring.

In a changing global scenario,<sup>14</sup> EU customs and trade policies have played a central role in stimulating industrial outsourcing to CEEC, and particularly the tariff arrangement known as Outward Processing Trade (OTP). With limited exceptions, the first phase of international relocation in low-wage countries by Italian firms took the form of international subcontracting, which often involved the export of semi-finished products and the reimport of finished ones under the Outward Processing Traffic (OPT).<sup>15</sup> Baldone et al. (2001), Crestanello and Tattara (2006, 2011), and Doeringer et al. (2009), among others, point out that OPT arrangements were convenient for Italian enterprises as a means for driving down costs and increasing profitability.

Italy's presence in international markets had been very limited until then. Graziani (1998) argues that the success of Italian industrial clusters was among the reasons why the process of international relocation from Italian districts started only in the mid-1980s, later than other EU countries. Late offshoring was attributed to the very structure of Italian industrial districts with their large number of small firms, often family-run, and the shelter from competition provided by a fragmented retail network in the Italian market.

In the first phase, the easiest tasks of the productive process were relocated abroad. Later on, however, clothing manufacturers undertook to relocate the more complex operations. Relocation to CEEC was chosen not only because of lower labor costs for which countries in East Asia could be preferred but also because of geographical and cultural proximity. Geographical proximity was considered critical because rapid delivery is a central feature of flexibility, one of the industry's main competitive factors.<sup>16</sup>

Until the end of the 1990s, processes of relocation in the textile industry have been limited compared to the more pervasive relocation of the clothing one. In fact, in the textile industry, capital- and technology-intensive processes afforded more protection against competition based on low wages (Dunford 2006). However, the need for the textile and clothing industries to be geographically close, to a certain extent, has pulled relocation also in the textile sector (Graziani 1998).

In addition to increased competition from emerging countries, the transfer of manufacturing to areas with preferential trade arrangements, such as the CEEC, is believed to be one crucial reason for a decline in domestic value added and a sharp decline in domestic employment. Moreover, analysts have pointed out that the restructuring of the supply chain of leading enterprises to include offshore operations has reduced the coherence of districts, thus increasing the exposure and vulnerability of micro-enterprises (Dunford et al. 2013: 20). Given that a central feature of the geography of the Italian fashion industry is its concentration in industrial clusters, the effects have been heavily perceived in the entire industry.

## 2.8 THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE VALUE CHAIN BY INCORPORATION OF MIGRANT WORK

Relocation abroad was not for everybody. Only lead firms who could develop their supply chain abroad were able to seize the opportunity of cheap production costs in Eastern Europe (Chiarvesio et al. 2010).<sup>17</sup> As stated above, the vast majority of firms in the Italian textile and clothing industry and in general in Italian industrial districts, are small- and micro-enterprises.<sup>18</sup> Due to their small size and limited research and managerial capabilities, they could not afford delocalization.

In his book *Story of my People*, Edoardo Nesi (2012), the former Prato textile entrepreneur who was quoted in the prologue, vividly shows to what extent the global arena was out of reach for the small and very small entrepreneurs in Prato and in other IDs characterized by micro-businesses:

*[...] our small scale industrialists, manufacturers of fabrics and shoes, bathroom fixtures and household appliances and ceramic tiles and so on, had neither the money nor the lines of credit from banks, nor the ambition nor the luxury, neither the personnel nor the talent, nor the courage nor the recklessness, and neither the vision nor the faith in the future to risk everything they'd built up until that moment, having started out with so little and having been blessed by such great good fortune; [...] it was ridiculous even to think that an industrial system of small manufacturers could board a plane and move to the opposite side of the planet and shoot up in size over the course of just a few short years, as if there existed some magic yeast capable of causing revenue, bank accounts, workforce, manufacturing structure, business skills, and ambitions to grow miraculously.* (Nesi 2012: 136)

Thus, smaller firms were able to keep the costs down mainly by attracting low-skilled migrants, whose arrival was favored by the enactment of migration laws/amnesties.

A crucial change in the Italian system of small firms mainly clustered in industrial districts, thus, is the mass arrival of migrants. Starting from the late 1970s and gaining momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, migrants were increasingly employed as workforce in the Italian manufacturing sectors. Migrant labor has contributed to keeping the costs down for those manufacturers that were not able to relocate production abroad. According to a recent study, the 2008 crisis greatly reduced the number of native workers employed in the fashion industry but immigrant employment were affected much less (Ares 2.0 2014).

Available data shows that by 2012, the number of migrants employed in the textile and clothing sectors in Italy was 38,927, making up 11.2 percent of the total. In the leather and shoes sector migrants made up 14 percent in the same year. Self-employment was significantly less widespread among migrants than natives: 80 percent of all foreigners in textile and clothing were employed as workers; besides they were employed in lower positions than natives (Ares 2.0 2014).

However, over time migrants have been able to gain access to the role of entrepreneurs. Data show that in 2012 almost 20 percent of the total firms active in the fashion industry were run by foreigners (20,215 businesses



out of the total 106,093).<sup>19</sup> The clothing sector had the highest percentage, amounting to 24 percent of the total number of firms in Italy (13,980 units), while shoes and leather totaled 17.1 percent of the total (4523), and textiles 8 percent (1712) (Ares 2.0 2014).

If migrants' country of origin is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that Chinese migrants make up the majority of migrant population in the Italian fashion industry. Migrants from China stand out as in 2012 they made up 47 percent of all migrants active in the industry. Moreover, two out of three immigrant entrepreneurs were Chinese, totaling 17,570 registered entrepreneurs (Ares 2.0 2014).

This, however, is a most conservative estimate, as it does not include the whole migrant population. First, some of the employed migrants are undocumented or irregularly employed<sup>20</sup>; second, data only refer to migrants holding a 'residence', and these are only part of the larger population of documented migrants as migrants can hold a 'permit to stay' without being registered residents (Ares 2.0 2014).

In the next chapter, I will provide statistics only focusing on Chinese immigrants in fashion IDs, showing that in those areas their presence is even more pervasive.

I find interesting a consideration offered by Dei Ottati (2014) who highlights a crucial difference in migrant entrepreneurship in urban and district areas in Italy. In large cities such as Rome and Milan, she argues, firms run by foreigners are mainly engaged in tertiary activities with a high intensity of unskilled labor (also see Sassen 1991). However, in industrial districts the workforce includes a larger share of skilled workers, as the immigrant firms acting as contractors gradually acquire the skills required in the specialization sector of the district in question.

## 2.9 IMPLICATIONS OF GLOBAL SHIFTS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

With the restructuring measures discussed above, the Italian fashion landscape changed radically in terms of employment of a migrant workforce, adaptation to the new global distribution order, and introduction of the fast fashion strategy.

Since the 1980s, migrant labor and to a certain extent migrant entrepreneurship, has become a regular feature of the fashion industry in Italy. The Italian fashion industry was thus moving closer to that of other Western

countries where, since long before, the clothing industry had relied on successive waves of immigration from different parts of the world, both in periods of expansion and in times of mere survival (Green 1997; Rath 2002).

Unskilled and often undocumented migrant work, with its vulnerabilities, engendered worsened working conditions, lower salaries, and a more docile workforce.

It is interesting to note that not only the inclusion of migrant work but also restructuring by offshoring has contributed to the erosion of existing social compromises in Italy. A side effect of the relocation of unskilled jobs, in fact, was an increased flexibility of the workforce in Italy. In the face of delocalization, companies delocalizing unskilled jobs to create parallel (rather than replace) structures could secure concessions from the government, trade unions and ultimately the employees. Dunford (2006: 28) shows that large numbers of agreements introducing previously unthinkable and not negotiable arrangements such as night work and Sunday work, also for women, have been signed in the companies' headquarters in Italy. A trade unionist explained:

*Trades unions are more flexible when you have a plant in another country. It is not a kind of blackmail. It is a fact. It is because of the existence of alternatives, [...] (of) the possibility to make choices. As a result, we have results in the last eighteen months that two years ago would have been impossible. There is much greater labor flexibility. Women work nights. Night working had been requested but was not achieved. In one plant we increased annual hours, and increased flexibility, including Sunday and night working, with no increase in the wage bill. (Dunford 2006: 28)*

Whilst the issue of a general worsening of working conditions in the Italian fashion industry engendered by global shifts is not the central concern of this study, the process described above is important. In fact, while in Prato and other fashion districts Chinese employers are accused of trampling on the most basic rights of workers, the statement by the trade unionist makes it clear that the erosion of workers' rights is more generally linked to processes of delocalization and restructuring of production.<sup>21</sup>

Shifts in global distribution have affected small and big national players in different ways. On the one hand, Italian top-end designers realized that in a completely changed fashion context, only by controlling the entire value chain, including production, advertising, and marketing, would they be able to drive the global market. It therefore became imperative for

them to be involved in distribution and to acquire the financial resources needed to grow. Cost compression also emerged as an important driver of fashion success across all market segments. On the other hand, as the grip of distributors and their supply chains strengthened, many Italian micro-enterprises were forced to close (Dunford et al. 2013: 22).

The introduction of fast fashion strategies is one of the big changes taking place in the global fashion industry. This seminal change is usually associated with the global retailers that since the late 1990s have changed the rules of the game in production and distribution practices. However, some two decades before the fast fashion strategy was adopted worldwide, Italy already had a variant of street fashion, known as *pronto moda* (literally, ready fashion).

Interestingly, in the late 1980s, when the *pronto moda* time to market<sup>22</sup> was being drastically reduced, the Chinese migrants started settling in Prato as contractors. Thus, the needs of the fast fashion met with and contributed to shape Chinese migrants' mode of emplacement in Prato. The diffusion of the fast fashion mode of production has been one crucial driver of the success of Chinese migrants in Prato. I contend that a unique form of synergy has emerged between the requirements of fast fashion production and the space reorganization of production adopted in the Chinese workshops. The outcome has been the emergence of a new labor regime in the network of Chinese contracting businesses, which I term 'the mobile regime' (Ceccagno 2015) that embodies the principles of fast fashion and pushes the frontiers of flexibility farther ahead of every pre-existing productive system.

Finally, as discussed above, the rise of China as a global leader in fashion export has been a crucial factor in the Italian fashion industry's loss of competitiveness. In an Italian national context where Krizia, a famous high end clothing brand, has recently sold its trademark and activities to Chinese businesses, and where growing numbers of well-known brands such as Prada increase their manufacturing of product in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the popular perception of China in Italy is one where China is the stiff and unprincipled competitor in sectors where Italy was once a world leader. Anger at China as the winner that has taken over the Italian role and heavily contributed to the country's impoverishment is a sentiment widespread among the populace throughout the country since the mid-2000s, and translates into different forms of distrust and sometimes hostilities toward China. These include politicians and economists taking a stance against China's dumping practices (see for example Fortis 2005)<sup>23</sup>;

cultural products such as movies or novels that depict China as an invading alien; and conceptualizations that link the success of the Chinese migrants living and working in Italy mainly to their connections to their motherland and its global economic rise.

This attitude toward China is in stark contrast with the Italian reactions to the recent intensive waves of Chinese investments in Italy, including the Chinese acquisition of stakes in Pirelli, a multinational manufacturer of tires based in Milan. According to Goldstein (2015), public opinion in Italy is accepting Chinese investments in a calmer way than in other European and Western countries, where the ‘China challenge’ is regularly criticized.<sup>24</sup>

In the next sections, I will introduce the crucial shifts in the mobility regimes in Italy and China that starting in the 1980s have created the institutional, economic, and discursive conditions for international mobility.

## 2.10 THE ITALIAN REGIME OF MOBILITY

Filtering, selecting, and channeling migratory movements, rather than simply excluding migrants, is a crucial aim of contemporary migration regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). In fact, control of labor mobility is one key stake where the expanding frontiers of capital intertwine with the national political and legal sovereignty.

There are 5,364,000 legal immigrants in Italy, or roughly 8.7 percent of Italy’s population of 60 million (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2014). The five main migrant areas of origin are Romania (933,000), Morocco (525,000), Albania (503,000), China (321,000), and Ukraine (234,000).

Since the 1980s, when Italy found itself transformed almost overnight from a country of emigrants to a net receiver of immigrants,<sup>25</sup> the Italian migration regime has shaped the conditions under which border crossing is possible and actually experienced.

Since 1997, forecasting of labor market needs in Italy takes place through the Excelsior surveys, conducted by Unioncamere (the national Union of Chambers of Commerce) and funded by the Ministry of Labor. One crucial role played by this institution is to assess the actual needs of the Italian enterprises, including the need of immigrant work (Unioncamere 2015). Thus, the Excelsior surveys and database have played a crucial role in relation to immigration policies. For instance, according to one such survey, 22.2–33.3 percent of all native entrepreneurs’ requests for new workforce employment in 2002 were aimed at attracting an immigrant workforce (Unioncamere 2003).

Over the last 30 years, Italian immigration laws have been clearly and overtly devised and enacted with the aim of helping the Italian industrial system to find cheap labor.

As a result, most migrants in Italy are either unskilled or employed in jobs mismatching their educational attainments. The overwhelming majority of migrants (87.1 percent of the 2.4 million officially employed migrants) work as employees (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2014). Migrants with the same educational and working background of natives have a probability of being employed in a job mismatching their educational attainments that is double than for male natives and eight times higher than female natives (Reyneri 2011). In 2013, only 6.1 percent of migrants had a qualified job (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2014).

Moreover, Italy has attracted large numbers of undocumented workers. It has been argued that the widespread recourse to the so-called ‘underground economy’ has been a major factor in promoting unauthorized immigration (Reyneri 1998). This is because unauthorized migrants tend to enter countries where it is easier for them to live and work for a long period of time without a permit to stay. Migrants’ expectations that a new amnesty could legalize their presence were realistic in Italy. In fact, immigration laws that in actual fact have mainly taken the form of amnesties have been promulgated repeatedly, in 1986, 1990, 1995, 1998, and 2002. A quota system has been adopted since 1998.

The crucial point is that the laws and regulations in Italy make it much easier for firms who intend to hire an ‘off-the-books’ workforce to hire undocumented migrant workers than those who hold a permit to stay. In fact, if the irregular employment is discovered by the authorities, employers have to pay a relatively modest fine for employing undocumented workers; but in the case where they employ migrants holding a permit to stay they have to pay all social contributions, amounting to a much higher sum of money (Dal Lago 1998). Thus, the national regime of mobility in Italy is designed in a way that off-the-books practices and migrant conditions of extreme vulnerability are not tackled effectively.

## 2.11 THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF AMNESTIES

Moreover each amnesty, although avowedly designed to remedy the perverse effects of officially closed borders—that is, the formation of pockets of undocumented workers—attracts a fresh wave of immigrants (Ambrosini 2001), Chinese migrants among them. I have personally

witnessed the amnesties' non-declared effect of attracting additional undocumented migrants in many instances during my work at the Center in Prato from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. In particular, one day in September 2002, I was walking down the street in Prato when I saw many Chinese queuing up and forming such a long line that police officers arrived on the scene because the street traffic was obstructed. (The day after it was estimated by local government that some 3000 Chinese had been queuing.) The queue stopped in front of an *en plain air* table in a small clearing of the street where some other Chinese were inspecting the documents of those first in line. I had never seen anything like this before, so I approached several people in the queue and asked them who they were and why so many people were waiting in the line. I discovered that the table was a sort of temporary office hurriedly opened by the Florence Chinese Consulate to accommodate the unexpectedly high number of passport applications. A passport is a precondition to qualify for amnesties. Those in the queue were undocumented workers already present in Italy, but many of them had just arrived from France, the Netherlands, Spain, and other European countries attracted by the prospect of legalization.

In general, most Italian amnesties were widely preannounced and information circulated among immigrants in Italy and their relatives in the countries of origin and elsewhere in Europe. It was not uncommon for those providing services to migrants at the Center in Prato to learn of the upcoming amnesty from migrants before the news reached the Italian media.

An in-depth discussion of the features of each immigration law in Italy is beyond the scope of this work. Here I simply highlight those aspects of the migration regime that are crucial in increasing migrants' vulnerability, and forging divisions within and stratification among migrants sharing the same national background.

For instance, the 1995 and 1998 laws introduced the notion of 'sponsors' that is, firms or persons that could invite a limited number of migrants to work for them. The 1995 amnesty only made it possible to legalize the presence of migrants as employees, as self-employment was prohibited. The 1998 amnesty freed access to self-employment; at the same time, it put a great responsibility on employers who were required to commit themselves to hiring workers on an open-ended or fixed-term contract lasting at least one year.

Thus, these amnesties stand as clear examples of a regime of mobility that filters and channels migratory movements in ways that trust power in

some and make others depending on the will of those empowered by the law. Research has shown that by introducing the notion of the ‘sponsor’ the amnesties contributed to strengthen the power of both native and migrant employers and increase the vulnerability of migrant workers (Ceccagno and Omodeo 1997).

Overall, the ‘sponsor’ mechanism significantly contributed to widening the socioeconomic divide within migrants and strengthened the employees’ dependence on the employers sponsoring them. Empirical evidence shows that this provision in the 1995 and 1998 immigration laws exposed immigrants wishing to regularize their condition to highly vulnerable situations and even to blackmail. According to information collected among migrants at the Center in Prato, significant sums of money were the conditions posed by most employers in exchange for legalization. In some cases, sponsors even required years of unpaid labor and asked the workers to agree to remain in the job for prolonged periods, so that their dependency continued even after they had regularized their status (Ceccagno and Omodeo 1997).<sup>26</sup> Thus, immigration laws have stimulated or aggravated some illicit practices involving natives and immigrants (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008; Ceccagno et al. 2010).

Research shows that in 2000 and 2001 when the sponsoring mechanism of the 1998 migration law was implemented, most sponsoring employers were migrants (Fasano and Zucchini 2002; Caritas 2002). As a result, tensions emerged especially in the areas with a high concentration of migrants employed by co-nationals. During the 1995 amnesty, for example, Chinese employers in Prato who could only sponsor up to two workers were not able to legalize the mass of undocumented workers that had arrived during the previous years. This aroused widespread conflict between the limited number of employers and the many employees expecting to be legalized (Ceccagno and Omodeo 1997; Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008).<sup>27</sup>

All in all, Italian immigration laws, while favoring the arrival and, over time, the regularization of a migrant workforce, often clashed with conditions and practices prevailing in the workplace, and in society at large. In many instances they have fueled conflicts and even favored widespread illegal practices in society such as forging identity, employment and housing documents, as highlighted by empirical research (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008; Ceccagno et al. 2010).

## 2.12 CHINESE MIGRATION TO EUROPE

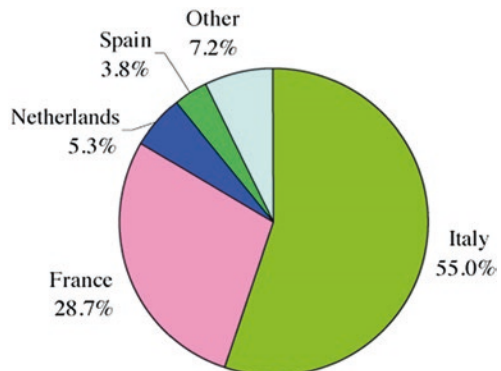
In the early 1980s, while Italy was shattered by global shifts it could not control nor ignore, China was undergoing political and economic reforms. These included a shift on emigration policies whereby emigration was officially decriminalized and a process of institutionalization of emigration from the PRC was started (for an overview of the policies pursued by the PRC regarding emigration of Chinese nationals see Thunø 2003; Xiang 2003). After a hiatus of more than 30 years, migration re-started and was directed to not only the traditional destinations in the USA, Australia, and Southeast Asia, but also to Europe.

The *xin yimin*, ‘new migrants’<sup>28</sup> came to Europe from traditional overseas home areas, including localities with a history of specialization in Europe, chiefly rural villages around Wenzhou, in southern Zhejiang province; areas that did not have a history of migration to Europe such as the Fuzhou area in Central Fujian province; and increasingly from areas with no history of overseas migration at all, for example the Sanming area in western Fujian (Pieke et al. 2004: 72).<sup>29</sup> Later on, migrants originating from Northeast China also arrived in Europe.

Europe was the major destination for Wenzhou emigrants in the economic reform period. This is partly because migratory chains were easier to reforge with the Wenzhou migrants that had settled in Europe since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Thunø 2007; see Farina et al. 1997 for a history of the Wenzhouese migrants in Italy since the 1920s).

Italy is by far the most popular destination in the EU for Chinese originating from the Wenzhou area in southern Zhejiang province, hosting over half of overseas Wenzhouese (Wu and Zanin 2007), as shown in Fig. 2.3.

**Fig. 2.3** Destination of Wenzhouese migration (2005)  
Source: Wu and Zanin (2007)





Migration from the Fujian province to Europe was first put in motion through the connections of Fujianese people with migrants from the neighboring Zhejiang province (Pieke et al. 2004).

In the 1990s, a different migration pattern emerged with migrants from the northeast provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang (hereafter Dongbei). These migrants left China for Europe following the restructuring of state enterprises in China (Kernen and Rocca 1998).

Migration was actively supported by the Chinese state through various political decisions, organizations, and activities (Barabantseva 2005). The critically important role of the state and the local governments in enabling migratory flows from China is discussed by Pieke, myself, and other colleagues (Pieke et al. 2004). For instance, in the 1990s the export of labor became a top priority for the county authorities in Mingxi County in the interior of Fujian province. Local authorities thus self-consciously engaged in giving political recognition to migrants and supporting outmigration, mainly in the form of vocational training classes on skills relevant to would-be migrants.

In sending areas in Zhejiang and Fujian a dominant discourse of international migration as the avenue and marker of success began to emerge in which migration was equated with modernity and progress. Migrants were turned into ‘models’ to be emulated. Starting from the mid-1990s, China developed a national official narrative that valorized migrants as bearers of modernity (see Nyíri 2001; Pieke et al. 2004). The dominant discourse stigmatized local alternatives to emigration as second-rate or even a sign of failure (Pieke et al. 2004: 194). This new approach to international migration has played a crucial role in forging Chinese migrants’ self-perception as it implies that their migration project is in line with the values of the dominant discourse of Chinese modernization.

Originally a destination of marginal importance with little allure, Europe gained attractiveness for Chinese emigrants as a consequence of sweeping political and economic developments: the collapse of the Soviet bloc opened up new previously inaccessible areas in Russia and in the member countries of the former Soviet union; the enlargement and consolidation of the European Union favored the circulation of workforce, alongside goods and capital; growing demand for flexible labor in the era of globalized markets also played a crucial role (Pieke et al. 2004). In particular, the transformation of southern Europe from a labor exporting to a labor importing region also helped to widen the potential for settlement.

Thus, by the turn of the 1990s all of Europe from Moscow to Dublin to Lisbon had become a single chessboard of opportunities for Chinese emigrants where the new immigrants could pursue their family-based strategies of settlement and accumulation of economic and social capital (for a description of the Chinese presence in the European countries see Ceccagno 2003a, b; Giese 2003; Lackzo 2003; Nieto 2003; Pina-Guerassimoff 2003; Pieke et al. 2004). Additionally, in the 1980s, Europe was interesting because immigrant policies based on family reunion schemes were more lenient in Western Europe, as opposed to those in South-east Asia (Li 1999: 188–189).

Thus, growing numbers of Chinese migrants could be found not only in London, Paris and Rotterdam, the traditional cities of settlement of the Chinese diaspora, but also in Budapest and Prato that over time became strongholds of the Chinese presence in Europe, the first as a prominent commercial hub (Nyíri 2003), and the second as the center for fashion manufacturing.

### 2.13 OCCUPATIONAL ROLES FOR MIGRANTS FROM DIFFERENT HOME AREAS IN CHINA

With the global shifts described above, opportunities for a low-skilled immigrant labor force opened in Italy, mainly in industrial districts, and the Chinese were among the newly arrived migrants.

In the mid-1980s, as soon as China introduced regulations that facilitated emigration, Chinese workers hailing from the mountain villages surrounding Wenzhou prefecture in Zhejiang province started arriving in Italy. These were mostly uneducated young people from rural areas. From their perspective, Italy had a lot to offer. First, frequent amnesties made it a desirable migration destination. Second, Italian industrial districts are places that traditionally had attracted (native) newcomers with the promise of quick upward mobility. With their small-firm-dominated diffuse production model, Italian industrial clusters were the ideal place where uneducated and unskilled Chinese migrants who dreamed of becoming self-employers could become affluent quickly. Instant upward mobility, in fact, was increasingly crucial for the Chinese migrants as it was also commanded by the Chinese ideology celebrating migrants as bearers of modernity. This ideology added to the strong pressure to aspire to and realize fast economic success (Pieke et al. 2004).

Over time, the network of relationships at their command and their ability to interpret and interact with the territory enabled the migrants from Zhejiang province to grasp the burgeoning opportunities sooner and better than others. From their ranks come the large majority of those who have started their own contracting businesses and, in general, those who have succeeded in diversifying their activities.

Additionally, in Prato, it was the entrepreneurs from Wenzhou who were able to make the leap from being contractors to manufacturers in the second half of the 1990s. This phenomenon was unique to Prato.

Chinese migrants from Zhejiang province made up more than 90 percent of all Chinese migrants in Italy in the 1980s, and at least 80 percent of the total in the 2000s (Ceccagno 2003b). It is estimated that in the 2010s they still make up between 70 and 80 percent of the Chinese population in the country (Latham and Wu 2013).

Over the years, the arrival of new waves of workers from different home areas of China has modified the composition of the Chinese workforce in Italy.

Chinese from Fujian province began to arrive in Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They originated both from the coastal area, mainly the prefecture of Fuqing, and from Central Fujian, mainly the prefecture of Sanming (Pieke et al. 2004). In Italy, the natives of Fujian entered into the productive activities established by their co-nationals from Zhejiang, adopting the existing working patterns. Until the mid-1990s, virtually none of the Fujianese had access to self-employment: they were nearly all undocumented workers and they filled the lowest positions in Zhejianese firms (Ceccagno 2007a). Many regularized their position with the 1995 and 1998 amnesties and began opening small businesses of their own, employing whenever possible workers from their home areas.

Migrants originating from Northeast China started arriving in Italy only from the mid-1990s (Ceccagno 2003b; Tolu 2003). As state-owned enterprises in Northeast China were closing down or being downsized, many urban workers, mostly women, chose emigration as a way to escape unemployment and poverty at home. In their wake rural dwellers also followed. In the Italian fashion districts, these latecomers who could not count on extensive networks were relegated to the bottom positions in the Chinese-run contracting firms, or else they looked for employment outside of the Chinese contracting networks. Moreover, many migrant women from Northeast China acted as nanny to Chinese employers, or else entered the ring of prostitution (Tolu 2003).

Two major phases can be singled out in the 30 years of new Chinese migrants' presence in Italy. The first phase, from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, constitutes the early phase of arrival and settlement. In those years, the vast majority of Chinese migrants' emplacement in Italy took place within productive activities in a limited number of industrial districts. Prato was the first industrial cluster where the Chinese migrants settled.

From the turn of the twenty-first century, with the rise of China as a global producer and exporter of goods, new pathways of emplacement emerged for its migrants as importers and traders of inexpensive goods into their countries of settlement in Europe, including Italy (Ceccagno 2007b). The modes of settlement of the Chinese migrants in Prato and in other Italian fashion districts will be discussed in the next chapters.

## 2.14 CONCLUSIONS

With some rare exceptions, accounts of the Italian textile and clothing industry often omit discussing the role played by migrants. Research tends to deal with only one single topic, such as changing fashion trends, or the destiny of industrial districts, or immigration laws and policies and migrant inclusion in Italy. The multiple links that hold together the fashion industry, its restructuring and the opportunities and constraints for migrants, including the ways in which borders are created or reinforced in manners that favor the entry of certain types of migrants and shape the opportunities of their economic emplacement, are often overlooked.

My analysis brings together topics usually separated out and shows that they are intertwined. This chapter brings together topics such as: (1) changing structures of production, demand and distribution of textile and clothing globally over time; (2) evolution of the Italian districts from role models acclaimed internationally to socioeconomic entities essentially unable to cope with, nor take advantage of global shifts; (3) regimes of mobility in Italy, including the way in which migrants' entry and incorporation into the labor market are channeled in ways that favor the needs of the industries; and (4) demands for labor originating from China in a context of changing global labor regimes. It shows that the cumulative effects of global shifts have engendered actions and reactions with lasting effects on the IDs, the Italian fashion industry, and the modes of inclusion of migrants.

From the mid-1990s, and especially during the 2000s, the Italian fashion industry has been declining, with a sharp fall in output and jobs.

This chapter offers an overview of the epochal changes that have taken place in the global fashion industry.

Analysts suggest that the decline in the competitiveness of Italian industrial districts is mainly due to an insufficient rapid adaptation to the changing conditions of international competition. Dunford and Greco (2006) point out that this happened because some crucial global shifts such as the global restructuring of the value chain through offshoring and the power of global retailers basically established a pattern opposed to the pathway dominant in most Italian districts. In fact, while the global value chain was becoming the dominant production organization, and countries such as China were gaining leadership positions because they were able ‘to turn scale-driven specialization into a persistent competitive advantage for the country’ (Gereffi and Lee 2012), Italian clusters still counted on a high degree of firms’ local embeddedness. Moreover, while competitive advantages were gained through product and process innovation, the Italian state still supported small firms mainly active in mature sectors.

Thus this chapter documents the persistence over time of a national policy that tends to perpetuate, and to a certain extent protect, clusters of small firms as a peculiar feature of the county.

Finally, the chapter shows that the Italian regime of mobility actively filtered and channeled immigration through immigrations laws that attracted an unskilled and often vulnerable immigrant workforce that could enable Italian small and medium firms to withstand the shocks of globalization.

## NOTES

1. The fashion districts are those producing textile and clothing, shoes and leather goods, and home furnishing (see below).
2. The industrial district or cluster concept has been developed by Alfred Marshall, who defined it as a concentration of large numbers of small businesses of a similar kind in the same locality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a review of the different conceptions and definitions of industrial districts and clusters adopted over time by scholars and policymakers.
3. The craft sector finds its roots in the preindustrial arts and crafts, and in the guilds that defended them. Essentially crafts are entrepreneurial activities centered on the work of skilled individual-artisan-entrepreneurs. They are legally defined as individual, family-run, or limited firms. Craft enterprises may have a maximum number of employees that differs according to the sector of activity: in clothing it is 40 (Law 443/1985 and 133/1997, see Dunford and Greco 2006).

4. Medium and large enterprises that were not considered part of IDs in the 1991 law and therefore had not been able to access subsidies, were now included. Additionally, firms that were not active in manufacturing were included in the 1991 law.
5. The measurement of the industrial district phenomenon imposes approximations that are higher than those incurred in measuring other economic activities. In the framework of ISTAT activities, Sforzi (1997) has collected municipality-level data and produced a systematic classification of Italian industrial districts.
6. A discussion on the changing role of industrial districts in the Italian economy is outside the scope of this work.
7. My translation from Italian.
8. See Noor et al. (2008), on the role played by Italian enterprises in technological advances in the so-called mature industries.
9. In 1974, textile and clothing quotas were negotiated bilaterally and governed by the rules of the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA). This provided for the application of quotas on imports under a special regime outside normal GATT rules. On 1 January 1995, it was replaced by the WTO Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, which set out a ten-year (1995–2004) transitional process for the ultimate removal of these quotas (WTO 2014).
10. Gereffi and Frederick (2010: 24) point out that China has increased its dominant position in all of the major industrial economies (the United States, the European Union, and Japan) and has also diversified its export reach by gaining ground in many of the world's top emerging economies as well, such as Russia for finished goods, and India, Brazil and Turkey for intermediate goods, such as textiles.
11. This does not apply to Chinese workers in the Italian fashion industry, whose number has constantly increased over the years, see the next chapter.
12. Alongside these established distributive actors, new modes of distribution include factory shops, telesales, other distance multimedia sales, and shops equipped with computers to sell made-to-measure clothes (Dunford 2006). The rising success of e-commerce accounts for a sweeping change in apparel retailing.
13. Recently, researchers and opinion leaders have started shedding light on the social, environmental and ethic consequences of fast fashion and its globally dispersed supply chain (see for example Siegle 2011; Value Fashion 2014).
14. Outsourcing strategies took place in a radically and continuously changing European context. From the late 1980s on, the socialist regimes in CEEC had been collapsing and some 15 years later, in 2004, CEEC countries joined in the European Union. The process culminating in the European enlargement, together with the adoption of the euro in 2002, has brought about not only a growing commercial integration but also a re-working of pre-existing production networks and structures (see Sellar 2007).

15. In CEEC, relocation of Italian firms also took the classical form of foreign direct investments and non-equity agreements.
16. Sourcing products from Eastern Europe permits 2–3 days of delivery while delivery time from Asia is far greater (Graziani 1998).
17. Small firms based in the Veneto region are an exception (Devi Sacchetto, personal communication).
18. In spite of the predominance of small and medium enterprises, a small number of large enterprises account for a large percentage of turnover.
19. The large majority of foreigner-run businesses were individual enterprises.
20. According to the Italian Statistical Institute a 12 percent ‘irregular work’ should be added on a national basis, with relevant differences among northern and southern Italy (Ares 2.0 2014).
21. More recently, however, worsening conditions for contractors in Tuscany are depicted as a ‘Chinesization’ of work (Redini 2015).
22. Time to market is the length of time it takes from a product being conceived until its being available for sale. Time to market is important in industries where products are outmoded quickly, such as the fashion industry.
23. See Ceccagno (2007b, 2008) for an account of the protectionist measures taken by the Ministry of Economics in the early 2000s.
24. According to recent research by the Chinese credit agency Dagong (whose European headquarters is in Milan), China accounted for 27 percent of incoming foreign investment in Italy in 2014. Italy ranked as the second most attractive European destination after the UK (Miratsky and Bevilacqua 2015).
25. Emigration from Italy diminished drastically from the late 1970s due to both external reasons—the drying up of opportunities for industrial workers in Europe and especially Germany after the 1973 petroleum crisis—and internal reasons, such as industrial and agricultural development (Pugliese 2007).
26. Evidence from research conducted at the Center in 1995 and 1996, shows a number of cases in which the employer required the undocumented worker awaiting for regularization to work without salary and that they committed themselves to remain with the employer for a period of up to two years.
27. Conflict however was short-lived as workers discovered that they had little bargaining power *vis-à-vis* employers who also provided food and lodging to them on the workshop premises.
28. *Xin yimin*, ‘new migrants’ refers to Chinese who emigrated from China since 1978, to differentiate them from overseas Chinese, or the Chinese that had left China earlier and their offspring (Wang 2001). The growing importance of the new migrants brought about a shift in China’s policy towards the Chinese diaspora in the 1990s to appeal more to new Chinese migrants than to the established Chinese overseas communities (Thunø 2001).
29. People of Chinese descent have been living in Europe for over a century and a half. They migrated as merchants, students and travelers in significant numbers from 1850 onwards (Benton and Pieke 1998; Latham and Wu 2013).

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## Migrant Pathway of Emplacement in Prato

### 3.1 PRATO: A GLOBAL STRUCTURE OF OPPORTUNITY

It is against the background of the restructuring of the global fashion industry discussed in the previous chapter that, starting from the 1980s, Prato started attracting international migrants with Chinese migrants among them.

In Italian industrial clusters, migrants were not only attracted as workers but, crucially, as contracting entrepreneurs. This was the case of the Chinese migrants, the only immigrant group massively following the employment path pre-existing in industrial districts at the time when all contractors and workers were native (Andall 2007). Counting on the opportunities offered by the Italian migration regime and labor markets and on networks connecting the Chinese diaspora in Italy with prospective migrants in the areas of origin, the Chinese migrants were able to enter the fashion industry *en masse*.

Chinese migrants holding a permit to stay in Italy numbered 320,794 in 2013, and were the owners of 42,705 businesses in the same year according to one source (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2014), and 69,401 in 2014, according to another source (Parisi 2015).

By the end of 2014, 15,957 Chinese held official residence in Prato (Statistica Prato 2015).

However, according to estimates, at least twice as many Chinese are living and working in Prato.

Prato stands out as the place that has most fostered migrant entrepreneurs' inclusion. In fact, foreign-owned businesses in Prato made up 27.7 percent of the total in 2013, or three times the national average (Unioncamere 2012). The large majority of these businesses are owned by Chinese nationals: there were 5058 Chinese businesses in Prato in 2014—of which 4000 or 75 percent were active in manufacturing—and 5464 in 2015 (on the growth trend of Chinese-run businesses in Prato see Table 3.1). They made up almost half of all manufacturing businesses in the Prato province (CCIAA Prato 2014, 2016).

This position as the place in Italy that fosters migrant entrepreneurship at the highest degree is in stark contrast with another feature: Prato also stands out as the place where Chinese migrants' entrepreneurship has been criminalized.

On 1 December 2013, in the industrial district of Prato, Italy, seven Chinese migrants died in a fire that swept through the building where

**Table 3.1** Chinese-run businesses in Prato: 1997–2015

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of registered Chinese businesses</i>
1997	479
1998	826
1999	1,158
2000	1,288
2001	1,499
2002	1,547
2003	1,724
2004	2,013
2005	2,414
2006	2,991
2007	3,501
2008	4,366
2009	4,460
2010	n.a.
2011	n.a.
2012	4,803
2013	5,023
2014	5,058
2015	5,464

Source: Chamber of commerce, Prato, various years



they worked and lived. This calamity stirred up national outrage in ‘the productive regime of the Chinese migrants in Italy’ (Pieraccini 2013).

On the same day, in an article published in the leading Italian economic newspaper, the Tuscany region president put forth a narrative according to which the Chinese-run clothing industry in Prato acts as ‘*a sort of extra-territorial body*’ within the Italian state’s national territory, ‘*something like reverse offshoring from China to Prato where the rules are not abided by and everything is based on a brutal workers’ exploitation*’. The involvement of the Chinese government was sought in order to deal with the situation (Sole 24 Ore 2013).

The interpretation of the Chinese fashion businesses in Prato as disembodied from the locality’s socioeconomic context had been circulated in the Prato district since the mid-1990s (Toccafondi 2005; Dei Ottati 2009a), was reinforced in the aftermath of the fire, and immediately echoed by the global media (Povoledo 2013; White 2013).

This chapter, in line with my entire work, challenges this interpretation. It shows that there is no Chinese productive regime in Prato cut off from the local economic, institutional, and social context.

I address the issue by building on two conceptual approaches that stress the embeddedness of migrant agency: the ‘mixed embeddedness’ concept, and the ‘economic emplacement’ concept.

The ‘mixed embeddedness’ analytical framework, put forth by Kloosterman and his colleagues (1999), challenges the analyses that almost exclusively focus on the social and cultural characteristics of immigrants’ groups as an explanation for their entrepreneurial activities and practices. It suggests that the micro-level of entrepreneurial resources be combined with the meso-level of the local opportunity structure, linking them to the macro-institutional framework.

Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2011) have developed a conceptual framework that situates migrants within specific localities and playing an active role as agents in the restructuring of cities. They argue that migrants and cities shape and mold each other. Their ‘economic emplacement’ approach proposes focusing analytical attention on the dynamic relationship between the constant restructuring of cities’ positioning within broader networks of power and migrant’s efforts to forge a place for themselves within specific localities. As pointed out by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2013: 500), cities are useful entry points because they have the coherence of a specific institutional structure of governance including taxation and regulation.

Following these approaches, this chapter focuses on the peculiar ways in which migrants interact with global, national, and local forces and contribute to shape the unique pattern of emplacement of Chinese migrants in Prato. It points at the dynamics and the array of actors participating in the process of urban change involving the development and success of the local clothing industry within the constraints and opportunities of a particular time.

In the previous chapter, I have shed light on the several different and intersecting regimes of mobility that are enacted, aiming to normalize or criminalize different types of movement and mobility. I have pointed at the position of the Italian national immigration frame as playing a pivotal role in the encounter between migrant labor and capital.

In this chapter, I assess the impact of overlapping forms of control on international mobility. I discuss the combined effects of migration laws and regulations banning migrants' entrepreneurship in the 1990s, and show their effects on migrants in the fashion industry, mainly focusing on Prato. This chapter, therefore, provides an empirical example of the crucial role of borders in shaping the modes of migrants' inclusion in the national territory and in specific industries and localities. While capital cannot abide barriers and always finds ways to transcend them, it is important to acknowledge that borders no longer only exist at the edge of the territory but have been transported into the middle of political space (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

This chapter addresses the dynamics behind the reasons why Prato has been the first fashion district where relatively dispossessed Chinese migrants have settled. Moreover, it analyzes the working arrangements that they have adopted which have increased their competitive edge as contractors and set the standard for Chinese contracting businesses' inclusion in other districts. It contrasts the opportunity structure in Prato with the opportunity structures in other industrial districts. It explains how the competitive advantages offered by the Chinese contractors to the final-good firms have brought about their progressive and systematic replacement of native contractors in the entire Italian fashion industry.

Thus, and crucially, this chapter shows that by entering contracting relations in the fashion districts, the network of Chinese contracting firms has helped prevent a more drastic reduction of Italy's role as a global exporter of fashion items. Thus they represent one crucial way in which small-sized firms in the Italian districts have responded to the globalization of the fashion market.

In this chapter, my analysis also strives to show that the pathway of migrant urban inclusion in Prato is shaped in the context of opportunities and constraints connected with a much broader structure of opportunity stemming from the epochal shifts taking place at other geographic scales and their interaction with this distinctive locality.

Prato is discussed as a case where capitalism investment and disinvestment can be observed simultaneously as they take place in a single locality but involve different industries. This is evident in the process whereby Chinese migrants active in the rising clothing industry came to replace industrialists in the declining textile industry in the use of old factories and warehouses, abandoned by natives because of the crisis. This process of replacement offers the most concrete glimpse into the role of migrants as agents of neoliberal restructuring (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011).

### 3.2 A NEW MIGRANT WORKFORCE

Since long ago Prato has been associated with mobility. Marco Datini, the so-called ‘Merchant of Prato’, who is credited as either the inventor or, at very least, a pioneer in the use of the check, was a fourteenth-century merchant banker traveling around Europe, and the check was exactly what was needed by the highly mobile fourteenth-century international textile merchants.

Since the Middle Ages, in fact, Prato’s wealth has been built on textiles, with its wool production soon gaining a privileged position in the world’s textile economy. After the Second World War, the textile industry’s production organization changed dramatically, with medium-sized firms drastically diminishing and a myriad smaller firms sprouting up. Since then, a vertical disintegration of production has become the central feature of the district, whereby final-good firms retain design, production organization, and marketing while production is contracted to the smaller units each specializing in a specific phase of the textile supply chain (spinning, twisting, warping, weaving, dyeing and finishing) (Becattini 2001; Dei Ottati 2009a).

From the 1950s to the early 1980s the local textile industry enjoyed a miraculous growth that ‘was the result of a set of extraordinarily favorable, once-in-a-lifetime conditions [...] a wave of epochal growth that sprang from the ruins of post war Italy and which had lifted everyone, capable and inept, industrialists and employees, well beyond their own limitations’ (Nesi 2012: 137). Sharecroppers from the rural countryside in Tuscany moved to Prato to become workers, soon followed by migrants from southern Italy.

From the late 1980s onward, when the Prato textile industry was losing market shares to new international competitors, the local textile factories started attracting an international workforce from Albania, Morocco and, later, Pakistan (Marsden 2003; CCIAA Prato 2003).

Chinese migrants also started arriving in those years but they have followed a different path.

### 3.3 TROPES OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Since the late 1970s, China underwent a transformation from a country where migration flows had been limited in time and space, into a sending country of growing numbers of migrants. In the same years, in Italy, opportunities for a low-skilled labor force opened for new migrants mainly in industrial districts, as the result of the global restructuring of manufacturing.

Among other migrant groups arriving in Italy in the 1980s were those of Chinese origin. Chinese migrants viewed Europe as a chessboard on which opportunities could be searched (Ceccagno 2003a). Italian industrial districts with their small-firm-dominated diffuse production model were the ideal place where uneducated and unskilled Chinese migrants could expect to access self-employment and make money quickly.

Thus, unlike other migrant groups that have mainly been employed as workers in native-run businesses, or have just replaced disappearing street-corner shops, many Chinese migrants have opened their own contracting businesses in the Italian district areas characterized by light industrialization production in mature industries with labor-intensive production processes, manufacturing so-called ‘made in Italy products’ in the textile, clothing, and leather goods sectors, and later also in footwear (Ceccagno 2003b; Barberis and Aureli 2010). They have thus followed the typical pattern prevailing in the Italian IDs where access to micro-entrepreneurship was encouraged (Andall 2007).

One crucial feature of the Chinese contracting businesses is that the workforce they employ, with rare exceptions, is comprised of co-nationals only. Such an arrangement offers some advantages to the Chinese employers as it greatly speeds up production processes, and, over time, has facilitated a thorough reconfiguration of the production space. From the point of view of the employees, the job placement in workshops run by co-nationals offered some significant benefits: a job immediately upon arrival in Italy, employment in a productive sector in which in a short span of time it was

possible to move up from manual laborer to self-employed businessman, and a milieu that cushioned the impact of the new linguistic and cultural environment (Ceccagno 2003b).

Most of the Chinese who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s had not worked as business people before and were not in possession of capital and know-how prior to their arrival in Italy. They were attracted to Europe and to Italy by the dream of becoming rich quickly, and those that reached entrepreneur status managed to reach it only after having tried and worked their way up the ladder in Chinese-run businesses (Ceccagno 2003b).

At that time, the predominant model of upward social mobility among Chinese in Italy culminated in ownership of a contracting workshop or a restaurant. It is this aspiration that helped many to endure harsh work in often unsafe workshops.

Although the entrepreneurial dream did not become a reality for everyone, and many remained trapped in the role of worker, the goal of self-employment was a powerful drive behind the growth and success of a number of Chinese contracting businesses, contributing to focus on energy, projects and the first, modest capital in that direction.

The dream of entrepreneurship is by no means typical of Chinese migrant workers only. Tsing (2009: 166) describes apparel workers in different locations around the world as imagining themselves in tropes of entrepreneurship. Yet, in the home areas in China, the dominant discourse on entrepreneurship as the only possible pattern for fulfilling social expectations was so compelling among Chinese migrants (Pieke et al. 2004) that at least in the 1980s it was probably not paralleled by tropes of entrepreneurship among other migrants in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Counting on the continuous arrival of co-nationals from China, the pioneer migrants that had arrived in Italy in the mid-1980s were able to start small contracting workshops performing the simplest and most labor-intensive manufacturing tasks for Italian firms in some Italian industrial districts where barriers to entry in terms of capital and technology were lower.

Chinese contractors did not immediately settle in every Italian cluster specializing in the fashion industry. Different constraints and opportunities were at work in Italian industrial districts that resulted in different entry barriers. Each industrial cluster in fact, reacted differently to the challenges brought about by globalization and the Italian manufacturing firms' loss of competitiveness in the global arena. The diverse pathways followed were also a function of the dimensions of the firms clustering in the district.

Below, I will discuss the different timing in the process of inclusion of Chinese migrants as contractors in the different Italian districts.

### 3.4 CHINESE MIGRANTS IN ITALIAN FASHION DISTRICTS

Prato was the first Italian ID where the Chinese migrants opened their contracting businesses in the clothing industry. Chinese immigrants started arriving in Prato in the second half of the 1980s, some ten years earlier than in other industrial districts.

Most Chinese pioneers in Prato came from a nearby locality, San Donnino,<sup>2</sup> close to Florence, where anti-Chinese policies and popular demonstrations in the early 1990s had pushed many Chinese migrants to look for opportunities elsewhere (Tassinari 1992; Marsden 1994).

Within a few years, the number of Chinese residents in Prato jumped from 38 in 1989 to more than 1000 in 1991.<sup>3</sup> By 1992, more than 200 Chinese businesses had been started in Prato, and they were almost 300 by 1994 (Marsden 2003).

Newly arrived Chinese migrants also settled in other areas of the country but did not find the same conditions and opportunities as in Prato.

Milan was also among the first places of settlement of the new Chinese migrants as clothing contractors (Ceccagno 2007a). A typical feature of the Chinese stitching workshops in Milan in the 1990s was the tendency to open family businesses clustering around those contractors that were most able to obtain orders from manufacturers. This made it possible to quickly handle large orders (Cologna 2001). However, unlike Prato, Milan was not mainly a manufacturing center and its role as such has tended to fade away as early as the late 1990s when occupations such as importers, wholesalers and retailers of cheap products made in China became available for Chinese migrants (Ceccagno 2007b).<sup>4</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, other Italian clothing clusters started attracting Chinese suppliers. In southern Italy, the most important area of settlement of Chinese stitching workshops was around Naples with the highest concentration in the San Giuseppe Vesuviano and Terzigno towns. In these areas, Italians tended to act as name lenders for Chinese contracting firms in the clothing industry. Chinese workshops employed at least 20–25 workers, and were formally organized as cooperative companies. According to Salvati (2002), this juridical status was adopted because it hid many irregularities while guaranteeing to its members the possibility of easily obtaining and renewing the permit to stay. Additionally, in the Naples'

area Italians acted as powerful jobbers<sup>5</sup> between native manufacturers and Chinese stitching workshops, thus becoming directly responsible for the success or failure of individual Chinese migrants as entrepreneurs.

Carpi is an important fashion district located in the Emilia Romagna region. Here Chinese contractors only started arriving from the mid-1990s, attracted in the most informal way. In those years the bosses of small final-good firms from Carpi would arrive to the only Chinese restaurant in Prato and ask the owner to put them in contact with Chinese contractors willing to either work for them while based in Prato or to move their stitching workshops to Carpi, as I personally witnessed again and again in those years. Carpi was a thriving manufacturing center, and over time, the Chinese-run stitching workshops have partially replaced Italian contractors (Bigarelli 2002; R&I 2002).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Chinese contracting workshops were also expanding in other areas of the country, including many that had little or no previous history of fashion manufacturing.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.5 THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE IN PRATO'S CLOTHING INDUSTRY

In general, access to the role of supplier in the clothing industry is relatively easy as this is a labor-intensive industry, with low barriers in terms of both capital and technology. By contrast, the textile industry is typically capital-intensive with relatively high barriers to access.

In Prato, entry barriers in the clothing industry were much lower than elsewhere. In fact, before the Chinese made inroads as suppliers this was an underdeveloped industry (Colombi 2001). Mostly, the few native manufacturers merely survived by sourcing cheap and sometimes leftover fabrics from the local textile industry, outsourcing the intermediate phases of production to stitching workshops in southern Italy, and selling the clothes to low-end markets in Europe (Toccafondi 2009).

Newly arrived Chinese migrants were received with a hearty welcome by local manufacturers eager to increase their profit by reducing the costs and complications of sending orders to far-away contractors. Thus, in the late 1980s, those Chinese migrants who could count on basic stitching skills and a modest capital were able to purchase second-hand sewing machines and open their workshops (Ceccagno 2015; Dei Ottati 2014).

In the first years, Chinese contractors in the local clothing industry were mostly employed in the intermediate, more standardized stages of

production, performing single manufacturing steps, mainly stitching and hemming. Clothes were then sent back to the manufacturers or to the dyer firms.

At first, Chinese migrants' stitching abilities were very modest, with both employers and workers mainly learning by doing. Migrants I interviewed in the early 2000s recalled the first years as stitching contractors as a period of time when native clothing firms encouraged them to go on despite their limited abilities saying that they would accept the goods 'as long as there are no holes'. The same process of learning by trial and error, entailing 'many failures as well as occasional successes', is described for the Chinese contractors active in Milan (Cologna 2005: 134).

With the passing of time, the Chinese workshops started handling more processes, including buttonholes and ironing. Moreover, in Prato workers' skills improved to the point that by the second half of the 1990s a number of Chinese stitching workshops were able to also produce for Italian well-known brands through Italian intermediaries: Armani, Ferré, Gucci, Max Mara, Patrizia Pepe, Valentino, and Versace were among the brands mentioned by my interviewees (Ceccagno 2003a). Over time, work for global brands became a regular feature of Chinese contracting nationwide.<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-1990s, Chinese contractors also started mushrooming in the Carpi's knitwear and clothing district where quality control was higher than in Prato, as most of the firms making up the district were positioned in the middle-to-high segment of the market (R&I 2002).

Thus, in a matter of few years, it became evident that clothing quality did not depend on migrants' skills but on the requirements of the clothing industries located in different areas. Today as in the early years of Chinese settlement, the overwhelming majority of clothing businesses in Prato are active in the lower-end fast fashion. According to interviews I conducted with entrepreneurs in Prato in the years 2012–2013, there are only two Chinese-run firms and a handful of native-run ones in the district producing medium-to-high quality fast fashion clothes.

Over time, unequal social relations developed among Chinese migrants as some were abler than others to extract labor from newly arrived workers. Soon hierarchies started emerging within the network of Chinese migrants as a result of the timing of migrants' arrival, their legal condition (documented or undocumented), their different abilities and different access to resources, and the extent to which they could count on networks that could provide support. Some newcomers could count on family



members' financial help as well as other forms of familial support; others were able to exploit their linguistic talents or their ability to mobilize others. Additionally, some had the ability to build relations with natives, especially manufacturers, and get more orders than others, thus being able to attract more experienced and ambitious workers. Over time, as internal competition developed, the ability to attract orders became essential for success. Different access to resources, including institutional ones, both in Italy and in China, heavily contributed to create stratifications among the Chinese migrants active in the manufacturing industry (Ceccagno 2002, 2003b; Pieke et al. 2004). The growing social stratification and the hiatus separating employers and workers could also be observed in the dynamics among Chinese pupils at school: children of *laobans* (employers), perfectly aware of their status and wealth, expected and elicited respect from workers' children (Ceccagno 2004).

### 3.6 THE REAL ESTATE MARKET

The ready availability of productive space was another important factor contributing to the Chinese migrants' pathway of settlement in Prato.

In the mid-1980s, the textile industry in Prato experienced the crisis discussed in the previous chapters: after having produced carded wool textiles for over 30 years, local firms moved from the production of low and medium quality textiles of regenerated wool to medium and high quality production of textiles of wool and other fibers. As a result of the crisis, by the early 1990s the textile productive system was scaled down, with fewer textile firms and fewer workers. Moreover, textile entrepreneurs started offshoring part of the textile production or buying partially processed fabrics abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the children of local contractors were not interested in following in their parents' footsteps (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2009).

With the growing number of textile firms closing down, factory spaces became available for rent, and the newly arrived Chinese came to replace textile entrepreneurs, using dilapidated plants as workshops (Rastrelli 2003). A Chinese migrant described this evolution as a situation where, in the 1990s, the Chinese renting abandoned textile firms from natives 'became the private welfare for early retiring native entrepreneurs' (Staglianò 2014).

Availability of empty factory space, in turn, strengthened the conditions for the development of Prato as a manufacturing hub for Chinese migrants.

Over the years, the growing demand by Chinese migrants for housing and empty spaces in which to open their businesses has increased the value

of the city's real estate. In the decade from 1991 to 2001 the number of people working in the real estate market in Prato grew from 889 to 2313 with an increase of 160 percent; from 2001 to 2005 real estate (and business services) further increased by 23 percent (Dei Ottati 2009b).

With the crisis of the local textile industry and within a national tax regime where taxes on real estate renting were lower than taxes on profits, more and more natives found it more advantageous to turn into real estate landlords renting industrial premises and flats to Chinese migrants.

Over time, and as the Chinese became a growing segment of the local population, the local real estate business became a sector which was also accessible to Chinese migrants. According to the Prato Chamber of Commerce, in 2013, 87 Chinese real estate businesses were active in Prato (CCIAA Prato 2014).

### 3.7 MIXITÉ AND URBAN RESTRUCTURING

The process whereby Chinese clothing contractors came to replace native textile manufacturers in the use of factory space implies that people of migrant background lived and worked throughout the city, including the most dilapidated parts of the historical center and most of the boroughs flanking the medieval area of the city.

Macrolotto 0 is one of the areas bordering the medieval city walls, where starting from the 1990s a concentration of people of migrant background has taken place, and Chinese commercial and productive activities have mushroomed.

This area, as well as most other areas in the city of Prato, is characterized by the so-called 'mixité' or the 'promiscuous development' of factories and living quarters.

Prato's peculiar urban development with houses and factories coexisting in a chaotic, promiscuous way is vividly described by Bernardo Secchi, who designed the city's urban plan in the mid-1990s:

*Promiscuous development [...] is the mixing of activities and the mixture of "materials", the factory building (small, large shed, multistorey, single-storey), housing (in estates, isolated on a piece of land, rows of blocks of flats, etc.), the loading yard, the service road, the car park, the dump, the garden, the allotment. And promiscuous development again like the field where everything differs from everything else, the place where the kaleidoscope of the city and society nowadays is revealed and where, all the same, the biggledy-piggledy mess is all*

*brought together in processes that, however imperfectly, “work”. Promiscuous development is naturally the outcome of a very complex history of individual and collective projects coming one after another completed often only in part and imperfectly, with consequences often unforeseen and undesired by the city. It is a terrain of open and latent conflicts, of compatibility and incompatibility between activities and materials.* (De Filippo and Secchi 1996 in Becattini 2001: 82)

For these reasons, Prato has been termed ‘the factory-city’.

Bressan and Krause (2014) argue that the settlement of migrant entrepreneurs in Macrolotto 0 has helped in preserving industrial buildings from decay, thus creating value. What is more, given the peculiar promiscuous development of industrial buildings and residence buildings, the process of replacement helped to avoid the decline of the entire neighborhood.

Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2011) discuss the relationship between migration and urban regeneration showing that migrants can become active agents in the neoliberal transformation of cities who contribute to or contest the changing status and positioning of cities. An example of immigrants’ positive role in urban regeneration is offered by Goode (2011) who describes the contribution of wealthy migrants in the gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods in Philadelphia, and working-class migrants in regeneration projects in other neighborhoods.

In Prato, the migrants’ entry into the urban landscape and their active participation in the urban real estate market has been ridden with open and hidden tensions. Opposing narratives have emerged over time. Many natives, and especially those native families that still live in Macrolotto 0, claim that migrants have worsened the composition of the neighborhood and are responsible for its decay. Bressan and Krause (2014) argue that such a narrative ignores that the decay of the neighborhood is the result of: (1) the abandonment of the area by many natives taking place mainly before the arrival of the migrants, and (2) a lack of urban regeneration policies, justified by the local authorities on the ground that the migrant presence *per se* was a persistent decay factor.

The Chinese migrants that I have interviewed, on the other hand, recount a stratified real estate market where dilapidated industrial plants and flats are rented at twice their value to migrants of non-Chinese background and three times their value to Chinese migrants. They claim that since their arrival in Prato they have spent huge amounts of money for real and fake flat renting<sup>9</sup> in Macrolotto 0 and other areas of the city.

The opposing narratives notwithstanding, the modes and temporalities of the urban and social changes in Macrolotto 0 result in a sense of displacement of those living in the neighborhood, irrespective of their different national backgrounds (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2011).

Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2011: 14) clearly point out that the significance of the migrants' role in urban redevelopment and requalification 'vary greatly, depending on and at the same time contributing to the ongoing rescaling of the city'. This conceptualization is of paramount importance. Yet, this is exactly what policymakers, opinion leaders and to a certain extent, scholars focusing on the urban dynamics in Prato have overlooked. They have not been fully aware of the dynamic interrelation between the process of the downscaling of the city, the role of the Chinese in reducing the downscaling, and the modes of urban restructuring resulting from these opposing and overlapping trends. They have also failed to capture to what extent the prevailing narratives in the city are intertwined with these developments.

### 3.8 EFFECTS OF THE ITALIAN REGIMES OF MOBILITY ON THE MIGRANTS' PATHWAY OF EMPLACEMENT

The process of normalization of some types of mobility and criminalization of others, which was discussed in the previous chapter, is evident in Italy's long-term institutional ban on immigrant entrepreneurship. From 1990 to 1998, Italy banned the access to entrepreneurship to new immigrants originating from countries where Italian citizens could not access self-employment. This policy heavily contributed to shape migrant inclusion in terms of creating internal divisions among migrants, exposing migrants to an increased vulnerability, and pushing many to resort to illegal practices (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008).

Chinese migrants in Prato were severely affected by the ban on immigrant entrepreneurship. For almost a decade the protracted clash between conflicting dynamics unfolding in the locality but originating at different geographic scales, has heavily impacted on the lives of the local immigrant population, channeling and limiting access to opportunities for newcomers. In fact, on the one hand growing international migration and the needs of the local clothing industry for fresh workforce were contributing to a continuous influx of migrants; on the other hand, the Italian rules banning access to entrepreneurship were blocking migrants' upward mobility.

This, combined with the status of undocumented migrants of many newcomers, heavily impacted on the lives of most migrants: most newly arrived Chinese migrants were going up and down Italy in search of employment and a place to stay in Chinese-owned workshops. As a result, contracting workshops grew in size, packed with many frustrated, immobile potential micro-entrepreneurs who had to put up with a dramatic imbalance between job supply and demand in Chinese-run businesses. The situation was so critical that some Chinese migrants interviewed in Prato recalled that at that time many were willing to work only for board and lodging, without salary, and they still perceived it as a privilege given the fact that the workshops shielded undocumented migrants from police checks (Ceccagno 2003b: 55). The particular conditions offered in Chinese-run workshops, as well as language barriers, prevented most Chinese workers from looking for employment in native-run firms (Ceccagno and Omodeo 1997).

In such a situation, those workshops' bosses who had obtained the authorization to go into business before 1990 were well placed to exploit the masses of co-nationals who had no immediate prospect of starting their own businesses.

The law banning access to entrepreneurship thus stands as an example of the crucial role played by regimes of mobility in instituting differential mobilities and emplacements (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

The modes of regulation adopted in Italy at that time have had a strong impact on the dynamics taking place both within the national group of migrants and between migrants and the local contexts. Among the Chinese migrants, a power differential was created between the pioneers who had been able to access the much sought-after role of entrepreneurs and the others who could only work as employees or take the risky decision to run a workshop illegally. Moreover, the ban contributed to accrue migrants' vulnerability *vis-à-vis* local governments even when, as it often happened, local authorities chose not to crack down on illegally opened workshops.

After the ban on entrepreneurship was lifted in 1998, workshops that had previously employed between 30 to 60 workers downsized and became places that on average employed up to ten workers (Borsari et al. 2006). Research shows that the steady growth in the number of Chinese businesses at the end of the 1990s was in part the result of the splitting of pre-existing workshops, and in part linked to an expansive phase of Chinese contractors' activities in the clothing industry (Ceccagno 2003a).

In Prato, in 1997, there were 479 Chinese businesses, but they almost doubled becoming 826 only one year later when the ban on entrepreneurship

was lifted. They numbered 1288 by the year 2000. In Milan, from 1999 to 2001, the number of Chinese-run businesses increased by almost 70 percent (Ambrosini and Zucchetti 2002).

Since the end of the ban on entrepreneurship, most Chinese contracting businesses are small or very small. This is in line with the traditional district model. The manufacturing micro-enterprise, in fact, is a recognized feature of the district model of industrialization (Lombardi et al. 2011).

### 3.9 OFF THE BOOKS PRACTICES AND IRREGULARITIES

Research on the Chinese manufacturing businesses in Italian IDs points out that for more than two decades Chinese contractors could profit from the continuous influx of workforce from China and the availability of cheap labor provided by co-nationals. Profits were also the result of longer working hours and off the books practices, even though these practices are by no means limited to Chinese suppliers (Barberis 2008; Barberis and Aureli 2010; Barberis et al. 2012; Barbu et al. 2013; Ceccagno 2003b, 2009, 2012, 2015; Dei Ottati 2009a, b, 2014; Lan 2014; Lan and Zhu 2014; Lombardi et al. 2011; Paba and Murat 2006; R&I 2009; Santini et al. 2011; Zanni 2007, among others).

Irregularities are a regular feature of contracting businesses. Since employing workers with regular contracts involves higher costs for the workshops which could reduce their competitiveness, contracts are signed and social and pension contributions are therefore only paid on an intermittent basis when required for important reasons, such as the renewal of a permit to stay or an application for family reunion. In both cases, in fact, the immigration law requires that workers showed that they could count on a minimum annual wage. Moreover, in some localities with high numbers of Chinese, the previous six months' wage slips are crucial documents needed by migrant workers to renew their permit to stay or apply for family reunion. Thus, many workers, once regularized, are formally dismissed by their Chinese employers yet continue working for the same company or other firms off the books. Six months before the expiry of the residence permit, the worker will be hired again with a full-time contract. Evidence from fieldwork conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Prato (Ceccagno 2002) and in 2002–2004 in the Emilia Romagna region (Spinner 2005) shows that this alternation of legal and off the books condition is adopted on a widespread basis in Chinese contracting businesses. It also shows that this is perceived

by both employers and workers as a cumbersome procedure needed in order to comply with bureaucratic impositions and not as a negation of workers' rights.

Furthermore, when the work contract is in force, the number of hours worked is under-reported in order to reduce tax liability.

Finally, employment of undocumented labor, which does not even entail the temporary signing of a work contract, is a regular feature of migrant inclusion in the Italian manufacturing industries. Research shows that undocumented workers are also employed in native-run firms (Dal Lago 1998).

According to my research, in the early 2000s one or two out of eight to ten workers in Chinese workshops were undocumented, whereas some ten years earlier, in the early 1990s, usually only the employer possessed the resident permit (Ceccagno 2003b: 117; Pieke et al. 2004).

Chinese irregularities in terms of employing an undocumented workforce, improper employment and unpaid taxes have been denounced by the Italian inspecting agencies and highlighted by the press ever since Chinese migrants first settled in Italian IDs. For instance, back in the two-year period 1999–2000, the Prato's provincial social security office (INPS) inspected 216 Chinese businesses employing 1053 workers, and found out that in 70 firms workers were employed off the books. This resulted in a missed payment of tax and social security contributions for 4012 million Italian lira. Additionally, 238 undocumented workers were identified (Ceccagno 2002).

It should be noted, however, that irregularities in the workplace are not uncommon to Italian small businesses as well. In the same period of time when extensive irregular practices were found in Chinese businesses, also native firms were checked nationwide. Out of 53,000 native-run firms inspected in the first six months of 2001, 34,000 or 64 percent of the total were irregular, which corresponds to unpaid tax and social security's contributions for a total of 841 billion Italian lira (Corriere della Sera 2001).

Kloosterman et al. (1999) argue that there is no sharp demarcation between the formal and informal economy: on the contrary, there are extensive areas where they overlap, and the informal economy may gradually transform into the formal one, and vice versa. Thus, these authors point out that informal economic activities are to be considered as embedded in the productive contexts. In fact, they are 'contingent on the regulatory framework' as what is illegal in one place may be legal in another.

There is also a temporal aspect to it as what was previously illegal can be legalized later. Moreover, and crucially, the national systems of law enforcement may adopt a more lenient position toward informal activities when policing the rules risks undermining the industry concerned (Kloosterman et al. 1999: 256–257).

In its analysis of the Italian fashion industry, Dunford goes even further. He pinpoints that very high shares of undocumented/undeclared labor (which includes family members, undeclared nationals, and illegal immigrants) characterize the Italian fashion industry and permit cost-based producers to execute labor-intensive phases of production at a very low price. He argues that government's tolerance of the employment of undocumented labor should be viewed as an instrument of the national government support for the sector (Dunford 2006). This testifies that far from being disembedded from the local productive systems where they have settled, the Chinese migrants mainly follow the pathway and the unwritten rules prevailing in the Italian fashion industry.

A narrative still prevails, however, that depicts the Chinese migrants as champions of off the books practices and overshadows the embeddedness of these practices throughout the length and breadth of the Italian manufacturing industries.

### 3.10 FIERCE COMPETITION ON PRICE

Research conducted by the Spinner research group (Spinner 2005: 25) in 2004 in the Carpi district documents that Chinese contractors charge very low, competitive prices. For a garment of medium quality, the direct cost of processing by a Chinese workshop amounts to five percent of the final market price, or just half the average processing cost in workshops run by Italians. While this shows that most profit is taken by manufacturers and intermediaries, it also shows that with the arrival of the Chinese contractors more profit has been squeezed out of the shop floor.

The reduced unit price charged by the Chinese contractors also stems from fierce internal competition among Chinese contractors that over the years has driven down the prices of outsourcing and reduced unit costs. The Spinner research has brought to light widespread competition among Chinese contracting firms (Spinner 2005). Thus, the narrative prevailing in Italy in the 1990s and early 2000s about Chinese firms being part of a hierarchic, mafia-like organization with powerful 'lieutenants' acting as organizers of Chinese contractors' production processes



on behalf of powerful Chinese bosses that pull the strings does not bear scrutiny. The research shows instead that among Chinese contracting firms competition prevails over cooperation, as does fragmentation over coordination. There are not even embryonic price-fixing agreements among Chinese contractors, and the Chinese are unaware of their potential bargaining power as a group.

Lack of internal cohesiveness depends on several factors. The Spinner research findings show that, as a general rule, Chinese workshop owners do not possess clear—and often not even approximate—information on the supply chain of which they are part; they have no notion of the costs borne by manufacturers and of the factors that combine to determine the final price.

The research also points out that failure to coordinate a common strategy for dealing with manufacturers also stems from the high territorial mobility of businesses. In fact, especially from the mid-1990s when Chinese businesses were progressively expanding to new areas in Italy, one way out of the fierce internal competition consisted of moving the business to new localities. Thus, for around 15 years, whenever internal competition undercut their selling prices, Chinese contractors could relocate production to areas where conditions were ripe for new Chinese businesses to settle, and selling prices were slightly more remunerative. Moreover, at the turn of the century many Chinese also found opportunities for upward mobility outside of the manufacturing, into the burgeoning business of import, wholesale and retail.

### 3.11 ISSUES OF EMBEDDEDNESS

Essentially, Chinese contractors have adopted many of the typical features of the Italian IDs.

A division of labor prevails in IDs by distributing production among small and very small firms; each specializes in a specific production phase. Such a division of labor has proven to be more effective than the vertically integrated companies, especially in the production of non-standardized products such as textiles and clothing (Sforzi 2003). As contractors in the clothing industry, the Chinese migrants have entered the typical organization of the IDs where vertical disintegration prevails.

As a result of such a division of labor in IDs, growth comes about mainly through an increase in the number of firms more than through the size of individual firms, as argued by Becattini (1979) with reference

to the textile industry in the Prato district (see Dei Ottati 2014). Chinese firms in Prato are small and very small, in line with the traditional district model, and the clothing center's growth has come about through an increase in the number of small and very small firms, too.

The inclusion of kinship ties within contracting chains as a way to cut off transaction costs is a distinctive feature of the Italian IDs. Especially in the first years, the Chinese migrants modeled their businesses on the ID model, employing relatives and people from their home area whenever possible (Barberis 2009).

Flexibility was a central feature of the Italian districts far before the Chinese made inroads into them. Unpaid family work, poor working conditions, long working hours and low pay, as well as widespread off the books practices were widespread in the districts' heydays as they are now among the Chinese migrants in the fashion districts.

A certain level of inter-group cooperation and trust existed both in the traditional Italian districts, as part of the so-called 'cohesive milieu' discussed in Chap. 2, and this can also be found among Chinese migrants, especially as far as vertical relations among final-good firms and contractors are concerned. Relations of trust in some cases also rest on trans-local sociabilities linking individuals sharing the same place of origin and their families in China.

Yet, increasingly, a pattern of heightened competition focusing mainly on price has more recently tended to prevail in Italian IDs among both natives and migrants. In both cases, internal price competition hits the weakest categories, that is, small firms and contractors (Ceccagno 2012). Hadjimichalis (2006) points out that such a competition has introduced conflicts and tensions in the Italian IDs that block the traditional mechanism of coordination through cooperation and trust (see Dei Ottati 2003a, b).

This strengthens my argument that points at Chinese economic activities as fully embedded in the Italian IDs where they have settled, and questions the long-lived concept that depicts the Chinese migrants in Prato as disembedded from the locality.

### 3.12 FURTHER BENEFITS FOR MANUFACTURERS IN THE ITALIAN FASHION INDUSTRY

Despite these similar characteristics, there are some other factors that the Chinese migrants exploit to increase their competitiveness. I argue that while the above-mentioned conditions offer important competitive

advantages to the clothing industry, the crucial driver of Chinese contractors' competitiveness is an intra- and inter-firm reconfiguration of the productive space through (1) the sleeping regime whereby workers are offered board and lodging in the workshop premises, where the owner's family also lives, and (2) workers' inter-firm mobility. I have called this reconfiguration of the productive space 'the mobile regime' (Ceccagno 2015). Previously unthinkable and unattainable advantages are provided to the Chinese contractors, and thus indirectly to the entire clothing industry by this reconfiguration of the productive space (which will be discussed in the next chapter).

In sum, the Chinese-run workshops offer manifold advantages to the manufacturers. These include very competitive prices that unquestionably generate savings and profits for manufacturers, and a flexible productive organization, which makes it possible for manufacturers to respond rapidly to the demands of the market, thus seizing new opportunities as they arise (Spinner 2005).

Other factors, often overlooked by scholars, make a difference.

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that mostly small and very small manufacturers were unable to relocate production abroad when the Italian fashion industry was hit by global shifts in production and distribution practices. One crucial asset for those who did not relocate production abroad has been the willingness of Chinese migrants to set up their contracting businesses in the very areas where native manufacturers clustered. It was thus possible to re-attract into the industrial districts stages of production that had formerly been performed by native contractors located in distant areas (Ceccagno 2003b; Doeringer et al. 2009).

By clustering their businesses in the Italian districts, the Chinese contractors have made it possible for what I have called '*in situ* offshoring': the benefits typical of international outsourcing are offered, that is, cheap workforce, externalization of costs of production, and a different attitude toward labor protection, without entailing the geographic reallocation of the production (Ceccagno 2003a; on recent processes of repatriation of phases of production previously offshored, see Ceccagno 2015; Redini 2015).

This amounts to saying that Chinese contracting firms, as well as the mass of migrant workers with different national backgrounds working in native-run firms, have helped prevent a more drastic reduction of Italy's role as a global producer and exporter of fashion items. Thus, the network of Chinese contracting firms represents one crucial way in which native small-sized firms in the Italian districts have responded to the globalization of the fashion market.

Recently, the crucial role played by the Chinese migrants as contractors in the Italian fashion industry has been acknowledged also by mainstream research. The 2010 *Report on the economy and finance of the Italian Industrial Districts* (Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani 2010), for the first time states that the Chinese contracting businesses, together with the high number of immigrant workforce employed in some industrial districts, for example the Florence leather cluster and the clothing district in Carpi, help reduce the productive offshoring and thus preserve the high quality of the national production.

Focusing their research on the Carpi district, Barberis and Aureli (2010: 24) point out that the Chinese migrants adapt to the district's productive environment of interdependent networks based on cooperation and competition. By taking on most of the business risks themselves, Chinese contractors to a certain extent cushion native manufacturers from market risks. Thus they contribute to a relative stability of the Carpi knitwear district *vis-à-vis* increasing global competition. A similar role, the authors conclude, is played by the Chinese contractors in other Italian clusters.

### 3.13 CHINESE MIGRANTS REPLACE NATIVES AS CONTRACTORS

In the Italian fashion districts, the Chinese contracting workshops have tended to replace native contractors. Table 3.2 shows the increase over the years in the numbers of Chinese businesses in the Italian textile and clothing districts and their percentage on the total businesses.

What emerges from Table 3.1 is that almost 14 percent of the entrepreneurs in the Italian textile and clothing sectors is Chinese. This percentage is up to 21.1 percent if textile and clothing production in industrial districts is taken into consideration.

Prato stands out in terms of Chinese entrepreneurship. In fact in Prato, since 2009 Chinese entrepreneurs make up almost half of the total number of entrepreneurs (see CCIAA Prato 2014). This has political implications that will be discussed in the next chapters.

If the clothing sector only (Table 3.3) is taken into consideration, the role played by Chinese migrants is even more evident as they make up almost 20 percent of the total, and they reach 36.5 percent in industrial districts (Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani 2010). Again, Prato stands out, and by far. In Prato, in fact, 82.3 percent of all clothing businesses were owned by the Chinese migrants<sup>10</sup> in 2009, and they were around 85 percent in 2013 (CCIAA Prato 2014).

**Table 3.2** Non-EU entrepreneurs in Italian textile and clothing districts in 2000 and 2009

	2000	% 2000	2009	% 2009	Chinese entrepreneurs 2009	% Chinese entrepreneurs 2009
Prato	1,544	19.6	3,725	50.5	3,615	49.0
Brescia	248	8.9	438	21.6	371	18.3
Firenze	594	10.6	919	20.7	809	18.3
Carpi	283	6.6	636	20.4	521	16.7
Treviso	192	5.7	416	15.4	325	12.1
Vicenza	138	6.3	267	15	200	11.2
Bergamo	92	4.5	175	11.6	127	8.4
Varese	98	2.6	150	5.5	75	2.7
Biella	54	3.1	65	5.3	5	0.4
Como	129	5.8	131	7.3	n.a.	n.a.
<b>Main IDs</b>	<b>3,372</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>6,922</b>	<b>24.1</b>	<b>6,048</b>	<b>21.1</b>
<b>Italy</b>	<b>7,926</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>15,493</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>11,854</b>	<b>13.8</b>

Source: Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani 2010

**Table 3.3** Non-EU's entrepreneurs in Italian clothing districts in 2000 and 2009

	2000	% 2000	2009	% 2009	Chinese entrepreneurs 2009	% Chinese entrepreneurs 2009
Prato	1,381	69.5	3,422	83.4	3,378	82.3
Brescia	224	15.3	374	34.6	344	31.8
Carpi	186	9.7	427	30.4	386	27.5
Firenze	566	15.7	884	25.5	788	22.8
Treviso	147	7.9	320	22.0	289	19.9
Vicenza	108	7.7	224	20.0	185	16.5
Bergamo	67	5.9	134	17.0	101	12.8
Varese	46	3.2	84	8.5	63	6.3
Biella	8	5.6	13	11.8	4	3.6
Como	58	6.2	65	10.0	n.a.	n.a.
<b>Main IDs</b>	<b>2,791</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>5,947</b>	<b>39.2</b>	<b>5,538</b>	<b>36.5</b>
<b>Italy</b>	<b>6,527</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>12,986</b>	<b>24.3</b>	<b>10,660</b>	<b>19.9</b>

Source: Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani (2010)

By contrast, the Chinese presence in the textile industry is much more modest. Less than one thousand migrant-run businesses were active in the Italian textile industry in 2009, compared with the almost 13,000 in the clothing industry. This difference is explained by the different opportunity

structures in the two industries, as discussed above. Additionally, clothing production, especially at the low end, is a riskier business than textile production.

Also in the case of the textile industry, Prato is the place in Italy with the highest number of Chinese entrepreneurs: in 2009, they were 237 making up 7.2 percent of the total entrepreneurs in the industry (Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani 2010); in 2014, they were 347 (CCIAA Prato 2014).

Altogether, Chinese businesses make up 12 percent of all firms in the leather goods and shoes industry.

However, the analysis on the impact of Chinese migrants as entrepreneurs in the fashion industry as offered by the national watchdog on IDs (Osservatorio Nazionale Distretti Italiani 2010) is structured in a way that overlooks the clear-cut divide between natives and migrants. It is crucial, instead, to acknowledge that in fashion IDs the Chinese migrants occupy almost only the role of contractors, while natives act increasingly as manufacturers and less and less as contractors.<sup>11</sup>

The growing role of Chinese contractors in the fashion industry is paralleled by a reduction in the number of native contracting firms. This process of replacement of natives by Chinese migrants in the fashion industry is more evident in some IDs.

As mentioned above, Chinese contractors started settling in the Carpi ID from the mid-1990s. Over time, the number of native-run contracting businesses has diminished drastically in Carpi. This, however, is the result of different and concomitant dynamics. On the one hand, the arrival of the Chinese migrants has pushed many native contractors to concentrate only on the upper-end production (R&I 2002; Spinner 2005) and to resort to hiring Chinese workers (Ceccagno 2003b). On the other hand, the local population of native contractors is getting older, and the lack of inter-generational continuity is so evident that it has become an issue.<sup>12</sup>

The shoe district in the Riviera del Brenta, between Venice and Padua, stands as another example of the process of replacement. In the 1990s, this district was integrated into the luxury fashion value chain and concentrated its activities in the rent-rich segment by exploiting its competencies in design, branding, and marketing. In 2001, Rabellotti (2001: 153, 2004) argued that whilst the top brand companies had become the leaders in the value chain, the local firms' performances were very positive, as they had the prospect of sharing with the chain's leaders the high profits of the luxury industry. Some 15 years later, other researchers underline the systematic loss of jobs among smaller native-run contracting firms (Bubbico et al. 2017).

In this thriving industry, Chinese migrants have over the years partially replaced natives as contractors. Around 100 Chinese contractors, employing some 600–700 workers, are active in the district, out of a total of 520 firms. (Bubbico et al. 2017).

Prato stands out as also being different on the issue of Chinese contractors replacing native ones. In fact, the clothing industry where they had made inroads was an embryonic one. Thus in Prato the influx of migrants from China has been instrumental in the expansion of stitching workshops and, over time, of the entire clothing industry.

Notwithstanding its peculiar position in the Italian districts landscape, Prato also experienced the closing down of many native-run businesses in the years witnessing the expansion of Chinese migrants in the clothing industry.

According to the local Chamber of Commerce, in fact, clothing businesses owned by natives in Prato fell from 669 in 2002 to 399 in 2005. However, the dynamics behind a sharp reduction of businesses owned by natives are complex and partially unclear. First, it is unclear whether those that closed down were contracting or manufacturing firms; second, it is unclear whether the reduction in the number of native-owned businesses was mainly due to competition from Chinese businesses or to other reasons, including the lack of interest among younger generations to follow in their parents' footsteps (Ceccagno 2012).

### 3.14 TRANSNATIONAL TRADERS

By the early 2000s, the new Chinese migrants were no longer the early pioneers who in the 1980s had opened the first contracting businesses expecting to reach overnight economic success.

Many of those that had arrived in Italy in the 1980s and had been able to open their workshops before the Italian law blocked access to self-employment had become affluent by the turn of the century. They had been operating in a market with little competition from co-nationals, taking advantage of both the opportunities offered by the market and the (unintended) competitive advantages over co-nationals offered by the Italian regimes of mobility. In fact, as discussed above, the ban on entrepreneurship had contributed to increasing the vulnerability of newly arrived migrants and their dependency *vis-à-vis* their employers, including co-national employers.

One multilayered issue discussed by scholars is migrants' transnational connections and their role in the economies of the sending and receiving

countries. Transnationalism denotes ‘the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’ (Basch et al. 1994: 6). The concept of a transnational social field as ‘a network of networks of unequal power’ (Glick Schiller 2013: 25) analyzes the simultaneity of migrants’ life within and across states and institutions that regulate economic, political, social, and cultural life (see Faist 2000).

China’s rise on the world stage has been a powerful base for the success of Chinese migrants’ businesses in Europe (Pieke et al. 2004; Ceccagno 2007b; Pastore and Castagnone 2011: 8). The most affluent Chinese migrants, and those that could count on extensive social fields in their home areas, were able to take advantage of China’s new role as a global exporter and to become transnational traders and entrepreneurs.

Italy is one of the most evident cases in Europe showing how Chinese migrants’ transnational connections with the booming areas of origin in China have contributed to reshape Chinese migrants’ structure of opportunity.

Essentially, since 1988, the Chinese central government has adopted various policies and measures to reform foreign trade which was previously kept under central control, and decentralized power to local governments with regard to export matters. In the second half of the 1990s, foreign trade underwent liberalization. Wenzhou, the sending area of the great majority of the Chinese in Italy, was growing as an export area. This facilitated the founding of many import and export companies by Wenzhou people also in countries outside China.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, new careers as importers from China and wholesalers—first in some selected locations such as Rome, Milan and Prato, and later on throughout the country—became available by the turn of the twenty-first century for those that had previously been able to amass enough capital and could count on good connections in the area of origin.

The figure of the Chinese transnational trader emerged in those years, conducting both imports from and exports to China.<sup>14</sup> As shown by Yow (2007: 83–114), the Chinese in Europe started exporting machinery, textiles and leather goods to China. Given that most Wenzhou migrants live in Europe, it does not come as a surprise that Europe was the main recipient of exports from Wenzhou, accounting for over 40 percent of total exports. Major imports from Wenzhou in 2005 included machines (35.6 percent), shoes (25.6 percent), and clothes (15.1 percent) (Wu and Zanin 2007).



As far as Prato is concerned, low cost production in China pushed some migrants that had acquired manufacturing know-how and experience in the fashion industry to foster in their places of origin the production of garments to be marketed in Italy and Europe.

Over the years, the success of the first entrepreneurs pushed many Chinese to seek fortune in this field of activity. In 2003, according to the officials I interviewed in Wenzhou, there were about 700 to 800 small-sized firms (each employing about a hundred workers) producing clothing exclusively for export, which had emerged as a result of the export businesses run by Chinese migrant importers in Europe. According to the same source, in that year, almost 50 percent of the exports from Wenzhou to Italy were managed by Zhejianese migrants, and the goods were marketed mostly in Italy, France, and Spain (Ceccagno 2007b). While Wenzhou was becoming a global exporting center, larger players such as large department stores entered the import from China business. Meanwhile, the Chinese migrants in Italy started importing also from other provinces in China, mainly from Fujian and Guangdong provinces (Ceccagno 2007b).<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the more affluent migrants with good connections in China were able to become transnational entrepreneurs, mainly acting as importers and wholesalers. In their wake, many others with less capital undertook the career of retailers of imported goods.

Evidence from my fieldwork in 2006 (Ceccagno 2007b) shows that in the mid-2000s many Chinese formerly employed in the apparel manufacturing industry in Italy moved to places such as Spain and Greece and transformed into wholesalers for Chinese apparel.

The new careers as global traders or retailers were enticing as more profit could be earned in a shorter time span and entailed shorter working hours than manufacturing businesses. As a result, by year 2004 the majority of Chinese entrepreneurs were active in the trade and service sectors.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.15 SUBSISTENCE ENTREPRENEURS

At the turn of the twenty-first century, while transnational trading was attracting the wealthiest and best connected, those Chinese who had just established their contracting firms found themselves entangled in not a few intertwined problems. The sudden mushrooming of Chinese contracting businesses, in fact, was leading to increased competition and difficulty in maintaining a position in the market, particularly as Italian manufacturers

could reduce prices, and/or stop orders (Ceccagno 2002; Marsden 2004). Internal competition was accrued by the seasonal cycles of production that resulted in a discontinuity of orders. Weakness of start-up businesses was also due to widespread ignorance of the local markets, which in turn induced many to basically copycat already established firms.

From the point of view of the employers, workers' high territorial mobility also added to the unpredictability of the business. Other difficulties include a high number of instances of non-payment for large orders (Ceccagno 2002).<sup>17</sup>

As a result, while many were reaching success, diversifying their economic activities in Italy, investing in China, becoming transnational businesspeople and building lavish Western-style homes for their relatives in their place of origin (Pieke et al. 2004; Thunø and Pieke 2005), many others only managed to become 'subsistence entrepreneurs' (Ceccagno 2002). Often, all subsistence entrepreneurs could do was to put together three or four sewing machines in a small workroom or in a corner of a workroom jointly rented by several small firms. Many Chinese micro-entrepreneurs were just people who were looking for success through self-exploitation, and exploitation of their own family members and a few workers. Their competitive advantages in comparison with the mass of Chinese workers were usually modest, unstable, and therefore, easily reversible (Ceccagno 2003a). In fact, for many subsistence entrepreneurs the risk of failure was high and many were forced to close down. This situation has been highlighted by a study conducted in Prato showing that among Chinese-run firms active at the end of 2002, only 10 percent were more than five years old (CCIAA Prato 2003).<sup>18</sup> Today the failure of Chinese businesses remains high (IRPET 2013).

In sum, the history of the Chinese migrants' success in Italian industrial clusters is dotted of personal stories of entrepreneurial failure. My experience at the Center in Prato shows that for most Chinese in Prato and Italy failure was often the starting point for taking on new entrepreneurial challenges (see also Cologna 2005).

In any case, the early 2000s were the boom years for Chinese migrants in Italy, and many, especially in Prato, found themselves in a productive context that fueled their growth.

Among them were the first Chinese persons who had been able to become final-good entrepreneurs, thus paving the way for the creation of a low-end fast fashion center mainly run by the Chinese in Prato. I will discuss the drivers and implication of this evolution that sets Prato apart from the rest of the fashion industry in Italy in the next chapter.

### 3.16 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter shows that the Prato district offered unique conditions to newly arrived Chinese migrants for their emplacement such as an unguarded clothing industry and a plethora of empty and dilapidated factory buildings that could be used as workshops. These conditions help explain why the Chinese contractors settled in Prato almost one decade before than in most other Italian fashion districts. This chapter therefore theorizes that urban variation in the city and industrial district of Prato is closely intertwined with the opportunity structure and pathways of migrant emplacement through entrepreneurial activities.

In turn, the working arrangements prevailing within Chinese suppliers' workshops guarantee previously unattainable advantages to final-good firms, which are not limited to lower prices but include high levels of flexibility, an issue that I will fully develop in Chaps. 5 and 6. As a result, Chinese contractors have been attracted *en masse* to most of the Italian fashion district, thus replacing native contractors.

The chapter offers an analysis of the differentiations emerging among the Chinese migrants as linked to different conditions emerging at different scales over time.

It shows that migrant entrepreneurs have both taken advantage of opportunities emerging in the locality and have simultaneously been subject to acute competitive stress. While overall growth over time may be impressive, at the individual firm's level the situation has been one of unceasing efforts in the face of grinding competitive pressure from the multiplicity of similar firms.

Moreover, different outcomes of immigrant entrepreneurship are largely linked to the conditions imposed by the national regime of mobility that has made it possible for some to exploit the vulnerability of others.

Additionally, the chapter shows that the opening up of trade opportunities for private citizens in China and the growing role of China since the 1990s as a producer of low cost goods have played a crucial role in favoring the emergence of new figures of transnational merchants, importers, wholesalers and retailers.

While anchored in the specific location of Prato, my analysis spans local, national, and global boundaries, and recognizes the multiple factors through which the Chinese migrants' mode of emplacement is constituted. Such an approach allows me to highlight the spatialities and the temporalities of the process.

## NOTES

1. From the 1990s, narratives celebrating self-employment and entrepreneurship prevailed also among other migrants, for example migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Senegal (Bruno Riccio, personal communication).
2. Even though San Donnino is not officially part of an industrial district, it is close to the Valdarno Superiore leather district, part of which is located in the Florence province.
3. The number of people of Chinese background at that time could have been higher given that migrants can legally live in one Italian city without having their residence there, while only relying on a permit to stay released by the authorities in any Italian city.
4. Clothing manufacturing businesses still exist in the hinterland of the city.
5. Jobbers serve an intermediary role on behalf of the manufacturer to acquire fabric and commission contract work.
6. Over the years, they have also been attracted as contractors in the production of furniture (Ceccagno 2007b), in the biomedical, metalwork, and tile industries (Barberis 2009).
7. In December 2007, a national TV channel broadcast a documentary, 'Slaves of Luxury' that linked several Italian luxury brands to low-paid and often off the books Chinese labor. According to the documentary, Prada and Ferragamo stopped such contract work when alerted to the issue (Spolar 2009).
8. For an in-depth analysis of the effects of the crisis in the 1980s see Dei Ottati (1996).
9. In order to access family reunion, migrants must show evidence of being the owners or the renters of a house. A market of fake contracts emerged whereby migrants paid a sum of money in exchange for a contract to show to the local authorities. The contract, however, did not include use of the flat.
10. Data for 2009 is also confirmed by more recent research (IRPET 2013).
11. Prato is the outstanding exception as it is the only ID where the Chinese have accessed *en masse* the role of manufacturer.
12. According to estimates by the Osservatorio Carpigiano in the early 2000s (Bigarelli 2001), it was expected that within the following five years about one hundred firms would close because of the employer's old age and lack of inter-generational continuity: in the following decade 270 firms employing 600 workers were expected to close for the same reasons (Bigarelli and Baracchi 2002: 114).

13. In 2001, in Wenzhou 115 companies had won government licenses for international trade; by 2005, they were 912 and the total number of companies permitted to export reached 3158 (Wu and Zanin 2007).
14. Chinese political and economic transnationalism has been researched since the 1990s (Benton and Pieke 1998; Benton and Gomez 2001; Ong and Nonini 1997). In their analysis of the associations linking the new Chinese migrants with their country of origin, Pieke et al. (2004: 196–197) point out that in the last decades many levels and agents of the Chinese state have become increasingly involved in nurturing overseas Chinese transnational networks for their own purposes of nation-building and economic development (see Barabantseva 2005).

Rauch and Trinidad (2002) analyzed the set of formal and informal links and associations that serve as nodes for information exchange between Chinese from both the receiving and the sending country. Their analysis focuses on the role of co-national networks in promoting bilateral trade by providing market information and supplying matching and referral services.
15. This issue is outside the scope of this research and is therefore only sketched here. More research on the subject is needed.
16. In 2004, in fact, there were 18,554 Chinese-run businesses in Italy, of which 7735 were in the wholesale and retail sector and 6236 in the fashion manufacturing sectors. This does not imply, however, that most Chinese living in Italy had by then moved outside of manufacturing. Available data in fact refers to registered business owners, not employees. Evidence from fieldwork conducted in Rome, Prato, and Carpi in those years shows that in fact most Chinese businesses in trade and services had few employees, while Chinese workshops on average had 10 workers (Ceccagno 2003a for Prato; Spinner 2005 for Carpi; Ceccagno 2007b for Rome). More recent research shows that workshops employing a larger number of workers are found in Prato (Lan 2014). Therefore, the majority of Chinese migrants in Italy is still employed in manufacturing.
17. Interestingly, the Chinese migrants I have interviewed in Prato in those years also blamed their difficulties on imports from China: They perceived the import and trade in inexpensive clothes from China as disruptive for the Italian low-end fashion industry and therefore indirectly also for their contracting firms (Ceccagno 2007b). Conversely, more recently, Chinese traders in Rome claimed that they had started to perceive themselves as being in direct competition with their colleagues in Prato (Lan and Zhu 2014).
18. High rates of failure are intrinsic to those industries that offer a very low profit margin ratio, especially at the bottom level. For an analysis of Chinese firms' failure in Prato, see Ceccagno (2012), IRPET (2013).

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## The Global Low-End Fast Fashion Center

### 4.1 PROLOGUE

*To work as a clothing manufacturer is a risky job. When we had just opened our business we did not know the models nor the clients' requirements. We had to produce garments even though nobody came to buy them, simply because we should not lose those occasional customers that would allow our business to take off. We used to produce garments that clients did not like, and those models that they liked we did not like at all, not a bit. We did not know which textiles we should use, which colors were fashionable, we had no idea that fabrics' colors and materials must be changed every few months, or even weeks.*

*Then, little by little, we began to understand which models are sold in spring, which models and fabrics are more fashionable and therefore easy to sell.* (Ceccagno 2003a: 57–58)

### 4.2 PRATO AS THE FOCAL POINT OF GLOBAL NETWORKS

In Chap. 3, I focused analytical attention on the pathway of migrant urban inclusion in Prato, highlighting the opportunity structure that has emerged for Chinese migrants as contractors in the clothing industry. I also explored the benefits offered by Chinese contractors to (native-owned) final-good firms, showing that they have significantly contributed to reduce the national fashion industry's loss of competitiveness.

In this chapter, I further explore the drivers and implications of the Chinese migrants' distinctive pathway of emplacement in Prato, and the ways in which they have contributed and are still contributing to restructure the city and the industrial district.

As mentioned earlier, a striking feature of Prato is that it is the only place in Italy where Chinese migrants have been able to upscale to the role of manufacturers in large numbers.

Starting from the late 1990s, while most other Italian fashion districts had just started attracting Chinese migrants, first generation Chinese migrants in Prato, previously active as contractors, were able to extend their activities upstream and downstream, from model design to distribution, relying on co-national stitching workshops as contractors. They have been able to overcome a barrier that elsewhere is 'well guarded [...] entailing class, language, cultural, social and educational privileges' (Yu 2002).

In this chapter, I explore the process of upgrading to final-good entrepreneurs, unraveling the structural reasons that together with the migrants' entrepreneurial spirit have made this change possible. At the same time, I highlight the active role of the Chinese migrants in the introduction of fast fashion strategies and the creation of a low-end fast fashion center. I argue that these processes further strengthen the role of Chinese migrants both in the Italian fashion industry as a whole, and in the rescaling of Prato as a vibrant fast fashion center.

In Chap. 3, I analyzed the emergence of Chinese transnational traders as linked to the rise of China as a producer of low cost goods.

In this chapter, I will go a step further with the analysis of transnational processes connecting peoples and goods as contributing to transform Prato in an increasingly interconnected city: I will explore the development of Prato as the focal point of global fast fashion networks. In fact, parallel to the activities of the transnational traders active in the import of low cost goods (including clothes) from China to Italy that were discussed in the previous chapter, new production and trading businesses have emerged directly connected with the Chinese-run Prato clothing industry, that by the mid-2000s was thriving.

Many traders—both Chinese and Italian—entered the textiles and accessories import business, while others became active in distribution of the clothes made in Prato all over Europe, thus expanding upstream and downstream the reach of the local clothing industry. As a result, Prato has become the center of fast fashion global production networks

that by now stretch from China and Turkey (as the sourcing areas) to most European countries (as the buyers of low-end fast fashion items made in Prato). By now, this is the largest low-end fast fashion center in Europe.

This is, however, a highly atypical global production network as it has traits quite different from those usually described in the literature.

Since the 1990s, a body of theories of production chains that are global in extent have been put forth. This has evolved from global commodity chain (GCC) analysis to global value chain (GVC) analysis to global production network (GPN) analysis, geared toward understanding how commodity chains function. These influential theories specify the way in which small firms are involved in production networks organized by leading firms (see for example, Gereffi et al. 1994; Gibbon et al. 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, they mainly focus analytical attention on chains and networks organized and coordinated by established capital and created from above. This is manifest for instance in the global fast fashion sector, where value chains are monopolized by large brands.

Prato, instead—as this chapter shows—has emerged as the center of production and marketing networks only little by little and incrementally, as new transnational opportunities emerged for self-made small and very small entrepreneurs and traders. Its development was not driven or planned by established capital. It is therefore the center of global production networks from below, and these networks are at the same time highly flexible and fragile, as this chapter illustrates.

I thus hope that my use of some terms borrowed from theories of global production chains will not obscure the special features and value of the case.

In disagreement with those scholars that posit a Chinese-only global value chain centered on the Prato fast fashion production hub (Lan 2014; Lan and Zhu 2014), in this chapter, I document and discuss the array of opportunities available as the result of the new global role of Prato. On the basis of evidence emerging from my fieldwork, I show that these opportunities are not limited to people of a migrant background that count on transnational social fields but are also available for natives, whose local, national, and transnational social fields enhance their abilities to be active transnationally.

### 4.3 NEWLY ESTABLISHED FINAL-GOOD ENTREPRENEURS

The industrial area of Prato called Macrolotto 1 is the place where most Chinese manufacturers' shops are clustered.<sup>2</sup> Trucks, vans, and cars originating from disparate cities in Europe crowd the area. Hundreds of Chinese fast fashion firms, settled side by side in cavernous warehouses, display goods surprisingly similar to one another. At noon, a Chinese-owned van delivers aluminum boxes full of Chinese food to each fast fashion firm. Alternatively, those who want to stretch their legs can instead eat hot soup at the Chinese-run corner stand.

Macrolotto 1 is conveniently located in the proximity of the highway, which is an ideal place for attracting buyers and shipping out goods (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2011). With the mushrooming of fast fashion firms, the prices have skyrocketed in Macrolotto 1. Here, in the heart of the Chinese-run fashion center, in the mid-2000s, which some Chinese think were the apogee of the Chinese final-good firms in Prato, newly established Chinese manufacturers were eager to pay incredibly high sums of money to rent a warehouse. At that time up to €300,000 could be paid, besides the rent, in order to take priority over other potential tenants (Ceccagno 2012).

From the interviews I have conducted among Chinese manufacturers in Prato, it emerges that the thriving Chinese-run clothing center in Prato has come into being through a bottom-up process, started only with the capital amassed by the entrepreneurs while working as contractors. Additionally, virtually no newly established Chinese manufacturers could count on previous knowledge of the business and its articulations, as clearly stated in the interview with a small manufacturer presented in the prologue.

Access to the role of manufacturer correlates with a good predisposition to risk. This is probably the reason why only those that have already been active as contractors jump into the position of manufacturers. A Chinese migrant that I had interviewed in 2007, however, told me that he had gone off the beaten track with six other co-nationals who, like himself, had previously been employed as workers and had just legalized their immigration status. They double jumped from the position of employees into the position of manufacturers without previously becoming heads of a contracting business.

Both large and small Chinese manufacturers exist in Prato. In the 2000s, those who had just entered the business and could not count on



start-up funds proceeded at a slow pace, with few production tools (such as a single cutting table) and limited personnel. In 2002, I interviewed one of the two owners (husband and wife) of one such firm in Prato that had been opened in the late 1990s who previously had worked as street vendors in another Italian city. This was a tiny business, only employing the husband and wife, a modelist (as opposed to stylists, who are paid higher wages), and a cutter. The modelist prepared the patterns, the husband had learned to be a pattern positioning operator, a worker with manual cutting skills cut the fabric, and the wife took care of customer service. The husband and wife together managed the contacts with Chinese contracting workshops. At the time of the interview, they did not own computerized cutting machines and they were waiting for the first returns on investment to purchase their first cutting machine, at which point they anticipated that there would be no further need for the cutting workers.

In larger firms, up to ten people can be employed. The workforce includes a designer or modelist, and some patterns positioning operators, fabric cutters, ironers, and warehouse workers. The more established firms can afford to hire one or two stylists (Italian or Chinese), while the smaller ones make do with only one modelist.

According to Lan and Zhu (2014: 162), larger final-good firms may also hire *zagoni* workers, or workers who do miscellaneous jobs, such as loading, fixing defects, and shipping.

Large manufacturers sell to relatively large buyers including chain supermarkets, large retailers, wholesalers, and to retail outlets. Small manufacturers, instead, usually sell to buyers who do not place orders but arrive directly in Prato and buy a relatively small quantity of garments among those on display, and then sell them in retail outlets or in open air markets all over Europe and beyond.

After being established for almost 20 years now, large and small final-good firms alike still do not have their own established brand.<sup>3</sup> Large firms act as original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) for their clients as they produce final goods for companies that sell them using their own brand (Ceccagno 2009; Lan and Zhu 2014). Smaller firms sell their garments without a brand, as a brand name is not a concern for whom the low-end final-good traders are produced. Lan and Zhu (2014: 161) point out that one reason for being brandless is due to the prevalence of design copying from fashion brands, that is, being brandless can potentially mitigate legal issues.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.4 THE GROWING ROLE OF FAST FASHION IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY

By the mid-2000s, a new productive organization had transformed Prato into a vibrant fast fashion garment center in Europe, able to keep up with the frantic changes in the fashion industry and withstand competition with garments from China.

Today, Prato is renowned in Europe and beyond as a center specializing in low-end fast fashion that offers competitive prices, a great variety of low-to-medium quality products, and flexibility in design and colors according to the latest trends in fashion.

Buyers come to Prato from a large number of European countries (such as France, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, Greece, Austria, the Netherlands, Russia, Hungary, and Poland). Buyers are both European and European-Chinese. France, Spain, and Germany are the primary markets within Europe. A small number of buyers also come from the USA and Canada (Ceccagno 2003b, 2007b; Pieraccini 2008). Moreover, a tiny group of buyers come to Italy from as far away as South Korea and Taiwan. The percentage of foreign buyers varies from year to year. Some of the interviewed people claimed to have sold about half of their production abroad in some years, and even up to 70–80 percent of the total in other years (Ceccagno 2009). This percentage is confirmed by more recent fieldwork (Lan 2014).

In 2014, out of a total of 5350 Chinese businesses in Prato, 4000 or 75 percent were active in the manufacturing industries (CCIAA Prato 2014). Existing data on Chinese migrants' businesses in Prato, however, do not separate manufacturers from contractors. My fieldwork shows that the first Chinese manufacturers emerged in 1997, in 2003 a critical mass was reached with around 100 manufacturing firms, and from 2006–2007 there were 300–350. In early 2011, there were around 900–1000 Chinese manufacturers, of which about 100–200 closed down their business in the following year (Ceccagno 2012). Another study estimates that there were 800 Chinese manufacturers in 2012 (IRES 2012).

As mentioned earlier, Chinese businesses make up 47 percent of the total manufacturing businesses in Prato and 85 percent of the local clothing industry (CCIAA Prato 2014).

Local cases of successful final-goods clothing firms owned by natives and outsourcing the stitching phases to Chinese contractors are Sasch (a manufacturer linked to the former Prato major, but now closed), and

Patrizia Pepe, which is now an outstanding fashion firm. Other successful Italian manufacturers outsourcing to the Chinese in Prato are located in other areas of the country.

Over the years, the clothing industry has gained ground in the overall local economy in Prato, also as an effect of the ongoing crisis and reduction in production of the textile industry.

According to estimates (Unione Industriali Pratese 2012), the clothing industry provides one-third of the total value of turnover and exports of Prato's textile and clothing industries together (total turnover €4599 million; total exports €2404 million). According to data provided for the Prato province, which is smaller than the district, production by Chinese businesses is estimated to reach €2–2.3 billion or 14.6–17 percent of the total production (IRPET 2013: 54).

It is thus evident that Chinese migrants have played a crucial role in the city's ability to achieve and maintain its competitiveness in the fast fashion industry. Their expansive role is visible in the growing importance of this sector in the overall local economy.

Moreover, by strengthening the fast fashion sector, the Chinese migrants in Prato have significantly contributed to the gradual transformation of what was solely a textile district into a fashion district (Ceccagno 2007a). However, full economic integration of the two specializations in the industrial district is partially taking place, given that the textile sector is active mainly at a high to medium level while the Chinese garment center mainly manufactures low-level fast fashion garments. In 2010, the local chamber of commerce advocated the creation of a 'city of fashion' through the transformation of Prato into 'Europe's fast fashion integrated chain'<sup>5</sup> (Rullani et al. 2010: 44). However, the local socioeconomic players seem unable to develop and pursue a solid integration project.

#### 4.5 DRIVERS OF THE CHINESE FAST FASHION CENTER'S SUCCESS

As mentioned above, around 900–1000 Chinese manufacturers were active in the industrial district in 2011. By the mid-2000s, the new productive organization had transformed Prato into the largest fast fashion garment center in Europe, able to keep up with the frantic changes in the fashion industry, and able to withstand competition with garments from China.

A number of conditions resulting from shifts taking place at different geographic scales with a particular timing have made it possible for the Chinese migrants in Prato to gain access to the position of manufacturers and develop the largest lower-end fast fashion center in Europe. Below, I undertake to analyze the main drivers of the Chinese fast fashion center's international success.

#### *4.5.1 Natives Did Not Foresee Such a Spectacular Success*

First, the Chinese entered an underdeveloped lower-value clothing industry that was almost unguarded and characterized by very low profit margins and by far riskier than textile production (IRPET 2013). The returns on investment in this industry are by far lower than in the textile industry. Besides, in the eyes of the local textile entrepreneurs, the clothing industry was so irrelevant that they failed to foresee its potential for growth. This explains the lack of substantial investments by natives in the clothing industry both before the arrival of the migrants and after the Chinese contractors had settled in the district. As a result, by the time it became internationally renowned and contributed one-third of the local wealth, the Prato clothing center was only marginally controlled by natives.

Focusing on women's clothes, particularly highly fashionable summer clothes, the Prato center gradually came to occupy a low-end niche market catering to working class consumers, mainly in Southern and Western Europe.

#### *4.5.2 Migrants' New Resources and Transnational Networks*

Second, at the end of the 1990s, the first batch of Chinese migrants was able to upscale to the position of final-good firms. By that time, in fact, they were able to count on previously unavailable resources. These include capital amassed when operating successful stitching workshops, and the coming of age of migrants' offspring, mastering Italian, and able to interact with the local contest (Ceccagno 2003b).

The coming of age for the migrants' offspring has also favored a certain degree of diversification. In the 2000s, some entrepreneurs, especially the children of first generation entrepreneurs, were able to move away from low-end garments and started producing medium quality clothes whose

competitive advantage was not necessarily low price but the ability to keep up more than others with the frantic changes in fashion models and colors. By now, some even resort to semi-programmed production for more established clients both on the domestic and international markets.

Finally, in a productive contest where woman's fashion prevails, some now specialize in medium level men's fashion (IRPET 2015: 26). This testifies to the growing maturity of Prato as a clothing center.

Moreover, the influx of high numbers of Chinese migrants also mattered in the growth of the fashion center. The fashion center has always been a center of attraction for new Chinese migrants, a place where they could easily find a job upon arrival or return after experiencing setbacks elsewhere (Lan 2014). Prato has thus become one of the places with the highest concentration of Chinese in Italy.

Furthermore, many have been able to count to a larger extent than before on transnational fields connecting them not only with their areas of origin but also with other areas in China and increasingly in Europe. By entering the textiles and accessories import business, being active in downstream distribution in Europe, and producing a small part of the garments with less fashion content in China they have contributed to create a global production network from below. I will explore this issue later on.

### 4.5.3 *Incorrect Business Practices and Their Effects*

Third, by creating a climate of distrust among Chinese suppliers, Italian manufacturers facilitated inter-ethnic supplier-manufacturer cooperation.

In the early 2000s, after an uninterrupted growth in the number of Chinese manufacturers, the native clothing manufacturers that in the previous decade had been thriving thanks to the low prices and flexibility offered by the Chinese contracting workshops, sounded the alarm on the local newspapers: they lamented that Chinese contractors were increasingly choosing to work for co-national manufacturers instead of Italians. My findings show that the shift was the result of different business practices for Italian and Chinese manufacturers (Ceccagno 2009, 2015). Debts for Italian companies are defaulted after bankruptcy. Many Chinese suppliers that I have spoken to claimed widespread debt default among Italian manufacturers and argued that their Italian clients regularly used bankruptcy to avoid paying contractors. This practice was devastating for

Chinese contractors, especially, when months or even a year of unpaid work went lost,<sup>6</sup> as confirmed by the following interview:

*The workshops have good reasons to not want to work for Italians. First of all, Italians pay every two months, and often pay with a check cashable three to four months later. Thus, a workshop risks working in January and collecting in June. About six months go by. The Chinese, instead, pay right away, as soon as you deliver the goods [...] At first the Chinese workshops preferred to work for Italians because they paid a little bit more, but they were discouraged by such lengthy waits. This is why now they prefer to work for the Chinese.*

*But there is more to it than that. What is unacceptable is that Italians don't pay. When they come to look for you they give you an order, then another one and another yet, and they do not pay. Then they come out with the discount story: they say that they will pay, yes, but only on the condition of getting a discount of 30–40 percent on the agreed price. Many Italians go as far as claiming bankruptcy on purpose, so that they don't have to pay the workshops that have worked for them. When they reach €500,000 of debt owed to a group of workshops, they are better off closing down. You will have a hard time finding a workshop owner in Prato who has not been cheated by Italians at least once. Personally, I have lost millions of liras in the past, when I had a contracting workshop. I went to collect my money from an Italian and his daughter said: 'This is not my name, it is my father's, and he closed down'. In this way she continued her father's business and they kept my money'. (Ceccagno 2009: 60)*

Chinese manufacturers instead pay less but guarantee that debts are collected even in case the company closes down. Additionally, when Italian companies commit fraud, Chinese firms have no way to sue (Ceccagno 2009: 60).

By alienating trust toward native clothing manufacturers, these practices have contributed to hampering a further expansion of the number of native manufacturers in Prato.

In any case, even though many prefer to work for co-nationals, Chinese stitching businesses have never stopped working for native manufacturers. Native-run fashion firms in Prato and elsewhere in Italy, in fact, do continue to contract clothing processing to the Chinese stitching workshops in Prato.

#### ***4.5.4 The Emergence of the Fast Fashion Production Strategy***

The fourth driver of the success of the Chinese in Prato, and a crucial one, is linked to an epochal shift, that is, the emergence of the fast fashion production strategy.

Fast fashion global success is the result of production strategies by smaller batches as the market has become more fragmented and uncertain; and as consumer fashion culture has changed. It aims at offering to customers the latest designs in limited quantities (Tokatli 2008: 23). Additionally, a very fast and highly responsive supply chain is needed. The fast fashion production strategy is the most outstanding form of flexible accumulation in the fashion industry, as it annihilates space and time to speed the velocity of turnover in the production, consumption, and distribution of fashion commodities.

The emergence of the fast fashion strategy is generally associated with the emergence of global retailers from the late 1990s. In particular Zara,<sup>7</sup> a major international clothing retailer based in Spain, is credited with being a pioneer of fast fashion principles (Tokatli 2008; Memic and Minhas 2011), together with the Swedish retailer H&M (Doeringer and Crean 2005). However, back in the 1980s, before the term ‘fast fashion’ was even coined and the fast fashion strategy was adopted worldwide, the fast fashion strategy did exist in the Carpi district and was referred to as *pronto moda* or ready fashion (Bigarelli and Solinas 2003). *Pronto moda* firms were able to reduce the so-called ‘time to market’ (from design to marketing) to a few weeks (Barberis et al. 2012). Usually, *pronto modas* prepare collections and collect orders from clients only a little before the sales season, and often even after the season had started. Their design abilities are modest, and the quality of their production is low (Bigarelli and Solinas 2003). In the 1980s, *pronto moda* clothes made up 40 percent of the Carpi district clothing production thus making it the largest *pronto moda* center in Italy (Bigarelli and Crestanello 1994). In Carpi, what was to become globally known as fast fashion, was implemented by counting on a native workforce moving from southern Italy (Barberis et al. 2012).

Recently, after the ‘fast fashion’ term was adopted worldwide, Prato’s clothing entrepreneurs use the English terms ‘fast fashion’ and the Italian term ‘*pronto moda*’ with different meanings: ‘fast fashion’ is used for medium quality clothes productions—Patrizia Pepe, Liu-Jo, Pinko and Fornarina are typical Italian fast fashion brands—while the term ‘*pronto moda*’ is used for low-end clothes, those that only imitate existing fashion goods.<sup>8</sup> Hereafter I will use the term ‘fast fashion’ in general, including medium quality and low-end productions.

Interestingly, it was in the late 1980s, at the time when the *pronto moda* time to market was being drastically reduced, that the Chinese migrants started opening their workshops in Prato. Their arrival thus coincided

with the introduction in Prato of the *pronto moda* strategy of production (Dei Ottati 2014). In Chinese workshops, clothes are manufactured in small batches overnight, and delivery time is reduced to the point that often materials delivered in the evening are processed by the next morning.

The Chinese have become manufacturers in the clothing industry in the very years when fast fashion was becoming ubiquitous. As a matter of fact, the Prato center has developed as a loosely connected fast fashion global value chain along with major European brands such as Zara and H&M.

Thus the needs of the nascent fast fashion met with and contributed to shape the Chinese migrants' pathway of emplacement. This pathway consists in an extreme reconfiguration of the intra- and inter-firm space of production, an issue that I will discuss in the next chapter.

In sum, the emergence of fast fashion explains the success of the clothing center in Prato. Conversely, the ability of Chinese fashion firms to interpret at the highest levels the needs of the fast fashion production strategy has also played a crucial role in the success of the Prato clothing center.

#### 4.5.5 *The Italian Fast Fashion as a Competitive Advantage*

Fifth, being part the Italian fashion industry counting on fast fashion production strategy is a competitive advantage that helps explain why the Prato clothing center is able to withstand competition with products from lower labor costs countries, including China. In fact, Prato produces garments with the speed necessary for the frantic changes in shape and colors demanded by the Italian fashion industry and can rely on higher fashion content than cheaper imported garments (Ceccagno 2009, 2012).

Retail shops owned by Chinese migrants in Italy and in other European countries, from Spain to Hungary, display side by side garments imported from China together with garments made in Prato, well aware that they respond to clients' different expectations, that is, lower prices in the case of imports from China and higher fashion content at reasonable prices in the case of garments made in Prato (Ceccagno 2012).

Thus, a driver of the success of the Prato fashion center consists in its positioning in the global fashion industry scenario: it 'supplements a particular gap between higher cost European fashion brands and lower cost Made-in-China imports' (Lan 2014: 94).



A fast fashion trader interviewed by Lan and Zhu (2014: 170) provides information on the competitive advantage of being part of the Italian fast fashion world. The interviewee explains that ‘because German fashion is about one year behind Italian fashion, the Chinese firms in Prato had been able to recycle their Italian design from previous year to produce for German markets’.

This competitive advantage, however, could be eroded soon as clothing manufacturers in China are quickly catching up and are now able to adapt to European fashion trends much faster than before. A shift in migration flows from China is resulting in a severe shortage of skilled workers in stitching workshops and, to a certain extent, also in manufacturing businesses. This, again, shows that the center in Prato, its success, and the opportunity structure it provides is inextricably linked to multifarious global processes impacting on the local economy.

#### 4.5.6 *Interactions Between the Clothing Center and the Local Textile Industry*

Sixth, the existence of a well-established textile industry has indirectly fostered the development of the Chinese-run fast fashion center. In fact, being active in an industrial district with an established local textile industry provides some competitive advantages. These include a context favorable to the local diffusion of knowledge that fosters what Becattini terms ‘imitative resonance’, with firms copying each other’s designs and adding their own innovation whenever possible (Becattini 2001: 49) and the development of economies of scale external to the single firm but internal to the district (Pyke et al. 1990). Many scholars have highlighted the advantages offered to Chinese migrants active in the fashion industry by their establishing their firms in the textile district (Bellandi et al. 2010; Bressan and Krause 2014; Dei Ottati 2009; Toccafondi 2005, among others).

In a previous writing of mine, I have drawn attention to the fact that besides taking advantage of the existence of a textile industry in the district, the Chinese in Prato have partially acted as agents of revitalization for part of the local textile industry (Ceccagno 2009). In fact, as soon as the local clothing industry gained momentum in the early 2000s, a pool of local textile firms started adapting their production to the needs of the local clothing industry. In addition to producing medium to high-end fabrics, they now also produce medium to low-end fabrics specifically for

local clothing producers. The new low-end production entails the internal reorganization of some productive phases such as the elimination of rigorous quality control, and adaptation to the frantic rhythm of fast fashion.

#### 4.5.7 *The Chinese Migrants Enter the Textile Industry*

Seventh, Chinese migrants were also able to expand upstream into the Prato district's textile industry. This trend that started in the mid-2000s gained momentum in 2013 when Chinese-owned textile businesses in Prato grew by 21 percent over the previous year (CCIAA Prato 2014). As mentioned above, in June 2014 there were 347 Chinese businesses active in the textile industry, with a further 8.4 increase over December 2013. According to Prato's Chamber of Commerce, most Chinese-owned textile firms are 'mainly functional or close to the clothing industry (printing, ironing, and dyeing firms. etc.)'. However, the same study also highlights the presence of some 140 businesses active in the textile industry proper (CCIAA Prato 2014: 7).

Essentially, dyeing and finishing firms are crucial for the swiftness required in the fast fashion mode of production. In fact, fabrics are kept undyed until much later in the season so that fashion choices for colors and fabric finishes can be moved to the very end of the production process (Doeringer 2012). This makes it possible for fast fashion producers to quickly react to last minute shifts in the perishable fashion market. Chinese growing acquisitions of textile firms in the district, amounts to a much closer control of the clothing value chain that helps speed up the production process.

Acquisition of textile firms proper by Chinese entrepreneurs, however, is underway and this trend is locally perceived as the first steps by the Chinese in the takeover of the industrial district's core industry (see, for instance, Reali 2009).

Not surprisingly, the Chinese migrants active in the textile industry employ natives counting on long experience in the textile industry with the know-how needed to operate within the industry, such as chemists, machine operators, dyers, and so on.

This, however, does not appease tensions and it is likely that further acquisitions will lead to an intensification of the conflict between the textile industrialists and Chinese newcomers.

Finally, the ninth driver of the international success of the fast fashion center in Prato lies in the fact that over time the manufacturing

center has become the focal point of loosely connected networks of production and trade stretching from China and Turkey to Europe and beyond. Given the complexity of the issue, this will be discussed in a separate section.

#### 4.6 THE GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORKS: UPSTREAM AND DOWNSTREAM

The growth of Prato as a global fashion center is intertwined with the emergence of a group of transnational entrepreneurs specializing in the fashion industry trade. Since the early 2000s, transnational entrepreneurs based in Prato manage the import of the textiles and accessories needed by the Prato fast fashion industry.

The sourcing strategy of fast fashion firms in Prato has always been a subject of heated debate in Prato. There is no credible data source for answering the issue of the percentage of locally produced fabrics versus imported ones (Ceccagno 2009; Dei Ottati 2014; Lan 2014).

In the second half of the 2000s, textile imports from China had become preponderant. The Chinese manufacturers I interviewed in Prato claimed that about 60–70 percent of the fabrics they bought in Prato both from natives and people of migrant background were made in China (Ceccagno 2009: 62–64). The same percentage is confirmed by more recent fieldwork (Lan and Zhu 2014).

The rest of the sourcing is done in Italy, including Prato and other Italian localities. As seen above, some local textile firms have adapted to local clothing center needs and produce small batches of medium to low quality fabrics specifically targeted at the local clothing industry. Locally sourced textiles amounted to around 30 percent of the total in 2004 (Confartigianato Pratese 2005) and according to some informants this percentage is more or less the same now. Over the years, the sourcing strategy has not changed much.

In the locality, the high percentage of imports from China has been narrated as evidence of the Chinese clothing center's disembeddedness from the territory. However, this is mainly the result of the intensification of all kinds of linkages between regions across the globe and the shifts in the global fashion industry, with the reduced role of Italy as a producer and exporter of low-end textiles. Moreover, it is also the result of the global fashion preference for new kinds of textiles, different from those traditionally produced in Prato.

Textiles and accessories are sourced in China and increasingly in Turkey. But who are the transnational traders that connect Prato with the sourcing areas in the world? In disagreement with Lan and Zhu (2014), who only highlight the Chinese role in sourcing from China, findings from my fieldwork in Prato in 2012–2013 show that Italian traders are also involved in textile sourcing for the Prato clothing center. Despite the fact that the emergence of China as the most powerful actor in the textile and apparel industry may have favored Chinese migrants as transnational traders sourcing from China, opportunities for becoming importers of textiles and accessories from China to Prato emerged for those who are resourceful, regardless of their national background. As a result, textiles and accessories sourcing is a field of competition between and among Chinese and Italian importers mainly based in Prato and in the Naples area.

Evidence from my fieldwork helps to map the dynamics involving transnational textile importers and the different competitive advantages and disadvantages of the different groups.

Both Italian and Chinese traders (and certainly also individuals within these broad groups) count on some competitive advantages. For the Chinese traders, the existence of extensive transnational social fields has favored the emergence of preferential channels of business connections that enable them to get bargain prices compared to the Italians.

Italian traders sourcing in China, however, count on a different competitive advantage: a better knowledge of the fashion trends in Italy enables them to order fabrics (of a slightly higher quality) that soon will be trendy. This competitive advantage is the result of social and professional networks in Italy being more accessible to native traders, and less to Chinese traders—at least for the time being.

Essentially, Chinese and native final firms mostly buy cheaper fabrics from Chinese traders exactly because they are cheap; while from Italian textile importers, they buy fabrics that better respond to the need to swiftly adapt to the frantic changes in fashion (for a more detailed and nuanced account, see Ceccagno 2009).

Moreover, according to some informants, until recently Chinese traders could get the goods without having to pay in advance, an advantage that is not granted to non-Chinese traders. However, as soon as the news of selective checks on the Chinese firms in Prato (see Chap. 7) started circulating, the textile producers in China stopped accepting delayed payment. Something similar happened downstream: Chinese manufacturers

in Prato used to accept delayed payments from co-national buyers from European countries, but not from non-Chinese customers. However, as a number of Chinese traders from the southern European countries hit by the economic crisis have never finalized the payments, this form of facilitation for co-nationals has stopped (Ceccagno 2012).<sup>9</sup>

In turn, some Chinese traders sourcing textiles in China for the Prato market told me in 2012 that their containers from China had been confiscated by customs in Livorno, Tuscany, as they were charged with under-reporting on the goods. The containers were never given back to the owners. This practice was quite widespread, they claimed, and they, as much as a number of other small traders, had to close down their businesses after losing the containers.<sup>10</sup> They lamented selective checks targeted at Chinese importers only.

This situation has some implications. Networks that link Chinese traders on the one hand and Italians on the other hand are active at local, national and transnational scales and provide some in-group advantages. However, these advantages are both limited and context-bound and cannot be taken for granted since they may disappear as soon as the external conditions change.

Within transnational networks information travels fast and this is a crucial competitive advantage for Prato as the center of a global value chain. However, changes in the *status quo* may result in swift changes in the preferential conditions offered to co-nationals, as confirmed by my informants. Additionally, the case of lost payments from Chinese traders based in the European countries hit harder by the crisis shows that relations of mutual trust based on shared place of origin are strained in times of crisis.

In turn, this shows that structural conditions play a crucial role in shaping the actual functioning of transnational social fields and the behaviors of network members.

The downstream marketing of the low-end garments made in Prato is partially linked to the movement of Chinese migrants across Europe. Many of the Chinese migrants that by the mid-2000s had moved from Prato to other European countries became traders. Some of them have become clothing wholesalers of garments, including garments made in China and garments made in Prato.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, as a rule, most newly established Chinese clothing wholesalers based in Europe do not import from China clothes made in China and from Italy clothes made in Italy, as one would expect. Instead, they

source in Italy both clothes made in Prato and clothes imported from China, with Rome as the main sourcing place for clothes made in China, and Prato for clothes made in Prato.

This evolution shows that the Chinese migrants that have become transnational traders in the European clothing industry do not simply take advantage of an opportunity structure stemming from the dynamics involving their place of origin and their place(s) of settlement, but are able to tap into their multi-sited working experience and international networks developed while living and working in different countries in Europe. They are thus able to access a truly global opportunity structure.

#### 4.7 A CHINESE-ONLY GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORK?

What emerges from the processes discussed above is that a circular process has been put in motion in Prato, that is, the very existence of a fashion industry mainly run by Chinese migrants has been essential in developing and further strengthening certain kinds of transnational business links. At the same time, transnational actors have contributed to transforming the clothing industry in Prato into the focal point of global production networks.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, increased access to transnational fields has also favored a further diversification of trans-local and transnational businesses by people in Prato, including the export of wines and other products, mainly to the Wenzhou area, and the opening of Italian style coffee bars in the city of Wenzhou.<sup>13</sup>

In an epoch when China's global outreach is narrated as unimpeded, some scholars seem particularly eager to depict the global clothing commodity chain with its center in Prato as dominated by people from China. Lan (2014) and Lan and Zhu (2014: 167) argue that from upstream to downstream, in Prato, a global value chain has been created 'relying on a transnational Chinese community across Europe' and that 'Chinese migrant entrepreneurs are horizontally integrating manufacturing with wholesaling through their ethnic networks' (Lan and Zhu 2014: 171). This conclusion is based on their informants' claim that more than 50 percent of their buyers from France, Germany, and Spain are Chinese migrant traders.

I suggest, instead, that those sourcing fast fashion clothes in Prato are both Chinese and European entrepreneurs. The number of Chinese wholesalers sourcing in Prato may be on the increase. It is also credible that, as

informants told Lan and Zhu (2014: 169), Chinese traders control cloth wholesaling for low-end fashion in key cities such as Paris and Madrid and some have also begun to develop their own retail chains.

Nevertheless, as can be easily inferred by taking a walk in the industrial area of Prato and as confirmed by my fieldwork, buyers from Europe are also retailers, and both wholesalers and retailers are by no means only Chinese people (see also Beccucci 2014). One peculiarity of Prato, in fact, is that many small retailers from all over Europe regularly and directly arrive in Prato to buy small batches of clothes, thus avoiding the established distribution channels. Additionally, well-known Italian brands, directly or indirectly, also source from Chinese manufacturers in Prato.

To sum up, both migrants and natives are part of transnational social fields that are actively involved in upstream sourcing and downstream selling. Chinese migrants are not the only protagonists as people with a Chinese, Italian, and European background are also a part of them. All these actors count on some competitive advantages linked to different global and local networks, look for opportunities, try to get around rules and regulations, compete with each other, and are constrained in different ways by specific policies, behaviors, and changing global dynamics. Thus, for the time being, a so-called Chinese-only global value chain with its center in Prato has not taken shape.

Against such a background, what would be interesting to learn is if a polarization is underway, according to which the clients of relatively large manufacturers in Prato are mainly Italian brands and Chinese traders active in Europe, while smaller manufacturers mainly sell to small retailers from all of Europe aiming at bypassing established distribution chains. The crucial point, however, is until when and how the Prato fast fashion center will remain among the leaders of low-end fast fashion in Europe in a changing global context.

## 4.8 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter documents the coming into being and the success of Prato's clothing industry, that 25 years ago was underdeveloped. Over time, it has become the largest low-end fast fashion center in Europe and the center of loosely integrated global production networks. Conversely, with this evolution, the Chinese migrants' involvement in fashion manufacturing and marketing in Europe becomes further centered on Italy (see Latham and Wu 2013).

The chapter offers an analytical explanation of the drivers of the success of the low-end fast fashion center. This is analyzed as involving actors at multiple geographic scales.

For instance, the Chinese migrants in Prato have been hit by the effects of the 2008 crisis and by the local criminalization of Chinese entrepreneurship. With a ‘hidden crisis’ affecting the local clothing industry, smaller or less established manufacturers and contractors closed down between 2010–2011 (Ceccagno 2012). Interestingly, however, Prato as a fast fashion production center has remained successful. The main reason is that it has benefited from a general ‘downgrading’ of the apparel demand in Europe. Lan and Zhu (2014:170) point out that as a result of the crisis, ‘the demand for cheaper clothing has actually grown, and over time, the firms have to reduce the average unit price’. This downgrading of fashion demand in Europe has been observed also by other scholars (Gereffi and Frederick 2010).

This evolution further highlights the role played by dynamics active at different geographic scales at certain points in time.

Structural contingencies do not always keep natives and migrants apart as they also contribute to push city inhabitants, regardless of their background, to build working and social relations.

In this chapter, as well as the previous one, it becomes evident that multiple actors are involved in the fashion industry in Prato. A large part of the local population, directly or indirectly, has actively participated in the process of development of the local clothing industry, that is, those that have rented or sold factory premises, flats, and fake contracts for flats that the Chinese do not even see, the real estate agents involved in the process, and those that have sold to the Chinese their factories, their machineries, their know-how, and their consultancy as book-keepers or those expert in liaising with the authorities and oiling the mechanisms for getting things done.

All these actors should be added to the host of local and transnational entrepreneurs that have been more directly involved in the making of the Prato global clothing industry. These include first those who take direct advantage of the exploitative conditions prevailing in Chinese businesses, that is, the Chinese manufacturers based in Prato and the Italian manufacturers, be they located in the district or in other areas. Second, they include those actors involved in the creation of the Chinese dominated low-end fast fashion center, such as fabric producers and buyers, stylists, accountants, logistic firms and the like, and those that have started their businesses together with Chinese entrepreneurs.<sup>14</sup>



Moreover, from the early 2000s on, transnational traders providing fabrics and accessories to the industry as well as buyers and traders from all of Europe and beyond have become part and parcel of the global value chain with its center in Prato.

My fieldwork sheds light on the dynamics involving transnational textile importers based in Prato and on the different competitive advantages and disadvantages of the different national groups involved in the business. Actors at different points of the production networks can remain in the business only as long as they rapidly adapt to changes and find out new ways to generate profits in the changed circumstances.

In disagreement with those that have already depicted the Prato's clothing center as a global value chain dominated by Chinese, my work shows that for the time being global production networks with Prato at their center are not controlled upstream and downstream by Chinese migrants. Clearly, the Chinese entrepreneurs play a crucial role in them. In fact, up to now most of the textiles and accessories sourcing has been done in China and a growing number of Chinese migrants based in Europe have entered the apparel business as wholesalers and retailers taking advantage of the competitive prices of clothes with high fashion content offered in Prato.

However, some crucial questions revolving around the viability of this industry are still open.

Up until now, the production networks with their center in Prato have had the potential to withstand the competition of garments from low labor costs countries, including China. In fact, the clothing center in Prato could rely on higher fashion content than cheaper garments from China (Ceccagno 2009, 2012). This has made the Prato clothing industry attractive even for big retailers such as Zara and H&M.

Now, however, China is catching up, and producers in China are now able to respond to European fashion trends much faster than before (Lan and Zhu 2014). Thus, Prato's competitive advantages should not be taken for granted.

## NOTES

1. While the concept of the international division of labor remains useful for tracing specific global commodity chains and the territorial specialization of production in certain areas, it is being criticized because it posits a binary division between 'core' and 'periphery' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 85) and it does not account for labor (Coe et al. 2008, Rainnie et al. 2011, 2013, among others) and labor mobility (Smith et al. 2002: 47–48; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Tsing 2009: 149).

2. Together with the Quadrilateral of Iolo, Macrolotto 1 and 2 are the industrial areas that were provided by the local government to textile firms in the previous decades. These areas are far less cramped and dilapidated than the area around via Pistoiese, in Macrolotto 0 where most Chinese commercial businesses are concentrated (Ceccagno 2009; Dei Ottati 2014).
3. Giulin, the oldest and larger Chinese manufacturer, selling leather clothes with the Giupel brand, and Koralline, which was launched in the late 2000s, seem to be among the few exceptions. Giulin has by now moved most of its manufacturing to China.
4. While the term ‘cutter-designer’ proposed by Lan and Zhu (2014) captures the features of larger final-good firms that technically are OEM firms, I do not find it appropriate as a term of the entire group as smaller firms often directly market their products. I prefer the more general term ‘manufacturers’ when referring to the entire group.
5. My translation from Italian.
6. The lost payments, deception, and fraud enacted by Italian manufacturers towards Chinese workshops that have emerged in Prato since the early 1990s (Ceccagno 2003a; Ceccagno et al. 2010) have also been uncovered in fieldwork conducted in Carpi (Spinner 2005).
7. Zara is part of a group called Industria de Diseno Textil (Inditex).
8. Author’s interview with a native clothing entrepreneur in Prato, see also Segre Reinach 2009.
9. On the crisis of the Prato clothing center at the end of the 2000s, see also *Xinhua wang* (2011).
10. This confirms that the crisis hitting the Chinese in Prato in early 2010 as a result of the combined effects of the global crisis and the selective attack against the Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato, essentially has hit smaller businesses harder (Ceccagno 2012).
11. Since the mid-2000s, some European capitals serve as centers for regional/national markets of imported garments. Paris and Madrid serve as the markets for France, Spain, Belgium, and Portugal (Lan 2014). Wholesalers at each level source products from their respective higher-level centers. This distribution process organized by the Chinese migrants in some European countries is strikingly similar to the one adopted in Italy (Ceccagno 2007b).
12. While data is not available, one could also speculate that this evolution in Prato has contributed to create and sustain a business niche for textile and accessories importers that do not only serve the Prato clothing center, but also the Italian textile market as a whole.
13. Exporting from Italy to China is clearly not a business only for people living in Prato.
14. In 2013, there were 438 joint ventures involving Chinese migrants and natives in Prato (CCIAA Prato 2014).

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## The Mobile Regime

*“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you run very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.” “A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”*  
(Carroll 2016).

### 5.1 PROLOGUE

*When I had just arrived, I used to spend the all day in the workshop, we had to work 18 hours, 17 hours, so to speak there was no day and night, when orders arrived we just worked. I mean, we can say, and I am not exaggerating, that essentially you do not see the sun in a full month, because during the day you sleep and at night, for instance at 3 a.m, orders arrive and we used to get up and work all night, and when the sun rises, it was time to sleep, we used to sleep till late in the night, and then we would get up again and work, this is how it works. [...]*

*Maybe I am one of the lucky ones, I have a place where I work and a place where I live. But most people work and live in the same place, for them it is not a question of having or not having time for enjoying themselves. (Bressan and Krause 2014: 72<sup>1</sup>)*

## 5.2 INTRA- AND INTER-WORKSHOP DYNAMICS: A NEW CONCEPTUALIZATION

David Harvey has shed light on the shift from mass industrial production to globalized regimes of flexible accumulation prevailing worldwide since the early 1970. Flexible accumulation, according to Harvey (1989: 147), ‘rests on flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption.’

In the neoliberal era, space is annihilated in order to speed up the velocity of turnover in the production, consumption and distribution of commodities. The ‘time and space compression’ described by Harvey (1989) refers to the simultaneous implosion of space and the acceleration of all aspects of economic—and hence cultural—life.

Harvey argues that one important implication of the time and space compression is that they have called forth a reorganization of labor markets with new forms of labor regulation, including outsourcing and employment of temporary, part-time, and seasonal workers. Furthermore, flexibility stemming from the implosion of space has brought about an increased segmentation of production processes.

The multiplication of labor as a new frontier of capital is also discussed by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013). Two analytical concepts put forth by these authors capture the trajectory of the labor regime discussed in this chapter: ‘intensification’, or the tendency of labor to ‘colonize the entire life of laboring subjects’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 88); and heterogenization, or the fragmentation of legal and social regimes that organize labor resulting in the creation of new kinds of production. This and the following chapter highlight both trends and show the ways in which they are intertwined with the dynamics in the Italian fashion industry where Chinese migrants are active as contractors and workers.

Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013: 189) critique the dichotomy between mobility and immobility that has characterized recent scholarship and theorize the interrelationship between and interdependency of mobility and stasis. They suggest that mobility and immobility be analyzed within a theory of globe-spanning relationships of power. In line with this approach, I do not address mobility and the related stasis *per se*, but I ground them in the space of production, showing that they are used as highly competitive tools for profit.

Drawing from these critical labor and migration studies, in this chapter I seek to grasp the mutation of labor, space, time, and power that has



accompanied the economic inclusion of Chinese work in the Italian fashion industry. I analyze the pathway of flexible accumulation that has emerged in the Italian fashion industry and the development of new production processes leading to the introduction of a revolutionary labor regime of the Chinese migrants in Italy.

I will do this by focusing on workplace arrangements and inter-firm dynamics and the effects they have on the lives of workers. I undertake to analyze the peculiar time and space reconfiguration taking place through a reworking of the dynamic interplay of stasis and mobility in the informal network of Chinese contracting workshops in Italy, and the resulting distinct labor regime that outcompetes by far all pre-existing productive regimes.

In particular, I document and analyze the peculiar reconfiguration of the space of production within Chinese-run businesses both at the intra- and inter-firm level and the resulting changes in the organizational pattern of the commodity chain that contribute to shape a unique productive regime.

While a vast body of literature exists on Chinese migrants in Italy and industrial districts, the logics of capital in the Italian clothing industry that rely on Chinese contractors have not been fully uncovered. I focus analytical attention on the dynamics taking place in Prato and other fashion districts in Italy as part of the global restructuring of production. This offers a number of insights into the logic of capital in relocating production sites and wooing an immigrant labor force.

Thus, a reworking of mobility and stasis in the productive environment as a central emplacement strategy of Chinese migrants is the focus of this chapter. Given that the emplacement strategy of Chinese migrants in industrial districts has been successful precisely because it offers previously unthinkable competitive advantages, this chapter aims to move forward the debate on the advantages brought by the Chinese mode of emplacement to the Italian fashion industry. I argue that a crucial factor has not been addressed before and should instead be given full consideration: the analysis should not only focus on the competitive conditions offered by the individual Chinese firms, but should also highlight the benefits brought about by an articulated and radical reconfiguration of the space of production involving the network of Chinese contracting businesses at a particular time and space. Based on the conjunction of individual supplier workshops with an informal network of contracting firms, I have termed this productive regime ‘the mobile regime’ (Ceccagno 2015, 2016). Intra-firm stasis, short-term inter-firm mobility, and mobility within and outside of the productive sector are the main articulations of this mode of

emplacement. I undertake to discuss each of these articulations and ground them in the broad historical perspective. I explore the ways in which they are interconnected to form a unitary and unique form of labor regime based on extreme flexibility.

Thus, in this chapter a dimension is added to the different forms of migrant employment, namely the extreme flexibility which is attained by shaping a very mobile inter-firms productive environment.

In Chap. 3, I have shown that Chinese migrants have tended to replace natives as contractors in the fashion industry. By highlighting the features of the Chinese suppliers' mobile regime, here I show that it is this productive regime that shuts and to a great extent replaces the pre-existing productive systems and industrial relations.

The chapter shows how the Chinese mobile emplacement strategies favor the spread of fast fashion strategies and help manufacturers by creating conditions similar to those offered by delocalization, as well as by offering them the benefits more recently associated with co-location of the different phases of production.

Moreover, the chapter presents and discusses data on the labor market involving Chinese migrants that adds to the understanding of the complex, flexible, and ever-changing architecture of the fashion industry with the Chinese-run workshops at its center. This data sheds a light on crucial shifts at the intra- and inter-firms level as a result of global changes (Ceccagno 2016).

### 5.3 CHINESE CONTRACTING WORKSHOPS: THE WAGE SYSTEM

The typical Chinese clothing workshop is set up as a sole proprietorship or family business. General or limited partnerships are few and limited companies are even fewer. This trend has not changed significantly over time. In 2002, for instance, out of the 1739 Chinese firms in the province of Prato 88.3 percent were sole proprietorship businesses (they reached 93.5 percent in the Carpi clothing district in the same year, R&I 2009), with general partnership businesses only reaching 7.1 percent, and limited companies 4.6 percent (CCIAA Prato 2003). Ten years later, in 2012, when there were 4803 Chinese businesses in the Prato province, sole proprietorship was still dominant in Prato: exactly the same percentage of Chinese-owned businesses as ten years earlier—88.3 percent—was made up of sole proprietorship firms, and according to the local Chamber of

Commerce, this percentage rises to 94 percent if only newly established Chinese firms are taken into consideration (CCIAA Prato 2013).

Working patterns, organization of the workplace and the reproductive sphere, and wage systems are important domains from where the competitive advantages gained by the Chinese contractors can be assessed. Therefore, what happens on the shop floor is crucial. The working arrangements in Chinese-run workshops greatly contribute to keeping costs, and therefore prices, down. This section dwells on some measures adopted at the firm level in different domains in order to gain a competitive edge. I will then move to inter-firms arrangements.

Chinese workers in factories run by co-nationals are paid either by piece rate or on a monthly basis, depending on their skills. It is not easy to provide a benchmark for the piece rate system, as it involves many variables linked to the industry (clothing, leather, etc.), to the product (clothes, shoes, bags), to the level of the production (high-end, low-end), to the type of work (e.g. whole or piece of cloth to do) (Wu 2008). In any case, evidence from fieldwork conducted in Prato in the early 2000s (Ceccagno 2003a), in Carpi in 2004 (Spinner 2005), and in the Veneto region in 2006 (Wu 2008) provides information on workers' earnings in different years and localities (Table 5.1).

A *shougong* is a worker that has acquired basic skills and can iron and sew, but not expertly. In the early 2000s in Prato and Carpi, a *shougong* earned around €600 per month, paid either by piece or as a fixed wage. A *chegong*, or a skilled worker, is paid by piece and earned between €7500

**Table 5.1** Estimates on wages in Prato, Carpi and Veneto in different years

	<i>Prato district</i> <i>Ceccagno (2003a)</i>	<i>Carpi district</i> <i>Spinner (2005)</i>	<i>Veneto region</i> <i>Wu (2008)</i>
<i>Zagong</i> Monthly wage	€400–500 monthly		€500–700
<i>Shougong</i> Piece rate wage or monthly wage	€600 per month	€600 per month	Not available
<i>Chegong</i> Piece rate wage	€7500–10,000 per year	€8400 per year	€900–1100 per month
<b>Highly skilled workers</b> <i>Baodi</i> wage	Occupational level did not exist	Occupational level did not exist	€3000

Source: Based on data from Ceccagno (2003a) for Prato, Spinner (2005) for Carpi, Wu (2008) for the Veneto Region

and €10,000 per year in Prato; €8400 in Carpi; and €900—1100 per month in the Veneto region (Ceccagno 2016).

A monthly salary, instead, applies to unskilled workers—known as *zagongs* or odd jobs workers—and highly skilled workers, whose wage is called the *baodi* wage. The *baodi* wage has only emerged in the last years, and is meant to remedy to the deleterious effects on employers of highly skilled workers' frantic territorial mobility (see below).

*Zagong* workers are responsible for a number of jobs, including cooking meals for all staff and family members of the employers living on the workshop premises, cleaning, loading and unloading, and completing the remaining work after the skilled workers have finished (cutting threads and strings, etc.). Depending on the size of the firms, there is at least one *zagong* per workshop. The salary for *zagongs* ranged from €400 to €500 per month in 2002 in Prato, and from €500 to €700 in 2006 in the Veneto region.

However, the customary arrangement for tax payment reduces the workers' real income. In fact, the amount owed to the state for tax, social security, and pension contributions—formally due by the employer—is instead deducted from the worker's salary (Ceccagno 2007a; Wu 2008). As mentioned above, in practice, this deduction takes place only during the months when the worker's contract is active, and for a limited number of hours, as the number of working hours is often underreported.

A clear hierarchy is visible in the wage system, with a visible gap separating *zagongs* from high-skilled workers. As pointed out by Wu (2008), the cycle of work demand is also an important factor affecting working conditions and overall remuneration. When a tough deadline for a production contract is set—because of market requirements or because the Chinese employer seeks to gain maximum profit from available resources—skilled workers that work longer hours 'may share in the accrued profits with the employer, but this is not the case for *zagongs*, who gain nothing but suffer from overwork' (Wu 2008: 14). Wu also argues that the difference in workers' working conditions reflects the unevenness and segmentation of the Chinese labor market in Italy, that is, the surplus of *zagongs* and the shortage of skilled and high-skilled workers (but see below for more recent developments). Moreover, *zagongs* are more likely to be undocumented latecomers, and therefore much more vulnerable than other workers.

In Chinese workshops wages are complemented by the provision of free food and accommodation to workers in the workshop's premises. I will discuss this arrangement below.

## 5.4 THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE PRODUCTIVE SPACE

As pointed out by many scholars, the Chinese workshops offer flexibility and lower costs to manufacturers by relying on extra-long working hours, informal transactions and irregular labor. Research has also shown that these features are not unusual in Italy and other parts of the world and therefore cannot fully explain the success of the clothing center.

Some scholars also focus on inter-firm relations' role in the functioning of the local fast fashion industry (Ceccagno 2015; Dei Ottati 2014; Lan and Zhu 2014). Dei Ottati (2014) suggests that a crucial role in the success of the Prato center is played by the 'thickening' effect of the ethnic business networks whereby 'intensification and intertwining' of the inter-firm relations help reduce entry barriers for new firms and facilitate reciprocal cooperation among interdependent firms. She thus posits that the development of Chinese-run businesses follow a pathway similar to the classical pathway of the firms in the traditional Italian industrial districts, but adopting a code of conduct that is 'ethnic', that is, Chinese only. As an explanation of the success, Lan and Zhu (2014: 171) offer the Chinese migrants' horizontal integration of manufacturing and wholesaling through their ethnic networks. Thus these authors, while connecting the fast fashion center in Prato with wider dynamics, mainly focus their attention on inter-group dynamics.

While migrants' transnational social fields play an important role, the approach that stresses inter-ethnic ties alone cannot explain the main dynamics at work. I am convinced that the features of the intra- and inter-firm dynamics are better understood in the framework of globe-circulating processes of capital and labor in the last decades. It is within this framework, therefore, that I analyze the articulations of the reconfiguration of the space of production, their evolution over time, and their implications.

## 5.5 SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

In Chinese contracting, workers are offered board and lodging in the workshop premises, where the owner's family also lives, or else they are accommodated in nearby flats, rented by the employers. This type of arrangement has been adopted in Chinese businesses since the late 1980s when the Chinese were attracted into Italian fashion districts as contractors. Today it still is a crucial feature of the stitching workshops.

Food and accommodation are provided also during the slack season and during periods of sickness (at least in principle), as well as provided to relatives and friends of workers who might be visiting to look for a job nearby. Even in the cases where there is a separation between the production premises and accommodation, with workers living together in flats near to the workshop, Chinese employers are still responsible for providing food and accommodation to all staff (Wu 2008).

This productive organization enables the contracting unit to swiftly respond to the high flexibility required by the market. In fact, stitching workshops also receive orders in the evening, and workers are expected to start working right away so that orders are completed even when this entails night work.

The sleeping regime as a characteristic of Chinese workshops that reduces costs and adds flexibility has been described long ago (Ceccagno 2003b, 2007a; Bressan and Krause 2014), however, only recently has it been analyzed in the framework of the repositioning of the Italian fashion industry within globe-circulating processes of capital and labor (Ceccagno 2015).

In Chap. 3, I explained that by clustering their businesses in the Italian districts, the Chinese contractors have offered to final-good firms the benefits typical of international outsourcing—a cheap workforce, systematic violation of labor rules and externalization of production costs—without entailing the geographic reallocation of the production. This has helped preventing a more drastic reduction of Italy’s role as global producer and exporter of fashion items.

Here I would like to point at the mutual constitution of the geographical positioning of Chinese contracting businesses and the workplace arrangements. Crucially, in fact, settlement in the vicinity of final-good firms has been made possible by the sleeping regime: It was by offering board and lodging to workers that Chinese employers were able to attract large numbers of co-national migrants into the Italian industrial districts (Ceccagno 2015).

Thus the sleeping regime plays a crucial role in enabling small Italian firms to respond to the globalization of the fashion market. This finding is confirmed by Paba and Murat (2006) and Zanni (2007) as these authors show that Chinese contracting businesses are found mainly in those IDs made up of small- and medium-size firms that do not have offshore activities.

## 5.6 WORKERS SHORT-TERM INTER-FIRM MOBILITY

The sleeping arrangement is part of a more comprehensive reconfiguration of the productive space that also includes worker's mobility. Workers' mobility is two-fold. It consists of workers short-term inter-firm mobility from one workshop to another, and, increasingly, of frantic territorial mobility. The term 'territorial mobility' is here used, for want of a better word, to capture different forms of mobility including mobility from one employer to another, but also outside of the district, outside of manufacturing, and outside of the employee position.

Here I will discuss workers' short-term inter-firm mobility and the advantages it provides to the network of workshops and thus to the entire fashion industry.

Manufacturers are able to reduce to a minimum the so-called 'time to market' by spreading the production over more workshops above what is actually needed during the slack season. This leads to the maintaining of a relationship with many contractors who are ready to speed up goods assembly during the peak season (Ceccagno 2009). Suppliers are asked to rely upon a large productive capacity when high volumes of orders are received. To do so, they count on workers' willingness to move from one workshop to another. When there are no orders in the workshop where they work, Chinese workers paid by piece are free to temporarily move for a few days or weeks to other workshops where labor is needed for quick completion of orders.

As a result of these arrangements, an informal network of Chinese contracting firms can routinely resort to occasional workers for completing urgent orders. The advertisement below, posted on June 4, 2015 on a job demand and supply websites (see below), is an example of this practice:

*I am an ironer for many years. Now my workshop does not have enough orders. Therefore, I am looking for a temporary help job at a stitching workshop or a manufacturing business. The ideal place would be close to the Chinese street [Via Pistoiese], but also places a little more far away but well connected would do.*

Combined with the sleeping agreements, this arrangement offers a net competitive advantage in terms of flexibility to the entire fast fashion industry.

## 5.7 IMPLICATIONS OF THE SPACE RECONFIGURATION

In Chinese manufacturing businesses workers' mobility (in terms of short-term inter-workshop mobility) and stasis (in terms of sleeping agreements) are reworked so that they make possible a reconfiguration of the productive space of production, a dimension that often risks being neglected (Pun and Smith 2007). Far from being a mere organizational factor, this reconfiguration of the space is crucial for generating previously unattainable profits. In fact, it enables the contracting units to swiftly respond to the high flexibility required by the market. This is a space reconfiguration where the space consists of the dotted line that unites many Chinese-run workshops needing instant workers for processing instant orders in the highly perishable instant fashion industry (Ceccagno 2015).

Interestingly—and counter-intuitively—it is the sleeping regime that makes possible the workers inter-workshop mobility.

While most scholars only focus on the competitive advantages offered by individual Chinese contracting firms, and others mainly stress the role of inter-ethnic transnational ties, I contend that today Chinese businesses' competitiveness is chiefly the result of the unbounded, innovative reconfiguration of the space that links intra-firm sleeping arrangements with inter-firm mobility. Intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility should therefore be considered as two interconnected poles of a new production regime. This reconfiguration of the space plays a crucial role in the organizational pattern of the commodity chain in that it provides production conditions that outcompete other systems and therefore make it possible to gain a competitive edge.

In a recent writing of mine, I show that the innovative combination of intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility offers benefits that address fashion manufacturers' old and new concerns over proximity (Ceccagno 2015).

First, by clustering in the vicinity of the manufacturers they provide, to small firms unable to offshore production, conditions usually associated with delocalization.

Second, more recently, a new global trend has emerged: in response to changing labor costs, higher transport cost and advantages of co-location of R&D and production, manufacturers that had previously outsourced production increasingly adopt strategies consisting in the segmentation of the supply chain and repatriation of part of the production (Foresight 2013). Moreover, some authors have shown that proximity is a competitive advantage for fast fashion (Crestanello and Tattara 2011).



I contend that it is mainly through the mobile regime, with its reorganization of intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility, that Chinese contractors provide to final-good manufacturers not only conditions similar to those provided by internationalization strategies, but also the benefits of co-location. These dynamics testify to the mutual constitution of mobility and immobility in space.

## 5.8 THE CHINESE MOBILE REGIME EMBODIES THE PRINCIPLES OF THE FAST FASHION

Most crucially, the intra- and inter-firm reconfiguration of space perfectly meets the imperatives of the fast fashion strategies.

Fast fashion offers trendy, inexpensive clothes in small volumes, that are usually not replenished, and are delivered to consumers at rapid speed. From conception to delivery usually takes about two to four weeks (Plunkett 2010: 22–23, cited in Memic and Minhas 2011) but mass media report of a much shorter lead-time. Fast fashion requires a very fast and highly responsive supply chain whose products are disposable and for immediate consumption (Hines and Bruce 2007: 44).

Segre Reinach (2009) states that by changing the conditions surrounding production, retailers resorting to the fast fashion strategies have freed themselves and consumers as well of the ‘seasonal collection trap’. In this and the next chapter I highlight the binding living and working conditions in contracting businesses that make it possible for consumers to free themselves from that trap.

As already pointed out, it was exactly in the late 1980s, when the Chinese migrants started settling as contractors in Prato, that the fast fashion production mode was adopted in the Prato ID (Ceccagno 2015; Dei Ottati 2014). The needs of the recently established Italian fast fashion contributed to shape the extreme reconfiguration of the space of production discussed above. In fact, the time pressure was such that a reorganization of the production strategies had to be invented. As a result, in Chinese workshops clothes are manufactured in small batches overnight, with materials delivered in the evening processed by the next morning. In many instances, in fact, work at night is programmed, as the Italian manufacturer finishes the design and cutting in the daytime and delivers the goods to the contractors in the evening to be completed by the next morning. Therefore, it often happens that workers have to work through the night, in some cases 24 hours or even more continuously, in order to meet delivery deadlines.

I argue that the intra- and inter-firm reconfiguration of the space of production is the unique way in which the Chinese migrants in Italy have embraced and interpreted the fast fashion imperatives.<sup>2</sup> This reconfiguration enabled the clothing manufacturers in Prato to reduce the ‘time to market’ for fashion commodities and thus brought about substantial benefits for the final-goods firms both in terms of price and lead-time. In turn, this fostered the growth of the local clothing industry and an increase in the number of local manufacturers (Ceccagno 2015).

While it was only in Prato that the synergy between the fast fashion and the reconfiguration of the production space brought about the creation of a vibrant lower-end fast fashion center, the same synergy has contributed to the success of Chinese migrants in the other fashion districts to which they were attracted, years later, as contractors.

In turn, the mutual constitution of the Chinese firms and the fast fashion strategy helps explain why in many districts the Chinese contractors have replaced native contractors. In fact, the impact of this novel productive regime is such that it shuts down and to a great extent replaces the pre-existing productive systems as the mobile emplacement strategy outcompetes by far even the most flexible measures adopted by natives. As native contractors cannot compete with this space and time reconfiguration, more and more of them are expelled from the fashion industry.

## 5.9 FROM BLOCKED MOBILITY TO EXTREME INTER-FIRM MOBILITY

While the sleeping agreement has been a feature of the Chinese mode of emplacement since the beginning, and is still predominant, workers mobility has changed over time in relation to the changes in the Italian regime of mobility and to the opening up of new transnational business opportunities for Chinese migrants.

In a previous chapter, I discussed the ban on entrepreneurship for migrants enacted during the 1990s. During the ban on immigrant entrepreneurship, inter-firm mobility of skilled workers had rarely taken place as opportunities emerged only for a limited number of people. Instead, newly arrived undocumented migrants had to frantically move from one workshop to another in search of work and a place where they could avoid police checks while waiting for the next amnesty.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 2000s, three amnesties in quick succession had made it possible for many to legalize their position. As the result, in the Prato

district, only two out of ten workers were undocumented, in contrast with the situation in the early 1990s when most workers were undocumented and, as a rule, only the employers and the members of their family had been able to legalize their presence (Ceccagno 2003a). A similar situation was found in the Carpi district (Spinner 2004).

Moreover, during the 1999 amnesty, many were able to access self-employment. As a result, the number of Chinese firms skyrocketed, as shown in the previous chapter.

Evidence from my early fieldwork in Prato shows that in the late 1990s, and in particular after the ban on entrepreneurship had been lifted, in Chinese stitching workshops previously prevailing employer-worker informal agreements tended to disappear (Ceccagno 2002).

In the 1990s, the Chinese workshops organization with workers living in the workshop premises had been a fairly stable one, and rarely did the workers quit the workshop without notice. A couple of times a year employers and workers explicitly or implicitly used to plan the reciprocal obligations for the following period. Essentially, this took place during the slack months of January and August, when accepting free food and accommodation in the absence of orders somehow implied that the worker would not quit the employer before the next slack season. This informal arrangement had been perceived as beneficial by the employers that could count on skilled workers, and also by the workers who had already been in Italy for a while, as the ban on entrepreneurship prevented them from starting their own business. Changing conditions, however, made these arrangements obsolete.

From the end of the 1990s, easier access to entrepreneurship and the mushrooming of Chinese contractors resulted in a drastic change of the internal rules of the game. Thus, around the turn of the century, as a result of the changing Italian regime of mobility and a new drive toward the fast fashion production Italian strategies, a drastic change was taking place in the Chinese network of contracting businesses: the previously blocked mobility was giving room to extreme mobility. One form of workers mobility was short-term inter-workshop mobility, as described above. By the early 2000s, short-term inter-workshop mobility became a regular feature of the Chinese productive arrangements. As a result, an informal nationwide network of Chinese contracting firms could routinely resort to occasional workers for completing urgent orders (Ceccagno 2015). Inter-firm short-term territorial mobility of workers from one workshop to another is the most important form of space reconfiguration taking place in Chinese

contracting firms: it links—and is made possible by the existence of—an informal network of Chinese-owned firms scattered all over the national territory.

The highly exploitative and highly revolutionary match of intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility stemmed from an employer-employees implicit agreement that soon became the unquestioned *modus operandi* in the network of Chinese contractors in the Italian fashion industry. However, in the same years when this reconfiguration of the productive space was becoming pervasive, another form of workers' mobility emerged.

### 5.10 WORKERS' FRANTIC TERRITORIAL MOBILITY

Recently, workers mobility increasingly has taken the form of frantic territorial mobility in search of better working conditions, in and outside the fashion industry. At the turn of the twenty-first century a new era had started; in fact with the mushrooming of the Chinese contracting businesses spanning the wide and large of Italy, those who could not open their own businesses could at least move to other workshops as soon as they heard of better working and living conditions (Ceccagno 2002). Workers' frantic territorial mobility ensued.

Meanwhile, the growth of China as a producer of low cost goods was pushing many Chinese migrants to become importers, wholesalers, and retailers of goods from China, as discussed in the previous chapter. As a result, many Chinese migrants moved to new localities especially in Southern Italy or to other countries in Europe. Commercial activities linked to the new role of China came to be perceived as the best avenue for quick upward mobility and many repositioned themselves into the promising new business (Ceccagno 2007b).

Workshop owners perceive workers' short-term inter-workshop mobility as beneficial but they are afraid of workers' frantic territorial mobility. This emerged clearly in my early fieldwork. Most Chinese employers who I interviewed in Prato in 2001–2002 described workers' territorial mobility as a handicap and the main problem in the management of their businesses. They stated that the workers' extreme mobility was particularly detrimental to small entrepreneurs who could find themselves left with the very difficult task of refusing orders at the last minute as skilled workers quit the job without notice. Some even lamented that they could not continue to supply Italian high-end brands because the workers, once trained to produce high-value

garments at the workshop owner's expense, hurried to open their own supplier workshops (Ceccagno 2003a, 2007a).

By the same token, employers interviewed in 2006 complained that workers' frantic territorial mobility in many cases had brought about the sudden loss of highly skilled workers (Ceccagno 2009). The owner of the Giupel firm, the icon of the Chinese manufacturers in Italy, confirmed that skilled workers' mobility was a problem, and explained that he had got around the problem by employing workers in his factory in China:

*In Italy, it's hard to hold on to the most skilled workers. Sometimes there is no work and they go elsewhere. In my factory in China these problems do not exist; the skilled workers stay. There is no slack season problem there.*

The drain of skilled workers had such an impact on production and the internal competition to get the best workers became so tense, that in the last years many employers introduced the monthly salary mentioned above known as the *baodi* wage as a means to retain highly skilled workers. Under the *baodi* wage system, the employer, whether busy or not, pays a certain amount to high-skilled workers within a defined period. The *baodi* wage can be as high as €3000 per month (Wu 2008). With the *baodi* wage system, employers try to contain their risks by reducing high-skilled workers' mobility. By adopting it, employers are able to accept more orders or orders entailing more complex tasks, thus making more profit.

Complaints on the high turnover of skilled workers show that the very actors that benefit from workers' short-term inter-workshops mobility perceive themselves as negatively affected by the territorial mobility whereby workers feel free to look for better working conditions and/or upward mobility. I argue (Ceccagno 2015) that this happens because different mobilities meet different demands. Short-term inter-workshops' mobility heavily contributes toward guaranteeing the swiftness of production and therefore is directly beneficial to suppliers and, indirectly, to manufacturers. Workers' territorial mobility and upward mobility toward self-employment are part and parcel of the same productive system counting on continuous arrivals from China and on growing numbers of suppliers competing for orders. They serve the more general interests of the industry and do not directly protect the short-term interests of individual manufacturers.

However, recently, new dynamics are shaking the state of things, as I will show in the next sections.

### 5.11 ‘WHO EXPLOITS WHO?’ THE NEW BARGAINING POWER OF SKILLED WORKERS

In the 1990s, the sleeping regime had contributed to legitimizing paternalistic working relations inside the workshop, as it emerges from the following interview conducted in Prato in 2002:

*The larger the workshop the more complex it is to manage it. We do not have managers, and the owners have to deal with all employees' aspects of life. We provide food to workers, take care of their flu, call the doctor. [...]*

*Recently, for renewing their permit to stay, workers are required to document that they have a flat where they live, and so I am the one that has to take care of finding a [fake] residence for everybody. Our job as the business owners includes being the workers' moms and daddies. We often joke about this among ourselves.*

Over the years, researchers have highlighted Chinese workers' high vulnerability *vis-à-vis* their employers (Ceccagno and Omodeo 1997; Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008; Ceccagno et al. 2010; Montenero 2011; Wu 2008; Wu and Sheehan 2011; Wu and Liu 2012). On the basis of fieldwork conducted in the Veneto region in 2006, Wu and Sheehan (2011) assess the total dependence of workers upon their employers arguing that the main source of workers' vulnerability is their social isolation, related to the type of premises in which they work.

Wu and Liu (2012) pinpoint that dissatisfaction at the work organization, frustration at the Chinese employer's attitude toward workers, and demand for respect are particularly strong when migrants have a background of employment in Chinese state-owned enterprises, mainly in Northeast China, or as white collar workers in urban China.<sup>4</sup> Employment in the contracting firms operating in the Italian fast fashion industry, they argue, follows rules drastically different from those that prevailed in China before the restructuring of the state-owned factories.

However, during my fieldwork in Prato in 2012 preliminary evidence of new trends emerged (Ceccagno 2012).

First, the productive systems cannot count anymore on the constant inflow of migrant workers from China. The arrival from China of a highly flexible and territorially mobile workforce has almost come to a halt.

China is undergoing a transition to an urban, service-based economy. This is transforming it into a major immigration country (Haugen 2012; Piekie 2012). The continued growth of its economy and its gradual transition

to an urban, service-based economy suggest that China is about to shift from a country of internal migration and international emigration to a major immigration country. Moreover, internal labor migration in China is undergoing a significant change: owing to the emergence of new opportunities inland for previous migrants to the coast, Chinese southern coastal regions are also facing labor shortages (Wang et al. 2005). These changes are at the basis of a reduction in emigration from China, at least for some types of migrants. By now, opportunities in China are more attractive, realistically available and less risky.

Moreover, the gloomy economic climate prevailing in Italy is drastically reducing prospects for upwards mobility for natives and migrants alike. A trend toward abandoning recession-hit Italy started becoming apparent in early 2010 across the various immigrant groups in Italy, including Chinese migrants (ISMU 2013).<sup>5</sup>

This recent shift may have a lasting impact on the overall functioning of the Italian fashion industry.

Second, in Italy over the years, employment as workers in stitching workshops has become less and less glamorous and rewarding when compared with enticing opportunities in the trade business emerging in the early 2000s, and also with more recent—and more modest—forms of employment, such as being the owners of a coffee bar or a hair salon. By now, far less Chinese migrants are willing to work in manufacturing (Ceccagno 2016).

As a result, labor supply does not meet labor demand anymore: Evidence from the fieldwork in 2012–2014 shows that workshops mainly need skilled workers but most of the available workforce is comprised of unskilled workers.

In turn, these shifts seem to have altered the relative bargaining power of employers and skilled workers. Chinese employers now understand skilled workers as being in a position of strength that enables them to dictate conditions both in monetary terms and in terms of board and lodging, as revealed in an interview with a Chinese employer in 2013 in Prato:

*When I was a worker I had to bear hardships. Now everything has changed. Employees by now [...] tell you what they want to have for dinner, and food is wasted. They threaten to report to the police straight away if they are mistreated. So, the employer is easily blackmailed [...]. I wonder who exploits whom. It seems to me that by now those exploited are not the workers, but their employers. In certain respects, the employers dance at the employees' tune. For sure employers are not in a position to dictate the number of working hours to employees;*

*they lack the strength to do it. And workers quit without even a day's notice. Employers now are required to practice the traditional virtue of benevolence (rén). They have to respect their workers as if they were their parents. This is what most employers say nowadays.*

This shows the interrelationship between exiting behavior adopted by workers and its impact on the labor process (Smith 2006).

More recent data provides new evidence supporting these preliminary findings.

### 5.12 DESPERATELY SEEKING SKILLED WORKERS: THE INTERNET JOB DEMAND AND SUPPLY

In order to verify whether and to what extent the mobile regime is widespread, and how it changes the bargaining power of employees, I have collected data on the job market among the Chinese migrants active in the manufacturing businesses in Italy through posts on *Huarenjie* (2015). This is a website operated by Chinese migrants where adverts are posted by high numbers of potential employers and employees.

In the first years of settlement, Chinese workers were mainly recruited by word-of-mouth and via the interpersonal network of relatives and co-nationals. Over time, however, more impersonal channels have been partially substituted by social networks. Research shows that in Prato in the mid-2000s channels included: (1) a myriad of handwritten and printed notices plastered on an outside wall on via Pistoiese, the area where most Chinese commercial businesses are concentrated; (2) an electronic job display placed in the window front of a Chinese supermarket in the same area; (3) classified sections of several Chinese newspapers on sale in Italy (Flandrich 2009).

More recently however, jobs are increasingly matched with workers through *Huarenjie*, the Chinese language website. Labor demand and supply in the website's section 'Jobs demand and supply in contracting and manufacturing firms' was monitored for nine days, from June 3 to June 11, 2015.<sup>6</sup> The most striking feature that emerged was the vast imbalance between labor demand and supply. This is particularly evident for the position of skilled workers (Ceccagno 2016).

On June 11, for instance, 195 ads were posted by employers in Prato looking for skilled workers (*chegong*), while only five skilled workers in Prato posted their ads for this position. Ads in other Italian fashion areas



were much more limited. The highest number of employers' ads for this position was in Milan where 67 ads were posted on June 6. Nationwide, on June 11, 374 ads looking for skilled workers were posted while only seven workers (including the five in Prato) looked for this position.

A much more limited number of potential employers looked for unskilled workers (*shougong*) in the monitored days. In Prato ads ranged from 8 to 41 (respectively on June 6 and June 11); with a maximum of four ads posted by unskilled workers. Nationally, they ranged from 19 to 99, with a maximum of seven ads posted by unskilled workers (including the four in Prato).

On June 11, the 16 advertisements by potential employers looking for ironers were matched by only four ads by ironers.

Ads posted by employers looking for *zagongs* in Prato ranged from a minimum of six ads (June 5) to a maximum of 28 (June 10 and June 11), while the maximum number of ads posted by workers seeking a position as *zagongs* was four (on June 11). Nationally, the highest number of ads looking for *zagongs* was 88, and the maximum number of ads by *zagongs* was four (both on June 11).

The imbalance between demand and supply was less pronounced for positions in final-good firms: on June 11, 13 positions were offered to modelists (*motesbi*), 12 to pattern positioning operators (*paibanshi*), and 11 to cutting workers (*caijianggong*), while four workers posted their ads for each of these positions on the same day (Table 5.2).<sup>7</sup>

In sum, data emerging from the monitoring of the website's job market shows a vast imbalance between demand and supply. This is in stark contrast to previous findings on the Prato job market in

**Table 5.2** Prato's labor demand and supply on *Huarenjie* website (June 11, 2015)

	Demand	Supply
Skilled workers (车工 <i>chēgōng</i> )	195	5
Unskilled workers (手工 <i>shòugōng</i> )	41	4
Odd jobs (杂工 <i>zágōng</i> )	28	4
Ironers (烫工 <i>tānggōng</i> )	16	4
Modelists (模特师 <i>móteshī</i> )	13	4
Pattern positioning operators (排版师 <i>páibǎnshī</i> )	12	4
Cutters (裁剪工 <i>cáijiǎngōng</i> )	11	4

Source: Ceccagno (2016)

2007–2008, when a sufficient labor supply was available and employers did not need to compete for staff: in fact, only about one-third of the advertisements asked specifically for skilled and experienced operators (Flandrich 2009).

From the website job market, however, an imbalance between demand and supply also for the lower positions emerges. This points to a drastic departure from the recent past (see below).

### 5.13 THE SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER

Evidence of a shift of relative strength between employers and workers also emerges from the advertisements' content. Ads by workers seeking positions not only are very few, but they are mainly posted by unskilled workers or by people with specific skills, such as machine repairing. A couple of skilled workers that posted an ad during the monitored period required that the workshop does not rush for completing orders and the employer offers a nice working environment.

One ad posted on June 4, 2015 offers a glimpse into the condition of those vulnerable workers who cannot count on skills, nor on legalization or place of origin<sup>8</sup> as assets that facilitate their inclusion in the job market:

*I am a 34-year-old male from Henan without permit to stay. I have spent two years as unskilled ironer and now wish to learn to become an expert ironer. I am willing to endure hardship and work hard in order to learn. I hope that a well intentioned employer offers this opportunity to me. The salary's amount does not matter! (Job seeker)*

Employers competing with each other to attract workers, instead, stress the good working and living conditions they offer. Living conditions include 'a pleasant working environment', Internet connection, and air-conditioning. The best conditions are offered in ads targeting skilled workers. One ad, for instance, offered an environment with sociable skilled workers in order to entice other skilled workers to join them.

The sleeping regime is so intrinsic to the working environment that it is rarely mentioned in ads. Potential employers mention it when they hope to attract skilled workers by offering particularly attractive living conditions. For instance, skilled workers may be offered sleeping quarters close to but physically separated from the workplace.

Favorable working conditions include daytime only work and no rush to complete orders (*bu ganhuo*), as in the ad below posted on June 2, 2015 targeting skilled workers:

*Stitching workshop near the Coop [supermarket] in Prato looks for a couple of experienced skilled workers. Only specialized in trousers and skirts, simple and fixed models, daytime work, fixed time, no rush time. The workshop is next door from the living quarters, independent dwelling with Internet.* (Employer)

Many potential employers stress that their workshops receive abundant and regular orders. Thus, the ability to attract regular orders is crucial, as it reduces the risk of losing workers to competitors. Regular orders are important for workers relying on a piece rate, as they imply higher earnings and reduce the need to move temporarily or permanently to other workshops.

A fair number of ads state the employers' preference for recruiting couples as work teams. This is one further move whereby employers in a constant struggle to hamper workers' mobility hope to prevent workers from easily leaving the workplace in search of better conditions. At the same time, the preference for hiring couples is linked to the scarcity of rooms for the workers, as skilled workers are increasingly unhappy to share a room with other workers.

The adverts analyzed here show the employers' efforts to attract a scarce and, from their perspective, too mobile workforce.<sup>9</sup> They thus confirm my previous findings on an ongoing shifting balance of power between employers and employees (Ceccagno 2012).

These findings also point to the historical evolution of the working arrangements in Chinese contracting businesses, and thus shed new light on the changing working relations.

## 5.14 IMPLICATIONS OF THE SPACE RECONFIGURATION FOR THE WORKFORCE

Wu and Zanin (2010: 119) view the Chinese contracting firms as a 'total institution' based on a management system modeled after the traditional organization of Chinese households. While the sleeping regime (that induces Wu and Zanin to speak of a 'total institution') has been a feature of past working arrangements not only in China but also in Europe, the 'total institution' concept is of no analytical help for

better understanding the features of Chinese workshops. In fact, the ‘total institution’ conceptualization stresses workers’ intra-firm stasis, but overlooks the dynamic nexus between intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility. Moreover, the ‘total institution’ concept somehow implies a lack, if only partial, of freedom of movement. As this chapter shows, however, the working arrangements in Chinese workshops cannot be equated to forced labor since as a rule they do not limit workers’ freedom of movement (for exceptions see Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008).<sup>10</sup> Nor can mobility be depicted as forced mobility.

I show, in contrast, that the role played by Chinese workers in the regime resulting from the intra- and inter-firm space reconfiguration should be viewed in its full complexity.

A pressure to move originates from the overall productive regime: being a crucial feature of the Chinese contractors’ competitive edge, movement itself can be a form of exploitation. This is evident in the wage system that is organized in a way that workers do not see a reward in staying idle in those workshops that do not receive orders on a regular basis. I thus agree with Glick Schiller and Salazar’s suggestion that we should move beyond the ready equation of mobility with freedom and that movement should also be examined as a form of exploitation (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013: 190).

Workers’ frantic mobility in a situation of lack of skilled workers is producing a shift in the balance of power, even though it does not shake the working regime, at least for the time being.

This, however, is only part of the story.

Smith and his colleagues (2002) argue that treating labor simply as one of many institutions to be considered within commodity/value chain analyses is conceptually unsatisfactory. Especially in commodity chain literature, workers are largely depicted simply as the passive victims of capital’s restless search for ever cheaper labor. Labor forces are often conceived of as an *a priori* factor in the spatial deployment of productive processes. The concrete conditions in which labor forces are constructed and embedded are not addressed.

My findings, based on empirical evidence, show that far from only being passively forced to accept the exploitation linked to the fast fashion’s annihilation of time and space, most Chinese migrant workers actively contribute to shape and mold the mobile regime.

An apparent paradox thus emerges: on the one hand, the intra- and inter-firm space reconfiguration brings about more intensive workforce

exploitation, as family and personal life undergo drastic compression (see next chapter), and the regime forces workers to move from one workshop to another so that operations are organized without lulls and staff time can be economized. On the other hand, short-term inter-workshop mobility and territorial mobility partially free workers from previous pressure in the workplace—while a pressure to move is added.

This paradoxical situation, to a certain extent however, complies with workers' aspirations to economic upward mobility both in terms of access to self-employment and in terms of affluence. Short-term mobility in fact, also functions as a lever workers use for getting better conditions (see also Wu and Liu 2012). By moving from one place to another in the inter-firm mobility context, they learn which places are better and why, they collect information on more advantageous arrangements and are in a better position to grasp new opportunities. The dynamism that characterizes the Chinese working arrangements does not only play in favor of the constant creation of profit; it also favors workers' aspirations to upward mobility. Thus, to a certain extent, and interestingly, the mobile regime provides the framework within which workers can have significant agency.

Conversely, workers' ambitions are at a time shaped by a number of dominant narrations on what one should be—a successful migrant, somebody that is able to facilitate outmigration for other members of the family, an entrepreneur, or an entrepreneur that contributes to the development of the area of origin—and appropriated by the industry that thrives also on workers exploitation and self-exploitation in order to reach their goals.

Interviews collected by Wu and Zanin in 2006 in the Veneto Region (Wu 2008; Wu and Zanin 2007), further illuminate this concept. Some Chinese workers lamented bad working conditions. In particular, they denounced the fact that in many instances their Chinese boss was not forced by the manufacturers to accept strict deadlines, but they set themselves deadlines that included night work as this enabled them to produce more and to earn accordingly. Answering to the question whether one could escape from such an intensive exploitation, one interviewee explained that this situation is found in 99 percent of Chinese-run factories.

*The remaining one percent might just be suffering from poor business or losses. If you cannot earn money at the workshop, will you still want to work there? The answer is obvious. I do not want to work in a workshop which makes a loss. (Wu 2008: 8; Wu and Zanin 2009: 16)*

From the interview, Wu infers that workers are trapped in a vulnerable position. I by no means question the fact that the workplace and the organization of production (with its expulsion of personal and family life) are based on the exploitation of workers needs and vulnerabilities. Yet, I tend to frame the worker's answer cited above in the contradictory position of workers in the context of the mobile regime. On the one hand there is no way to oppose the pressures at the workshop, unless exiting the very industry; on the other hand, even though workers are not those that set strict deadlines implying overwork, overwork may be preferred to inactivity in workshops where employers do not get enough orders.

As the ads in the *Huarenjie* website show, the recent shift in relative strength in employer-employee relations empowers skilled workers and makes it possible for them to accept jobs only in those workshops where there is no overwork. Clearly, the situation is different for unskilled workers and *zagongs* (multiple function workers).

In sum, the different forms of workers' mobility contribute to shape the mobile regime in ways that were unexpected by Chinese employers. Workers too have a vested interest in shaping this spatiality (see Castree et al. 2004; Rainnie et al. 2011: 161–162). To a certain extent, the capital drive to profit in the Italian fashion industry has come to overlap with migrants' race to success that involves both employers and workers.

### 5.15 HIERARCHICAL POWER STRUCTURES IN RELATION TO THE MOBILE REGIME

Moreover, this regime is embedded within hierarchic power structures. This is why the space reconfiguration does not affect all workers in the same way. For most workers, inter-firm mobility is attractive because it entails more earnings and/or upward mobility. As pointed out above, *zagongs* are particularly vulnerable because their fixed-rate wage does not repay them for the frequent rushes to meet strict deadlines that still are a regular feature of the Chinese contracting businesses in Italy. Data from *Huarenjie* analyzed above, however, suggests that their position in the power structure is changing. In the 1980s and 1990s, the bottom position of *zagong* had been a temporary occupation for most newly arrived migrants. Many in fact were able to reach the position of skilled workers in a relatively short span of time (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008). The widespread perspective of quick upward mobility is the distinctive trait that puts labor in Chinese-run workshops in Italy in a completely different

light from labor in export-oriented factories in Southern China or in the Foxconn factories in Europe (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2013; Pun 2005; Pun and Chan 2013). Expectations of becoming entrepreneurs following in the wake of the many who had been able to become owners of a business have helped workers to accept working conditions that were perceived as temporary.

Research shows that the prospect of quick upward mobility has dried up in the 2000s for a group of Chinese latecomers. These are migrants originating from Northeast China (Dongbei) that had started arriving in Italy only from the mid-1990s. In the contracting workshops mainly run by migrants from Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, latecomers from Dongbei often did not receive the necessary training to become skilled. They could not count on networks as powerful as those available to migrants from Zhejiang and Fujian. This produced a situation in which they often ended up stuck in the position of *zagong* (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008). This is a clear case of mobility that induces entrapment (see Kalir 2013) in that mobility from one workshop to another does not entail upward mobility.

The case of the migrants from Dongbei highlights the crucial role of social fields of power and different timing of migration in providing migrants with access to upward mobility opportunities.<sup>11</sup>

Thus for a long time undocumented workers and those trapped in the workshops' lowest levels did not benefit from the space reconfiguration.

Recently, however, besides demand for skilled workers, demand for unskilled workers and *zagongs* also seems to exceed supply, as it appears from the monitoring of the *Huarenjie* website, given that many tend to walk away from manufacturing. This amounts to an end of the entrapment of many into the condition of *zagong* highlighted by previous research. What remains to be seen is whether or not employers feel it worthy offering on the job training to *zagongs* and other unskilled workers in a context where most skilled workers do not perceive loyalty to an employer as a priority.

## 5.16 EMPLOYMENT WITH ITALIANS

The mobile regime is so widespread among Chinese contractors that it is virtually impossible to work in the Chinese contracting businesses without abiding by the non-written rules of personal life compression and extreme mobility. Over the years many have tried to shorten as much as possible their position as workers and to quickly access the position of

self-employers, a position where personal life compression is less pervasive (for instance, children can live with their parents) and mobility can be reduced or eliminated altogether.

However, some workers instead, prefer to work for native-run contracting firms.

Data by Caritas/Migrantes (2010) shows that in the last years the number of migrant workers employed in Italian fashion districts has increased.<sup>12</sup> However, data focusing on Chinese employees in native-run firms is not available. Findings by Wu and Zanin show that in 2006 Chinese working for Italian employers in the Veneto region's fashion industry made up 10 percent of the total Chinese workforce (about 3000 workers) (Wu 2008; Wu and Zanin 2009).

Wu (2008: 9) points out that compared with their Italian counterparts, Chinese workshops are generally lacking in terms of space, air, light, and hygiene standards.

Workers in Chinese workshops are likely to work over 14 hours each day for seven days a week without any provisions for paid sick leave. By contrast, workers in workshops owned by Italians are more likely to work eight hours each day for five or six days a week with a likely provision of paid sick leave. There is no rush to complete orders.

Wu and Zanin (2009) point out that the working pressure in Chinese-owned workshops is such that it inhibits Chinese workers from seeing the doctor, attending Italian language courses or develop external social networks.

Wu (2008: 10) explains the differences in total earnings and earnings in relation to the number of working hours:

*The hard work in Chinese manufactories may bring in a monthly income of €900 to €1100 for the workers, which is €200 to €300 more than workers in Italian manufactories get in absolute terms. Taking into account free food and accommodation, which may be equivalent to between €200 and €300 monthly, the total income of Chinese workers in Chinese-owned manufactories adds up to between €1100 and €1400 per month, which is about 40 percent to 60 percent more than the incomes of those working in Italian companies. This calculation, however, ignores the difference in the payment systems because the former adopts a piece rate system while the latter pays a monthly wage based on total working hours each week and month. Taking into account the longer working hours in the former, which are roughly double the latter, the actual salary in Chinese manufactories is around 60 percent that of Italian manufactories in terms of hourly pay.*



If welfare and other benefits (holidays and illness and maternity leave) are taken into account, Wu argues, the working conditions in Chinese manufacturing seem even less favorable when compared with those in Italian companies.

The spatial organization of workers' life is what makes the real difference between Chinese-run and Italian-run workshops. In fact, the Italian-run firms do not provide living spaces for workers and work does not require the total availability of workers as in Chinese-run firms (on the requirements of worker's availability around the clock see Akalin 2015). In turn, working for an Italian boss does not require that the social reproduction be outsourced, as regularly happens for the workers employed by Chinese migrants in the fashion industry (an issue that I deal with in the next chapter).

Even though better conditions are offered by Italian employers, most first generation Chinese workers are still employed in Chinese supply workshops. Language barriers, precariousness of employment, and lack of social networks connecting Chinese workers with Italian employers are one side of the coin; the other side is the higher amount of money earned in Chinese workshops, even though this entails longer working hours, no safety nets, and different prospects for upward mobility.

Research in the same area where Wu conducted research offers new insights into workers' perceptions of the working environment (Sacchetto forthcoming). First, Chinese workers working for Italian employers tend to exhibit a reluctant attitude toward risk-taking and/or have previously experienced a setback as entrepreneurs; second they are mainly people who have arrived more recently or else migrants' offspring who wish to unfetter themselves from the pathway of inclusion followed by their parents; third, the younger workers perceive work in Italian-run firms as offering greater room for building their personal and social identity and providing a better access to socioeconomic upward mobility outside Chinese manufacturing firms.

This offers a glimpse into the different ways in which recently arrived migrants and migrants' offspring look for avenues for socioeconomic inclusion.

Interestingly, those working for Italian employers claim that they are less free than they were when working for co-nationals as in native-run businesses—where they are paid on a monthly basis and not on piece rate—they cannot easily take an afternoon off during work-time.

## 5.17 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter addresses the shifts in production processes as they have taken place in Prato and other Italian fashion districts, and the migrant work role in the new production configurations.

Production organization and working conditions in the Italian fashion industry are far from the Fordist model. Most fashion firms in Italy are located in industrial districts that are part of what since the mid-1970s, has been termed the ‘Third Italy’ that is, areas that were outside the early ‘industrial triangle’ of North Italy and the state-led industrialization that was being promoted in the South (Bagnasco 1977). As pointed out by Hadjimichalis (2006), the existence of an informal sector, unpaid family labor, poor working and safety conditions, long working hours and low pay are part and parcel of the reality of Italian productive clusters. In the district’s heyday, monetary returns were more important than working conditions and even workers opposed detailed regulations of labor organization (Dei Ottati 2003). Flexibility was a central feature of the Italian districts far before the Chinese migrants made inroads into them. While with the arrival of the Chinese migrants’ flexibility has reached new, previously unthinkable levels, a breeding ground already existed that could make easier a further leap in the direction of extreme precarization of work and personal and collective life.

This chapter presents and discusses the mode of inclusion of Chinese migrants in the Italian manufacturing clusters by highlighting the articulations at the intra- and inter-firm level of a drastic reconfiguration of the productive space. These articulations revolve around a highly flexible form of employment that requires unrestrained flexibility from the workers and increases the precariousness of personal and social life (Neilson and Rossiter 2008).

Timing is crucial for understanding the unfolding of events, the way they are interrelated and the outcomes they produce. Intra-firm stasis and inter-firm mobility as two dynamic poles of a new production regime did not exist or at least were not widespread in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, in fact, only intra-firm stasis was widespread, while short-term inter-firm mobility and mobility in and out of manufacturing only emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century, when new global dynamics started unfolding and migrants from China started feeling that a variety of new opportunities were available to them.

It is against this backdrop that at the turn of the century the Chinese migrants emplacement in Italian districts could evolve from a

productive model mainly based on traditional forms of firm-based labor exploitation—radicalized by the compression of personal and family life within a sleeping regime—into a new productive model based on inter-firm reorganization of the productive space and territorial mobility.

The mutual constitution of mobility and stasis is at the core of the economic emplacement of Chinese migrants in Italian districts. The resulting mobile regime enables Chinese suppliers, and through them native and Chinese manufacturers, to outcompete by far previous productive regimes and thus to keep up with the ever more stringent requirements of global production.

This chapter highlights the unique form of synergy that has emerged between the requirements of fast fashion production and the space reorganization of production adopted in Chinese workshops. Through an extreme reorganization of intra-firm stasis, short-term inter-firm mobility, and territorial mobility, in Chinese contracting businesses a labor regime has emerged that embodies the principles of fast fashion and pushes the frontiers of flexibility farther ahead of every pre-existing productive system.

More recently, the mobile regime has been undergoing a further change. Over time, in fact, workers' frantic mobility within the manufacturing sector seems to have become prominent.

In this chapter, I link the features now prevailing in the web of Chinese contracting businesses with dynamics emerging in migrants' areas of origin where more rewarding and less risky opportunities have arisen. The outcome is the drying up of the previously uninterrupted flow of migrants entering the lowest positions in the Italian fashion industry, and a generalized lack of workers, especially skilled workers.

While workers' short-term inter-workshop mobility is agreed upon with employers, workers' frantic territorial mobility is increasingly perceived as dangerous by their employers. In fact, recent data on the Internet's job demand and supply site as well as my recent fieldwork point at the risk that frantic territorial mobility, together with the lack of a fresh workforce from China, offset the functioning of the supply workshops. Thus, the ability of the Chinese contracting workshops to interpret the needs of fast fashion could be jeopardized by the most recent evolutions.

After the fire in Prato in December 2013, echoing the Italian dominant narrative, the global media have interpreted the Chinese mobile emplacement as a deterritorialized Chinese regime (Pieraccini 2013; White 2013).

It is true that in the last three decades the Chinese contracting firms in Italy have systematically set out to transgress the boundaries set by the national state in terms of laws regulating industrial relations—or at least

acted obliquely to them. Moreover, boundaries set by the state in terms of labor laws and industrial relations' regulations are often transgressed with the tacit approval of national and/or local institutions. Chinese entrepreneurs thus collude with the regime of power of the Italian nation state in that one crucial Italian industry—the fashion one—benefits from the Chinese transgression of the set boundaries.

Similar behaviors have been described by Nonini and Ong (1997) as prevailing in Chinese transnational practices in the Asia Pacific. In their book 'Ungrounded Empires', these authors (Ong and Nonini 1997) suggest that systematic transgression of national state laws and regulations is the result of unbounded—and ungrounded—transnational practices adopted by Chinese entrepreneurs. I offer a more nuanced perspective on the issue. While I am aware that the processes constituting labor markets are increasingly delinked from the nation state, I contend that the mobile regime is grounded in and interconnected with the territory and the governmental powers that are based in the territory. As pointed out by Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013), each historic restructuring of modes and spaces of accumulation creates new and dynamic relationships between mobility and immobility. While a host of forces active at different scales and responding to global trends push in the direction of more and more precarious labor conditions, it is the national state that has tolerated, facilitated, and promoted globalized modes of production.

## NOTES

1. My translation from Italian.
2. During the 1990s, Chinese contractors mainly adopted the intra-firm sleeping regime while inter-firm mobility played a minor role. Full-fledged inter-firm mobility came about only at the turn of the century (see below).
3. In those years, a continuous influx of workforce from China to Italy took place, not only from the traditional sending areas in southern Zhejiang province but also from Fujian province and Northeast China (provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning).
4. Wu and Liu (2012) report that since the 1990s there has been a significant increase in the proportion of new immigrants to the Veneto region who were previously urban residents in China.
5. A trend for skilled migrants to return home has been observed also in other national contexts. Researchers focusing on the situation in the USA have shown that a substantial number of highly skilled immigrants have started returning to their home countries, including migrants from China

- and India who return to their home countries because they perceive that there are greater economic and professional opportunities for them there (Wadhwa et al. 2009).
6. I would like to thank Ambra Bucci (2015) for monitoring the employment website.
  7. Ironers can work for contracting firms and also for final-good firms.
  8. People originating from Zhejiang province make up the large majority of the Chinese migrants in Italy and in Prato, followed by Fujianese and people from Northeast China. While statistical data is not available, my fieldwork (Ceccagno 2003c) shows that Chinese from Henan province are not many in Italy. Thus they cannot count on kinship or place of origin connections that facilitate their working inclusion.
  9. The Internet job market does not represent the overall job supply and demand for Chinese workers in the fashion manufacturing industry. Future research will have to uncover how much the patterns identified here overlap with or differ from the dynamics prevailing in the overall job market.
  10. I do not imply that Wu and Zanin equate the ‘total institution’ with forced labor. Their ‘total institution’ concept is more nuanced and mainly based on the observation that ‘migrant workers in these workshops are isolated by their location and long working hours, and they depend heavily on owners for information, language, legal documents, social networks, transport and other reasons’ (Wu and Zanin 2010: 119–120). Moreover, Wu and Zanin’s evidence is based on Chinese contracting firms in the Veneto region.
  11. Another typical occupation for migrants originating from Northeast China is as cutters in the manufacturing businesses. Garment cutting is considered a physically demanding job, and therefore not so sought-after (Ceccagno 2012).
  12. The manufacturing industries with the highest presence of migrant workers in Italy in 2009 were the textile and garment industry with 81,145 employees making up 14.2 percent of the total foreign workers in these industries; and the leather goods and shoes industry with 29,535 employees, or 5.2 percent of the total (Caritas/Migrantes 2010).

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# The Foundations of the Mobile Regime: Global Restructuring of Social Reproduction and Ethnicization of the Workplace

## 6.1 PROLOGUE

- A. *So, what is this kindergarten that you want to set up in Prato?*
- B. *Well, our association cares about the Chinese families in Prato. They are finding it difficult to take good care of their children after school and in the evenings. So, we were thinking about organizing a kindergarten. It would be managed by a group of volunteers, including some from our association.*
- A. *So a private kindergarten?*
- B. *Yes, a private one, with teachers from China, so the children can improve their Chinese ... and it would be easier for the parents to talk to Chinese teachers about how their children are doing at school.*
- A. *So you mean a kindergarten for Chinese kids only?*
- B. *Um... well, if Italian parents choose this kindergarten for their kids, then we would also hire some Italian-speaking teachers. But they are welcome. Of course Italian kids are welcome. Maybe we could also hire some Italian nannies for the night, besides those from China.*
- A. *For the night? What do you mean?*
- B. *Yes, kids would stay at the kindergarten at night, and see their parents whenever the parents are not busy working.*
- A. *Are you talking of a boarding school? There are no boarding kindergartens in Italy; they are not permitted.*
- B. *Yes, well, there is this Chinese school in Naples where Chinese children can stay at night. So, basically, we were thinking that if the municipality permits it ... you surely know that often these Chinese parents are busy until late in*

*the evening, as there is no way that they can take proper care of the children. So, a boarding kindergarten would benefit everybody.*

- A. *A kindergarten for Chinese kids, with teachers come from China, in which the children can stay at night? Staying there for days, maybe for weeks without seeing their parents? We are afraid this is not doable. I do not think the city councilor for social services would even consider the idea; politically it would be an own goal. Why don't you come up with something more feasible? As for this project, the way you are presenting it, just forget it.<sup>1</sup>*

## 6.2 AT THE BASIS OF THE MOBILE REGIME

In the previous chapter, I discussed the mobile regime in its articulations of stasis and mobility at the intra- and inter-firm levels. I have shown that far from being a static regime, over time it has undergone crucial shifts, mainly linked to dynamics unfolding at different scales.

In this chapter, I aim to push the analysis of the mobile regime further forward by focusing on the foundations on which this productive architecture rests. I bring to light two conditions as key to understanding the role played by Chinese migrants in the generation of profit in the Italian fashion industry: (a) the restructuring of social reproduction, and (b) the compression of the workforce's diversity through a process of ethnicization. I undertake to show how these processes are intrinsically interconnected with the restructuring of production (Ceccagno 2016).

The concept of social reproduction refers to the processes involved in maintaining and reproducing people and their labor power. This includes the transmission of social values and cultural practices and the construction of individual and collective identities (Bezanson and Luxton 2006).

The issue of the global restructuring of social reproduction has been highlighted by a number of scholars. Salazar Parreñas (2005) and Miraftab (2014), among others, argue that the global restructuring of production is intertwined with a parallel and simultaneous restructuring in the sphere of social reproduction and that the two forms of restructuring should be analyzed relationally. This is the approach I adopt in this chapter, pointing out that the mobile regime could not exist without a massive outsourcing of the social reproduction. Moreover, I focus analytical attention on the ways in which gender is constituted in the network of Chinese contractors, connecting and explaining the workplace reduction of gender inequalities with the requirements of the mobile regime.

Attention to temporalities of migration becomes crucial also because different historical conditions can engender different forms of inequality.

Moreover, the reduction of gender inequalities can only be temporary. I discuss these issues in the framework of the debate on how migration and gender inequalities correlate (Nagar et al. 2002; Ong 1999; Salazar Parreñas 2009) and how the global shifts of the last decades, including the time-space compression, affect pre-existing power relations, with a focus on gender inequalities (Massey 1984).

Moreover, I document the evolution over time from practices of trans-local outsourcing of social reproduction to (increasingly) forms of *in situ* outsourcing, as well as discuss their implications.

I consider the outsourcing of social reproduction as one specific form of displacement since it increases precariousness both for migrants as well as for those that have been left behind.

In the second part of this chapter, I launch a critique of the ethnic lens in academic research and the tendency of essentializing migrant businesses. I engage in the scholarly debate on immigrant entrepreneurship questioning the conceptualization of workshops owned by Chinese migrants as ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’. I argue that such a theoretical approach does not help to better understand the reasons why over the last 25 years the Chinese contractors’ working regime in Italy—with the recent outstanding exception of Prato—has not been fought against as violating labor rules and regulations. Rather than taking the ethnic factor as a given for exploring and explaining the behaviors of a single group that is assumed to share common cultural traits and exhibit bonds of trust, I ask how the ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural, and other factors are stressed and why.

As an alternative to the ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’ concept, I offer a new conceptualization that links ethnicization of the workforce and global outsourcing of social reproduction to the imperatives of fast fashion in the restructuring of the Italian fashion industry.

### 6.3 REDUCED GENDER INEQUALITIES AT THE WORKPLACE

In Chinese supplier workshops, male and female participation in work is relatively balanced.<sup>2</sup> Unless they are pregnant or have just given birth, women are not discriminated against in the workplace. They are not kept at the lower levels. Equality in work and salaries between men and women are a typical feature of the Chinese contracting businesses: men and women work the same hours, perform the same tasks and receive the same compensation (Ceccagno 2007).<sup>3</sup> Thus, more egalitarian working conditions are a typical feature of Chinese-run workshops.

Moreover, as the spouses of the business owner, Chinese migrant women often acquire some sort of entrepreneurial skills. In fact, as a rule, the work organization in family-run businesses entails a gendered division of tasks between the employers and their spouses according to which the business owner mainly takes care of the relations with the suppliers, while the spouse is in charge of the management of workplace activities (Ceccagno 2003a).

Migration—and the mode of inclusion in the Italian fashion industry—indeed offers some crucial opportunities. In the last decades it was not uncommon for Chinese migrant women with a modest educational background and limited work experience in the place of origin to end up being those favoring the migration of other members of the family and/or opening their own business, thus becoming entrepreneurs themselves.

In fact, over time the number of female entrepreneurs has increased. Women made up 35 percent of the total number of entrepreneurs in Prato in 2002 (Marsden 2003a). Ten years later, in 2012, they made up almost 44 percent of the total (45 percent in 2013), with their number increasing twice as much than male entrepreneurs (CCIAA Prato 2013, 2014).

Women are more often found in leading positions when a family manages more than one firm (Marsden 2003b).

Evidence from fieldwork conducted in Prato in the 2000s, however, shows a discrepancy between the official position and the actual entrepreneurial role as a number of women simply lend their names to be used as a front by their husbands (Ceccagno 2007).

In general, high rates of Chinese female entrepreneurship can be explained with the working arrangements described above that free women from tasks traditionally associated with women. They are also a typical feature of the fashion industry, especially clothing. In Italy, as in other countries (Green 1997; Rath 2002), the textile and clothing industry mainly employs women. Moreover, in Italy, female self-employment in the clothing sector is higher than male self-employment (Birindelli and Ricchetti 2004).

Thus, migrants' inclusion in the Italian fashion industry favors dynamics that rework previously existing positions in complex and contradictory ways that can result in an expansion of women's entrepreneurship, as was first uncovered by Nagar and her colleagues (2002).

And yet, more egalitarian working conditions on the shop floor and more opportunities for women entrepreneurship do not come for free. They are made possible by the fact that social reproduction, which disproportionately rests on women, is delegated to other caretakers, mainly

women, outside of the workplace (Ceccagno 2017). I will discuss this in the next two sections.

## 6.4 THE GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The reconfiguration of the space of production discussed in the previous chapter raises the question of the articulation between the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction, and the way in which trans-local households come to terms with labor markets (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 224).

As far as the inclusion of Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry is concerned, the mobile regime commands that everything related to the family and its life that could hinder production is moved as much as possible away from the production site (Ceccagno 2007). As a result, parallel to the restructuring of production, a process of restructuring occurs in the sphere of social reproduction.

As a rule, children do not live on the workshop premises. Chinese migrant workers arriving in Italy in the last 30 years did not bring their children with them but left them behind, counting on the grandparents to act as the caretakers.

Childbearing is often postponed because of the lack of separate housing for the workers, and also because the labor arrangements based on piece-rate wages do not provide benefits to support childbirth and care of newborns. For many working couples childbearing is moved ahead until the moment when they will be better off, and ideally only when, as the owners of their own businesses, they will be able to keep the children with them.

Moreover, the vast majority of female workers do not breastfeed, and parents do not keep the babies with them. As a rule, workers' babies—and to a much lesser extent also employers' babies—born in Italy are separated from their parents when they are a few months old.

While no statistical data is available on the subject, my previous research on the offspring of Chinese migrants (Ceccagno 2004) shows that in 2003 the number of children of entrepreneurs living in Prato was higher than it was for the children of workers.

Thus, social reproduction mainly rests on the shoulders of the members of the family left behind in China.

In principle, especially in the 1990s, family reunion was postponed until the moment when children reached the age of six and had to go to school. The possibility of reuniting the children with their parents, however, was linked to more than one variable. In fact, not only the workshop's organization tended to expel children; the migration laws required that in order to access family reunion, migrants had to show evidence of being the owners or renters of a flat large enough for the family to live in. These multiple constraints weighed on most migrant workers, creating barriers that most of them could not easily overcome. In point of fact, such constraints could be circumnavigated mainly by those owning a business, even a small one. In fact, on the one hand they could afford to break the unwritten rules banning children from the contracting workshops and, on the other, they were affluent enough to afford to pay for fake contracts—that is, contracts which did not include the use of the flat—to show to the local authorities. Only well-off employers were able to rent or buy a flat, invite their own parents to reach them through the family reunification scheme, and avoid sending their children to China (Ceccagno 2017).

## 6.5 NEW WAYS OF OUTSOURCING THE CARE WORK

All in all, the outsourcing of social reproduction has taken on different forms, linked to the changing context over time and the migrants' different status as workers, subsistence entrepreneurs, or affluent entrepreneurs.

From the turn of the twenty-first century, when more and more Chinese migrants were able to access entrepreneurship and reach relative affluence, growing numbers of parents were able to reunite with their children earlier, and send them to kindergartens in Italy.

Affluent entrepreneurs could employ nannies to take care of the children either at the employers' place or else in their own houses. New practices offered the great advantage of children growing up together with their parents or, at least, in a place closer to them.

The nannies themselves were mainly Chinese migrants, mostly originating from Northeast China, who had migrated to Europe, often without their own families (Ceccagno 2003b; Pina-Guerassimoff 2003). They were hired by Chinese parents because they were fluent in standard Chinese (Tolu 2003). Their migration was the result of a specific process of displacement involving women more than men in the area of origin: following the restructuring of the big state-owned enterprises in northeastern China, large numbers of (mainly female) workers were laid off. The case of migrant

women from northeastern China illustrates well how globalization is linked to processes of marginalization (Nagar et al. 2002, p. 262).

A new process was thus unfolding as well-off families were becoming increasingly able to move from the practice of delegating care work to their families in China to new practices consisting of purchasing the labor of other (Chinese) women in the place of settlement. This amounts to partially switching to forms of *in situ* outsourcing of the care work (Ceccagno 2017).

Clearly, the search for care solutions in Italy has never completely replaced practices of trans-local care. Mixed cases are not infrequent, with one child living in China and other, often younger, children living in Italy (see Bressan and Krause 2014).

To complicate the picture further, the outsourcing of social reproduction is increasingly entrusted to other migrants also from China, but not from northeastern China.

Moreover, among those offering their services as caretakers to Chinese migrants in the fashion industry are native families that undertake this work as a way of making ends meet (Ceccagno 2007). Besides, the caretakers may even be distressed families: in the early 2000s, social workers in Prato were worried that some Chinese children lived with and were taken care of by natives with a record of social distress and drug abuse.

## 6.6 THE INTERNET JOB SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR CHILDCARE

More recently, the process of *in situ* outsourcing of social reproduction is taking on new forms.

By analyzing 100 posts on the *Huarenjie* website section on ‘Child care and similar occupations’ (on September 20, 2016),<sup>4</sup> I was able to capture the process whereby the outsourcing of children care to co-nationals living in Italy increasingly takes the form of care at the caretaker’s premises.

In fact, the majority of job seekers offer long-term childcare in their own house (‘I have my own house’), where the children’s parents could come to visit the children at their convenience. Ads by persons who already take care of one or more children and wish to increase their income by adding a new one are not infrequent. In other cases, those looking for a job are mothers themselves and are willing to bring up other people’s children in their own home.

Salaries for caretakers who also provide food and diapers are around €800–900 per month per child (see the post below), while, according to



some interviewees, live-in nannies on average are paid around €1200–1300 a month. The ad below offers a glimpse of the types of services offered by caretakers hosting babies in their own house:

*I'm from Qingtian, Zhejiang. I have a strong sense of responsibility ... I am the mother of three children ... I am interested in taking care of another child in my house. At home there's also my father who takes care of the cooking ... heaters are turned on in my house during the winter, which is good for small children. I can offer an all-inclusive service ... providing diapers, powdered milk, canned vegetables, fruits, meat, and everything else ... for €850 per month per child all inclusive ... I live in Verbania. To get there from Milan, it takes one hour and twenty minutes by train and then half an hour by bus.*

On the *Huarenjie* website would-be employers often state their preference for people from the same country or they even explain that the job offer is limited to people from specific areas. This is probably the reason why many job seekers clearly state their place of origin in their ads. Many specify that they originate from Zhejiang province, and in a number of cases they offer even more detailed info on their place of origin, within Zhejiang province (Qingtian county, Wencheng county, Rui'an city), and even within the country (Wenxi town in Qingtian county).

It is interesting to note that in the 100 ads analyzed, the only places of origin mentioned are in Zhejiang province. This is certainly linked to the fact that the vast majority of Chinese migrants in Italy come from that region, and migrants from Zhejiang province are those that have been able to take advantage of the opportunity structure available in Italy and become affluent. Consequently, they are now probably driving a supply market of childcare by women from Zhejiang province.

This evolution sets the case of the outsourcing of social reproduction among the Chinese migrants in Italy apart from other cases of global care where a more clear-cut divide exists between the different actors in terms of place of origin, ethnicity, and class.<sup>5</sup>

The analyzed ads offer revealing insights.

First, among the Chinese migrants in Italy, a market for social reproduction has emerged whereby (Chinese) migrants resort to the services of other (Chinese) migrants.

Established migrant families in receiving countries employing other migrant workers for care are mentioned in the literature and conceptualized in terms of stratifying implications of labor inequality for migrant family life

(Kofman 2012). This, however, is a case where migrants massively resort to migrant caretakers sharing the same area of origin (Ceccagno 2017).

Second, childcare at the caretaker's house implies that it is the children that move to the caretaker's place, and not the other way around. This is another distinctive feature, different from the cases described in the literature on global care, whose implications are far-reaching as the different facets of social reproduction work are delegated to the caretakers more fully than when the caretaker lives with the children's family (see Ceccagno 2017 for an in-depth discussion of the implications of this peculiar mode of outsourcing of social reproduction).

All in all, the widespread recourse to forms of transnational outsourcing of social reproduction and, increasingly, to forms of *in situ* outsourcing of childcare is imperative for the migrant families active in the Italian fashion industry. As in many other contexts worldwide, the restructuring of the production and processes of expulsion of the migrants' personal and family lives are intertwined.

Miraftab (2014) argues that the ability to take part in global restructuring of social reproduction for oneself and one's family makes a difference in workers' ability to make the wages worthwhile. Most crucially, for the Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry the ability to take part in global and *in situ* restructuring of social reproduction makes a difference in the workers' ability and willingness to accept the sleeping regime and inter-workshop mobility. This amounts to saying that for workers, the exclusion of social reproduction from their everyday life is the *sine qua non* of their employment within the Chinese web of supplying businesses in the Italian fashion industry.

Conversely, workshops' extreme flexibility weighs on the weakest workers: during the 1990s, the Prato Center registered many cases of pregnant women or sick persons who had to continue working when they should not, and who at the birth of their baby or when the sickness worsened were expelled from the workshop, thus simultaneously losing both work and lodging when they were most vulnerable (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008). Today, rules within the workshops are no different, as the mobile regime is still centered on the expulsion of all aspects pertaining to social reproduction. However, with more opportunities emerging outside of the manufacturing industry, there are now more ways to find temporary solutions for reducing the discomfort of the weakest.

Recently, the global division of reproductive labor has acquired new meanings for some wealthy Chinese parents. They increasingly plan their

children's return to boarding school in China, convinced that education in China will increase their chances of professional upward mobility. Thus, the trans-local restructuring of social reproduction has been transformed by the wealthiest into a new structure of educational opportunities, where the pros and cons of different localities on the global chessboard are weighed in order to guarantee increased social upward mobility to their offspring.

### 6.7 REINFORCEMENT OF OLDER GENDER INEQUALITIES

Doreen Massey (1984) has put forward the conceptualization on the 'power-geometry' of time-space compression, according to which increased mobility and accelerated turnover times result in the reinforcement of older asymmetrical power relations, including gender inequalities. The relationship between new and more flexible labor systems and traditional ideologies has also been discussed by Ong (1999) that highlights the revival of Confucianism among people of Chinese descent as a moral justification for the modes of gender domination associated with flexible labor systems.

Among the Chinese entrepreneurs in Italy, a reduction of gender imbalance had emerged in the first years of settlement. Especially in the late 1980s and the 1990s, when many newly established owners of small workshops needed to mobilize all family resources in order to have their businesses take off, children of the employers would help out taking care of the most simple tasks such as cutting trends. As newly arrived small entrepreneurs struggling for success needed to mobilize all the family's internal resources, primogeniture and not gender was the discriminating factor in deciding which children were bound to participate in the family business, and which were free to access higher education (Ceccagno 2007).

However, in more recent years, a revival of more traditional gender behavior prevails and seems to correlate with wealth. An unpublished research conducted in Prato and the Florence area in 2010<sup>6</sup> shows that, contrary to the first years of settlement, Chinese parents active in the Italian fashion industry enforce a double standard in the raising of their sons and daughters. By now in well-off families gender is increasingly considered when strategies for future investments are pondered and the traditional gender inequality prevails whereby sons (and not daughters),

and in particular the firstborn son, are considered the heirs of the family business.

In Gruppi (2008), a 26 year-old child of a Chinese entrepreneur in Tuscany, describes how the firstborn son is educated to become the family business' boss and supposed to abide by the family expectations:

*If you are the first-born son, you are more bound. If you say no, you don't do them justice and feel guilty ... This is a Chinese habit. It works this way. It is rare that a first-born decides not to help his father in his business. If this is not what I wish to do, I can always diversify my business in the future, but in any case, I help my father first.*

According to another child of a Chinese entrepreneur employed in his family's business, Chinese parents are willing to guarantee investments only for sons, not for daughters, as daughters, once married, are expected to contribute to the success of the business in their husband's family. He himself adopts a very traditional working model for himself and his future wife:

*For example, she [my girlfriend] helps me at work, she does not get paid for her work, if she needs to buy something, then I buy it for her, this is a way of sharing material assets.*

Thus, traditional gendered roles are intertwined with social upward mobility and class, and a pattern seems to prevail whereby dispossession tends to obliterate rigidly gendered roles while affluence tends to restore them. This emerges also from research conducted in the Emilia Romagna region according to which in affluent Chinese families women tend to stop working in the family business and become housewives who take care of the children. This choice is perceived as a privilege, and is therefore exhibited as a status symbol (Cecchini 2009).

This does not amount to state that over time the Chinese migrants resume patterns of inequality that are typical of their country of origin. To the contrary, the return to more traditional gendered roles shows that even in a working context where the creation of profit favors less pronounced levels of gender inequality at the workplace, there is room for reinforcing older asymmetrical power relations.

## 6.8 THE SCHOLARLY DEBATE ON IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In order to swiftly respond to the fashion market's needs, the mobile regime rests not only on the global restructuring of social reproduction but also on a workforce made up of co-nationals only. It is therefore crucial to understand the conceptual implications of this workforce organization.

Migrant entrepreneurship in contexts where employers and employees share the national origin has frequently been analyzed in terms of ethnic entrepreneurship. The ethnic entrepreneurship conceptualization posits that migrant economic incorporation is mainly an outcome of the cultural attributes and human capital attainments of a specific ethnic group (Waldinger et al. 1990; Light 1972; Light and Gold 2000 among others). Cultural repertoires, skills and practices of a migrant population that shares the place of origin are assumed as structuring their economic performance (Bonacich and Model 1980; Light and Bonacich 1988).

Some scholars however have moved beyond the concentration on co-ethnic social capital approach. Kloosterman and his colleagues (1999: 257) challenge the approach that refers the crucial concept of embeddedness almost exclusively to the social and cultural characteristics of immigrant groups and neglects the wider economic and institutional context in which immigrants are inevitably embedded. They propose instead the more comprehensive concept of 'mixed embeddedness' that encompasses the interplay between the social, economic, and institutional contexts.

Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2013) and Glick Schiller et al. (2006) challenge the dominance of the ethnic lens in migration studies. They suggest that scholars should reject methodologies and analyses that make unquestioning use of the ethnic group as the primary or exclusive unit of study.

Groupism, or the insider/outsider dichotomy, usually taken for granted in migration research, takes the form of ethnic/national categories. Nowicka and Ryan (2015) suggest that migration scholars reject groupism notions and argue that ethnic and national belonging and gender are multilayered, culturally constructed concepts.

## 6.9 THE CULTURALIST APPROACH TO CHINESE MIGRANT INCORPORATION IN ITALY

Researchers analyzing Chinese migrants' inclusion in Italy often adopt a culturalist approach. (For an outstanding exception see Barberis 2009). The Chinese contracting workshops in Italy where employers

and employees share the nation of origin is often analyzed, in implicit or explicit terms, as the quintessential ethnic entrepreneurship model, where migrants exploit some competitive advantages connected with their status as a group in order to better succeed in the industry to which they have gained access.

For instance, in their analysis of the Chinese-run fast fashion center in Prato, Santini and his colleagues (2009) suggest the existence of an unchanging pattern typical of Chinese entrepreneurs overseas in which they bring their cultural heritage, show a high adaptability, and exhibit a remarkable attitude to risk-taking and to opportunistic behavior. Moreover, building on Wah (2001), these authors single out a typically Chinese temporal pattern of settlement in foreign countries according to which during the early stage Chinese entrepreneurs are more likely to be involved in trading activities and only after having accumulated enough money are they willing to move into industrial and manufacturing activities. Such an approach not only essentializes the migrants but also disregards the actual pattern and timing of emplacement of the Chinese migrants that in Prato and in other industrial districts first entered manufacturing, as I have showed in previous chapters. The authors conclude:

*Overall, the study suggests that the unique business opportunity, that is an integral part of being based in Prato for Italian firms does not influence Chinese entrepreneurial behaviour one way or another. The industrial district of Prato has been targeted for entry by new-coming Chinese entrepreneurs only because of the presence of a Chinese enclave and not because of the business model of the Italian industrial districts and the distinct opportunities it offers.*

Along the same lines, Guercini (1999, 2002) argues that Chinese businesses have a great respect for hierarchy, a low degree of individualism, tend to avoid uncertainty and exhibit a high degree of patience and persistence in conducting businesses.

This is by no means a new perspective. It is connected to an approach that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s consisting in obsessively focusing on Chinese traditional and family values and *guanxi* (personal connections). Scholarly focus on *guanxi* as an explanation of the Chinese migrants' success still persists in more recent times, even though some authors point out that this value system is not so different from the traditional value system of the IDs (Lombardi and Sforzi 2016).

Essentially, this approach presupposes that there are intrinsic and timeless features of the Chinese culture that persist unchanged in the midst of non-Chinese societies. However, as shown by Ong and Nonini, ‘essentializing symbols of Chinese culture, capitalism and other values are absorbed, negotiated, deflected, mocked, or contested by transnational Chinese’ (Ong and Nonini 1997: 330).

Other authors (Wu and Zanin 2007) highlight special skills developed in the areas of origin as competitive factors facilitating Chinese migrants’ economic inclusion in the receiving areas (see the next section).

In turn, this conceptual approach paves the way for claims that the Chinese working regime is disembedded from the local context (Pieraccini 2013), a conceptualization that I have questioned in the previous chapters.

## 6.10 QUESTIONING ONE EXPLANATION FOR THE MODE OF INCLUSION OF WENZHOU-CHINESE MIGRANTS IN ITALIAN IDS

In a paper that explores the links between migration to Italy and Wenzhou’s development, Wu and Zanin (2007) adopt an approach widespread in the literature that stresses migrants’ inclinations, skills, and practices as enhancing the group’s economic performances (Bonacich and Model 1980).

Wu and Zanin argue that one crucial factor accounting for the international migration from Wenzhou to Italy was the Wenzhouese expertise in the industrial sectors in which Italy is famous:

*... it was the Wenzhouese, rather than other ethnic groups, whose production experience and organization based on region of origin are similar to Italian counterparts in the garment, leather and shoe sectors. As a result, Wenzhouese entrepreneurs are able to successfully take up this opportunity and meet the demand from the newly emerging immigration sector in Italy.* (Wu and Zanin 2007: 15).<sup>7</sup>

Having connected the emplacement of the Chinese migrants with the specialization of the sending area in the very industrial sectors in which Italy is famous worldwide, Wu and Zanin conclude that the similar production experience and organization have played a more important role than the ‘chain migration’ in attracting Chinese from Wenzhou to Italy. This explanation has been accepted and used by other scholars (see for instance Lombardi et al. 2011).

While I agree that the Wenzhounese entrepreneurial spirit and experience contributed to facilitate the mode of emplacement of Wenzhou people as entrepreneurs in Italian industrial districts, I question the conceptualization according to which migrants from Wenzhou have been attracted into the Italian fashion industry because of their specialization in this industry.

First, Wu and Zanin's (2007) explanation fails to consider the working background of those arriving in Italy from Wenzhou. According to Giese (1999: 201–202), most emigrants from Wenzhou hailed from a middle group of people who were aware of the few possibilities they could seize in China, and could count on certain financial possibilities that would enable them to afford the expenses of international migration. They did not come from a single class but might have included the son of a peasant and the daughter of an official.

As far as migration from Wenzhou to Italy is concerned, information collected at the Prato Center in the years 1994–1995 (Ceccagno 1997) show that most Chinese migrants accessing legal and other services provided by the Center did not have a background as entrepreneurs or workers in the industries in which migrants from Wenzhou were employed in Italy.<sup>8</sup> In China, they used to do all sorts of jobs, including working as peasants, little traders, teachers, and among them could be found also some former low-level government officers.

Second, there is no evidence that the Chinese migrants who entered into a contracting relationship in Italian districts had stitching skills. My fieldwork shows that in their first years in Prato, stitching workshops learned the basics of their job by trial and error (Ceccagno 2003a; Cologna 2005).

Third, temporality is crucial in understanding processes of emplacement. Wu and Zanin's explanation overlooks the fact that the dates of the full development of Wenzhou as an export-oriented economy specializing in shoe, clothing and leather production do not coincide with the arrival of the first group of new Wenzhounese migrants in Italy. Even though most migration from Wenzhou took place in the 1990s or later,<sup>9</sup> the new Chinese migrants from Wenzhou started arriving in Italy in the mid-1980s, and the number of arrivals from the Wenzhou area increased over time.

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Wenzhou was taking full advantage of the economic reform program launched in China the late 1970s and was among the first cities in China to create and develop a non-state-owned (NSO) economy.<sup>10</sup> Family-based and private business in the era of economic reforms began with the production of clothes buttons, plastic shoes, woven bags, and low-voltage electronic equipment.



Thus, in the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Wenzhou was still acquiring technology and know-how from Italy and other countries in shoe, clothing and other light industry sectors.

It was only in the mid-2000s that, after a decade of efforts, Wenzhou became a global exporter.<sup>11</sup>

Crucially, at the time when Wenzhou was becoming a prominent global player in some fashion sectors, the migrants from the Wenzhou area had already made inroads into the Italian fashion industry as contractors and workers.

Against such a background, the thesis that Wenzhouese migrants' competency in the fashion sectors made them the ideal contractors for the Italian fashion industry, to be preferred to other migrants, does not hold up to scrutiny.<sup>12</sup>

I argue, in contrast, that other reasons attracted Zhejianese migrants to Italian industrial districts: the opening up of Chinese frontiers after decades when migration had been limited in numbers and scope (Skeldon 2007) and migrants had been narrated as national traitors (Thunø 2001); the Wenzhouese tradition of outmigration to Europe and Italy (Cologna and Farina 1997); the frequent amnesties in Italy (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008); and the economic transformations taking place in Italian productive clusters that offered the opportunity to become affluent in a very short span of time to unskilled migrants aspiring to become self-employed.

Indeed, Wenzhouese migrants did contribute greatly to create economic links between Wenzhou and Italy in the industries in which Italy was an historical global player and Wenzhou was becoming a prominent global player. This took place at the turn of the twenty-first century, when they played a pivotal role in the development of their home town's export-led economy.

## 6.11 AGAINST THE ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP MODEL

Much of the literature claiming that Chinese businesses are disembedded from the economies of the areas where they are located rests on the observation of the features of the workforce employed in the Chinese-owned workshops. These, in fact, only employ a workforce sharing some features: a place of origin in China, a national language, the ideology of the successful migrant with its pressure to reach affluence within a matter of a few years. In the first years after migration, for many the pressure also comes from the need to repay emigration debts.

During my twelve years' work as consultant to the local government and service provider to migrants in Prato, I have witnessed only one case of a Chinese supplier employing a non-Chinese worker. This was a Pakistani young man who was the fiancé of a Chinese young woman who had been accepted as a worker on a temporary basis. His Chinese fiancée was responsible for mediating the daily interactions between the young Pakistani who did not speak Chinese and the employers and workers in the workshop.<sup>13</sup>

The challenge I take up here is to shed light on the use and role of ethnicity not only inside the workshop or within the network of Chinese contractors but in the productive organization of the entire fashion industry in Italy. This can be done by focusing on the conditions of the Chinese migrants' inclusion in the Italian fashion industry.

As discussed in the previous chapters, since 1980 the Italian fashion industry has been threatened by sharp alterations in the global fashion architecture. These include the rise of China and other countries as powerful competitors; the restructuring of distribution chains with the consequent growing power of global retailers; and the emergence of the global fast fashion strategy (Dunford et al. 2013). Not all fashion firms in Italy could react to these shifts by resorting to international delocalization. In a context where the Italian model of industrial districts' production was declining (Dunford and Greco 2006), they needed much more than the costs containment they had obtained up until then by resorting to suppliers in southern Italy. Even a cheap immigrant workforce was not enough. New and more drastic ways of extracting profit were needed.

In the same years, globalized regimes of flexible accumulation were introducing new forms of exploitation of labor and displacement as new frontiers of capital (Harvey 1989). Territories and actors were forced into unexpected connections that facilitated new processes of production and exploitation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

The coming into being of contracting businesses employing a workforce made up of co-nationals adopting the mobile regime can be understood only within this structural framework.

## 6.12 ETHNICITY AS COMPRESSION OF THE WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

As mentioned above, in Chinese workshops all factors that hamper the swift completion of orders are excluded from the workplace. The process of filtering out does not take place at the single workshop level but at the Chinese workshops network level.

Besides social reproduction, other factors can hamper the mobility of workers from one workshop to another and ultimately the quick completion of the orders: these include a series of elements that make a workforce diverse in terms of languages, backgrounds, and aspirations.

The process of ethnicization of the workforce in the network of Chinese contracting businesses addresses this diversity. The ethnicization of the workforce, in fact, helps reduce efforts of mediation among languages that would be needed if workers with different linguistic backgrounds and not sharing a common language were employed. A recent study on the Chinese migrants in Italian IDs hints at the linguistic problem by pointing out that it is easier to embed migrants not speaking the national language in the assembly line of large firms than in the population of smaller firms typical of the IDs (Lombardi and Sforzi 2016).

Moreover, workers employed in Chinese workshops tend to share (historically determined) expectations about which working environment, sleeping accommodation and use of the free time after work are acceptable (I will further elaborate on this issue below).

I wish to clarify that these arrangements do not stem from cultural values peculiar to Chinese migrants. It is not in the Chinese workers' intrinsic nature to sleep in workshops and send their children back to China; mobility from one workshop to another is not a cherished Chinese value, nor a culturally sanctioned practice in China. Chinese migrants steer away from this working regime that entails the sleeping arrangements and frantic mobility as soon as better opportunities emerge in other sectors. As a matter of fact, Chinese migrants active in commercial businesses do not adopt the sleeping regime.

Essentially, only workers sharing the basic characteristics listed above can easily interact with each other in small workshops where orders may arrive at every hour of the day and the night, or swiftly move from one workplace to another.

Thus, I contend that the selection of a Chinese-only workforce is a process of ethnicization of the workforce aiming at reducing workers' diversity within the network of manufacturing firms in the fashion industry as a precondition for smoothing production operations.

Barberis (2009) has pointed out that the inclusion of Chinese migrants in the Italian district is an ethnicization process tied with wider local socio-economic transformations and can be considered as related to the districts' organization and survival strategies. Here, I bring the argument one step further. In fact, I analyze this process of ethnicization within the mobile regime.

I argue that a compression of workers' diversity through measures that ethnicize the workforce is a crucial condition making possible the intra- and inter-workshop reconfiguration of production adopted in the Italian fashion industry. Parallel to the compression of diversity, and equally important, is the outsourcing of social reproduction discussed above.

I contend that the compression of the workforce's diversity through the ethnicization of the workforce and the outsourcing of social reproduction are the two crucial pillars supporting the mobile regime adopted in the Chinese contracting businesses in the Italian fashion industry. They are the *sine qua non* of the Chinese migrant's peculiar mode of production restructuring.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, I suggest that this process be analyzed as the outcome of global shifts affecting the Italian fashion industry, and the changing features of global production and labor exploitation, and their interaction with migrant agency.

Within their 'multiplication of labor' theory, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) offer the 'diversification of labor' concept to explain the emergence of new forms of labor and different kinds of production in the framework of global processes. I propose that the mobile regime—as a production regime based on compression of the workforce diversity through ethnicization of the workplace and outsourcing of social reproduction—be considered as one peculiar form of labor that further illustrates the diversification of labor put forth by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013).

### 6.13 ETHNICIZATION OF THE WORKFORCE INCREASES PROFIT FOR THE ENTIRE FASHION INDUSTRY

In her discussion of Wal-Mart as the model for thinking about global capitalism, Tsing (2009: 156) highlights the main features of the highly hierarchical model of global contracting. She argues that there are clear demarcations between what global manufacturers want to control (for example, prices, marketing, logistics) and what they do not want to control (for example, labor arrangements, and environmental practices).

In supply chains contractors help manufacturers cut costs, and also relieve top-of-the-chain manufacturers of all responsibility for labor. The Italian fashion industry is no exception. Contractors, be they native or of migrant background, take the responsibility for labor arrangements and therefore shoulder responsibility for breaches of the law and issues of labor exploitation.

From this perspective, the ethnicization of the workforce alongside the outsourcing of social reproduction in the network of Chinese workshops, are practices that the manufacturers do not want to control but from which they largely benefit. In fact, as the foundations of the mobile regime, the ethnicization of the workforce and the outsourcing of social reproduction are crucial practices of displacement that serve the imperatives of fast fashion as they make it possible to squeeze production time to the maximum.

Profit stemming from the mobile regime is thus gained not only by those directly involved in the making of the mobile regime but also by the array of actors in the fashion industry.

This evolution helps explain why, with the exception of Prato where clothing manufacturers are Chinese, a polarization has taken place in the Italian fashion industry whereby the Chinese migrants occupy almost only the role of contractors and native manufacturers act as manufacturers, and less and less as contractors.

Moreover, given that the Chinese contractors' mobile regime provides previously unattainable conditions to manufacturers, it comes as no surprise that for decades Italian institutions have not seriously tackled the modes and levels of workforce exploitation in Chinese contracting businesses.

I thus offer a novel approach that helps redirect the gaze in the analysis of the mode of emplacement of Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry: practices that had been interpreted as 'ethnic' are instead the outcome of the interaction between the migrants agency and structural factors shaped by local and national institutions and broader fields of power (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011) in a particular historical epoch that combine to make possible this peculiar form of inclusion.

My research thus shines a new light on the basic processes for profit generation in the Italian fashion industry in relation to the restructuring of capital within a global perspective.

## 6.14 GLOBAL PATTERNS OF ETHNICIZATION

In their suggestively titled study, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) discuss the issue of identity as being increasingly claimed as property and managed by palpable corporate means. Ethno-entrepreneurialism is the marketing of ethnic cultural differences as a naturalized biological fact and a source of strategic economic value in the marketplace (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 28, 51).

Research shows that processes of ethnicization of the workforce take place elsewhere in the global marketplace. Xiang (2007) describes the process of ethnicization of workers in ‘the body shopping’ or the specialized recruitment of Indian information technology professionals to enter a destination country on a temporary work visa without any prior job opening. Pun and Chan (2013) also show that in the assembly lines at Foxconn factories in southern China workers are divided along dialectal/area of origin lines.

Features similar to those that I have highlighted for the Chinese workshops in the Italian fashion industry seem to be at the basis of the organizational model adopted at the Taiwanese multinational Foxconn’s plants in the Czech Republic. In Europe Foxconn has set up factories in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Russia, all exhibiting significant variations in the composition of the workforce and the methods of managing labor both from a social and legal perspective (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2014). In the Czech Republic the multinational employs temporary migrant workers, mainly originating from Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. With the exception of the core workforce made up of Czech workers, a dormitory regime is adopted.

As an institution connected to the workplace, the dormitory regime in itself is based on more or less intensive forms of outsourcing of social reproduction. Foxconn’s plants in the Czech Republic are no exception.

Interestingly, the dormitory regime is not a regular feature of all Foxconn’s factories in Europe but is only adopted where an international, territorially mobile workforce is employed and where national and local institutional and social conditions favor it.

Moreover, with the aim of smoothing the productive process, at Foxconn’s plants the workforce is divided along language and nationality lines rather than on the basis of their skills. The same division is adopted in dormitories, where workers are allocated rooms on the basis of nationality (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2014).

In sum, a preliminary comparison of the working regimes of the Chinese in Italy and Foxconn’s factories in some European locations suggest that they share some key elements introduced in order to speed up production and blast out everything that could hinder the extreme flexibility of the workforce: (1) recourse to an international workforce; (2) mobility of the workforce; (3) compression of the workforce’s diversity through an ethnicization of the workplace; and (4) reconfiguration of the reproduction sphere as a prerequisite for the restructuring of production. These can be singled

out as crucial basic features of working regimes that differ greatly in many other respects, from the size of the businesses to the level of official acceptance of or even support for the working arrangements.

Thus processes aiming at compressing the workforce diversity and outsourcing social reproduction can be seen as localized pathways of emplacement that are increasingly accepted and adopted within the global restructuring of capital. Far from being the result of ethnic preferences, or interests, these practices come into being as the result of globally fostered politics of production that are sanctioned at national and local scales.

### 6.15 AN ETHNIC KINDERGARTEN?

Culture is always integral to processes of unequal social relations and unequal control of force and resources (Glick Schiller 2013).

Here, I wish to point out that the culture integral to the processes of emplacement conceptualized in this work is time and place bound. That is, people from some areas in China in the two decades following the start of economic reforms in China in 1978, migrated embodying the local culture of the successful migrant that narrated work opportunities in the home areas as only second choice (Pieke et al. 2004). In order to succeed in a very short span of time they were culturally ready to face hardship. This is not a typical trait of Chinese national culture, but a localized elaboration of the migration culture that has tended to prevail in certain areas and at a certain point in time (see also Nyíri 2003; Thunø 2007).

The mobile regime has developed on this fertile ground that made certain conditions culturally and practically acceptable within those time and place boundaries. However, the mobile regime would not have developed during the last decades unless once set in motion it turned out to generate previously unattainable profits for an array of actors, as discussed in the previous chapters. Thus, this is a form of social and cultural reproduction of inequalities legitimized by the needs of capital.

Processes of essentialization, I argue, hinder a correct understanding of the nexus between the migrants' culturally bounded expectations and the rules of the industry where they are employed. In the case in point, these processes are orchestrated by different actors.

First, an essentializing narrative has been developed by the media in China. In 2012 a successful tele-series appeared featuring a Chinese migrant family moving from Wenzhou's mountains—where the large majority of the Chinese migrants living in Italy come from—to Paris and Prato, the topical places of the Wenzhouese diaspora in Europe. This is a travel and

conquest epic narrating the Chinese migrants as astute entrepreneurs, as opposed to the inept Italian entrepreneurs. The conveyed message is that these migrants are successful because they *chiku nailao*, that is, they endure hardships. Chinese emigrants are depicted as persons that by sticking to an abnegation attitude are able to amass money and become wealthy, thus helping to build global Chinese power (I discuss this in next chapter). Tellingly, the tele-series' English title is *The China story. The legend of entrepreneurship*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a context-bound culture has to a certain extent been essentialized in the places of origin of the Chinese migrants.

Second, and interestingly, those involved in processes of essentialization participate themselves in the narrative of ethnically-based skills.<sup>16</sup> Xiang (2007: 8) points out that the process of ethnicization was perceived and narrated both by IT workers and the so-called 'body-shop' operators as a professional choice, as Indians were simply the world's best in IT.

A similar narrative has emerged in the Chinese workshops in Italy: many times I have asked Chinese suppliers whether they could consider employing non-Chinese workers. The almost invariable answer was that no one else besides Chinese would accept working long hours, or sleeping in the same bed where other workers had just slept when urgent orders required that workers only take short naps, or move to new workshops where everybody spoke Chinese only. Thus, both in the case of Indian workers in IT and Chinese workers in the fashion industry the process of ethnicization is strengthened through the spread among the workforce of a rhetoric of work requirements that can be met only by counting on cultural distinctiveness: the perceived professional excellence of Indians and the perceived Chinese ability to endure hardship. This resonates with Tsing's (2009: 167) argument that suppliers in the apparel chains in the United States both recruit labor and motivate it through appeals to ethnicity.

Third, an academic discourse has been developed, mainly in Prato, where ID scholars propose an approach that essentializes cultural traits. Media and politicians in Italy have endorsed essentializing narratives.

As a result, up until now, scholars focusing analytical attention on Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry have failed to shed light on the implications of processes of essentialization.

I argue that processes of essentialization have covered up the nexus between changing labor arrangements in the contracting workshops and the interests of a globalized fashion industry. Essentializing narratives obscure the fact that the Chinese culture of the migrants that endure hardship in order to be able to move from rags to riches (and the inequalities it has



engendered in its instantiations in the Italian fashion areas) make it easier to extract labor from some, and allocate the product of this labor to others.

In sum, essentializing narratives have been instrumental in veiling this process of systematic exploitation, and the multiple actors that benefit from it.

To acknowledge the role of workforce ethnicization and outsourcing of the social reproduction as (human) oiling mechanisms for the mobile regime is important not only in order to understand the role they play in the economy but also because of their political and social implications. While the political implications will be discussed in the next chapter, here I focus on one social implication emerged from my fieldwork.

The vignette in the prologue refers to the negotiations in Prato between some Chinese associations' representatives and the local government on the feasibility of a Chinese-run kindergarten where (only) Chinese children under six could stay seven days a week. The request was dismissed by the local government on the ground that it stemmed from a 'backward' (national) approach to children's education and familial duties.

The actual tension, instead, revolved around the new imperatives of accumulation through the restructuring of production and the underlying compression of the workforce diversity and outsourcing of reproduction they commanded. In fact, the request to open a kindergarten was related to the sleeping arrangements, to night work, and to workers' mobility within the mobile regime, that is, to a series of practices that imply that children be separated from their parents. It had therefore to do with the need to expel social reproduction from the lives of workers.

Similar tensions have emerged again and again in the relationship between migrants and the Prato local government. Tensions, and the way with which they have been dealt, show that accumulation by productive restructuring is, to a certain extent, implicitly accepted, while the underlying social reproduction practices commanded by the mobile regime are either ignored or attacked as culturally backward and therefore unacceptable.

More recently, the policy developed in Prato aiming to eliminate the sleeping regime of the Chinese migrants goes in the same direction: it deliberately ignores that the sleeping regime supports the mobile regime that in turn is part and parcel of the competitive conditions of fast fashion.

## 6.16 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter offers a new and different approach for the analysis of some features of Chinese migrants' emplacement in Prato and in other fashion districts.

First, it unveils the modes and timing of restructuring of social reproduction and it links it with the restructuring of the space of production.

Second, it challenges the 'ethnic entrepreneurship' conceptualization that in its more extreme forms postulates the disembeddedness of Chinese suppliers from the Italian fashion industry. It argues that by reversing the gaze it is possible to move from an approach that essentializes Chinese entrepreneurship to one that unveils the process of compression of the workforce diversity through the ethnicization of the workplace. It thus shows that what is at stake here is not a relatively simple issue of low-paying jobs and long hours that are not accepted by natives as it can be found in many places around the world. Here at stake is a process of ethnicization that becomes the norm to the point that 'not-ethnicizable' workers are *de facto* excluded.

This new conceptualization challenges the assumption that a clear-cut separation between natives and newcomers exists that is based on cultural differences or differences in human capital (see Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013: 497). As shown by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), ethnicization of people and places as a means of generating profit is now pervasive.

This chapter contends that (1) the global restructuring of the social reproduction sphere and (2) compression of the workforce's diversity through the ethnicization of the workplace are the two pillars supporting and guaranteeing the functioning of the mobile regime adopted by the Chinese contracting businesses. It thus sheds light on the existence of a more profound layer of double manipulation of labor and workers' personal and family life as the precondition for the existence of the mobile regime. It is through these processes that the Chinese suppliers are able to proactively interpret the imperatives of fast fashion.

Therefore the chapter shines a new light on the basic processes for profit generation in the Italian fashion industry.

I suggest that the processes introduced in the network of Chinese contractors in the Italian fashion industry be analyzed in the framework of the globally prevailing trend to diversify various components of the production process, including the characteristics and the management of labor and workers lives.

These processes are one contingent articulation of the globally interconnected intrinsic diversity of labor. They should be analyzed, I argue, in the framework of globally fostered politics of production and as part of the diversification of labor as new structures of labor exploitation. While they are not unique, they reveal that new frontiers are overcome in labor organization in the European employment system (see also Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2014).

However, new features of labor are not simply the way in which global capitalism or neoliberalism glides in the locality; instead their very existence also depend on the orientations, silences, and implicit sanctioning of local and national authorities and the vested interests they defend. I will address this issue in the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. The vignette reports the content of a meeting that took place at the Prato municipality in March 2002 between (1) some representatives of the local administration, which for sake of simplicity I have grouped under A.; and (2) three Chinese migrants representing one of the Chinese associations active in the locality, which I have grouped under B. I was one of the participants in the meeting.
2. Full female employment is considered a typical feature of immigrant businesses employing co-nationals (Light 2007).
3. Ironing is often performed by men, on the basis of the presumed physical strength required.
4. They include the first 50 ads by people seeking a job and the first 50 ads by would-be employers.
5. On the so-called global care chain, and on challenges to the current.
6. Unpublished research on the offspring of Chinese migrants in Prato and Florence conducted by the author with Valentina Gruppi.
7. Both the terms ‘Wenzhouese’ and ‘Wenzhounese’ are used for people from Wenzhou.
8. In the first years of activity of the Center, the large majority of Chinese migrants accessing legal and other services provided by the Center originated from the Wenzhou area. While the majority of those accessing the services lived in Prato and Tuscany, many came to the Center from other Italian locations.
9. A survey organized by the Overseas Chinese Association of Wenzhou Municipality on several key sending communities was conducted in 2005 by local Overseas Chinese Branches. As reported by Wu and Zanin (2007: 7), in three major sending communities including Fengling, Tangxia and

- Auhai townships, all located in Wenzhou Prefecture, ‘very few departed before 1978, 12 percent departed between 1979 and 1990, and the vast majority (86 percent) in the 1990s or beyond’.
10. NSO denotes anything private from family workshops, and private enterprises small- medium- and large-scale.
  11. International trade reached US\$6.18 billion by 2005, 14 times the figure in 1995. The dependency on international trade increased from 10 percent in 1995 to 40 percent in 2005 (Wu 2009). Additionally, by 2003, the NSOs accounted for 90 percent of Wenzhou’s enterprises and 85 percent of GDP (WAEC 2004, cited in Wu 2009) and, as pointed out by Wu and Zanin (2007: 5), ‘the predomination of NSO economy in Wenzhou has provided a unique environment for the development of Wenzhouese entrepreneurs within and outside of Wenzhou’.
  12. It is possible that, especially from the late 1990s on, Wenzhouese migrants with a background in the clothing and shoe industry arrived in Italy and, thanks to their skills, were immediately employed as skilled workers in Chinese workshops or even opened their own business. However, evidence for this evolution is not provided. In any case, this does not imply that the Chinese have found a preferential track as contractors in Italy because of their skills.
  13. Among themselves, the two fiancés spoke a basic French that both had learned when previously working in France.
  14. This opens up the analytical scope to a broader view of how ethnicity and un/employability relate.
  15. The Chinese title is *Chuangye niandai, Wenzhou Yijiaren*.
  16. The question of how ethnicity is constructed—and problematized—in relation to conceptions and practices of employability, is an overarching one. To tackle it is even more challenging as contemporary qualitative studies concerned with the relations between employability and ethnicity are relatively rare. For an overview of the limits of both quantitative and qualitative studies in this field see Vesterberg (2013: 741).

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# ‘My City Brought to Its Knees’: The Downscaling of Prato and the Criminalization of Chinese Entrepreneurship

## 7.1 PROLOGUE

Fabio is a 50-something worker laid off only a few years before his retirement. Ashamed of being jobless, short of money, and depressed, he is trying to gas up the car at the self-service gas pump with his last five-euro bill. The bill has been in his pocket for days, it is dirty and wrinkled, and the dispenser keeps spitting it out. Behind him a young Chinese man is waiting his turn.

*He turns around and he sees that the person waiting behind him is Chinese. He’s a young man, possibly the same age as his daughters. He’s not looking at Fabio; he doesn’t seem to be impatient. He is wearing a jacket with a fur collar that looks like it must have cost a fair amount of money, and he’s holding his wallet open and at the ready. Fabio can’t help peeking, and he sees plenty of hundred-euro bills, all clean, and one of those rare light-yellow two-hundred-euro bills, and even a five-hundred-euro bill.*

*Fabio takes a big breath, turns back to the self-service pump, and once again the slot spits out his five-euro bill. Fabio curses under his breath, and he feels a wave of shame at having only that bill to insert into the dispenser, that one and no other. He curses again, in a slightly louder voice this time, passionately. He gives it one more try, and the dispenser spits it out again, only this time the bill slips through his fingers and falls, turning and spinning, wrinkled and filthy, until it lands on the young Chinese man’s shiny new shoes.*

*Fabio leans down to pick it up [...] and when he’s finally able to lay his fingers on the bill they brush the smooth shiny leather of the young Chinese man’s*

*shoes—and at that very moment it seems to him that he's just bowed down before him. [...] He feels shame, and he hopes that no one he knows has seen him bow down before a Chinese man.*

*Because, he thinks, it was the Chinese who took my job from me.*

*It's not true. That young Chinese man in particular never stole anyone's job. [...]. For that matter, the father of the Chinese boy, who also lives in the same city as Fabio [...] didn't steal his job, either. [...] Now, the Chinese who are still in Chin—well, it might be fair to say of them that they stole Fabio's job, if we can describe as theft the guiding principle of our impoverished world, its new quintessence, that is to say, the exaltation and the absolute protection of the mobility of employment, our unanimous consensus that jobs should be allowed to cross all borders freely to move wherever labor is cheapest... (Nesi 2012: 123–125).*

## 7.2 ILLUMINATING ONGOING STRUGGLES

In summer 2007, a 'Pact for security in Prato' was signed by the Mayor of the left wing local government in Prato, and representatives of the Prato province, the Tuscany region, and the Italian Ministry of Interiors. The pact addresses and adopts measures against (1) urban degradation; (2) criminality and deviant behaviors; and (3) Chinese enterprises. The document claims that too many Chinese businesses are active in Prato and they often operate off the books. Therefore they bring to the city security problems that need to be addressed with specific measures. The same pact has been signed again in the following years by the mayor of the new right wing local government and other regional and national institutions. Shortly after this policy was adopted, a series of selective raids against Chinese businesses started and continued until recently, when a new policy tackling the Chinese sleeping regime was adopted in 2014.

Intensive inspections and heavy fines against Chinese businesses followed. The raids have damaged many businesses and contributed to exacerbating illegal practices (Ceccagno 2012).

When I first learned of the policy, I was puzzled at discovering that problem fields so different had been put together and that measures had been taken for tackling them together.

Feldman (2011a) suggests that in order to decode what he terms as a 'historically particular apparatus', we should make good use of two advantages of participant observation. These are displacement, or the alternative insights gained through removal from familiar cultural logics, and historical contingency, or in particular, situated events that alter or sustain the status quo.

Feldman (2011b) contends that displacement requires a reflexivity that goes beyond the ‘common sense’ of the situation. Displacement problematizes what the researcher would otherwise take for granted. In the case of the ‘Pact for security in Prato’, displacement is produced by asking the question ‘how could it happen that at a certain historical moment problem fields so different such as urban degeneration, criminality, and Chinese businesses are put together as a security threat to the locality?’. Displacement takes place when the researcher situates the dominant discourse by uncovering the meaning and the interests behind the common sense. In this sense, as pointed out by Feldman (2011a: 391), ‘ironically, to displace is to situate’.

Historical contingencies are contested moments and events altering (or, alternatively, reproducing) the status quo. By focusing our attention on them, we can illuminate ongoing struggle.

In the second half of the 2000s, two historical contingencies gave rise to—and illuminated—the contestation of the Chinese migrants’ garment industry prospering in Prato. The first one was the severe crisis of the district core industry, the textile industry, owned almost exclusively by natives. The second historical contingency was the approach and then the election of the new local government.

In this chapter I document and analyze the forces, dynamics, and narratives conducive to the contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship and wealth through the enactment of a policy and the creation of social consensus around it. This, in turn, brings about a reflection of the nature of policies and the new social reality they shape (Shore and Wright 2011; Feldman 2011a).

The contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship can be understood only by addressing the crisis of Prato as a global textile center contributing to the success of fashion made in Italy and the role played by migrants in the city and industrial district.

To fully enable this analysis, the theorization put forth by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011, 2013) proves useful. These authors posit that some cities are disempowered in the competitive processes of repositioning that are global in their reach. They argue that ‘migrants become scale makers as they labor, produce wealth, raise families, and create and reproduce social institutions, thereby contributing to the economic, social, cultural, and political life of their cities’ (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2011: 12). Moreover, they suggest that studies of migrant pathways of incorporation in cities that find themselves relatively disempowered and impoverished within

global restructuring can contribute to a new and different analysis of the relationship between migrants and cities.

In previous chapters I have shown that by developing the fast fashion industry and influencing the real estate market and the local economy in general, the Chinese migrants have actively contributed to the competitive repositioning of the Prato district.

In this chapter, I contend that Prato is an exemplary case that yields new insights into the complex dynamics between migrants and the locality. In fact, any assessment of the role of migrants in the process of repositioning of the Prato district case appears far more controversial and therefore nuanced than in other cities where the rescaling of the locality is more straightforward and migrants' contribution to it is not bitterly contested by the main stakeholders (Ceccagno 2012).

This chapter shows that one element adds to the complexity of the situation: the rise of Chinese-run businesses coincided with the crisis of the main industry in the district that plunged the city into a state of socioeconomic uncertainty. In the case of Prato, any assessment of migrants' contribution to restructuring the locality is tinged with anger and fears that have been mounting nationwide and locally against China.

I show that Prato is the place where the conceptualization of China and its migrants as a dual challenge hanging over the district and the Italian economy is devised.

Thus, this chapter addresses the question of the hegemonic discourse in Prato. More precisely it is concerned with understanding how the hegemonic discourse frames the interpretation of the role of Chinese migrants in the city and industrial district; how far the hegemonic discourse frames definitions of problems and tasks ahead for the locality in a way that also includes the Chinese migrants' point of view; and how far definitions of problems are specific to the city/district uniqueness, or how far the hegemonic discourse reflects concerns that circulate nationwide.

I will show that the very dominant discourse on the role of migrants in the Prato district became the starting point for the criminalization of Chinese migrants' entrepreneurship.

### 7.3 THE DISAPPEARANCE OF OLD DISTRICT VALUES

In the framework of the changes in the global fashion industry discussed in the previous chapters, the Italian industrial district model was hit by an irreversible crisis in recent decades.

According to ID scholars, one fundamental feature of the industrial district was the respect of the implicit norms of intra-district cooperation, or the ‘code of the district’ (Becattini 1990; Brusco 1999; Dei Ottati 1994a, b, 2003a, b). Scholars argue that the integration of the division of the labor between the firms in the district took place largely ‘through the setting of prices through free competition in the local market’ *and* the reciprocal collaboration resulting from the respect of implicit norms shaped by experiences, beliefs and behavioral attitudes developed within the district (Dei Ottati 2009: 27). The ‘code of the district’ therefore played a crucial role as it heavily contributed to generate competitive advantages for the members of the local community.

In Prato, ID scholars maintain, this pervasive ‘code of the district’ has been both molded by and contributed to the spread and strengthening of a local individual and collective identity proactively reinforced by local institutions. According to Dei Ottati (2003a, b), a sense of local membership spread, which became prominent compared to other identities, for example that of class belonging.

Central to the district culture, and to the district functioning, was therefore the development of a climate of trust and the reduction of risks of opportunism.

Starting in the 1990s, ID scholars pointed out that these values and informal norms tend to disintegrate and disappear when wild competition brought about by globalization displaces a large part of the local production and induces destructive forms of competition within the district (Ferrucci and Varaldo 1993; Whitford 2001). Hadjimichalis (2006) contends that price competition prevailing in Italian districts in the last years—that affects the weakest categories, that is, small firms and contractors—has introduced conflicts and tensions that block the traditional mechanism of coordination through cooperation and trust. Whitford (2001: 579) argues that the disappearance of the ‘old’ values of the districts is presented as disruptive by the ID scholars owing to the ‘belief that the districts remain partially closed systems dependent to some extent on a series of positive externalities derived from their operation as communitarian markets’.

This evolution is evident also in Prato. According to the local ID scholars, in the ‘exemplary case’ celebrated for its cohesive socioeconomic milieu (Becattini 2001), the behaviors shaped by the ‘code of the district’ disappeared, replaced by unbounded competition (Dei Ottati 2003a). Many entrepreneurs found themselves unable to cope with a dramatically altered competitive context.

The issue of the 'code of the district', with its implication of membership that postulates a divide between insiders and outsiders, has been brought up again by the local ID scholars more recently: the Chinese migrants have been accused of introducing a new 'code of the district', different and parallel to the one that had characterized the Prato district in its golden years (Dei Ottati 2009). This will be discussed below.

#### 7.4 THE NEO-CORPORATIST ALLIANCE

Since the end of the Second World War, a leftist coalition has governed the city of Prato. Sociologists have enquired into the nature of the decades-long political stability.

In their analysis of the Prato industrial district's takeoff phase, Romagnoli (who was to become the mayor of Prato in the years 2004–2009) and Berardi argue that Prato was characterized by a silent neo-corporatist pact that regulated not only industrial relations but also political, economic, and social relations (Berardi and Romagnoli 1984 cited in Becattini 2001). The pact has been at the basis of the city's relatively untroubled and orderly long-term development (Giovannini 1984 quoted in Becattini 2001).

Bracci (2015) explains that the neo-corporatist system is 'led politically by the local Communist Party and economically by the entrepreneurs' local association'. He points out that in spite of its leftist ideology as a national party, the Communist Party (now Democratic Party) in Prato regarded small firms and contracting businesses as key allies, thus 'extending beyond the traditional working-class base of the Party' (Bracci 2012).

Such a form of alliance was more the rule than the exception in Italian districts where, in the golden era, a dense network of local institutions provided shared conventions and understanding, and, to a certain extent, values were shared among entrepreneurs, politicians and workers who perceived themselves as entrepreneurs-to-be (Bianchi 1994 quoted in Whitford 2001). Brusco (1992: 195) pointed out that in the industrial districts the role of public action was to turn bottlenecks into opportunities and resolve problems the private sector would be unable to solve alone, given that the district was 'not only a unit of analysis but also [...] a unit of initiative: a fully-fledged and organically unified organization'.

In the early 1990s, when the Chinese migrants were only active as contractors for native garment manufacturers in the district, the local government had interpreted the city's warm attitude towards the newly arrived Chinese immigrants by producing a booklet in Chinese whose title was

‘Welcome to Prato’ that explained to the newly arrived migrants how to use the city and its services. More crucially, from 1994, the local government set up the Center, connected with the Social Policy Office, directed by scholars and flanked by language facilitators and consultants, with the aim of both offering services to immigrants and studying their socioeconomic inclusion in the city. The creation of the Center clearly corresponded to a local government policy recognizing migration as a permanent and highly complex phenomenon (Campomori 2005). Moreover, in a research study comparing the action of the Prato local government vis-à-vis migration issues with other Italian cities also providing services to migrants, Campomori (2005: 262) highlights Prato’s dependence on the locality’s historical legacies in devising migration policies. It can thus be argued that in the first period, the traditional pathway of creating a locally cohesive milieu was, to a certain extent, also followed as far as migrant inclusion was concerned.

Essentially, this was the approach adopted by the leftist local government for almost two decades. Checks and crackdowns on businesses hosting undocumented migrant workers or producing counterfeit goods did take place, but they were limited and mainly aimed at showing to the public that the growing inflow of (Chinese) migrants was under control. ‘Slavery-like’ practices in Chinese-run workshops were often denounced in the local pages of newspapers, and discourses contesting the Chinese migrants’ disembeddedness had been gaining impetus but this never translated into an explicit will to crack down on Chinese entrepreneurship.

But by the late 2000s, the hearty welcome of the early 1990s and the implicitly tolerant attitude of the following years had given way to local stakeholders’ acrimony towards a group that by then had been able to upscale to the role of manufacturers and was increasingly perceived as rapaciously taking advantage of the district. The (left wing) local government’s symbolic actions prefiguring this shift were the closure of the Center in January 2007, and, immediately after, the ban on the dragon parade along the main streets of Prato that had already become a local tradition (see Di Castro and Vicziany 2009 for an account of the dragon parades in the following years, and for the negotiations around them see Lan 2014).

Behind such a drastic policy shift were the dynamics that had been unfolding for a long time and had become self-evident by the second half of the 2000s.

As discussed in Chap. 1, severe global competition and the drastic drop in demand for carded wool—in which the Prato textile industry specialized—had resulted in a series of devastating crises of the Prato ID. Massive closure of textile firms ensued, and the workforce was drastically scaled down.



By the 2000s, a sense helplessness was widespread in the district among the local entrepreneurs who lacked lines of credit, business skills, ambition, talent and vision 'to risk everything they'd built up until that moment', as vividly recounted by Edoardo Nesi in his literary award winner book *Story of my people* (Nesi 2012: 136).

Himself a former third generation entrepreneur in Prato and later a member of the Italian parliament, Edoardo Nesi depicts the entrepreneurs in Prato, and in Italy, as those that by now are on the '*losing side, those who have realized, over the course of just a few years, that they have been left behind by history. The [...] raving ones, the furious ones, the ones who yearn for the past*' (Nesi 2013).

Thus, both from an entrepreneurial narrative and from scholarly scrutiny (Whitford 2001), Prato emerges as a city yearning for its glorious past of self-containment.

While the local textile industry was facing such a dim economic prospect, the local Chinese-run industry was following a success pattern of its own, largely unrelated to the fate of the core industry in the district. The growth dynamics of the two industries of the district, thus, had been going in opposite directions: while the clothing industry, mainly operated by Chinese migrants, was thriving, the textile industry was sinking.

On the basis of data on the growth rate of Chinese-owned businesses and my recent fieldwork, I am convinced that the years 2005–2006 can be singled out as the heyday of the Chinese-run local garment industry. In fact, those were the last years of exceptional, steady growth in the number of Chinese-run businesses.<sup>1</sup> They were also the years when Chinese manufacturers-to-be competed with each other in a rush to rent from natives warehouses in the heart of the booming fast fashion center at skyrocketing prices.

The diverging trends for the two local industries help to explain the local stakeholders' attack against Chinese entrepreneurship. I tackle this issue below.

## 7.5 A NEW POLITICAL COALITION

It is against such a background, and in the framework of the unfolding of global dynamics that were heavily affecting the locality, that a second historical contingency can be singled out: the imminence of the election of the new local government and the political campaign for the election of the city major.

The high-pitched political campaign that started in 2007 and was in full swing in 2008 revolved around the growing presence of Chinese businesses and their ‘siege’ on the district. On such an issue, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, the leftist coalition lost the elections and the balance shifted in favor of a right wing coalition. The local industrialist association (Unione Industriali Pratese [UIP]) played a pivotal role in this shift (Bracci 2015, 2016). It broke the traditional model of governance whereby the leftist party governed with the support of industrialists, and called for a political change on the grounds that the local government had not been able to fight back the Chinese takeover of the city.

Thus, the ‘Chinese migrants’ issue turned out to be crucial in shifting the balance of power in political terms. With the fading away of the traditional productive and social model, and the affluence linked to it, the political legitimacy of the main stakeholders had been at risk. As a remedy, the alliance with a new political coalition that more than others tended to blame the downscaling of the city on the Chinese migrants could preserve the industrialists from the loss of trust as the central actors in the district. By shifting their support to the right wing coalition government, the industrial stakeholders remained the pivotal players in the city.

The result was a rupture with the traditional political ally which at the same time foreshadowed a further swift departure from the traditional role played by the municipal government. The local government intervention in Italian districts traditionally consisted of providing infrastructure and social services, and, most importantly, ‘brokering compromise between the players in the local economy’ (Whitford 2001). Once local industrialists chose to ally with the right wing coalition—much more inclined than the left wing to construct narratives on the Chinese migrants as besieging the district<sup>2</sup>—there seemed to be no room left for brokering compromise between the interests of the old stakeholders and those taking advantage of the new dynamics unfolding in the district, including the Chinese.

In a traditionally leftist city, the popular support for a shift away from the traditional alliance between the leftist party and the local textile industrialists also testifies to a growing uneasiness in the city with the mounting economic crisis and the dim prospects for the future.

## 7.6 THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL TEXTILE ENTREPRENEURS

Thus two concomitant historical contingencies that unfolded in Prato immediately after the mid-2000s—the ravaging crisis of the industry run by natives with its destructive socioeconomic effects, and the elections of the new local government, where for the first time the contenders' fight heavily focused on the Chinese migrants' role in the city—structured and illuminated the contestation by the main stakeholders in the district of Chinese migrants' entrepreneurship and wealth.

Against such a background, the reasons behind the policy 'Pact for security in Prato' enacted in 2007 that had puzzled me when I had first heard of it, become clear. The policy is the outcome of an ongoing conflict and at the same time a further step in the struggle over the control of both production of wealth and political legitimacy in Prato.

The main stakeholders in Prato were finding themselves helpless in front of global changes that heavily contributed to the downsizing of the textile industry; at the same time the success and the growing economic power of Chinese migrants in the district was more and more evident. Such a contingency lent itself easily to the consolidation of a binary logic, already widespread in the district, postulating an irreconcilable antagonism between the interests of natives and migrants. On the basis of this logic, the dominant discourse started narrating the Chinese migrants as detrimental to the district and questioning the migrants' right to pursue their goals under the existing terms.

More recent elections, in 2014, have resulted in the return of the left wing government and a new policy towards Chinese entrepreneurship devised by the regional authorities after the tragedy of the fire in a Chinese firm in Prato. I will address it below.

What remains unchanged is the pivotal role of the local industrialists in the making of local policies. According to Bracci (2014), the hegemonic position of the local industrialists' association since the 1980s and its ability to affect the local political actors' choices explain 'the overlapping of the firms' interests, the destiny of the district and the axes of the local system development'.

The composition of the local entrepreneurs association shows that textile industrialists are still dominant in the city, and by far. In fact, in 2014 out of the 52 members on the UIP's<sup>3</sup> board of directors, 28 were textile industrialists, 20 were textile machines' industrialists, and three were clothing entrepreneurs; and they were all native (Unione Industriali Pratese

Cariche Associative 2013). Only two Chinese firms have joined the UIP to date. Chinese entrepreneurs are increasingly coopted into the local associations of small and very small businesses. However, these associations seem to play a less crucial role in shaping the trajectories of the city, at least as far as the destiny of the fast fashion center in Prato is concerned.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while the textile industry is still the core industry in the district, the growing role of the clothing one is downplayed.

## 7.7 THE TRADE UNIONS

Most notably absent from these dynamics are the trade unions. Historically, the trade unions' role in Prato was constrained by the dominant work culture whereby monetary returns were more important than fighting over working conditions (Dei Ottati 2003a). As Dei Ottati (2003a) points out, in the district's heyday detailed regulations of labor organization were not only perceived as disadvantageous by the entrepreneurs but were also opposed by many workers.

A similar work culture prevails more recently among the Chinese in the fast fashion industry. As I have shown above, employers and workers' interests may partially converge. Both owners and workers actively squeeze their family time in return for more output as sacrificing working conditions for higher income is attractive. This drastically reduces the room for unions' appeal to workers (see also Lan 2014, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 250) point out that the historical articulation between labor and citizenship, on which the traditional trade unions' action is based, is being continuously disarticulated by capital. They argue that nationalized trade unions fail to capture the multiplication of both labor and citizenship and are therefore less and less able to fulfill their role as labor organizations.

The limits of the unions' action *vis-à-vis* new forms of work emerged in mid-1995 in Prato, when some workers had turned to unions (and lawyers) for help feeling that the conditions posed by their employers in exchange for legalization (that is, years of unpaid work) were highly exploitative. The attempt at unionization was however short-lived as the workers—all living on workshop premises together with their employer and their family—discovered that the unions' types of workplace regulations were in evident conflict with the unwritten rules of the Chinese workshops, and primarily with the sleeping regime (Ceccagno 2007).

## 7.8 THE CRACKDOWN AND ITS UNFORESEEN EFFECTS

With the election of the right wing local government in 2009 in a traditionally left wing city, the number and frequency of police and administrative inspections of Chinese businesses and living conditions increased sharply (see Bracci 2012). These checks were selective in that they were mainly targeted at Chinese businesses, and this strategy became the central pillar of the local government's approach to Chinese businesses in the city. According to a member of the local government who I interviewed in late 2012, the aim was to reduce the number of Chinese migrants living and working in Prato. However, it was unclear how the city and industrial district would have benefited from a reduction of the number of Chinese migrants and their activities.

According to some natives that do business with the Chinese, the continuous raids stepped up against the Chinese penalized all Chinese businesses, including those that operated legally (Ceccagno 2012). The manager of a bank branch in Prato declared that less foreign buyers were going to buy in Prato, discouraged by the widespread checks (Pfaender 2010). Additionally, fines imposed on irregularities were perceived as too heavy, especially when the Chinese migrants operated small businesses. Chinese migrants felt vulnerable and unable to sustain the relative affluence they had gained through hard work over the years. This emerged clearly from my fieldwork in Prato in 2012–2014.

The strategy adopted by the local government is not without consequences, and some are probably unexpected. The weightier administrative inspections and fines imposed on businesses resulted in a higher number of Chinese people choosing to enter complete illegal practices and to stop paying at all (Ceccagno 2012). In fact, as a reaction to administrative checks and fines, a growing number of Chinese manufacturers find name-lenders among Chinese elders or people that intend to end their migratory experience and return to China. These businesses avoided paying taxes and levies, including personal income tax, value added tax and local taxes, including the tax for garbage collection. As a rule, these businesses close down after only one year, and reopen the activity under a different lent name. The business director, which is the actual owner of the business, is the same in the new business.

The practice of name-lenders is not completely new among Chinese businesses in Prato. Researchers have highlighted cases of people that appointed one of their workers as the (fake) boss of the business so that

they could avoid the risk of being convicted on a charge of using undocumented workers (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008). According to Pieraccini (2008), in the mid-2000s many Chinese firms closed down immediately after inspection in order to avoid paying taxes and fines. Now, however, according to some interviewees, the situation is much more radicalized and widespread.

The option of reopening the business under a new name seems available only to manufacturers who, as a general rule, are wealthy enough to be able to pay co-nationals as name-lenders. Small contractors cannot afford to look for name-lenders and when administrative checks find them irregular and heavy fines are imposed, they often cannot do anything else than to close their business permanently.

The choice of becoming fully unlawful, however, was not appreciated by many other Chinese migrants, even if they perceived it as somehow induced by the new local policy. Name-lenders have been termed ‘predators’ by a Chinese interviewee who explained that these migrants’ actions were having tragic effects on all other Chinese manufacturers who more or less regularly pay taxes and thus faced higher production costs and were therefore forced to sell their garments at higher prices.

Some Chinese interviewees argued that a vicious circle had been started by the local government that will eventually destroy the Chinese-run businesses. One Chinese migrant likened the situation in Prato with the end of the Titanic, where the iceberg was submerged and therefore not visible but it nevertheless caused the destruction of the ship and its passengers.

This situation shows that the Chinese migrants in Prato are far from being as monolithic as many depict them. On the contrary, interests within the group sharing the national origin can be conflicting and choices made by some have a negative impact on and are therefore strongly disapproved of by others.

## 7.9 ANTHROPOLOGY OF POLICY

Policies reveal patterns and processes of power and social change. By problematizing their meaning it is possible to explain what kind of reality policies create and what interests they promote. Shore and Wright (2011) argue that policies are windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites. According to Feldman (2011a), actors fuse together disparate policy domains into a broader problem. Thus, new policies constitute new problem fields that

were not there before. In this way, previously disconnected areas are conflated. A created semantic world becomes a reality in itself.

This approach contests the common sense of policy. Feldman's big claim is that policy is not only a window through which to broaden the understanding of political processes but it is a process itself. Policy has agency, it creates subjects and objects of power. Feldman's conceptualization on policy is a very useful analytical framework for shedding light on the dynamics around the signing and implementation of the 'Pact for security in Prato'. This pact is an interesting example of how disparate domains—urban degeneration, criminality and deviant behaviors, and Chinese migrant entrepreneurship—are merged together into a broader problem. When urban degeneration and migrants' entrepreneurship are put together, the meaning of both change. By signing the pact, the actors constitute new problem fields that were not there before. Hence, the previous approach to migrant entrepreneurship is transformed and recast in a way that justifies security measures, and migrant enterprises become a territory for patrolling. Thus, new subjects and objects of power are created. New notions of 'public order' are devised that modify the range of acceptable interpretations of the social reality.

A new discriminating logic emerges by reworking some of the tropes of entrepreneurship. A divide is created and institutionalized between native entrepreneurs on the one hand, whose business enterprise is legitimate and supported by the institutions, and migrant entrepreneurship on the other hand, that is transformed into a security concern.

Ortner (1973: 1344) conceptualizes 'elaborating symbols' as symbols that play a powerful organizational role in relation to the system of reference. An elaborating symbol is a key 'insofar as it extensively and systematically formulates relationships—parallels, isomorphisms, complementarities and so forth—between a wide range of diverse cultural elements' in a socio-cultural context (Ortner 1973: 1343). Selective police controls on the Chinese migrants in Prato include strong symbolic actions such as, (1) soldiers patrolling the streets and policemen assisted by police dogs in 2008; (2) an order issued in 2010 by the newly elected mayor limiting the business hours of commercial businesses in the area where most Chinese commercial businesses cluster (but not in the rest of the city)<sup>6</sup>; and (3) police helicopters repeatedly flying over the areas where checks were conducted in late 2011.

Following Ortner's analysis, it could be argued that, as much as the policy, these symbols fuse together domains previously unrelated and thus remind people of the created isomorphism of migrants' free enterprise and criminality.

Moreover, the ‘Pact for security in Prato’ document specified the amount of money to be spent by each institution in order to implement the policy. Given the powerful role played by symbols, public money spending on helicopters and police dogs was justified. It was part of the policy itself in that it strengthened the interconnectedness of previously disparate domains at the symbolic level. Thus, local consensus on the new problem field could more easily be stirred and voluntary compliance secured.

Chinese migrants, instead, are constructed as objects of power and their narrative on their role in the restructuring of the locality is ignored.

Feldman (2011a) argues that in neoliberal times policies travel across boundaries. The ‘Pact for security in Prato’ is a good example in this sense as it travelled back and forth between the local and the national. In fact, the policy that depicts Chinese businesses as a security concern had been developed locally, but the pact was also signed by the regional government and the ministry of interiors. The policy thus became both more authoritative, and embedded in the given for granted of the state. Therefore a newly created reality, grounded in specific interests of the district stakeholders, reached the national and became a state policy that could easily reverberate from the national to other localities in the country.

This is in fact what happened some years later, in the aftermath of the fire in a Chinese firm in December 2013. The tragedy in Prato created the conditions for more explicitly giving a nationwide resonance to the dominant discourse shaped in Prato that presents Chinese entrepreneurship in Prato as a problem of law and order. As discussed in Chap. 3, a discourse depicting the Chinese firms as a Chinese enclave in Italian territory has become the dominant narrative in Tuscany in the aftermath of the fire, and has been echoed by the national and global media.

Local ‘policies of exclusion’, in many cases targeted at migrants, had already become a prominent feature in many Italian cities after the national government in 2008 and 2009 introduced the Security Package, that is, a set of norms granting more power to the cities’ mayors on issues of law and order (Ambrosini and Caneva 2012).

The institutional bodies at different scales that had signed the first ‘Pact for security in Prato’ in 2007 and its renewals, were easily re-attuned to each other. The President of the Republic, interpreting the national outrage at the tragedy in the Chinese firm in Prato, publicly supported the need for increasing checks on the ‘clothing productive district characterized by a large amount of violations of Italian laws and workers’ rights’ (Radiocor 2013). National authorities declared that the ‘Pact for security in Prato’ would have been renewed in no time.



This is an outstanding example of a locally shaped narrative that travels back and forth from the local to the national and the global,<sup>7</sup> and becomes the dominant discourse on the issue.

### 7.10 INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT SCHOLARS CONTRIBUTE TO SHAPING THE CITY'S TRAJECTORIES

The elaboration of a policy that criminalizes Chinese entrepreneurship and its enactment took place in concert with the deployment of an articulated narrative that depicts the Chinese migrants as detrimental to the local economy and society.

I find it particularly interesting to focus analytical attention on the role played by the local ID scholars in shaping the dominant discourse on the Chinese in Prato. They are among the main actors in the construction and spread of the official narrative, and hence influence the symbolic dimension of whose is the city of Prato.

Research has questioned the grand narratives of some scholars theorizing on Italian IDs arguing that they leave in the dark unequal power relationships among members and off the books practices (Hadjimichalis 2006). However, up until now research has largely neglected the role played by local ID scholars in the dynamics shaping the Prato ID and its trajectories.

Being embedded in local dynamics and being proactive participants in the unfolding of the hegemonic discourse, local ID scholars are part and parcel of the much celebrated district's cohesive social milieu. Prato's mayor in the years 2004–2009 was a former ID scholar, and one member of the local government formed in 2014 has been actively writing on ID issues and the Chinese migrants' role in the Prato ID.

Being part of the cohesive social milieu, district scholars tend to approach migration only through the lens of the interests of native entrepreneurs, and hence fail to grasp all the implications of the contribution made by Chinese migrants to reshaping the city. Much of the district scholarship remains trapped in the alleged polarity between assimilationism and transnationalism, even though recently some authors have moved to a more nuanced position that argues for a focus on interactions between the two (Dei Ottati 2014; IRPET 2015).

Below, I will briefly discuss some conceptualizations put forth by the ID scholars focusing on Prato in the last decade.

### 7.10.1 *The ‘Code of the District’ Replaced by Chinese Values*

The isolation of Chinese businesses, their having created a ‘district within the district’, that is, an industry parallel and detrimental to the core textile district, has been the recurrent theme of the political discourse in Prato since the late 1990s, one also proposed by industrial district scholars (Toccafondi 2005, 2009; Bellandi et al. 2010). Chinese businesses have been presented as disembedded from the local industrial system, even though it has largely benefited from it and from the ‘made in Italy’ informal brand. By the mid-2000s, when many Chinese were already able to make the leap from being contractors to being manufacturers who could contract stitching tasks to others, the narrative of the Chinese-only parallel district became more plausible and gained further momentum.

Linked to this is another major contestation. As seen above, ID scholars posit that the ‘code of the district’ had disintegrated with the changes brought about by globalization. Gabi Dei Ottati, a prominent scholar who has formalized the local dominant narrative on the role of Chinese migrants in the district, argues that after the disappearance of the traditional ‘code of the district’ a new set of implicit norms and shared values have been emerging in Prato, those of the newly arrived Chinese migrants. She contends that the process of division of labor between Chinese immigrant firms, so similar to the division of labor typical of the district, has been supported by the socio-cultural system of ‘the Chinese community’ with values, beliefs, propensities and implicit behavioral norms following a pattern similar to the traditional industrial district one, even though quite different from it ‘in some respects’ (Dei Ottati 2009: 32). She argues that many advantages favoring this success story can be ascribed to the socio-cultural system of the Chinese migrants that ‘maintains its fundamental separateness with respect to the local society, as it is evidenced by the formation of an ethnic enclave labor market’ (Dei Ottati 2009: 34). In her analysis, the Chinese socio-cultural system not only lowers the costs of coordinating the division of labor within Chinese firms but also reduces transaction costs and favors the flexibility of the internal coordination.

This approach recalls the consolidated body of academic research that points out that firms embedded in systems of social relations enjoy a privileged position relative to isolated ones (Granovetter 1985).<sup>8</sup> It also builds on the concept of ‘untraded interdependencies’ (Storper 1995), that in turn refers to key concepts developed by ID scholars according to which un-codified knowledge is shared among those in the ID, and trust reduces the uncertainty of transactions (see Becattini 2001).

In Dei Ottati's conceptualization, Chinese clustering is linked with a specific cultural system. However, the author leaves unspecified in which sense the socio-cultural system of the Chinese migrants' norms and shared values is different from the preexisting 'code of the district' and how and why it overcame the local code.

The social impact of Chinese immigrants is depicted in harsh terms. According to Dei Ottati (2009: 36–37), they have changed '*the physiognomy of the district as a whole: the urban and industrial landscape itself [...] becomes transformed to the point of becoming alien to the local population*'. Moreover, '*the expansion of the Chinese community introduces conflict into the very heart of the local population*'.

### 7.10.2 *Migrants' Transnationality*

Another contestation of Chinese migrants revolves around Chinese migrants' trans-local connections.

In the mid-2000s, when Prato was battered by the crisis, the city discovered the competitive advantages of transnational Chinese entrepreneurs who could count on a web of suppliers, clients and contacts in China and started questioning it. A heated debate sparked in the district around Chinese migrants' importing of fabrics from China. Such imports were and still are depicted as detrimental to the locality on the assumption that they damage or at least do not foster the development of the local textile industry. Estimates on the dimensions of the phenomenon are rarely an issue at stake; and the same role played by natives in importing textiles is systematically ignored. By doing so, a locality unable to tackle the issue of the dramatic loss of market shares of its textile industry blames it on the Chinese migrants and thus transforms an issue tightly intertwined with global dynamics into a local issue around which an ethnic divide is created. Moreover, the issue of a global value chain with its center in Prato is addressed in a way that embraces the old concept of the district as a partially closed system isolated from the outside.

Migrants' links to suppliers, customers and other networks in their country of origin or in third countries are usually valued as heralds of economic development of the locations where they settle. In Prato, ID scholars lament that the relationships that Chinese businesses maintain with economic and political agents in their own country enable 'ethnic firms to benefit from an added type of external economies, which is not ordinarily available to district firms, but which has become increasingly

important to the context of today's global markets, namely trans-local external economies' (Dei Ottati 2009: 33).

All in all, local policymakers, entrepreneurs and scholars display an ambivalent attitude towards Chinese migrants' trans-local connections. On the one hand they perceive this competitive advantage as a form of unfair competition with native entrepreneurs and depict Chinese migrants' transnational positioning as part of the compounded pressure originating from China and its migrants on the district (see below). They thus posit a dichotomy between the maintenance of transnational connections and incorporation into the locality (for similar approaches elsewhere see Glick Schiller and Levitt 2006).

On the other hand, they propose that Chinese migrants' trans-local networks be made available to Prato native entrepreneurs, with the explicit expectation that these networks will help the Prato textile entrepreneurs to 'internationalize their manufacturing and eventually the distribution of their products as well' (Dei Ottati 2009: 39).

In 2015 a report was published that moves away from the narrative on migrants' transnationality as it had developed in the 2000s. First, it recognizes that migrant transnational fields contribute to develop from below a global value chain (IRPET 2015: 28). Second, it argues that the existence of Chinese transnational firms in the locality in itself reduces the informal economy and therefore 'on the one hand favors the inclusion of these firms in global capitalism and on the other it also favors their integration into the local economy' (IRPET 2015: 32).

This evolution, that appreciates the offspring of migrants for setting up businesses outside of low-end fast fashion, is in line with the political evolution in the city.

### 7.10.3 *What Role for the Chinese Migrants in the Tasks Ahead for the Locality?*

Interestingly, therefore, until recently the Chinese migrants were at the same time blamed for not contributing to the fully revitalization of the district and urged to play a pivotal role in the city's attempt at reversing its ongoing downscaling.

The price for being accepted as part of the cooperative milieu, however, is high as they are asked to upgrade their clothing production so that it matches the quality of the textiles produced in Prato. This implies that they should embark on a new type of business that serves different markets and

has different dynamics, unknown to most local players, including natives and migrants. In other words, they are urged to dismantle a thriving low-end fast fashion industry in order to contribute to the revitalization of the sinking textile industry.<sup>9</sup>

While the issue of fostering the regeneration of the district through a better integration of the two local industries that could result in a fully integrated fashion industry can be appealing, global fashion dynamics could make this project quite arduous to implement. Gereffi and Frederick (2010: 11) argue that there is an increasing request for low quality garments in Europe and that 'apparel manufacturing is highly competitive and becoming more consolidated, with increasing barriers to upgrading'.

Additionally, the locally hegemonic discourse frames problems and tasks ahead for the city in a way that includes Chinese migrants as only playing a subaltern role. Only by embracing the interests of the core industry and native industrialists could the Chinese hope that 'some respected local actors, having capacity of vision and leadership' legitimize the Chinese entrepreneurs' role (Dei Ottati 2009: 39) thus restoring social cohesion in the locality (Dei Ottati 2009: 38).

Thus, despite the Herculean task they are required to perform, Chinese migrants do not seem to be considered as the leading party for the advocated changes. Moreover, here, as in the contestation of Chinese migrants' use of their transnational networks, migrants' loyalty or lack of loyalty to the locality are assessed on the basis of their willingness or unwillingness to adapt to the needs and aims of the (native) textiles entrepreneurs.

Such a pressure on Chinese businesses is even more unexpected given that local civic institutions have not played a significant role in the market expansion of Chinese firms, in sharp contrast to the extensive role they had played in the growth of the native firms that have shaped the district (Santini et al. 2011).

Expectations that the Chinese migrants fully adapt their businesses to the needs of the core industry are still a central issue in the city, widespread among different social classes and natives with different political values. This testifies to both the popular concern on the future of their city and the prospect of a subaltern socioeconomic inclusion of the Chinese migrants. On the website of the local Chamber of Commerce a more nuanced proposal of joining in the creation of a 'fashion valley' in Prato has been posted in the late 2000s (<http://it.fashion-valley.it/>).

#### 7.10.4 *China's Dual Challenge*

The tense atmosphere in Prato can be fully grasped only if the events and dynamics unfolding at the global and national scales are taken into account. A ravaging economic crisis has been damaging not only Prato but the entire country. In Italy, the crisis had been mounting years before the 2008 so-called global crisis. Italy is among the countries in Europe where by now the crisis is hitting harder: the European monitoring bodies have pointed out that Italy is the country that in 2012 registered the sharpest financial distress for households in Europe (European Commission 2013).

This is mainly the result of the composition of the Italian industry: Italian IDs mainly specialize in so-called 'mature' products and therefore are much more susceptible to competition from low wage countries than the industries in other Western European countries. Moreover, in Italy, unlike many other European countries, manufacturing activities, and in particular the fashion industry, remain a pillar of the national economy (Fortis 2005).

Against such a background, while China was gaining ground globally, in Europe the textile and clothing industry was losing ground. Dunford and his colleagues (2013) show a direct correlation between the rise of China and the fall of Italy in textile and clothing production (see also Giovannetti et al. 2011, 2013).

Moreover, research has pointed out the growing specialization of the Chinese and increasingly Turkish economies in higher end items, once mainly exported by Italy, and resulting in the squeezing out of Italy's domestic manufacturers from the industry's segment (Dunford et al. 2013: 15). As pointed out by Gereffi and Frederick (2010), China is the big winner in the two crises of the global textile and clothing value chain: the WTO phase-out of the quota system for textiles and apparel in 2005—which provided access for poor and small economies to the markets of industrialized countries—and the current economic recession that has led to massive unemployment across the industry's supply chain (this issue has been tackled in Chap. 2).

Thus China is a stiff competitor of Italy in the productive sectors in which Italy boasted leadership and which are still vital for the Italian economy.

These dynamics involving Italy and China help explain some attitudes prevailing in the country. Expectations that the Chinese 'would rush out to buy Italian style' (Nesi 2012), prevailing in the 1980s, have

quickly been replaced by anger and fear towards such a dreadful competitor (Ceccagno 2008).

Since the early 2000s, China has been narrated in Italy as the country responsible for the impoverishment of Italy.

This is rendered with an explicit metaphor in the movie 'The Arrival of Wang' released in 2011, where an octopus-like alien whose name is Wang and who only speaks Chinese arrives in Italy and from this country destroys planet Earth. The movie closes with a close-up of the wounded young Italian interpreter of Chinese who naively had trusted the alien.

The movie is an overt metaphor of how China is perceived as a devastating power in Italy. It is therefore evident that the hegemonic discourse in Prato reflects concerns about China that circulate nationwide and beyond.

*Mozzarella Stories* is another Italian movie, also released in 2011, where some Chinese entrepreneurs make a fool out of the best producer of Italian mozzarella, as they are able to market his mozzarellas at a lower price with a Chinese brand. Even though this neo noir-comedy film is self-ironic, it nevertheless addresses existing concerns and widespread popular narratives on the Chinese takeover of Italian excellence.

In Prato, however, the conceptualization on China as a dangerous competitor is brought one step further. Nationwide fears of being destroyed by China are compounded with fears that the Chinese migrants in Prato are taking over the district (Ceccagno 2012). A Chinese 'dual challenge' is perceived as hanging over the district—from China and from its migrants based in the district (Dei Ottati 2009). The transnational positioning and global relational assets of Chinese migrants are depicted as part of the compounded pressure originating from China and its migrants that weighs on the district.

The nightmare quoted at the beginning of this chapter is set in Prato. The well-off migrant wearing shiny shoes who involuntarily humiliates the laid off worker has oriental traits, and this is enough to link his (supposed) nationality with competition from China.

The thrust of Nesi's thesis is that the failure of Italian small firms is to be blamed on globalization with its Italian cantors and on Chinese migrants' entrepreneurship (for an analysis of the implications of the novel by Nesi see Zhang 2013). Nesi's acclaimed book goes hand in hand with and condensates in narrative form the conceptualization put forth by ID scholars according to which China and Chinese migrants are to be blamed for the impoverishment of Prato and its loss of international relevance.

It is in Prato that the dominant ideology depicts Chinese migrants as part and parcel of the pressure originating from China that weighs on the district. Chinese migrants in Prato are thus depicted as the long arm of the Chinese state (Ceccagno 2012). This discourse, suggesting a clear-cut separation of interests between natives and Chinese migrants, and presenting Chinese entrepreneurship as unfit for the district, paved the way for the full enactment of the ‘Pact for security in Prato’.

### 7.11 MONEY, WEALTH AND DAILY ROBBERY

In Italy, Chinese migrants are more and more perceived as linked to money and wealth to the extent that recently they have become the epitome of the affluent migrant. An article on the website of an institution providing support to small businesses in Padua presents the results of research according to which the growth trend for Chinese businesses in Padua has been declining (Confapi 2013). The content of the article is in contradiction with a photo featured by the same webpage where a person with Asian traits waves Chinese banknotes.

The economic success of migrants sharing the same national background is new to Italy where the combination of words such as ‘affluent’ and ‘migrant’ tend to be perceived as an oxymoron. This stems from the prevailing mode of migrant incorporation: Italy mainly attracts uneducated migrants for low-end jobs. As a result, individual successful migrants with different national backgrounds have been depicted as role models in the national press but no single migrant group has been associated with wealth before (Ceccagno 2014). The recent countertrend that portrays Chinese migrants as affluent and busy to buy whatever is worth buying, from businesses to luxury houses, is therefore a sharp departure from previous narratives on migrants in Italy.

Moreover, a widespread perception is prevailing in Italy that Chinese migrants have been spared by the pervasive economic crisis that is still battering Italy. The growing wealth of Chinese migrants is systematically contrasted with the shrinking wealth of natives.

The volume of remittances from Italy to China is highlighted as a measure of the dimensions of Chinese migrant wealth. For years, remittances to China have been by far the highest in Italy. In 2012 they amounted to €2.674 billion, almost triple from 2005 when they amounted to €947 billion (Banca d’Italia 2014) and making up almost 40 percent of remittances from Italy. However, they diminished by 20 percent between 2013



and 2014, and in 2014 China was no longer the first country in terms of remittances from Italy, bypassed by Romania (Banca d'Italia 2015; Papavero 2015).

Since 2006, Prato has ranked second or third in terms of remittances to the PRC. Remittances from Prato, however, have decreased steadily over the last years: from €226,801 million in 2011 to €187,595 million in 2012 (Banca d'Italia 2014) to €162,134 million in 2014 (Papavero 2015).

In Prato, Chinese wealth is under attack. Money remitted to China is discussed as the most blatant example of untaxed earnings that rather than being invested locally are allocated elsewhere (Goldsea 2011). Remittances in some cases are presented as money laundering (Pieraccini 2008). However, one of my interviewees pointed out that often money is sent to China as a payment for imported raw materials needed in the fashion industry.

The attack on the wealth of the Chinese migrants in Prato is evident in the persistent tolerance for widespread robbery. Chinese walking down the street, or working in workshops or even staying at home are the constant target of personal assaults or robbery.

Some interviewees recount that employers tend to avoid establishing a fixed pay-day for fear of robberies and assaults. In some cases machines are stolen, as shown in the interview below, which I conducted in Prato in 2012:

Some four or five months ago, thieves came to my friend's workshop and they stole their machines, they left a note with their phone number, they wanted some €4000 as ransom, but my friend did not have so much money to buy the machines back. It happens to most of the Chinese all the time. Sometimes they are black people [people from Morocco], sometimes they are Albanians, sometimes they are Italians.

Some interviewees claimed that, according to the experience of many, asking the police for help was useless. In 2013, *Compost*, a theater group based in Prato has collected more than one hundred submissions of complaint by Chinese migrants who had been robbed.

The phenomenon is by no means limited to Prato. In 2012 robbers assaulted and killed a Chinese immigrant and his eight-month-old daughter in Rome (for a discussion of the press coverage see Sredanovic 2016).

## 7.12 THE OFFSPRING'S COUNTER-NARRATIVE

The offspring of Chinese migrants have started promoting an information campaign and a counter-narrative on the issue.

In February 2014, AssoCina, an association founded in 2005 by second generation Chinese in Italy, has started the *Prato Insicura* (UnsafePrato) webpage (Prato Insicura 2014) whose very title questions the *Prato Sicura* (Safe Prato) euphemism used for, among other things, anti-Chinese measures. Chinese migrants who were robbed or whose houses and workshops were burgled post their comments such as the one below by Luna Chen (AssoCina 2014):

*I am not surprised that I got robbed in the very center of Prato while I was walking with three friends. After all, all my Chinese friends in Prato have been robbed at least once in the last years and I do not see why I should be the exception! On the contrary, I am surprised that I came out of it with only one scrape on my knees, nothing more. I'm really lucky!*<sup>10</sup>

On the same website, Angelo Hu protests that the Chinese migrants are fed up with being considered the walking ATM of the city. Bai Junyi laments the lack of attention of the local authorities who seem to consider it the problem of a 'foreign body', not pertaining to the city.

In one of the two local newspapers the councilor for city security answers back to Luna Chen arguing that Chinese migrants should be more 'cautious' when walking down the streets and that they should not 'bring on themselves amounts of money that maybe no citizen of Prato can afford to have' (Milone 2014).

This answer is interesting because it condenses and conveys different political messages. By contrasting Chinese migrants and 'citizens', the councilor implies that citizenship is not for (Chinese) migrants and their offspring. Moreover, an ethnic divide based on supposed affluence is set up between 'the citizens' and 'the Chinese migrants', thus contributing to strengthen the narrative on (all) Chinese being richer than (all) 'the citizens of Prato'. This in turn somehow seems to justify both robbery and the immobility of the local government on the issue. Institutional immobility is in stark contrast with the narrative of a supportive role played by the local institutions in creating an atmosphere of social cohesion in the district.

The nightmare of the laid off native worker and the Chinese *nouveau riche* in the prologue should be read against this local background.

### 7.13 THE LEGEND OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

While the city narrated Chinese entrepreneurship as dangerous and created new symbols to reinforce this newly created reality, the Chinese media proposed to Chinese migrants a quite different narrative. This emerges clearly in the tele-drama *The China's Story, The Legend of Entrepreneurship*, mentioned in the previous chapter. The series is set in three places: Wenzhou, the topical place representing Chinese migrants' journey from rags to riches, Paris, and Prato.

The center of the story is a fairly prosperous family that emigrates from Wenzhou to Prato. After reverses in the family's fortune the Chinese migrant's daughter, young Amy, winds up owning a successful clothing workshop. She clashes with a Prato entrepreneur so seriously that according to a journalist from the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Prato '*fa una brutta figura*' (appears in a bad light). The series celebrates the acute and effective Chinese entrepreneur in search of economic success on a global scale as opposed to the sly but far less talented, and even less motivated Italian entrepreneur.

The Prato government did not appreciate this representation. In fact, the filming of the tele-series has been the battleground for opposing narratives.

On the Prato side, the mayor refused permission to film the scenes in the city. As a result, the only scenes filmed in Prato are those inside Giupel's premises (the most famous Chinese clothing entrepreneur in Italy), while most other scenes are filmed in the town of Lucca.

On the Chinese side, the film director asked the Italian persons working as extras in the drama to look slack, inexperienced and unwilling to improve their skills while performing the role of Italian workers in a stitching workshop.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially, the series conveys the message that to make money as a migrant is patriotic. This message is the same conveyed by the Chinese teledramas centered on travel-and-conquest heroes of the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> However, differently from those heroes, who were forced to give up their wholesome Chinese values to be successful in America (Barmé 1995), the protagonist of this series outwits her Italian counterpart exactly because she relies on Chinese values. The crucial value is that amassing wealth is the best way to participate in building China's global potency. The narrative aims to strengthen migrants' cultural identification with China built on the accumulation of wealth.

Thus, while the very existence of narratives competing with each other—the one developed in Prato and the one proposed by the Chinese tele-series—shows that Prato and its diverse inhabitants are situated in multiple and interpenetrating scales of relationality (Glick Schiller 2013), both narratives sanction an ethnically constructed separateness, and acknowledge amassing wealth as a Chinese (only) ability.

In general, however, the Chinese migrants in Prato both lack mechanisms of negotiation and collective bargaining as entrepreneurs, and cannot count on formal or informal social bodies strong enough to narrate the city and the migrants' role in it from a different point of view. Research has shown that although there are a number of Chinese associations in Prato, they lack representative power even among the Chinese in Prato.<sup>13</sup> Essentially, their leaders, chosen by deals made between the most powerful, are mainly interested in establishing connections and gaining influence in China or within Chinese circles that are potentially valuable for their interests in China (Ceccagno and Rastrelli 2008).<sup>14</sup>

#### 7.14 THE CHINESE CONTRIBUTION TO CITY RESCALING

Prato, like every other city, has been restructured by processes that are both global and local, and it has been forced to re-image itself.

In the last decades, Prato has become an impoverished city trying to resist drastic downscaling. Chinese migrants in Prato have been themselves constitutive of the repositioning struggles of the city. This is confirmed by data. In the years 2001–2013, the decline in textile and clothing exports from the Prato province has reached 45 percent. The Regional Institute for Economic Planning in Tuscany points out that if clothing exports are not included, the decline in exports for the textile industry only is even sharper. In fact, growth in export was registered only for clothing, with an increase of 19.7 percent in 2001–2008 and 58.8 percent in 2008–2012 (IRPET 2013: 17). Estimated production by Chinese migrants in Prato, including off the books activities, amounts to €2–2.3 billion with an estimated added value of €680–800 billion, contributing between 10.9 percent and 12.7 percent of the total added value of the Province (IRPET 2013: 58).

Moreover, the Chinese heavily contributed to the boom of the real estate market whose value is estimated to make up 17 percent of the total added value in the Prato province, including non-registered rent contracts (IRPET 2013: 57).

Furthermore, recent research shows that in the framework of a shrinking number of consumers induced by the crisis, the Chinese migrants significantly contribute to consumption in the locality and partially replace natives as consumers of luxury goods (Berti et al. 2013).

How is it then that the Chinese have been depicted and dealt with as a security problem in the city? Below I undertake to unravel the knot.

### 7.15 A STRUGGLE OVER WEALTH AND LEGITIMACY

For decades in Italian districts, the political and labor implications of the Chinese extreme labor regime have not been tackled in a conclusive way, given that, as suppliers, Chinese contractors have helped manufacturers to effectively withstand global competition in an epoch of severe economic crisis. The highly exploitative working conditions in Chinese-run businesses have been put under scrutiny in many instances but, mostly, the repression has been limited to a number of exemplary cases, while the core features of the Chinese economic emplacement in Italian industrial districts have never been called into question in a conclusive way. Such an opaque attitude may have prevailed because the system of law enforcement may undermine itself when the cost of policing the rules risks becoming more of a burden on the industry concerned than if a more lenient position is adopted (Kloosterman et al. 1999).

Prato is the place where this state of affairs was changed in the second half of the 2000s, with the inspections and heavy fines described in Section 8 of this chapter.

As argued above, those were the years when it became clear that the two local industries were following patterns largely unrelated: in the very years when the Chinese fashion center was thriving, the native-run textile industry was undergoing a washout, showing the worst performances in Italy.

Furthermore, Chinese migrants do not directly contribute to the wealth of the textile industry. As workers, the Chinese have not entered the native-run textile industry and have not contributed to its resistance to disruptive global changes. As entrepreneurs in the clothing industry, many Chinese have been able to directly take advantage of the competitive conditions offered by co-national suppliers, and the growing opportunities for global upstream sourcing, thus reducing the advantages for natives. It is thus in this respect that Prato is radically different from the other fashion areas where Chinese migrants are active: elsewhere in

Italy, in fact, the manufacturers reaping the benefits of the mobile regime adopted in Chinese contracting businesses are native (Ceccagno 2015).

Together with the severe socioeconomic crisis hitting the city, these are the main reasons why Prato is the place where in the second half of the 2000s an explicit anti-Chinese entrepreneurship policy was devised and enforced.

The diverging trends of the two local industries, and the new awareness of being almost helpless *vis-à-vis* the multilayered forces weighing on the district, led the stakeholders in Prato to fully realize that the new dynamics did not favor the interests of the textile industrialists who used to reap the largest benefits from the district's economic and productive organization. This new awareness was the breeding ground for a radical contestation of the Chinese migrants' entrepreneurship, their mode of emplacement and their transnational networks.

Thus, the contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship in Prato is a struggle over the production of wealth and political legitimacy.

The attack shows that the economic stakeholders and political actors in Prato seem to be entangled in dynamics that only conceive wealth creation and the future comeback of the city as originating from the textile industry (Bracci 2014).

The widespread acrimony against the Chinese that emerged in the second half of the 2000s is the result of the policy and multiple narratives discussed above. The role played by the downscaling of the city in the lives of many, however, should also be taken into consideration as an element that has both potentiated the dominant rhetoric and fostered popular consensus around it. The positionality of cities in the global chessboard, in fact, affects the opportunities and aspirations accessible to their inhabitants.

Prato, in fact, is the place where the precarity usually associated with migration (Kalir 2013) overlaps with new forms of displacement of those considered locals who experience new forms of dispossession including unemployment and early retirement, mortgage foreclosure, and loss of social status. Fabio, the laid off worker in the prologue of this chapter embodies the new precarity.

In 2012, Prato has been the city in Italy with the highest number of mortgage foreclosures. In 2015, the number of tenant evictions in Prato was twice as much as in the rest of Tuscany (Tarantino 2015). These are the persons who are experiencing drastic downward social and economic mobility, linked to the city's downscaling. By now, in Prato as well as in

many other localities in Italy, even those that do not directly experience forms of dispossession experience subjective feelings of precarity as they perceive themselves as being at risk of becoming dispossessed in the wake of many others.

Anxieties about precarity are often channeled into anti-immigrant discourses.

My fieldwork in Prato has uncovered situations of displacement also involving those Chinese who in the 2000s had been relatively affluent. The first to realize that the bonanza years were over have been the real estate agencies and people renting their warehouses to Chinese migrants: Chinese migrants, who used to buy real estate in Prato, by the early 2010s had stopped buying; also the competition for renting one of the once much sought-after warehouses in the garment center was over. By the early 2010s, many Chinese migrants too had stopped paying mortgages (Ceccagno 2012).

And yet, even in a context where the spectacular growth years for the local clothing center are over, the Chinese migrants are still perceived as those that, at the very least, can find employment. As pointed out by Burawoy (2011: 75), 'looking at things globally, the experience of exploitation through wage labor is becoming ever more a privilege rather than a curse'.

## 7.16 MORE RECENT TRENDS

My research does not stretch beyond the epoch of the right wing local government that ended in May 2014, when a left wing mayor was elected again, thus restoring the decades-long tradition of an alliance between textile industrialists and left wing politicians. However, I offer some observations on the more recent evolution, given the fact also that a new approach to Chinese businesses was emerging among politicians in the Tuscany Region even before the elections in Prato took place.

The fire in Prato in December 2013, where people died while sleeping on the firm's premises has shown that the sleeping regime can be dangerous for workers. By the summer 2014, a new security policy was devised in Prato (and enacted from September 2014) that focuses on workplace security. The new policy prescribed that all Chinese businesses in the Prato area<sup>15</sup> were inspected within a three-year period and closed if found to be not complying with national regulations and lacking in workplace security. The elimination of dormitories in the shop premises is clearly listed among the workplace conditions to be tackled (Biggeri et al. 2015: 41).

Thus, whereas for the previous right wing local government ‘legality’ had meant the criminalization of Chinese entrepreneurship, the new policy intends ‘legality’ as strict compliance with the standards set for the industry.

On the whole, the new approach and narrative are significantly different from the previous ones. In a book on the new policy, the narrative proposed is one of ‘local harmonious and sustainable development’ (Biggeri et al. 2015: 15). In the book’s introduction, the policy is presented as promoting local development; the persons that inspect the Chinese firms are called ‘technicians for development’. It is thus clear that the new narrative aims at presenting the policy as an aseptic tool for fostering local development and favoring local entrepreneurship. The traditional ID rhetoric of the local institutions fostering local development and a cohesive social milieu is thus reactivated.

Shared goals and shared action are the catchwords used by politicians, and also by the scholars reporting on the policy.<sup>16</sup>

The big shift away from the previous policy is also evident in the new role of local Chinese associations. In fact, the new policy has gained the support of virtually all local Chinese associations, including institutions that usually steer away from political issues, such as the Buddhist association (Biggeri et al. 2015: 18).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, cooperation with the University of Wenzhou reduces the room for narrating the policy as dividing natives and migrants. Cooperation instead of struggle, thus, is the big narrative shift.

Moreover, during the first months of the policy implementation, a number of meetings were organized with Chinese-Italian interpreters to raise awareness among Chinese small entrepreneurs regarding the changing political climate and the new policy. Chinese entrepreneurs were advised to start implementing all necessary measures required to guarantee workplace security if they did not want their business to be closed down by the authorities.

The policy was presented as bringing economic benefits to many in the locality. Given that plans had been made to inspect each and every Chinese activity, consistent amounts of money were expected to flow from the Chinese entrepreneurs to local businesses providing workplace security services, as stated by the person in charge of the policy implementation at a public meeting in autumn 2014. Moreover, public money was to be spent training young people, including those of Chinese descent, as ‘technicians for development’.



Yet, the new policy is as selective as the previous one. Within the 'Prato Project' in the Regional Development Program of the Tuscany region, 'textile quality' and 'innovation of the productive system' are the planned actions targeted at native-run firms, while emersion from the grey economy is the priority action targeted at Chinese enterprises.

In the near future the crucial point will be to understand the impact of the new policy on the working regime of the Chinese contractors. As this work shows, the sleeping regime is part and parcel of the mobile regime that in turn guarantees the competitiveness of the entire low-end fast fashion industry. It will also be interesting to see to what extent Prato will follow a pathway different from the one still prevailing in other fashion areas in Italy, as the sleeping regime is now tackled in Prato but not elsewhere.

## 7.17 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter deconstructs the 'Pact for security in Prato' and shows that through it a new problem field connecting security issues and Chinese entrepreneurship has been created. Once accepted and reinforced, the new problem field has become an unproblematic given. The problem field conjured up by the local leftist coalition with the aim of catching up on the population's dissatisfaction and thus avoid losing popular consent has been appropriated by the right wing coalition after winning the elections. This problem field has been appropriated by the right wing coalition after winning the elections. Migrant entrepreneurship had never been linked to security problems before. The pact is not only a tool for tackling a problem, as the proponents narrate: it is itself a created semantic world that influences and creates a new social reality.

This chapter unveils the logics behind the 'Pact for security in Prato'. While elsewhere the expansive role played by Chinese people is appreciated, in Prato Chinese businesses are criminalized. The policy is the outcome of—and at the same time it brings a step further—the contestation of Chinese entrepreneurship and wealth in the district. Such a contestation is a struggle over production means, wealth, and political legitimacy.

I argue that the central reason that explains the contestation of Chinese businesses and the 'Pact for security in Prato' is the fact that Chinese migrants are not and have never been directly beneficial to the Prato's textile industry.

Different Italian districts follow different trajectories. Prato is the place in Italy where Chinese migrants have been able to occupy most of the supply chain in the fast fashion industry, thus reducing the advantages for the natives. Moreover, Chinese fast fashion manufacturers in Prato do not compete in a quality-conscious market, and this reduces the possibility that the Chinese-run garment industry fully integrates with the local textile industry. Furthermore, in the locality, efforts to integrate the two industries are discussed as a problem of migrants' loyalty to the locality, and this approach covers up the need to enquire whether and to what extent such an ambitious goal can be realistically pursued in an unfavorable global context.

As in other Italian districts, the Prato ID finds itself in a globalized world pressured from below by low wage countries and from above by larger competitors who more and more control distribution (see also Whitford 2001). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the adequacy of local government institutions so important in the Italian districts' past was already being challenged. The institutional innovation that had been a hallmark of the Italian districts throughout their history had proved unable to find a way to break in.

Against such a background, the severe crisis that Prato is experiencing and the social distress linked to it, like a Damocles' sword hanging over the district, has partially undermined the political legitimacy of those in power in the district. Unable to find a way out of the decline of the district's core industry triggered by the crisis, facing a crisis of legitimacy, and more and more aware that the (relative) wealth available in the district was increasingly being accumulated by Chinese manufacturers, the main stakeholders in Prato have adopted a binary approach that narrates of an irreconcilable antagonism between the interests of natives and Chinese migrants, and criminalizes Chinese entrepreneurship.

A different approach and a narrative that puts an end to the criminalization of the Chinese businesses has been adopted recently by a different institutional actor—the Tuscany region—and later embraced by the new local government in Prato. Action within this approach—which although strives to be as inclusive as possible—is taken, however, in the framework of a taken for granted divide separating the entrepreneurs in the local textile industry and those in the clothing one.

## NOTES

1. From the early 1990s on, Chinese businesses have been steadily growing (Ceccagno 2003). They were 479 in 1997, 1288 in year 2000 and 2013 in year 2004 (CCIAA Prato 2005). In 2006 there were 2991 firms, with a growth rate over the previous year close to 24 percent (CCIAA Prato 2007). By 2010, 4808 Chinese-run businesses were active in Prato. However by the end of the decade the growth rate was declining. In 2012, the increase only amounted to a few dozen new businesses (4830), and they became 5464 by 2013 (CCIAA Prato, various years).
2. Problems connected with immigration are one of the major discursive tools with which the right wing parties address social issues (Zincone 2006).
3. Lan (2014: 183) rightly points out that by 'refusing to join the Italian business associations, the Chinese apparel firms directly challenge the cooperative conventions in Prato'.
4. In the past, the local associations of small businesses (Confartigianato and CAN) had defended the interests of textile phase firms against the larger industrialists in the textile industry (Dei Ottati 2003a). However, up to now, they have not positioned themselves in ways significantly different from the UIP on issues revolving around the Chinese presence in the city.
5. On the lack of trust on the trade unions among native workers in the textile industry in Tuscany see Redini (2015).
6. This is mayor's order number 2054/2010. Bressan and Krause (2014) explain that the involved area does not exactly overlap with Macrolotto 0 but stretches beyond it in order to include all the activities—mainly Chinese commercial businesses—for which complaints had been submitted by the area's inhabitants. In 2012 the Regional Administrative Court rejected the order as being discriminatory.
7. For an account of the global press framing of the issue in ways that echoes the dominant narrative in Prato see Ceccagno (forthcoming).
8. The embeddedness argument suggests that firms embedded in networks of social relations that sanction all opportunistic behaviors are able to keep transaction costs to a minimum. Granovetter (1985: 507) argues that small firms in a market setting may survive because 'a dense network of social relations is overlaid on the business relations connecting such firms and reduces pressures for integration' into the mainstream market. Social networks analysis has become a rich field of study, and 'policymakers attach great value to creating and strengthening networks' (Giuliani and Pietrobelli 2011: 3). Staber (2001) points out that cluster scholars have focused analytical attention on IDs' inter-firm networks and networks density, sometimes without being supported by adequate empirical evidence.

9. No public comments have emerged from the Chinese in Prato on the proposal for the two local industries integration.
10. My translation from Italian.
11. My interview with an extra in the drama conducted in Prato in 2013.
12. Nyíri (2001) has highlighted the process through which the Chinese state has successfully mobilized overseas nationalism ‘not so much through policy measures as through its discourse of patriotism, success and modernity, through its economic value to new migrants, and through the cultivation of new migrant elites’.
13. AssoCina, the association founded by the migrant’s offspring, is an exception.
14. For a discussion on how the Chinese state has fostered the creation of Chinese associations overseas and supports them as a tool to increase its global reach see Pieke et al. (2004).
15. Also including a small number of businesses in Florence, Empoli and Pistoia.
16. As much as other policies devised and financed by the Region (also with European funds), the new policy counts on ‘the active participation of the local stakeholders so that [...] goals and action to be undertaken have been assessed together’, as stated by the official in charge of the project for the Tuscany Region (Biggeri et al. 2015: 12).
17. The associations include: Associazione Buddista della Comunità Cinese in Itala, AssoCina, Associazione di Amicizia dei Cinesi a Prato, Associazione Culturale della Comunità Cinese di Fujian in Italia a Prato, Associazione Generale di Commercio Italo Cinese e Associazione Comunità Pakistana in Toscana di Prato.

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## Conclusions

In this study, I analyze the political economy of Prato as a city, a fashion ID, and a migrant hub. However, neither the city itself nor the migrants have been considered the unit of analysis. As suggested by studies on migrants' ways of emplacement in cities, I have focused analytical attention on Prato as the entry point from where to observe trajectories of power involving both natives and people with migrant background.

Building upon the conceptualizations of critical studies of the neoliberal restructuring of cities (Brenner 1999; Brenner and Theodore 2002), studies conceptualizing the role of migrants in urban restructuring processes (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011, 2013) and studies focusing on the dynamics between global capital, the state and labor processes (Harvey 1989; Sassen 1999), I have explored the mutual constitution over time of the local, national and global in a city deeply changed by multilayered restructuring processes.

The study sheds light on the entangled processes of city/ID making and the restructuring processes linked to capital accumulation by tackling issues of governance, territory, jurisdiction, migration, division of labor, labor mobility, housing, rights, and the relevant narratives. It has been possible to fully grasp the dynamics behind most of these issues, as they emerged in Prato, only by framing them in relation to other places involved in the constitution of the city.

Building upon the theoretical approaches discussed in the introductory chapter of this study, some crucial issues are addressed.

## 8.1 URBAN PROCESSES OF INVESTMENT AND DISINVESTMENT

As reiterated by critical geographers, the contradictory dynamic of de- and re-territorialization is endemic to capitalism (Harvey 1989; Brenner 1999; Brenner and Theodore 2002).

My study contributes to the debate on the uneven and unstable historical spatialities of capitalism by unveiling Prato as a case in which capitalist investment and disinvestment can be observed as taking place within a single locality but involving different industries, roughly in the same time span. In Prato, in fact, the social space has been both rendered obsolete and transcended in search of other more suitable places for sustained accumulation as far as the local textile industry is involved, and reworked as a new place for accumulation in the clothing one. My study unveils these related processes, showing that disinvestment in the textile industry has literally made room for investment in the clothing one. Moreover, this study points out that these coeval processes of investment and disinvestment are intertwined with the ID organization of production and the restructuring of capital. On the one hand, since the 1980s the self-contained ID model was proving unable to withstand stiffer global competition without changing drastically; on the other hand, some aspects of the production organization in Italian districts (such as the vertical disintegration of production and the high flexibility of contractors) are retained and even strengthened in the clothing industry.

Thus, my research points to a development that both scholars and the stakeholders in Prato fail to acknowledge: the development of the Chinese-run low-end fashion center in Prato is the crucial way in which the quintessential Italian district has evolved over time as the result of multilayered dynamics unfolding at different scales. While other Italian fashion districts have followed a variety of pathways including different degrees of international delocalization, technological upgrading, and recourse to migrants as workers or contractors, the peculiar evolution in the Prato district has mainly been centered on the creation of a vibrant low-end fast fashion industry dominated by Chinese entrepreneurs, that over time has become the center of global production networks from below.

In sum, my research contributes to studies exploring the highly contradictory trajectories of urban change that have been generated through the deployment of neoliberal programs at various spatial scales and their transformative impacts upon the local economies and politico-institutional infrastructures (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

## 8.2 MIGRANTS ARE ENTANGLED WITH THE URBAN RESTRUCTURING

This study brings to light the multifaceted entanglement of the Chinese migrants' businesses with the city. Contrary to the dominant narrative in Prato that depicts the mode of production adopted by the Chinese entrepreneurs in the clothing manufacturing industry as dis-embedded and 'de-territorialized', this study analyzes the process of emplacement of the Chinese migrants as entangled with the global neoliberal restructuring as it takes place in Italy and in particular in Prato.

This study discusses migrants' emplacement as a process linked to the local opportunity structures resulting from the relative positioning of each city/locality within global spanning networks of power (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013). Long-term research enabled me to contrast the different opportunity structures that emerged in Prato, where the Chinese contractors have been able to become final-good entrepreneurs and create global production networks, and in other Italian fashion districts, where the position of final-good entrepreneurs has been retained by the natives.

I was thus able to shed light on the ways in which the migrants' struggle to forge a place of their own is intersected by the specific ways in which new forms of accumulation and work emerging globally have been appropriated and given shape by Italian institutions nationwide, in industries, and within the networks of power in the fashion districts.

## 8.3 THE RECONFIGURATION OF WORKING AND LIVING SPACE

Through my long-term empirical research I was able to shed light on the organization of production processes and labor in the Italian fashion industry, addressing some crucial elements that enhance the competitiveness of the Chinese fashion firms. This is an issue that is often neglected by studies on the fast fashion center in Prato.

I offer the concept of 'mobile regime' (Ceccagno 2015, 2016) as a distinctive feature of the production organization within the network of Chinese contracting businesses in the Italian fashion industry. This is an intense labor system where an old model of capitalism—the dormitory regime—is reworked by creating new forms of labor processes based on a multi-sited reconfiguration of the spaces of production. Multifarious workers' mobility is the key characteristic of this regime.

My research highlights how processes of accumulation based on the mobile regime create different forms of displacement. Workers' time and space are marked in a syncopated way as inter-firm mobility and territorial mobility are part and parcel of the working regime.

Displacement is also experienced through the outsourcing of social reproduction, partially along lines similar to those in other localities and other industries where the social reproduction is outsourced globally, and partially in ways unparalleled by other experiences as a market of (Chinese) caretakers has emerged both in Prato and in other areas in Italy that caters to the Chinese migrants' need to have somebody else taking care of their children (Ceccagno 2017).

As a further development of the mobile regime conceptualization, in this study I single out the ethnicization of the workforce and the outsourcing of the social reproduction as the foundations upon which the mobile regime rests. These two conditions are key to understanding the role played by the mobile regime in the generation of increased profit.

By shedding light on these forms of reconfiguration of the processes of production, I offer a new approach to the understanding of the regime adopted by Chinese contracting businesses in the Italian fashion industry.

At the same time, my research analyzes the mobile regime in the framework of globalized regimes of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989) and accumulation through dispossession, and suggests that this is one of the ever newer modes of production devised to extract value from labor. The mobile regime conceptualization offered in this study thus fills a gap in the literature on IDs, fashion industry, and migrants who are active in manufacturing districts.

#### 8.4 THE MOBILE REGIME IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE MULTIPLICATION OF LABOR

This study engages with the scholarly debate on immigrant entrepreneurship. I distance myself from concepts that have dominated the academic landscape for decades that depict migrants as segregated communities and immigrant entrepreneurs as 'ethnic entrepreneurs', following an ever richer body of scholarship that questions such an approach.

Many scholars that address the issue of the Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry adopt a culturalist approach and analyze Chinese enterprises as 'ethnic', only focusing on benefits internal to the migrant group, thus risking analyzing Chinese entrepreneurship in an institutional, economic, and social vacuum.

In contrast, by refusing to cast migrants as ethnic, in this study I have been able to clarify that ethnicity matters, but in a completely different way and for completely different purposes. In my research, what is often depicted as ethnic is instead analyzed in terms of ethnicizing practices and their *raison d'être*.

I conceptualize the practices of ethnicization of the workforce in Chinese contracting workshops as a factor that plays a paramount role in the production processes both at the intra- and inter-workshop levels, within the fast fashion strategy. As my research shows, the inclusion of only those workers that share some basic characteristics has proved to be a crucial way of smoothing the frantic interactions between employers and workers and among workers in contexts where urgent orders are completed and strangers could arrive in the workshop every day and share the working and living environment with the employers and the workers that had arrived earlier.

Ethnicization of the workforce as a practice of employing co-nationals only in order to erase some factors that can hamper the inter-workshop organization of production and ultimately the swiftness of production can therefore be conceptualized as compression of the workforce diversity in order to speed up production and guarantee increased profit.

The ethnicization of the workforce is thus intimately connected with the mobile regime as it is a crucial condition, making possible the intra- and inter-workshop reconfiguration of production adopted in the Italian fashion industry, and ultimately the mobile regime. I approach the ethnicization of the workforce from the perspective of the intra- and inter-firm arrangements that prove to be crucial for the restructuring of capital and production in Prato.

The mobile regime is thus analyzed not only as shaped by migrants' practices and everyday choices and linked to the interests of an ethnic group but first and foremost as an organization of production geared toward the generation of more profit. It stemmed from the global needs of fast fashion; it has prospered thanks to the degree at which new ways of extracting profit from labor have been tolerated, promoted, or tackled in Prato and other industrial districts; and is undergoing continuous changes as new policies and workers' aspirations to upward mobility, linked to the emergence of new opportunity structures, impose specific constraints on it.

My research thus shines a new light on the basic processes for profit generation in the Italian fashion industry in relation to the restructuring of capital within a global perspective.

This new approach to labor processes in Prato makes it possible to single out the mobile regime of the Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry as one peculiar form of labor that further illustrates the diversification of labor as put forth by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) within their multiplication of labor conceptualization. In Mezzadra and Neilson's theorization, in fact, in the framework of global processes, the diversification of labor consists in the development of new kinds of labor linked to different kinds of production.

## 8.5 CONTROL OVER THE GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORK AND WORKERS' AGENCY

Long-term empirical research has enabled me to shed light on the global reconfiguration of the spaces of production and labor processes that have transformed Prato into the center of loosely connected production networks from below stretching from China and Turkey as the sourcing areas, to many European countries as the buyers of made-in-Prato garments.

In disagreement with scholars eager to depict Prato as the center of a global value chain in the hands of the Chinese actors only (Lan 2014; Lan and Zhu 2014), in my study, I provide ample evidence of ongoing competition in the sourcing of textiles and accessories for the clothing center in Prato between and among people with a migrant background, people of Chinese descent, and people who consider themselves natives, each and every one counting on local, national and transnational social fields.

Most analyses focusing on the fast fashion center in Prato, including those that point at the emergence of a global value chain, tend to neglect the role played by labor. My approach is different in that it gives centrality to the reorganization of labor in relation to the capital and urban restructuring in Prato. In fact, my research analyzes the patterns and dynamics of the labor processes in the Chinese workshops active in the Italian fashion industry and the ways in which workers contribute to shape the working environment.

Contrary to analyses that appear to consign workers in small firms within wider production networks to a dependent, powerless position, this study highlights the workers' active role in the historical process of emplacement of the Chinese manufacturing businesses in Prato and other fashion districts. Workers' individual and collective aspirations and action, in fact, concurred as much as the capital search for increased profit to shape the mobile regime of Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry.



## 8.6 OLD AND NEW POLICIES TARGETED AT THE CHINESE ENTERPRISES

Finally, looking at the city of Prato as a strategic center of neoliberal restructuring (Brenner and Theodore 2002), in this study I explored the complex, contested interactions of the new productive regime of the fast fashion industry in Prato with the inherited local regulatory and discursive landscape. I have thus been able to unveil the pacts and struggles for influencing the forms and trajectory of economic restructuring, and to show how they have been conducive to the criminalization of Chinese entrepreneurship in Prato. By grounding my analysis in the broader historical perspective, I have been able to avoid taking the easy shortcut that identifies the left wing government in Prato with an open attitude toward Chinese migrants and the right wing one with the criminalization of Chinese entrepreneurship. Instead, my analysis focused on the crucial role played by the corporatist socioeconomic elite still dominant in Prato with the textile industrialists at the center and able to heavily influence political life. Also, my research for the first time highlights the role played by the Prato ID scholars in shaping the locality, and to a certain extent also the Italian-wide dominant discourse on China and the Chinese migrants.

My work situates the analysis of the attacks against Chinese entrepreneurship in the framework of the crisis of the textile industry, the discontent against globalization and its effects on the wealth in the city, and widespread and growing popular perceptions of dispossession.

My analysis of the evolutions in Prato points out that the main limit of the anti-Chinese policy enacted in the 2000s in Prato lays in the local stakeholders' approach: they mainly deal with dynamics that are transnational in their scope as if they were merely local. Moreover, they struggle to challenge the hegemonic dynamics of capitalist accumulation as they have emerged in the clothing industry without calling into question the basic neoliberal premise of market-driven socio-spatial transformation (Brenner and Theodore 2002). I thus connect my analysis of the political dynamics in Prato to the scholarly debate on how different stakeholders in the cities proactively facilitate neoliberal restructuring or try to oppose it.

My thesis closes with a preliminary analysis of the new policy recently enacted in Prato targeted at Chinese firms. Instead of joining the narrative that depicts this policy as aiming at 'the local harmonious and sustainable development', I raise some questions on the viability and profitability of such a policy for the different actors in the city.

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