

Chinese in Prato.

The peculiarity of Prato's case in Chinese migration to Europe.

Introduction

Chinese immigration to Europe has a long history. It began during the First Opium War (1839 – 1842). From this moment forward China and Europe had, greater or lesser, due to China's central power, continuous exchanges.

The decisive breakthrough comes with Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and "open door" policies introduced in the 1970. In the hereafter a massive migration of Chinese people started in all different directions of the world. This migration has kept growing up to the present day.

The increasing of interconnection and interdependence between China and Europe in all fields: such as international trade and mutual investment brought a lot of Chinese in Europe.

In specific, the most part of Chinese that arrived in Europe came from the south of China: Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong provinces; just a small part came from the northeast. Chinese population in Europe rise from 600,000 in 1980 to 2.15 million in 2007.

Chinese community in Prato is not the largest in Europe but it is the most noticeable given the relatively small population of the town of some 180.000 people, the Chinese population in Prato, estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000 people.

About 70 percent of this population come from Zhejiang, a further 15 percent from Fujian and the remainder from other parts of the country.

Push and pull factors.

This massive migration was enforced by push and pull factors. Push factors are factors that make people move away from their own country, while pull factors attract people to another country.

In the case of Chinese migration, push factors can be summarized in two main factors.

First of all, many Chinese were no longer able to find a place in Chinese society due to the closure of state-owned enterprises. Indeed, the State-owned enterprises reform (SOE), that took place in the late 1990s, has brought to the closure of hundreds of thousands of small and medium sized state-owned enterprises. This led to the birth of private or joint venture firms and the redundancy of tens of millions of SOE employees that find themselves forced to move abroad.

In addition, due to economic reform China has lived an economic development that brought to the growth of the middle class. Therefore, an increasing number of Chinese started to move from the countryside to main cities because of the significant inequality between urban and rural welfare. Though, labour market in the cities could not come with the large number of people coming from countryside. Consequently, many people start to move from countryside directly to new countries with the dream of achieve success through the opening of small family-based new business. Indeed, a characteristic Chinese mindset is the willing of becoming a *lǎo bǎn* 老板, which means "boss", the idea of setting one's own business and not that one of expatriating to find a job as an employee.

With reference to pull factors, even in this case it is possible to identify two main factors.

In the first instance, the internationalization of the markets and the consequent globalization of productive assets had undermined small and medium-sized enterprise. These kinds of enterprises started to need a cheaper and faster workforce to survive the international markets.

Europe and especially Italy are home to many small businesses that could not afford the cost to relocate production abroad and they managed to keep costs down mainly by attracting low-skilled migrants.

Indeed, especially in Prato it was widespread in between Italian employers the knowledge that Chinese workforce was less expensive, and willing to work for more than 8 hours.

In this way Prato employers started to attract an increasingly number of Chinese people.

Furthermore, in Europe, especially in Italy, in the late 90es there has been a period of relaxation of immigration policies.

In Italy, with law 40/1998 were introduced new ways to manage immigration and to safeguard the status of foreigner. Indeed, Prato in September 2002 in only one day 3000 irregular Chinese migrants went to the Consulate to become regular migrants. In this year in Italy among 634728 migrants gained a legal status. Furthermore, 40/1998 law introduced the feature of “sponsor”. For the first time an Italian enterprise or any person legally resident in Italy was authorized to guarantee the entrance in Italy of two foreigners to facilitate their entry into the working world. What is noticeable is that in 2000 and in 2002, years in which it was possible to employ the feature of “sponsor”, mainly foreigners living in Italy used this tool.

Extensive family networks.

Chinese migrants usually rely on family and native-place networks for support when migrating. This process is based on the immigration of nuclear families, rather than of single individuals, whose start small business. In this way through the strong interconnection that persist with the origin country, more and more Chinese families start to reach new countries, in order to start new businesses. The peculiarity is that this new business did not develop in the same sector, but in all the sectors that are necessary to satisfy the request of Chinese people daily life. This ethnic economy is based on the idea of breaking the usual migration barriers such as language and lack of familiarity with the host-society. In this way, first wave migrants, as well as second wave migrants, starts to live in a new society with new opportunities but without abandoning homeland comforts. The Chinese migration, indeed, develops through mutual aid not only regarding the construction of a people’s network but also building of an interdependent network of enterprises. This is an explanation of what happened in Prato.

Chinese enrichment in the textile industry of Prato.

Prato has mainly 188,000 inhabitants whose have produced and traded in woolen textiles ever since the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it was only in the decades following the Second World War that Prato has experienced a notable industrial development. This was an extraordinary development not just for the size of growth but also because it was based on the multiplication of small family firms. Following three decades of continuous growth, towards the mid-1980s Prato’s industry went through a period of crisis which led to the closing down of many textiles sub-contractors. In a few years, Prato’s textile system had downsized and changed the quality and type of its products. It was at this time that first Chinese started to arrive in Prato. Prato was a favorable context for these immigrants, both because of the demand for work by local knitwear firms and because of the availability of industrial spaces. Chinese migrants are used to develop their business in niche economic sectors. This happened also in Prato where Chinese did not insert themselves into textile industry, but entered in the sector of knitwear, where they developed a model of production: the fast fashion and opened Prato to the sector of clothing. At the end of the 1990s the largest agglomeration of Chinese manufacturing firms was formed in Prato. At this point, some Chinese sub-contractors of fast fashion who had been in Prato for some time and who had acquired the production skills and had also established relationships with people in Prato and in Italy transformed their companies from sub-contractors to final firms. The example set by these pioneers was soon imitated by other Chinese entrepreneurs. Among these factors also the peculiar productive organization they developed became a fundamental point for the development of a such characteristic situation. Chinese carried out a reconfiguration of the space. Chinese industries in Italy offer their workers board and lodging in the workshop, where the owner’s family also lives. Chinese suppliers routinely undertake to complete orders within a short time, especially in the high season. It often happens that Chinese workers work at night, or 15–16 hours in a row.

In addition, Chinese entrepreneurs developed also an inter-firm mechanism of space reconfiguration that increase the competitiveness of the productive system with short-term territorial mobility of workers from one workshop to another.

These characteristics reduces costs and add flexibility.

Chinatown and the discourse on integration.

As stated before, Chinese migrants create an ethnical network. This gives place to the birth of alternative universe, a city in a city. The famous Chinatown of Prato.

As a matter of fact, while walking on Via Pistoiese everything in the surroundings looks like a common district in Fujian province. It's difficult to find someone who can speak Italian, not only in the old generation, even in the youngest, because many young Chinese arrive directly from China. This Chinatown offers Chinese people their usual Chinese way of living. Here it is possible to find any kind of Chinese services: restaurants, schools, supermarket, financial agencies, dentists, and beautician.

This reorganization of the urban space has been loudly criticized both by institutional and local people voices.

The criticism is based both on the organization of the Chinese businesses that do not comply with Italian rules and on Chinese behavior and cultural practice, such as crowding, dirtiness and smelliness. These beliefs brought some Prato people to associate Chinatown's degenerative state as a clear sign of the inferior moral status of the Chinese. Here starts the idea of Chinese as polluted: without legal documents, that do not pay taxes and practice exploitation.

Nowadays the situation seems to evolve in a different way. The second-generation Chinese, through the constant contact with local people, in the schools and social life, have elevate the degree of integration.

There are many newborn associations that want to achieve the goal of collaboration. The purpose is to create a more lovely zone in terms of architecture but also in terms of reorganizing of the space.

Conclusion.

The Chinese migration process to Europe and to Prato is in a continuous evolution and it is necessary to find a cutting-edge model of integration to satisfy both Chinese and local people in their daily life and in business life.

Despite this, the Chinese presence in Prato in global terms must be perceived as positive. The strong crisis that affected the textile sector in Prato couldn't be restored without the hard labour by Chinese small firms that contributed to bring back Prato on the top of the textile industry.

Sources:

1. Baldassar L., Graeme J., McAuliffe N., Bressan M., Chinese Migration to Europe. Prato, Italy, and Beyond, Palgrave Macmillan. 2015
2. Berti F., Pedone V., Valzania A., Vendere e comprare. Processi di mobilità sociale dei cinesi di Prato, Pisa, Pacini Editore. 2013
3. Ceccagno A., Sacchetto D., A chinese model for labour in Europe in International migration, 2020, 58, pp. 73 – 86
4. Ceccagno A., Rastrelli R., Ombre cinesi? Dinamiche migratorie della diaspora cinese in Italia. Carocci. Roma. 2008
5. Ceccagno A., IDEAR, 'Roghi e successo imprenditoriale: Prato, i migranti cinesi e il mercato globale della moda, Università di Bologna, 27 novembre 2014
6. Ceccagno A., 'The Mobile Emplacement: Chinese migrants in Italian Industrial Districts' 2015
7. Latham k., and Wu B., Chinese immigration into the EU: New trends, dynamics, and implications. Europe Chine Research and Advice Network. 2013