Lost in Alien Surroundings:
The Identity Crises among Chinese Labourers in Prato

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Chinese Laborers in Prato

Structure of Garment Industry

- Garment Workshops
  - Laborers 1

- Cutting-out Companies
  - Laborers 2

- Markets
  - Laborers 3

- Customers
Chinese Laborers in Prato

- Stratification
  - Laborers 3: Employees in Garment Markets
  - Laborers 2: Employees in Cutting-out Companies
  - Laborers 1: Employees in Garment Workshop
Chinese Laborers in Prato

- Research Target
  - Laborer 1
  - Grass Root of Chinese Community
  - A group with a big amount: 14,000-20,000

- Research Method
  - Participative observation
  - Interviews
Social Identity

- Social Identity Theory \( (Tafel, H, Turner, J, C1986) \)

---group membership creates in-group self-categorization and enhancement in ways that favor the in-group at the expense of the out-group.

---individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from an out-group on some valued dimension.
Social Identity

  ---is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself.
  ---people experience an identity crisis when they lose "a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity".
Four Causes of Identity Crises for Chinese Laborers in Prato

- Lost in an Unfamiliar Working Environment
  - Sewing?: "This is totally strange for me."
  - Different working experience:
    - done by the machine, with specific division of labor
    - long working hours
  - “Am I worker?”
Four Causes of Identity Crises for Chinese Laborers in Prato

■ Lost in an Unfamiliar Social Network
  ✓ From the soil: a community differs from a western one (Fei Xiaotong, 1945)
  ✓ Different social network:
    ✓ Live together with the boss
    ✓ “Here [personal] interests outweigh human relationships.”
  ✓ “Are we relatives?”
Four Causes of Identity Crises for Chinese Laborers in Prato

- **Lost in an Unfamiliar Social Life**
  - A life of festivals: 20 important ones in rural area
  - Different social life:
    - “we had to work that day, because orders still come during the spring festival.”
    - seemed to be irrelevant and left out of all the activities and celebrations in Chinese community: “We couldn’t afford them.” [both time and money]
  - To take leisure time or not?
Four Causes of Identity Crises for Chinese Laborers in Prato

Lost in a Foreign Italian Society

- Why Italy: culture or geography of the country? a lot of compatriots here? ---- for a job pure and simple.
- Italy, Italian, Italian: Non Capisco
- Even worse:
  - The only effect of Italy on the laborers is to increase their dependence on the Chinese Community.
  - Do they have way to get in the main alien society?
- To be Chinese or not?
Encircled by the familiar in an unfamiliar community

- There will be “a irresolvable tension between strangers and the construction of the modern order” (Bauman, 2002)

- When social identity is under threat, people will take different strategies to seek positive self-esteem: social mobility, social competition, social creativity.

  (Turner, J, C1986)
Encircled by the familiar in an unfamiliar community

- What can these workers do?

- Two major avenues: to either stay trapped in the workshop or find a way out

- How can they find a way out before paying off their debts.

- Remain to be trapped in a small and familiar circle in the unfamiliar alien surrounding and foreign society.
Thank you!

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