Social Inclusion: the Chinese and Italian Communities in Prato.

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The Use of Information and Communications Technologies by the Chinese and Italian Diasporas

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Our research aims to understand the role of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) among Chinese and Italians, as migrants, and in their homelands. In Australia we are studying Chinese and Italian migrants. In Italy we are studying Chinese migrants. Why? The research investigates whether ICTs promote a respect for difference, a willingness among groups to co-operate, improve economic and social development, promote participation in civic culture, and allow bonding within and bridging beyond ethnic groups. We hope to be able to offer local government some advice on how ICTs are used, and whether they might advance good community relations.

1. The first stage in 2007 investigated the use of the Internet in cafes in Prato, Italy, by Chinese and Italians. That research has been summarised and presented elsewhere.

2. The second stage was undertaken in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, this year. It explores the use of all ICTs by Chinese and Italians. I report on this stage today.
3. The third stage in 2009 will take place in Italy again. This time we will explore the use of all ICTs by Chinese in Prato, most of them recent arrivals from Wenzhou, working in textile manufacturing and wholesaling. We also aim to investigate Chinese migrant groups in other northern Italian cities -- Bologna, Florence, Milan, Padua, and Verona. The Chinese comprise the fifth largest migrant group in Italy.

**Multiculturalism, assimilation, integration?**

The Australian government has promoted *multiculturalism* since the 1970s, especially of skilled professionals. It is not uncommon for Australia to be held up as a paragon of multicultural success. Italy’s current policy can be said to encourage *assimilation* rather than multiculturalism, and at the moment favours unskilled rather than skilled migration. It is necessary to remember that the Chinese diaspora in Europe is well connected to itself. Often there is little initial intention by Chinese labourers to put down local roots, by choice, but rather to roam Europe ‘as a chessboard’ seeking any work.

*Multiculturalism and integration* are emphatically associated by the Chinese Association of Victoria, 1982 – 2007, *Silver Jubilee Celebrations:*

‘Multiculturalism is about loyalty to one legal system, one national language, and one common education system. Multiculturalism is based on the recognition that cultural diversity does not threaten social cohesion, rather it is the basis for a harmonious and equitable society’.
Stage 2 of the project asked 4 basic research questions:

1. What types of ICTs do Chinese and Italian migrants in Melbourne use and for what purposes do they use them?
2. Has the use of ICTs facilitated the integration of Chinese and Italians into Australia?
3. Has the use of ICTs by Chinese and Italians supported the maintenance of their community identity and memory?
4. Does the use of ICTs by Chinese and Italians assist migrants to maintain social, business and cultural links to their countries of origin?

We adopted grounded theory which requires the researcher to develop concepts, insights and understandings from the subject of the research, that is, from the migrants, from the ground up. Participants impart as much useful knowledge about themselves as possible. Information is elicited gradually, equitably and sensitively by interview. We selected a non-random sample based on the use of public sources to identify willing participants. Once a few people volunteered, then by snowballing technique, others came forward for audio-recorded interview.
Comparable demographic features

We tried to maintain a comparable set of features in each migrant group. There were 12 participants in each group.

• Some of the features of the Chinese group were as follows: both male and female equally; aged from their early 20s to 50s; recent migrants, and migrants from the 1970s; occupations which included a small business manager, a mechanic, homemaker, medical researchers, social worker, community developer, radio manager, tertiary student, and legal secretary.

• The Italian group was: both male and female; aged from their early 20s to 60s; recent migrants, migrants from the 1950s, a little earlier than the Chinese, and children of Italian migrants born in Australia; occupations which included small business managers, financier, a teacher, tertiary student, clerk, scientist, bookseller, theatre manager, doctor, and accountant.
Migrations of Chinese and Italians

Up to 1945 migration to Australia was almost exclusively from the United Kingdom. After the end of World War Two, large numbers of Italians came to Australia. From 1901 restrictive immigration barred non-European migrants entering Australia until the discriminatory law was repealed in 1973. Since then substantial numbers of people from new countries including China have migrated. In the period from 2000 to 2005, 40% of migrants to Australia came from Asia. Most Chinese migrants are more recent arrivals. The second-largest source of migrants is Italy, and the fifth-largest is China.

Migrants come to Melbourne for many reasons, but the most common are to provide necessary skills for employment (55%) and for family reunion (26%). Migration accounts for half of the current population growth in Victoria. At home 20% of Victorians do not speak English, and within this group, Italian is spoken most (by 133,327 people), followed closely by Chinese-Cantonese speakers (by 131,227 people).

For decades it was not possible for Italians to hold dual citizenship; it is still the case for Chinese. Most of them become Australian citizens.

They are integrating into the host society while maintaining their cultural identity. They are as likely to own a home as the average Australian; they live in areas where social, economic and cultural activities are concentrated; these areas have above average house prices. The dominant family types among the migrants are similar to the ones among the Australian-born, although more among the migrants will share living quarters with relations and visiting students.
Emergent themes for Chinese migrants (1)

The interviews with Chinese migrants in Stage 2 revealed these 6 themes.

1. Family.
   Family links seem stronger among the Chinese than any other links. That is, even physical distance did not remove a firmly-held family obligation to stay in regular touch with concern. Grandchildren figure very prominently in photographs (whether still or moving images) sent online or by CD or DVD. Frequent family visits to and from China are commonplace.

2. Immediacy, frequency of phoning and messaging.
   There was a strong preference among most interviewees for use of the phone, especially mobiles/cells. One interviewee even called phone talk 'face-to-face communication'.

   The younger Chinese in Melbourne (up to their 20s) strongly favoured instant messaging and chat. They featured much more commonly than e-mails. QQ is the top form for contacting China, followed by MSN Messenger. In China QQ is the most popular free instant messaging computer program.
Emergent themes for Chinese migrants (2)

3. Language.

The quantity of information available on the Internet in Chinese is growing – it comprises 14% of all Internet content at the moment. However, Chinese as a language does not lend itself to easy keyboard construction. Obstacles to language construction reinforce the ease-of-use and portability offered by the mobile phone.

4. Technology enthusiasts.

Chinese are early and comprehensive adaptors of all forms of ICTs, and will try all new products and services; they are very IT savvy, especially with regards to costs and value-for-money. The full range of technologies were used.

5. Frequent contact.

Contact with China was very frequent, at least 9 of the 12 interviewees making 'daily' contact, most of them by phone (including SMS) and instant messaging. Without daily contact, one interviewee said that he would be ‘desolated’. Distance from the homeland does not seem to affect the pressing desire for family connection. Time zones (two hours difference) are not seen as an obstacle to phone calls.
Emergent themes for Chinese migrants (3)

6. Maintenance of original cultural identity, and relations with the host country.

This emerging theme was the least clear. Evidence about cultural identity and social integration is ambivalent. One interviewee used Skype (VoIP) exclusively for speaking regularly to her migrant Chinese husband. Another engaged with a listserv dedicated exclusively to sharing the news of her eight cousins in China and elsewhere. Living between cultures can lead to cultural tension. ICTs are not automatically helpful to integration; they facilitate communications with many other cultures, but on the other hand they also enable individuals to huddle in a metaphorical shelter on their own. Cohabiting with cultural tension in the interstices is a common uncomfortable experience for Chinese migrants. In keeping with the compulsion for maintenance of culture of origin, one interviewee felt a special obligation to send e-mails to her friends for Chinese New Year; another enjoyed accessing Chinese comics frequently; another enjoyed sharing Chinese jokes. A Chinese father reported that his son was constantly online because he ‘is interested in his culture from both sides, and knows a lot more than I do. It’s very positive’.

But the self-identification with China is not automatic; one interviewee asked: ‘If I read Chinese [books and news], does that mean that I am Chinese?’ She seemed to doubt it. With regard to connecting with the local Melbourne community, there are many signs of positive links, and the involvement of ICTs. The frequent interactions among interviewees were not only with China, but also with non-Chinese friends in Melbourne as well.
Emergent themes for Italian migrants (1)

The same interview process for Italian migrants yielded related themes.

1. Family milestones are celebrated online, and the village.

Social life is important to Italians. One interviewee spoke of close-knit family life in Melbourne in the 1950s. On Sundays the extended family would sing political songs and drink beer around the lunch table. Recently parents sent their Australian-born sons to Perugia to study, but they spent most of their time socialising.

*Family social life is replicated digitally in many forms.* A wedding video was posted online for all relations to view, being compared by the interviewee with the once-obligatory wedding telegram. Two interviewees mentioned use of videophones, where grandchildren were shown off to overseas admirers. One interviewee contributed to an extended family website. While a proud parent made a video of the annual Christmas BBQ in Melbourne and sent it to Italy by e-mail, he also used specific software for creating his family history. A great-uncle received an online photo of a new baby on the day that it was born in Italy. One migrant mentioned unsolicited contact by distant (New York) relatives through the Internet.

Family connectivity is top priority, but there is also strong emphasis on the village of origin, the place where family began. One interviewee commented: *Italy is a ‘street society’.* Physical presence is essential; virtual presence enhances it. One interviewee treasured a video of the village he left when young, made by a deceased auntie.
Australia was regarded as more Italian than Italy by some interviewees. In Australia, no Italian speaks of being 'Italian' to other Italians, but of being from a village. They view their village via a webcam in some cases with nostalgia. *When visits are arranged online and by phone with Italy, family and friends are thought of in the context of their physical environment* – food, wine, houses, picturesque landscapes.

2. The globe is the new village.

Old Italian migrants could not speak to their parents directly by phone when they first arrived; they had to ring a neighbour who might be lucky enough to own a phone. Another limitation about use of the phone – still today -- was the large difference in times (9 hours) between Australia and Italy.

In contrast, several Italians in Melbourne now marvelled that ICTs brought the entire world to their home; *global communication is easier to the world than with an immediate neighbour. The global village has arrived.* Among older Italians, there is a revival of contact with extended migrated families around the globe, e.g., in Argentina and Brazil, all made possible by the Internet.
Emergent themes for Italian migrants (3)

3. Language.

Italian as a language may be fading as a cultural marker. Initial experiences of migrants did not help: one migrant ‘had the hell beaten out of’ him in Carlton, Melbourne, in the 1950s for speaking Italian; a contemporary (who became a doctor) had barely literate parents. Now English is widely spoken in Italy on visits by second-generation Italo-Australians, and English is the language of Australian-Italian business. An interviewee who traded in nickel used automatic online translations (from French) a lot.

Two third-generation children did not want to learn Italian.

4. Tendency to favour one technology.

Several interviewees focused on just one technology, or a very narrow range of technologies. The positive reasons for this pattern were: convenience, mobility, expressiveness, immediacy, intimacy, personability, similarity to an office for business, and availability of Italian language news. One interviewee advocated just one technology: ‘I like phones. I like the immediate reaction. I can tell if someone is smiling over the phone’. Others were negative about specific technologies: SMSs are ungrammatical; e-mail is not responsive fast, is impersonal and requires too much concentrated effort to compose well; mobile interfaces are hard to use; loud public conversations on mobiles are intrusive; and time zone differences make phone calls to Italy inconvenient.
4. Tendency to favour one technology. Continued.

Although 2 interviewees were learning Italian, neither was using the computer for that purpose (one watched Italian cable TV). An exceptional interviewee was a very active promoter of Italian by his radio program, community TV programs, and Italian theatre. Another exception was a multi-skilled general practitioner who used a full gamut of technologies – fax, databases, video, mobiles, networks, radio, e-mail, + websites.

Generally younger Italian migrants used a wider range of technologies.

5. Maintenance of original cultural identity, and relations with the host country.

Italian interviewee responses were very ambivalent on this point. A very valuable observation was offered by one interviewee, who worked in California for 3 years before the advent of the Internet, returned to Italy for years, then migrated to Australia 7 years ago. In his view, ICTs encourage shared culture, although he felt more ‘American’ by being forced to adapt there, without digital links, than he has in Melbourne where he can roam the world online. The world is his village now. Similarly, a senior business manager who was born in Melbourne of an Italian diplomat father, began by saying that his Italian community is in Melbourne, and that ‘the technology is basically an extension of my life’, a facilitating layer. ‘It is part of everyday life, regardless of cultural background’. But then he proceeded to assert that ICTs speeded up acculturation in a chosen home country.
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<th>1. Family.</th>
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<td>Maintenance of family ties is equally valued as a high priority by both Chinese and Italian migrants – a very important shared feature, which might be built on for further community harmony. An ongoing link to the village of origin seems more important to Italians than Chinese. Long-term migration from China started before mass migration from Italy.</td>
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<th>2. Frequency and the paradigm of global reach.</th>
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<td>The Chinese make more frequent contact by ICTs than Italians, but the Italians articulated greater awareness that the global village is at their fingertips. Both use ICTs extensively. Social interaction is no longer constrained by geographical isolation. Individuals belong to multiple communities. Migrant groups in diasporas are like ‘world wide webs’ in their own right, ‘with dense interlocking, often electronic strands spanning the globe and binding different individuals … together’ (Fullilove).</td>
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<th>3. Language.</th>
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<td>Form of language dictates technical preferences by Chinese speakers, but for Italians, language seems of little consequence technically. All participants spoke English.</td>
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<th>4. Range of forms of ICTs.</th>
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<td>A greater range of ICTs was used widely by the adept and price-conscious Chinese than by Italians, who were more selective, limiting themselves in choice of ICT.</td>
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5. Maintenance of original cultural identity, and relations with the host country.

In both groups, interviewees expressed doubt about the usefulness of ICTs to maintain cultural identity. But practice belied their expressed doubts, probably from an understandable reluctance to be stereotyped by specific cultural characteristics. Thus they valued frequent online interactions very highly with family and friends. Chinese and Italians alike used ICTs for extensive nourishment of inherited cultural values and relationships.

Both groups showed that ICTs were used as a means of acculturation into the host society.

In fact both trends – links to country of origin and to the host country -- should be encouraged if better connections between groups are to be stimulated. Building on existing connectivity would be constructive; managing the development of prior networks provides a typical precondition for successful community development and sustainable growth by means of ICTs.

Diasporas should not be thought of just in terms of nation states, or citizenship, but rather as forms of connectedness. Adoption of citizenship, where the migrant has no choice, does not amount to evidence of real social integration.
Thanks to worldwide ICTs, migrant identity can be shaped and personalised by the migrant, to fit in with a gamut of fresh adopted lifestyles, which are not dependent on geographical place. Frequent travel complements ICT use.

*Migrant identity can be ‘switched on and off’ (with varying levels of intensity) to suit*

- An informed social or economic activity,
- a patriotic need, or cultural connection,
- an emotional bond to family,
- a task in hand for work, study or leisure,
- a serious or trivial use,
- a language obstacle, or
- a form of relationship or companionship.

Independent of the actual migration, global virtual networks remain intact, firmly in the control of the migrants, functioning like a portable safety net to shore up culture and identity (as required) against the rigours that accompany physical migration and possible future threats to culture.
The Way Forward

• We need to investigate some of the discovered themes more fully with further participants.

• A study of the use of websites and blogs by Chinese in Italy, and of the use of ICTs by Italian non-profit organisations, serving migrant needs, in north and central Italy, may be undertaken in 2009.

• A larger study of the use of ICTs (especially the Internet, mobile/cell phones) to maintain business, financial and social links between Australia, China and Italy, would help to further our understanding. An analysis of Italian-Wenzhou ICT links alone would be very revealing.

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