CHINESE DRAGONS IN PRATO: ITALIAN-CHINESE COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN A SMALL EUROPEAN TOWN

Angelo Andrea Di Castro and Marika Vicziany


ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a larger project initiated by Monash University to study the overseas Chinese community in Prato. Monash has a strong commitment to multiculturalism in both Australia and abroad, and our interest in Prato is partly informed by the Monash centre that is based in that town. Monash Prato, has proven to be a dynamic research and conference centre for Monash University. Our presence there during the last six years has increasingly involved us in community relations. The Monash-Prato Research Project is a direct outcome of that engagement.

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In this paper we have tried to understand Italian perceptions of the Chinese community as reflected in the media. Our main sources of information have been the local editions of the newspapers *Il Tirreno* and *La Nazione*. We choose these two papers because they are not only amongst the most popular in Tuscany, but they also have daily inserts for Prato readers – these inserts run from between six to 14 pages. We have also consulted the national and the regional editions of *La Repubblica*. Between 1998 and 2001 for example, *La Nazione* had a 30% share of the Italian language newspaper market in Tuscany; the relevant proportions for *Il Tirreno* and *La Repubblica* were about 21% and 13%.

Together these three newspapers represented about 64% of the total newspaper circulation in the region of Tuscany. The socio-economic data that we cite in this paper have been downloaded from the official website of the Municipal Council of Prato or the Prato Multietnica of the Municipality of Prato, which is located at: http://www.comune.prato.it/immigra/home.htm. Where appropriate other internet sources and secondary sources have been cited. Future papers will analyse Chinese perceptions of the Italians in Prato and also the relationship between Italian and Chinese governments, especially at the municipal and provincial levels.

European colonialism saw the expansion of European power and people into the Asia Pacific regions. Today that expansion is being reversed by the rise of the two new Asian powers – China and India – and the arrival on the European continent of considerable numbers of Asian migrants. What constitutes ‘considerable’ numbers? The emerging problem in European-Asian relations is that what constitutes a small number for Asia with its vast populations, represents a significant number for Europe. This imbalance is clearly one of the issues that is currently taxing community relations in the small Italian town of Prato, a traditional textile town about 30 minutes north of Florence. In the first part of this paper we examine the socio-economic characteristics of the Chinese population in modern Prato and in the second half we look at what happened to Italian-Chinese community relations in the lead-up to Chinese New Year celebrations in February 2007. We then compare the evidence about the Chinese New Year celebrations with other examples of Italian-Chinese community interactions. In the conclusion we ask what impact Chinese migration will have in the medium to long term on community life in Prato.

1 The Chinese in Prato: socio-economic characteristics of a migrant community

By the end of 2005, Prato had a total of almost 20,000 official foreign residents of whom about 57% were of Asian origin (Diagram 1). Of these 11,000 Asian residents about 82% (or 8,627) were from China (Diagram 2). This number considerably outstrips the Albanian population of Prato that is equal to about 41% of the Chinese population.
(Diagram 2). The Albanians originate from a homeland that is relatively close to Italy and familiar compared with China- we note, for example, that Albania was part of imperialist expansion plan of the Italian Fascist regime. This factor makes the Chinese in Prato even more visible. Diagram 2B shows that about 43% of the foreigners living in Prato are from China. Most local people seem to regard these figures as a great underestimate: one of the popular whispers amongst the Italians in Prato is that ‘in the last 20 years not a single Chinese person has died’. The implication is that any deaths amongst the Chinese community are concealed so that a quick replacement can take the place of the departed without drawing attention to the growth of the Chinese community.

**DIAGRAM 1 – FOREIGNERS LIVING IN PRATO**
Divided by continent of origin (current as at 31st December 2005)

![Pie Chart: Foreigners Living in Prato](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continent</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10.641</td>
<td>9.130</td>
<td>19.771</td>
<td>100,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>2.739</td>
<td>2.814</td>
<td>5.553</td>
<td>28,09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1.405</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>2.348</td>
<td>11,88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>2,76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>6.346</td>
<td>4.976</td>
<td>11.322</td>
<td>57,27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Prato Multietnica*, Municipality of Prato
[http://www.comune.prato.it/immigra/home.htm](http://www.comune.prato.it/immigra/home.htm)
DIAGRAM 2A - TOTAL NUMBER OF FOREIGN RESIDENTS IN PRATO
Divided by country of origin (current as at 31st December 2005)

China 8,627
Albania 3,560
Pakistan 1,533
Morocco 1,177
Romania 869
Bangladesh 446
Nigeria 341
Philippine 271
Poland 223
Ceylon 178
Peru 161
India 156
Senegal 142
Tunisia 137
Ukraine 150
Ivory Cost 134
Ex-Yugoslavia 111
Brazil 107
Somalia 80
Germany 76
Russia 77
Egypt 78

Source: Prato Multietnica, Municipality of Prato
http://www.comune.prato.it/prato/eng/strwld_e.htm
Residenti stranieri nel Comune di Prato.
Distribuzione per cittadinanza. Dati al 31/12/05

Fonte: Anagrafe comunale di Prato
Elaborazione: Banca Dati Centro Ricerche e Servizi per l'immigrazione del Comune di Prato

Source: Prato Multietnica, Municipality of Prato
http://www.comune.prato.it/immigra/stran/anagrafe/gif/stran7.gif
The overseas Chinese in Prato come mainly from Wenzhou, located south of Shanghai in the province of Zhejiang. However, firm statistical data on the origin of the migrants is not available. We believe that Wenzhou has been a key source of migrants into Prato from community sources - for example, the scholars at Wenzhou University and also the municipal government of Wenzhou city are keenly aware of the scale of the migration that has taken place. Both are concerned for the well being of the overseas migrants and there are now plans to set up Mandarin schools in Prato and elsewhere to help a new, young generation of Italian-Chinese speak the language of their homelands.

Migrants from China first arrived as workers in the textile industry but by the end of 2004 there were more than 2,000 active registered firms in Chinese names. These were businesses ranging from a single owner to larger partnerships. This may at first sight seem like a success story as Graph 1 suggests, but Table 1 fills out the picture. From this we see that at the end of 2004, almost an equal number of Chinese firms (1,769) had closed down and a further 66 were described as non-active. Thus Chinese firms in Prato are subjected to the same business ups and downs of ordinary firms anywhere in the world. Certainly the proportion of non-operating firms to current firms – about 46% relative to 53% according to Table 1 – is not unusual. Indeed, in most capitalist economies the proportion of business that has been closed down at any one time would
be much higher. The local interpretation, however, is more cynical than this. Some Prato business people claim that the business cycle represents attempts by the Chinese entrepreneurs to avoid paying local taxes and cesses. In terms of normal business practice, this argument also makes little sense - the opening and closing of firms is normally governed by government protocols that require business to pay their normal taxes and cesses at regular intervals. When such payments are overdue, it is the responsibility of government to collect them. Nevertheless, these perceptions need to be taken seriously and their roots discovered before they can be addressed.

The rise of Chinese firms has also been problematic at a more general community level: in contrast to other migrant communities in Prato, the Chinese have quickly transformed themselves from factory workers into entrepreneurs. This transition is unusual and has been commented on in many parts of the world: only Indian migrants have been as entrepreneurial as the Chinese. In Prato, however, the Italian community has never experienced anything like this with the result that much suspicion adheres to the process by which the Chinese have been increasing their economic status. Accompanying the above graphs which appear on the Prato Council’s website is a commentary on how to interpret this information. The commentary notes that even though the Chinese businesses involved in textiles and garments have faced difficulties in recent years, other areas in particular retail/wholesale and the restaurant sectors show positive trends. Moreover, the commentary says that the ups and downs of the business cycle pertain more to individual Chinese firms and small partnerships, but that in contrast to these larger firms based on non-family capital are experiencing persistent growth and suffering few closures.ii
GRAPH 1 Active Chinese businesses in the Province of Prato

Source: Prato Multietnica, Municipality of Prato
http://www.comune.prato.it/immigra/cinesi/imprese/statoatt/gif/tsta1.gif
TABLE 1  Chinese firms in the Province of Prato to the 31/12/2004
Distribution by sectors and state of activity

(This is a translation of the original Italian language table)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector of economic activity</th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>State of activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A.V.*</td>
<td>%V.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile industries</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>47.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing and related industries</td>
<td>1,412</td>
<td>50.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather processing and preparation</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>60.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole sales and sales mediators</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>62.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail sales</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>60.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>57.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars &amp; Coffee shops</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet making &amp; other trade industries</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>76.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate activities</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional &amp; entrepreneurial services</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building industry</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>76.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Points and call centers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>86.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>69.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not recorded data</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,013</td>
<td>52.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Prato Multietnica, Municipality of Prato
http://www.comune.prato.it/immigra/cinesi/imprese/statoatt/txt/tsta4.txt

Notes: ‘Chinese firms’ are meant all firms with at least an owner, administrator or associate partner of Chinese origin. Source: Ufficio Studi C.C.I.A.A. Elaboration: Banca Dati Centro Ricerche e Servizi per l’ Immigrazione del comune di Prato

* A.V. = Absolute Value or Total Numbers - % V. = Percentages

The data discussed above have been collected, collated and analysed in table and graphic form by the Prato municipal council. This also means that the Italians engaged in this analysis must themselves be sharply aware of the changing nature of the Prato community. No doubt these tables, graphs and diagrams become dinner table conversations when the municipal workers go home. In this way, socio-economic information that might be hard to estimate through personal observation is being codified and transmitted to a wide Italian audience. The result is that this same information can be used to create a climate of fear – fear that the overseas Chinese are displacing not only Italian workers but also Italian businesses.

What this draws attention to is the urgent need for better education which can begin to explain the positive aspects of overseas migration, especially in the context of Italy’s demographic crisis. Attention also needs to be drawn to the fact that if a Chinese worker suddenly opens a Chinese restaurant (and Table 1 shows that Prato had about 26 active restaurants in 2004) he/she might be catering to the increased demand generated by the Chinese community itself - such growth does not necessarily displace Italian restaurants. Indeed, many of the inputs into the new Chinese restaurants will come from Italian suppliers - fresh foods, for example, given that the Chinese in Prato do not engage in agricultural activities and so cannot fill restaurant orders.
Beyond this obvious point, research on the impact of immigration on economic growth in Australia, for example, shows that migrants drive consumer demands and that this demand provides an essential stimulant for greater economic expansion. Even if the migrants require culturally specialized products and services, their general consumer needs as householders, parents and workers create a far greater demand than the original Italian community itself can respond to. In short, there is considerable economic data showing that migration stimulates economic growth rather than economic recessions. These economic facts, however, are poorly understood in Italy and even amongst the general public in Australia which has been a migrant society since the arrival of the first Europeans.

In the case of Italy, the fear of Chinese economic competition is exacerbated not only by socio-economic developments in Prato but more generally by perceptions about the rise of China and its negative impact on Italy’s international competitiveness. The reverse argument, that Italian competitiveness in critical areas increasingly depends on Chinese entrepreneurship inside Italy has not received as much attention. A growing element of cultural chauvinism is in evidence. One on-line newspaper article showed how these two elements of anti-Chinese sentiment are linked in Italy. The article was centred on a photograph of a mask of Jesus manufactured in China and imported into Italy. The author intends to suggest that this mask is an offence to the cultural sensitivities of the Italians, while simultaneously building on the image that Chinese imports are threatening Italian goods and crafts more generally. The author wishes to suggest that a failure to appreciate the cultural sensitivities of the Italian public will rebound with disastrous consequences for domestic peace. Published in La Nazione on-line, this article clearly resonates with other instances of community violence in Europe in which cultural insensitivities played a major part – the controversy about the Danish cartoons for instance. The article noted that suddenly a mask of Jesus Christ had appeared in Roman shop windows, next to Zorro and Fairy masks. The mask was ‘obviously’ made in China; the word ‘obviously’ here hinted both at the fear of Chinese imports and also a derogatory feeling towards the diffusion of imported Chinese goods. The subtle suggestion was that the Chinese are ‘insensitive’. The same mask had appeared in an Italian shop in Verona, but it was withdrawn from the shelves when the Bishop of Verona protested about this insult to Christianity. The question about the Jesus masks was also taken up by Luca Volontè the Leader of the Christian Democrats (Udc, Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici e di Centro) in the Italian parliament. He denounced the commercialisation of the image of Jesus Christ as an offence to millions of Christians. He added that if some unscrupulous firm were to manufacture a ‘made in China’ mask with the face of the Muslim Prophet Mohammed, there would be dangerous repercussions given the violent episodes that followed the publication in Denmark of cartoons depicting the Prophet and Islam. The Christian Democratic Party went so far as to issue a press release denouncing all Jesus masks. It is interesting to note that during this particular controversy the focus was on the Chinese origins of the masks; nobody asked whether Italian firms were also importing and selling them. It is this kind of separate treatment of the Chinese and Italian communities that should worry us all.

The events leading up to the celebration of Chinese New Year in Prato provide a dramatic illustration of how fear of the foreigner generates petty jealousies and meanness. In the past, the dragon procession which forms a central part of Chinese New Year celebrations across the world, would wend its way through the streets of Prato. In January 2007, a few weeks before the grand event, the Chinese Associations for the celebration of the New Year sought permission for this parade but suddenly found themselves confronted by numerous obstacles. In fact, at the time they asked permission they were told that the Prato Council had already imposed a ban on the Dragon procession.

Andrea Frattani, the Prato Councillor for the Multicultural Affairs Section, allegedly stated to the media that he was upset by the ‘deafness’ of the Chinese community which was not collaborating with the Italian community on matters of the overseas Chinese integrating with the local culture and respecting basic European, national and local regulations ranging from sanitary to fiscal matters. He called for a ‘moment of reflection’ on these issues. It is likely that Counselor Frattani – a member of the Communist party – was expressing wider popular discontent and resentment towards the Chinese community. It seems that he was going to use the occasion of the Dragon procession to pressure the Chinese to change their attitude towards local institutions. In adopting such a hard line he was also, however, appeasing those elements of the local Italian community which are less tolerant of cultural difference and even xenophobic.

Typically, Chinese New Year celebrations are also accompanied by the sale of food, toys, and other activities. Counselor Frattani explicitly referred to these as imposing increased risks to order and hygiene, not to mention extra municipal expenses to clean up the mess after the celebrations. Counselor Frattani admitted that the ban on the Chinese New Year parade was ‘a wake up call’ to let the Chinese community know that ‘the climate has changed’. This message seemed designed to remind the Chinese that they were guests in Prato and they had to comply with municipal regulations and the local social customs.

In the end, the community divisions were apparently resolved by the decision to allow the procession to proceed not along the streets of Prato but indoors, in the amphitheatre of the municipal museum Pecci. Attempts were made to justify this choice by arguing that an indoor event could become a major moment of cultural exchange between the Italian and Chinese communities. As it happened, what had previously been a grand parade and joyous celebration now became a public affairs disaster. Very few ‘Italo-Pratesi’ turned up at the museum Pecci and the Chinese could only be present for a quick show of about 30 minutes as they had to run to the industrial district of Iolo, where most of their companies were based, and where the New Year was celebrated with real gusto. Thus, the Italian citizens of Prato did not have a chance to interact with the Chinese community on this significant occasion. It was a sad affair because an opportunity was lost for Italians and Chinese to share in what could be a joyous, inter-community occasion.
It is important when studying the controversy surrounding the Chinese New Year celebrations in 2007 to make room for the dissenting voices of Italian Prato citizens. Not everyone agreed with the decision taken by the Prato municipality to restrict the festival to the Macrolotto, the Chinese industrial quarter of the city. One interesting form of protest was organized by a group of young Prato artists called the Senza Dimora Fissa—an artistic association whose philosophical position on art is that it is too important to be contained in any physical boundaries—it belongs to all human kind. Hence the origin of their name: Senza Dimora Fissa—meaning ‘homeless’, ‘itinerant’ or even ‘foreigner’.

They decided to organize an event on the morning of Chinese New Year day which followed the same route of the previous year’s dragon procession. One of the artists undertook a performance which involved him walking down the middle of the streets, dressed in a green coat and a red hood, colors which have symbolic value in Chinese culture. The garment style also recalled the Italian student demonstrations of mid 1970s. The artist was consciously acting out the role of a subversive force to shake the souls of the Prato citizens in response to the ‘moment of reflection’ which had been called for by the councillor Frattani.

As the artist walked the streets he handed out of flyers denouncing the new ‘regime of fear’ that the Council had created. The protest succeeded in slowing down the Sunday morning traffic and attracting the attention of the passersby, but it probably had little impact in improving community relations. The troupe filmed the artist’s procession, and we obtained a copy of that film. Despite its inability to change anything, the protest by these artists of Prato, largely representative of younger people including one second generation Italian-Chinese person, was an important symbolic protest against the municipality’s decision to impose a ban on the route normally taken by the Chinese dragon and a sign that not everyone agree with the suppression of the Chinese minority’s right to its own cultural expression. The flyer the artist handed out also carried a warning about the dangers of discriminating against minorities. The protestor invited the Prato citizens to think about the Counsellor’s statement about the need to reflect on inter-community relations. One side of the flyer carried an aerial photograph of the area surrounding the Museo Pecci. This area was contained inside a red quadrangle with four corners which represented some public buildings in Prato, namely la Questura (the national police building), the Tribunale (the courts), the barracks of the Carabinieri (the jails) and the Ufficio of the Finanza (the revenue police) (Figure 1). These buildings represented the four corners that now trap the overseas Chinese community: permits, trials, jails and money.
The controversy surrounding the Chinese New Year Parade in Prato in early 2007 is only one of the many issues attracting public criticism of the Chinese community. That criticism is unlikely to disappear in the short term given that each day eight new migrants legally arrive in Prato, of which five are Chinese. Pre-existing discrimination against Chinese migrants makes the lives of these new arrivals much harder; and whatever fear the overseas Chinese have is then augmented by the reciprocated fear and resentment of the Italians. In this way, newspaper stories about the wealthy Chinese businesswoman who was forced to leave a Prato nightclub because she has dared to enter the mezzanine level reserved for only rich Italians, contribute to community disharmony. On occasions such as this, other resentments also blend with the hostilities of the moment: a rich Chinese business woman in a Prato nightclub also reminds local Italians of the popular stereotype that behind her stands an army of illegal Chinese migrant labourers augmented by family child labour. The Prato Municipal statistics themselves suggest that such an army exists: in 2004 the total number of Chinese living in Prato was recorded as...
about 9,000 people as per municipal reports or some 43% of all foreigners, but a figure of
20,000 is widely used amongst the local Italians. Clearly better Municipal figures are
needed to set the record straight; only then can realistic guesses be made about the actual
number of illegal migrants. The Municipality should also include on its website a
statement about the accuracy of their data so that whatever figures are produced by the
council can be taken more seriously. Doing this might help to diffuse exaggerated
notions about the inward flood of Chinese migrants.

The view that the Chinese are very good at exploiting the malfunctions of the Italian
system of government is daily augmented by other stories such as the Chinese preference
for importing goods via the port of Naples, universally known for poor customs control
and a long history of under-invoicing. And it is not just the ordinary residents of Prato
that are expressing their resentments. Prominent citizens such as the President of Prato’s
Chamber of Commerce, who is also owner of a local textile firm, have been reported as
saying:

We underestimated them. What they're doing here is called unfair competition.
We need a battalion, an operation like the one in Iraq, to keep them under control
(Ehlers, 2006)

It is our observation that the Prato and Italian press has been very critical of the overseas
Chinese community and its impact on local society and economy. Yet the press itself,
also carries news items that indicate that the Chinese communities have also made
positive contributions to the local environment. As other research on migration has
suggested, new migrants create a range of demands for infrastructure, including home,
offices and industrial buildings. In the case of Italy that has been suffering a
demographic collapse for the last two decades, the arrival of the overseas Chinese has
helped to maintain productivity, domestic prices and export growth. For example, the
overseas Chinese have contributed to the maintenance of real estate and rental values.
According to the Municipal records, the average price of real estate in Prato is 1,000
Euros per square metre and rental properties range from 2.5 Euros to 5.8 Euros per square
metre. Ironically, the willingness of the Chinese to take on poor accommodation (to
the advantage of Italian renters it must be stressed) has also exposed them to closer
surveillance by the Municipal Police of Prato whose job is to enforce safety, health and
hygiene standards.

The overseas Chinese have also filled a gap in Italy’s labour supply, especially because
young Italians are no longer willing to work as subcontractors for the textile mills. At
the higher end of the market, former Chinese textile workers have emerged as
entrepreneurial designers of garments which contribute to reducing the costs of clothing
for Italians and also fuel Italy’s export drive. As Ehlers and others have observed, cheap
Chinese labour plus Chinese entrepreneurship and Italian design sense have produced a
new industry of ready made (prêt à porter) garments – or Pronto Moda. Luigi, one of the
success stories publicized by Der Spiegel, began as a contracted labourer smuggled into
Prato at the age of 17 in 1993 and today runs a prosperous import and export business.
He now hopes to diversify into the local garment industry. Local newspapers also
carry stories that acknowledge the role of the Chinese in Prato contributing to the 3.4% growth in the local textile industry during 2006.\textsuperscript{xix} One journalist wrote provocatively in March 2007 this year that if the Chinese were to suddenly vanish from Prato the town ‘would suffer a terrible economic decline from which it could hardly recover’.\textsuperscript{xx} This more balanced journalism needs to be given greater prominence.

3 Conclusion

The Italian press appears to have a schizophrenic attitude towards the overseas Chinese, an ambivalence shared by prominent and ordinary Italian citizens alike. Our analysis of inter-community relations therefore requires us to undertake a sensitive balancing act between an assessment of prejudices against the overseas Chinese counteracted by the deeper realization that Italy needs these migrant labourers. At a provincial and national level, there is a broader recognition of the role of China in the global economy, with the result that the Government of Tuscany has now opened a trade office in Shanghai.

So what did the events surrounding Chinese New Year celebrations in Prato signify? Clearly inter-community relationships are not invariably hostile, even though the ban on the Dragon procession was an act of rejection by the Municipal Council. But even that rejection was not universally supported by local Italians. Beyond the artists who mounted their protest procession through the streets of Prato, \textit{La Nazione} conducted an on-line survey asking Prato residents whether they agreed with the ban or not. Only a minority of 39.7% agreed with the ban; a much larger group of 46.3% were against the ban and a further 14% said that while the Chinese community were a problem, they should not be denied freedom of expression.\textsuperscript{xxi} The survey solicited a total of 458 responses, and it is a reasonable assumption that most of the respondents were younger generation Italians who are the most intense users of the internet in Italy.

The ban on the Dragon Procession represents, in our view, a lost opportunity to bring together the local Italian and Chinese communities on the occasion of what has now become an international festival – Chinese New Year. In the City of Melbourne, for example, the city centre is cordoned off so that the Chinese community can set up stalls and sell food, fortune cookies, games, fire crackers and much more. In Melbourne, the Dragon dances its way through all the restaurants in Chinatown - inhabited by communities of all kinds. It is regarded as good luck to touch any part of the Dragon and a special privilege for the Dragon to stop in front of your table so you can pay it special attention. In the case of Prato, this exuberant celebration was replaced with a sterile inter-community exchange limited to the local town hall for only 30 minutes.

It will be interesting to see how Chinese New Year Celebrations fare in Prato in 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics. In the meantime, the activities of the Tuscan government’s office in Shanghai might be able to make a contribution towards redressing Italian community perceptions of the rise of China? The rise of China for Italy, has benefits for
Italy too, even though unlike Australia, Italy is not in a situation to export urgently needed energy sources.

The debate about the overseas Chinese community in Prato has also drawn sharp attention to issues of governance throughout the civil, police and parliamentary institutions. If some Chinese firms have defrauded the Prato and Italian tax system they have done so with the assistance of some Italian accounting companies. These Prato based accountants are now under the scrutiny of the tax office.\textsuperscript{xxii} Hopefully, similar attention will soon be paid to the question of the workings of the Prato municipality. How and why has it been possible for the overseas Chinese (and many Italians and other foreigners too) to avoid paying taxes and cesses such as those on garbage collection?\textsuperscript{xxiii} The process of clamping down on negligence, inefficiency, fraud and corruption is beginning to bite: recently 50 millions Euros worth of assets owned by Italian firms in Prato were frozen by Prato’s tax officers, following allegations of fraud.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

As Collina argues, the rules of society need to be evoked for all residents, not merely overseas minorities.\textsuperscript{xxv} Historically, however, this has been difficult for Italy that has blurred distinctions between what constitutes legal and illegal behaviour. Such legal ambiguities, however, have been broadly tolerated by bureaucrats and residents alike. Now suddenly, the arrival of the overseas Chinese and their rapid rise to fortune and success has focussed attention on all the familiar issues of poor governance. Perhaps the overseas Chinese are acting as a catalyst for the modernisation of Italian government – something that successive governments at all levels have been unable to fully realise during the last fifty years. In the meantime, Chinese labour and entrepreneurship are making a genuine contribution to the sustained prosperity of Prato- it is hoped that this contribution will become increasingly prominent in the Italian public’s perceptions as Italy develops better cultural and business relations with China. The time is perhaps not so far distant when the Chinese Dragon Procession for New Year will be sponsored by the Prato Council. We should also add that if Chinese New Year is celebrated with such pleasure in the city of Melbourne, it is also partly because we have all had time to get used to living together. After all, the overseas Chinese in Australia have been living with all other Australian migrants since the gold rushes of the middle nineteenth century. In other words, Australians have been moving up a long term learning curve. Italy now needs to embark on a similar journey but with much greater speed as towns like Prato cannot afford to loose the opportunities before them of the cultural enrichment and economic prosperity that would flow from better Italian-Chinese community relations. If the municipal council doesn’t take the positive steps towards a community reconciliation the risk is that there could be streets conflicts as we saw recently the 12\textsuperscript{th} April in Milano.
PHOTOGRAPH OF AN INCREASINGLY COMMON SCENE IN URBAN ITALY

Nuns walk past a Chinese man leaving his shop near the Piazza Vittorio in the Esquilino neighborhood of Rome. (Gregorio Borgia for The Washington Post)

Ceccagno, Antonella Forthcoming “The Economic Crisis and the Ban of Imports: the Chinese in Italy at a Crossroads”, no place (?).


Reali, Ilenia ‘Record di imprese grazie ai cinesi’, Il Tirreno 22 Febbraio, p. I.

Cecchi, Stefano 2007 ‘Ex capitale del lavoro la stanno salvando I cinesi’, La Nazione 25 Marzo, Prato, p. II.


Nencioni, Paolo 2007 ‘I Quattro uomini d’oro dei conti cinesi’, Il Tirreno 14 Marzo, Prato, p. II. One of the accountants of the Chinese has been fined for tax fraud for 600,000 Euro: Duranti, Elena 2007 ‘Evasione, maximulta al ragioniere dei cinesi’, La Nazione 27 Febbraio, Prato, p. IV.

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