

## An Essay on the Active Role That Chinese Small and Micro Enterprises in Turin Play in the Construction of Multi-Ethnic Harmonious Society

ZANG Yu<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Faculty of European Languages and Cultures, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Recently, the population of immigration has been steadily growing in Italy, which has become a multi-ethnic society with various and complex social problems. Chinese in Italy, as the third largest ethnic minority, have made a positive contribution to the construction of a harmonious society with their small and micro enterprises. This article is based on empirical investigations by the author, using Turin as an example to introduce the phenomenon mentioned above from three aspects and to analyze its causes. It aims to demonstrate the contribution to the fusion process of multi-ethnics that Italian Chinese has actively made, in the process of their own adaptation to the environment, reflecting the good intentions of its positive integration in order to achieve a win-win situation, which is a process beneficial to all parties, during their positive interactions with the local community.

**Key words:** Italy; China; Small and micro enterprises; Social harmony; Multiethnic society

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### INTRODUCTION

For nearly thirty years, as the number of Italian Chinese increases, together with their ascending position in the Italian economic life, academics have also paid more attention to this particular population and its interactions with the local community (Carchedi & Ferri, 1998; Marsden, 2014). At present, relative researches have involved more and more fields, indicating a further diversification.

The historical content of Chinese immigrants in Italy has become clear, and the interpretation of their general trends and motivations has gradually been formed into a consensus (Chang, 2012). Immigration crime was once a controversial topic, where a series of empirical studies had attempted to interpret these “mysterious” and “hidden” crimes by organized Chinese immigrants, and to offer advices for the authorities’ intervention (Bucci, 2002). The Italian academics and politics had criticized the so called “cultural lag phenomenon” in the integration of Chinese immigrants (Berzano, 2010); but in fact their investigation on Italian Chinese have also tended to focus heavily on economy and weakly on society and culture. The average income of Chinese immigrants is higher than the local residents. This particular phenomenon has prompted scholars to explore the Chinese models of economic development and their impacts on the Italian economy. Some areas where Chinese enterprises are most concentrated, such as the textile town of Prato, have become the center of attention (Dei Ottati, 2013; Dei Ottati, 2014; Lan & Zhu, 2014a; Lan & Zhu, 2014b). A limited number of empirical studies which have been opposed to the idea of simply viewing Italian Chinese as economic animals, reflects the social responsibility of scholars and their humanity concern for vulnerable groups. Amico et al. have investigated the Chinese immigrants’ settlement pattern in Rome and criticized the general discourses on the “settlement pattern” made by the authorities and scholars. They have called for

a more targeted public policy which better reflects the ethnic differences (Amico et al., 2013). Explorations on a series of topics about incorporation and conflicts have provided tangible recommendations for improvement of the relationship between Chinese immigrants and the local community (Cologna, 2008; Hatziprokopiou & Montagna, 2012). Together with the growth of the second-generation immigrants and their increasingly frequent participations in social life, studies on their identity and intercultural education have also increased (Marsden, 2014; Cologna, 2008).

Evaluations on Italian Chinese have been generally low whether it is academically, politically or civilly. Although the local residents admit their hard-working, they disagree on the immigrants' belief on sacrificing personal lives and working against the traditional rules of the industry in exchange for success. Chinese immigrants' low level of education, inactive participation in the social affairs and self-isolation have brought numerous accusations from media and the public (Ceccagno, 2007; Wu, 2014), which have become entangled with prejudices and stereotypes (Ceccagno, 2014) and filled with dwarfing caused by ignorance. This article is not intended to deliberately glorify Italian Chinese, but to use Turin as an example to clarify a fact, which has been neglected over the years by all parties, that Chinese economy, especially small and micro enterprises has played an active role in the construction of a harmonious multi-ethnic society of Italy that cannot be underestimated. In additions, the author hopes to correct these current way-too-one-sided studies and provide references and basis for a fair assessment of this population in all aspects.

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## 1. BACKGROUND

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### 1.1 Basic Features of the Multi-Ethnic Society in Turin

According to the data released by the Italian National Bureau of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2016, a total of 5.54 million foreign residents from more than 160 countries over five continents are living in Italy, accounting for 8.3% of the total number of residents (the sum of Italian citizens and foreign residents) (ISTAT, 2016). If we count the number of other ethnic residents with Italian passports and illegal immigrants with a population that cannot be underestimated, then it is apparent that the proportion of immigrants would be higher; at least one in every ten inhabitants is an outsider. Therefore, Italy has become a fully-fledged multi-ethnic society.

This phenomenon is more obvious in Turin since the proportion of foreign residents has reached 15.4% (Torinotoday, 2015). If we count the "new citizens" and illegal immigration, it is no exaggeration to say that there is at least one foreign immigrant in every six people in

Turin. Whether it is in the downtown, the residential areas, schools or police stations, one can easily have a sense of the proportion of immigrants judging merely by the most obvious physical features.

### 1.2 Basic Situations of Chinese Small and Micro Enterprises in Turin

Turin is the capital of Piedmont, the third largest economy of Italian cities. It is also the city with the third most foreign companies in Italy (after Rome and Milan) (Askanews, 2015). In the 138,076 foreign residents in Turin, about 19,000 people are Chinese, forming the third largest minority just after Moroccans and Albanians (Torinotoday, 2015).

Due to the low level of education as a whole, commercial success has become almost the only rising channel for Chinese immigrants. From 2011 and onwards, the Turin Chamber of Commerce has been in cooperation with the local Chinese every year and held seminars with the theme "to be the boss", offering suggestions for Chinese micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.

According to the statistics from the Turin Chamber of Commerce, there are 2,092 Chinese enterprises, mostly small and micro-enterprises in the territory of the Province of Turin (where Turin is the capital of the administrative district, including the city of Turin and its surrounding towns and villages), and this number has increased dramatically (nearly doubled compared with 2011). Traditionally, they have mainly engaged in hairdressing, massage, catering and other industries with low capital and technology threshold. In recent years, they have turned into financial and professional offices, bars, and other fields. Chinese supermarkets and shops in the urban and rural areas account for a considerable amount in the local retail industry. In the last two years, the textile city of Settimo's wholesale industry has been reshuffled. The proportion of Chinese enterprises has reached 50%. Amnesty has allowed a lot of illegal immigrants to obtain legal status, which also prompted small tailor shops (sartorie express) to flourish.

### 1.3 Introduction of the Investigation

From January to June, 2016, while being a visiting scholar in the TOCHINA Centre at University of Turin, the author investigated the interactions between the Chinese and the local community in Turin. After 20 days of literature reviewing, the author visited and observed hundreds of Chinese small and micro enterprises, asking the staff, customers, and neighbors to be the objects for a hundred semi-structured qualitative interviews with guidelines, each of which lasted 90-180 minutes. The author also carried out field observations for at least three hours per day for 150 days. In addition, the author had ten discussions with the interviewees, local scholars and officials based on the author's observations and point of views for corrections.

## 2. CONTRIBUTION OF CHINESE SMALL AND MICRO ENTERPRISES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HARMONIOUS MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY

During the construction of the harmonious multi-ethnic society in Turin, Chinese small and micro economy has made a positive contribution. This is actually an active choice made by Chinese in the process of adaptation, reflecting their intentions of positive integrations, and it is a win-win situation beneficial to all during its interactions with the local community. This will be introduced from three aspects in the following and analyzed for the motivations behind.

### 2.1 Inexpensive High Quality Products and Services

Providing cheap products and services is not exclusive to Chinese small and micro economy. Small supermarkets and shops owned and run by South Asian and Turkish immigrants are often able to do it, as well. The biggest difference between them is that Chinese enterprises have a wide range of spreading and clients. They are cost-effective, provide products and services of a diversified and wide selection, understand, are sensitive and responsive to the market demand, and so forth.

First, it is necessary to give a brief introduction of their distribution. The distribution of Chinese economy in Turin is different from the Chinatown-style stereotype. Through empirical investigations, Berzano et al. had described and interpreted the distribution of Chinese, accurately and vividly, and summarized it with the word 'archipelago' (Berzano et al., 2010). Although there are obvious compact communities like the one in Porta Palazzo, they spread all over the place and a dominating neighborhood like Via Paolo Sarpi in Milan has never been formed. The author's investigations have confirmed it. Chinese small and micro enterprises scattered along the main roads connecting the urban and rural areas like Corso Regina Margherita, and there are Chinese restaurants, supermarkets and bars even in the narrow alleys on both sides of the main roads. Chinese products and services can be seen all over the urban and rural areas and have integrated perfectly in the communities. One inevitably has to have contact with them unless he/she deliberately rejects.

Such distribution patterns have become a trend of diffusion of Chinese economy in most of the large and medium Italian cities because most Chinese small and micro enterprises have already passed the era when they only do business with either their fellow townsmen (countrymen) or curiosity seekers. They have fully integrated into the economic life in Italy and become an indispensable part and parcel of this system. The entire Italian society has become their customers.

Most people in Turin have been enjoying the convenience that Chinese small and micro enterprises

have brought, which is particularly valuable in this Italian economic down time, with high unemployment and limited purchasing power. The general hairdressing service is a good example. The Chinese salon charges 7-8 euros for a normal haircut while the average price of such service in an Italian salon is around 15 euros. The pasta sold by Chinese bar during lunchtime is usually 20%-30% cheaper than in an Italian bar. Chinese restaurants opened in densely populated areas, such as near the train stations, also offer €5/person buffet. Despite the dishes are quite ordinary, there are a variety of choices, and it is "all-you-can-eat"; thus, it is much liked by the nearby students and workers.

The price of vegetables and fruits sold in Chinese supermarkets is significantly lower than the ones sold in Italian supermarkets, and the kinds of products sold in Chinese supermarkets are much more than mini-markets owned by South Asian. Not only do they have Chinese Kang Shi Fu instant noodles, they also sell Korean Shin Ramyun; not only do they have Wang Zhi He fermented tofu, they also have the necessity in Italian table: mozzarella, in order to satisfy customers from different ethnic origins.

Chinese clothing stores and mobile shops have offered more choices for those who love fashion but are pinched for money. It is very costly to rent or buy formal wears or costumes in Turin. The Chinese formal wear stores next to the Municipal House has won and stood firmly in the market with competitive prices and a variety of styles.

Chinese who study or work in Turin have to improve their life qualities by visiting the Chinese restaurants, and they can also find their hometown food in the supermarkets. Tong Yi 100 instant noodles, Fu Ling preserved pickle and Lao Gan Ma chili sauce not only can comfort their stomach, but also ease their homesickness. In Italy, where internet shopping is not sufficiently developed and logistics are slow, if one forgets to bring an adaptor, electronics brought from China cannot work, then the best solution is not to shop at the largest local electronic store Media World, instead, is to find a small Chinese store.

Customers of Chinese small and micro enterprises include a significant number of immigrants, the so-called "New Italians", especially immigrants from poor countries in Asia and Africa. The average age of them is quite young, with low level of education, lack of professional skills, hence it's difficult for them to be employed. Their salary is limited, and their material life is not well-off. It would be inevitable for them to become threats to the stability of the society if their basic needs were not satisfied. Chinese small and micro enterprises have provided inexpensive, high-quality products and services, which dramatically alleviate their difficulties on economy. Even though they are treated as refugees, are immigrants who received 20 euros subsidy per day and mainly visit Chinese stores, they do not need to worry about life

necessities and may even have money left to purchase a pair of leather shoes or a new piece of clothes from the Chinese stores in Piazza Repubblica. Actually, this is what most immigrants have done. For the Chinese enterprises that we investigated, more than half of the profits they make comes from immigrants. Hence, the importance of Chinese small and micro enterprises has already been beyond the scope of economy and they have positively played an active role of a “social lubricant”.

The reason why Chinese small and micro enterprises can take advantages of their prices and have a significant share in the economy is the great productivity and efficient logistics of Chinese economy. In Turin, or even all over Italy, the Chinese are playing an important role in manufacturing, especially in labor intensive industries. The size of Chinese manufacturing enterprises, in most cases, is not large, but they have established a mutual beneficial relationship amongst the Chinese businessmen by keeping a close contact through relatives, hometown associations and communities. They have effectively controlled the cost based on their special production model (extending labor time, workers living close to the factories, flexible labor sharing and so on), and have done necessary intervention on the quality of products according to the market demands. These have provided both wholesale and retail Chinese enterprises with highly cost-effective products. More and more Chinese are involved in planting in Turin area. Their cost-control guarantees Chinese grocery stores' comparative advantages in price. In case that a Chinese enterprise in Italy is not able to produce a popular merchandise, they will transport it from other EU countries via Chinese commercial companies or even import it from China. The advantages that Chinese businessmen have in price and categories are ensured by mature channels, stable cooperation partners and relatively efficient logistics. During the investigations, the author can often find some products which are old-fashioned and unsalable in China, such as a diet product that had been on CCTV's advertisements, some popular snacks back in the 90's, and some poor-quality, old-fashioned plastic hair accessories with both Chinese and Korean printed on it. Chinese businessmen have noticed such market demand among the immigrants and imported these products with low prices into Italy. By doing so, not only did they make a considerable amount of profit, they also helped to digest leftover products in China. In comparison, even with a larger number, it is difficult for Moroccan businessmen to achieve such success because they lack of great productivity and logistic supports coming from their own people and based upon trust and mutual beneficial relationship.

In Turin, the Chinese small and micro enterprises can often keenly discover and meet the specific needs of consumers, which compensate for the lack of market supply while harvesting economic profit and customers'

praise. It is hard to find cosmetic products for black people and African braids wig which is favored by the young immigrants from Africa in an Italian store, but Chinese businessmen have brought them into the main African immigrants communities. Most of the bars in Turin are closed on Sunday afternoon, but people need a place for a rest, getting together and socializing. Chinese bars, which are open as usual during this period, very well compensate for this shortcoming; their revenue increased and they offered conveniences for the local residents at the same time. In this case, they have won favorable comments. All of these have effectively promoted the integration of Chinese and Chinese economy in the community level. (See my Research on the Integration of Chinese Immigrants in Turin—A Case Study of Bar Francesca, *Canadian Social Science*, 2016, No.6)

Being able to accurately find the targeted customers within a large number of consumers, to identify and meet the core aspects of their needs, and to discard the unimportant details, is an important reason for the Chinese small and micro enterprises to achieve a win-win situation with the local community. In Chinese supermarkets, for example, since the main focus is on low-pricing market and services for population with middle and low income, good quality, large quantity and low price have become the key to survival. While the environmental factors of shopping (decoration, lighting, air conditioning, etc.) can be ignored. The businessmen have controlled the cost, then customers do not need to pay for unvalued factors themselves, hence the two sides have reached a mutual understanding.

## 2.2 Flexible Employment Opportunities

It is inevitable to hire staff when starting a business, which will create opportunities for employment. The reason for introducing and analyzing Chinese small and micro economy in Turin in this dimension is that we have found and gained a deeper understanding of a new situation which has been mentioned few times in extant studies. The Chinese businessmen not only have provided job opportunities to their own fellow townsmen (countrymen), but also helped Italian residents and immigrants from other countries in term of employment. When the old and new residents have solved their economic difficulties and have obtained stable lives, the society is more stabilized. Then the mutual tolerance and integration between local residents and immigrants can be expected to be further strengthened. While providing employment, the Chinese small and micro economy have also received better human resources and won initiation for self-development. This is actually a mutual beneficial behavior which promotes the development of a harmonious multi-ethnic society.

According to the stereotypes about Chinese companies, they often prefer to hire Chinese and trust Chinese (or people from the same hometown), and studies have

also proved their rationality (Ricucci, 2010). However, with the rapid development of Chinese economy and expansion of its business scope, its degree of integration with Italian society has become deeper and deeper. This leads to more and more communication and interactions with each other. New situations in work have made the Chinese bosses realize that certain work is beyond his, his family members, or his fellows' ability, and maybe hiring an "outsider" has apparently lower cost and is more efficient. Under such circumstances, utilitarian Chinese businessmen have made a simpler and economical choice: hiring "outsiders", including Italians and "new Italians" from different countries. As for general and more substitutable positions, they usually still prefer hiring Chinese, especially people who came from the same hometown of the boss.

Language and communication skills are most valued by the Chinese businessmen. Chinese in Turin, especially those immigrants coming from Zhejiang and Fujian provinces (the main part of Chinese immigrants) generally are poorly educated and knew limited Italian. Although many of them can handle everyday communication, they have difficulties conducting in-depth and detailed communication and are even more helpless when trying to use formal expressions. Spending money and time to improve their language skill or training their relatives or other Chinese employees takes a long time, and the result may not be ideal. Italian employees are often seen in the Chinese catering industry, especially where Italian customers are the majority. Most of them are in their 20s or 30s, have some working experiences, quick and neat, smart, enthusiastic and talkative. There are two Italian waitresses working in a Japanese restaurant<sup>1</sup> located in Turin's busiest commercial street Via Po. Since Italian customers are the majority, in addition to their ordinary services, the two girls also need to introduce the food materials, the cooking methods and other information repeatedly, answer all kinds of curious questions of the customers, and give suggestions as Italians. They work like ducks to water, have good relationships with the boss and colleagues, and are thankful for their stable income. At the same time, the boss also feels proud to have such a "strategic resource".

English is the biggest trouble to Chinese businessmen. Most of them have received limited education and are less competent in English than in Italian. Turin is a tourism city and full of tourists coming from all over the world. Chinese restaurants need to know English. Immigrants from south Asia have a gift on it. Moreover they do not request extra high salary. Those make them favorable to Chinese employers. A famous Chinese restaurant in Corso Giulio Cesare employs a male student from Pakistan to treat guests who know neither

Chinese nor Italian. This stable salary can support him to complete his study.

Business of Chinese companies is not limited in China or Italy, but all over the world. It brings new opportunity to students who major in foreign languages from University of Turin. Daria, 26 years old, studied Spanish and English in the university. Two years ago, she even selected Chinese. She started internship in a Chinese company in Southwest Turin during her sophomore year. Now she is a formal employee and responsible for South American business.

Recently, there are more and more Chinese students. There are about 2,500 Chinese students in total<sup>2</sup> studying in Turin. On average, every 1 out of 4 foreign students comes from China (Rigitano, 2015). Lots of them are planning to stay in Italy after their graduation. Thus job is the first problem that needs to be solved. At the same time, their Chinese identity, high degree of education and professional skills are wanted by Chinese small and micro enterprises. A Chinese company that locates near the city center is developing online business platform for local medium, small and micro Chinese enterprises. It employs two Chinese postgraduates. One of them is from Polytechnic University of Turin and is responsible for website construction. The other one received her postgraduate degree from Albertina Academy of Fine Arts and works on website design. Though salary is not high, it is enough for them to live in Turin. Also they are free to leave and welcome to come back at any time. The company has limited size and attraction to two young men, however flexible working style can help them obtain residence permit easily. In addition, they are able to seek a better position with certain income. At the same time, with the help of two experts, the platform is being developed smoothly with low cost.

### 2.3 Information and Intelligence Support

Chinese small and micro enterprises in Turin are usually places of different nationalities, and different groups of people. It provides place for zero-cost or low-cost sharing of information, makes knowledge and skills accessible to foreign immigrants, and contributes to mutual understanding and integration between different groups of people. Chinese small and micro enterprises win popularity and reputation, gain goodwill and trust from customers and community in this process, which is able to enhance its soft power for further development.

Around Turin, Chinese stores are everywhere. On the wall of those stores, there are lots of free posters with different kinds of information, like recruitment, training, rental and so forth. Those posters are in Chinese or Italian and face to immigrants. It objectively increases

<sup>1</sup> In Turin, most Japanese restaurants are opened and run by Chinese immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> According to the presentation of the president of the Federation of Chinese Students and Scholars in Turin, in May 2016.

the possibility of employment, self-improvement and adaptation to the local society for immigrants, as well as alleviating social pressure. Additionally, it brings more attention and customers to those stores which provide free space for advertisements.

The contribution of Chinese small and micro enterprises in training cannot be ignored. They improve the quality of immigrants and provide opportunity for Italian people to understand Chinese language and culture. Chinese hairdressing schools have helped a considerable number of immigrants learn a skill. Said, a young man from Algeria, learned haircutting skill from Chinese and has studied and worked in a Chinese hair salon for 6 months. Now he has his own salon and a stable life. Chinese language schools do not have very high charge. They provide Italian courses for compatriots to help them get residence permit and jobs. Their Chinese courses also have attracted lots of native residents and allowed them to know more about China.

Chinese bars also provide places for cultural exchanges which promote communication between different people. It brings praise from compatriots and communities. Bar Francesca, which is on the riverside of Dora, provides free area for University of Turin to hold Chinese corner and Italian corner continuously. In addition, it does lots of assistants on organization, helps Chinese students and new immigrants improve language skill and adapt to local society, and promotes a better mutual understanding between Chinese immigrants and native residents. As a consequence, the bar owner's family is respected and welcomed by compatriots and local communities and their appreciation leads to good business.

## CONCLUSION

According to introduction above, it is easy to realize that Chinese small and micro enterprises are feeding back society initiatively while developing themselves and making positive contribution to harmony and stability of the multi-ethnic society in Turin. One has said that the fragrance always stays in the hand that gives the rose. Similarly, lots of problems that they meet in development are fixed while they are promoting social integration.

Via cooperation and flexible management, Chinese small and micro enterprises provide cheap goods with high quality to mid-to-low income groups and immigrants, meet their daily needs, stabilize society, occupy and expand market. In this way, they are in a advantageous position in competition and gaining generous profit thanks to the strategy of "small profits and quick turnover". They provide different kinds of jobs in the market, employ people with rare talents, catch opportunity to develop, convenient information sharing, process training, enhance adaptability and viability of immigrants, promote understanding between foreign immigrants and native

residents and bring favorable comments and customers to themselves.

The rapid developments of Chinese small and micro enterprises in Turin have made non-negligible contribution to social harmony and ethnic fusion and prove integration of Chinese living in the Italian society. The mode of joint development which is built on the basis of mutual benefit and win-win outcome is worth attention and future studies. Governments of both countries and academics also have responsibility to provide more guides and convenience in order that these people and their enterprises can play a more positive role in the relationship between China and Italy in the future.

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