

Venturesome, Mysterious, Isolated? The Image of Chinese Immigrants in Italian Mass Media

Modern Italian society is becoming increasingly multicultural. Since the 1980s, Italy has been influenced by different flows of migrants coming from various areas of the world. Nowadays, the current statistical data show that foreigners constitute about 7.5% of the whole population registered in Italy (a percentage higher than the European average: 6.2%). According to the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011*¹, the Chinese are the fourth largest immigrant community in Italy (around 210,000). The Chinese tend to occupy specific areas of the Italian labor market: they work as manufacturers in the textile and tailoring sector. They dominate the trade sector, too, both as dependent workers and entrepreneurs. The Chinese immigrants are particularly noticeable in Tuscany (especially in the province of Prato). In various Italian cities there are so-called “Chinese districts” like Esquilino in Rome or the Via Sarpi zone in Milan. The Italian mass media, by presenting and characterizing different foreign communities, construct and spread their public image, often based on stereotypes. The Chinese are frequently presented as one of the most enterprising, mysterious and isolated group among immigrant communities. The media try to reveal their everyday lifestyle, family structures, working conditions (focusing on illegal employment in textile factories), as well as their “hidden” impact on the Italian society. The aim of this article is to present some common clichés concerning the Chinese and the most important elements of their image promoted by the Italian press.

¹ *Immigrazione Dossier Statistico* is an Italian annual report regarding migration issues in the Italian and international context. According to ISTAT data (National Institute of Statistics), on January 1, 2011 the number of registered Chinese immigrants was 209,934. Retrieved from www.istat.it (February 20, 2012).

Chinese immigration in Italy

It is unquestionably necessary to make at least some general remarks about Chinese immigrants in the Italian society in order to better analyze their common perception produced and spread by the mass media. Thus, in this part of my paper I intend to characterize the most important immigration waves from China, as well as their concentration on the Italian territory, typical professions and living conditions.

The first Chinese immigrant who came to Italy was a merchant, Qiu Guoding, coming from Zhejiang province. He arrived in Turin in 1893 to expose his goods for selling (Di Corpo, 2009, p. 57). Starting from the nineteenth century, different groups of Chinese from Zhejiang began to settle down in Italy. These initial family-based small migration networks functioned as a model for later chain migration flows to Italy. The success of the first Chinese migrants encouraged the following generation to take the risk as well. As Valentina Pedone states, the first important groups of Chinese immigrants came to Italy in the 1920s, but at that time did not constitute a visible foreign community (Pedone, 2008, p. 6). They settled mainly in Milan and subsequently moved to Bologna and Florence. Those immigrant groups were mostly constituted by adult males who had moved to Italy from other European countries affected by the Great Depression, such as France or the Netherlands. At first, they commonly earned their livelihood by selling “Chinese goods” imported from other European countries where the Chinese communities were already well-structured. However, soon afterwards they recognized the opportunities offered by the Italian labour market and became involved in the local silk industry: they produced silk ties for Italian entrepreneurs. As Pedone observes, from the very beginning the Chinese people successfully managed to insert themselves into some relevant niches, and this ability allowed them to make it through the difficult period of the Second World War. They spread their activity throughout the Italian textile market, producing leather and canvas goods for a third party (*ibid.*, p. 7).

When analyzing the current situation, it can be noticed that this initial activity connected to the textile area has become the main occupational feature of Chinese immigrants over the last decades. Through the years they have settled in the textile market and are now an important element of its structure.² However, in the 1960s when work possibilities in the leather factories were already limited, a new alternative sec-

² For many years, this has been the main difference between the situation in Italy and other European countries (Great Britain, the Netherlands), where the Chinese were mainly involved in the catering service area (Ceccagno, 2003, p. 187).

tor – ethnic gastronomy – began to attract the Chinese immigrants, who started to open Chinese restaurants (*ibid.*, p. 7).

It was at the end of the 1970s that Italy registered a significant volume of Chinese immigrants for the first time. Over the 1980s the immigration flow from China visibly increased, but both the main areas of employment and the region of provenience remained unchanged. Many unskilled workers coming – almost exclusively – from the province of Zhejiang have continued to occupy two traditional sectors of the labour market: ethnic restaurants and small garment factories (*ibid.*, p. 8; Di Corpo, 2009). Hence the first Chinese traces in Italy came from Zhejiang and contemporary data show that this tendency has been maintained: currently around 70% of the Chinese residents in Italy are from Zhejiang (Pedone, 2010, p. 7).

At the end of the 1980s, a new area of provenience emerged: the Chinese coming from the province of Fujian started to flow to the Apennine Peninsula. Recently a third migration wave has occurred, coming from Northern China. This wave was directly connected to the situation in Chinese industry: many public mines and factories in the northern part of the country were closed, causing the lay-off of about 14 million Chinese workers. As a consequence, numerous male and female workers decided to rebuild their lives abroad, and emigrated to Italy. They often entered as tourists and stayed in Italy illegally. The last important flow of young Chinese graduates also came from the North, especially from Beijing. They wish to take up post-graduate studies in Italy and often plan to return to China afterwards (Di Corpo, 2009, p. 57).

At the end of the 1990s there appeared new migration tendencies: the Chinese community began to spread to new regions and new “occupational typologies” (Pedone, 2008, p. 8). The Chinese started to move from Italian cities traditionally considered as principal areas of destination (Milan, Bologna, Florence, Rome) to Southern Italy, especially Naples. Because of the significant growth in number of the Chinese immigrants, some new types of jobs catering to the Chinese community itself have emerged: tourist agencies, Chinese pharmacies and stores, hotels, beauty centers, video shops, law firms (*ibid.*, p. 8). Starting at the beginning of the 21st century, although the majority of Chinese small garment industries still produce for Italian enterprises, some Chinese entrepreneurs began to work on their own, founding their own companies of *prêt-à-porter* garments. In Italy they are called *prontisti*, which means producers of ready-to-go clothes, following the seasonal fashion trends in Italy. This new category of Chinese businesspeople usually settled in Prato (*ibid.*, p. 9). Apart from the production of *prêt-à-porter* clothes in Italy, some Chinese entrepreneurs – especially those who settled in Rome – operate

in other areas: they handle the wholesale of products imported from China, which they supply to clients of both Italian and other descent.³ Some of them are at the same time the owners of garment factories in China where clothes bound for the European market are produced (*ibid.*).

The “Prato phenomenon” (described, *inter alia*, by Morganti & Zheng, 2012) would definitely deserve a separate analysis, as Prato hosts the second largest Chinese immigrant population in Italy (after Milan with Italy’s largest Chinatown). This Italian city currently functions as a “gateway for Chinese ambitions” (Spolar, 2009). At the end of 2009, the number of legal Chinese residents in Prato was over 12,000.⁴ Local authorities estimate the number of Chinese citizens living in Prato at around 45,000 (including illegal immigrants).⁵ The local Chamber of Commerce registered over 4,500 Chinese businesses by June 2010.⁶ When examining the concentration of Chinese enterprises on Italian territory, some general tendencies can be observed. The North-East of Italy (Florence, Prato), the Adriatic Coast and the Avellino Province situated in the Middle-South of the country are dominated by the clothes manufacturing and footwear industry. The Chinese production of the so-called *pronto moda* („ready-to-wear fashion”) constitutes 42% of all Chinese business in Italy. The Chinese trade sector (46%) is concentrated in Southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia. Chinese ethnic gastronomy business is distributed all over the Italian territory and adds up to 5% of the whole sole proprietorship of Chinese community.⁷ In 2010 Chinese entrepreneurs constituted 14.7% of all immigrant businessmen in Italy.⁸

According to ISTAT data, at the beginning of 2010 the Italian municipalities with the highest number of Chinese immigrants were: Milan (17,172), Prato (10,877), Rome (10,283), Turin (4,900), Florence (3,740).⁹ The trait which distinguishes Chinese immigration from other ethnic

³ Alex Castelasi, an Italian buyer, states that Chinese goods are 50% cheaper than Italian clothes: “The Chinese can’t be beaten on price and the quality is now very good” (Kennedy, 2010).

⁴ Source: Municipality of Prato. Retrieved from www.comune.prato.it (February 20, 2012).

⁵ Source: the official web portal of the Tuscany region. Retrieved from <http://www.intoscana.it/> (February 20, 2012).

⁶ Source: Prato Chamber of Commerce. Retrieved from <http://www.po.camcom.it/servizi/datistud/stsint.php> (February 20, 2012).

⁷ Data of the Italian Ministry of Interior and National Confederation for the Craft Sector and Small and Medium Enterprise (CNA), 2009. Retrieved from http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/15/0086_Sintesi_rapporto_cinesi.pdf (February 20, 2012).

⁸ Source: CNA, *L'imprenditoria straniera in Italia nel 2010 in cifre* (Data on Foreign Enterprise in Italy in 2010). Retrieved from www.cna.it/.../69704/912704/file/Imprenditoria%20straniera%20in%20Italia%20nel%202010%20in%20cifre.pdf (February 20, 2012).

⁹ *La popolazione straniera residente in Italia, 2010* (*The Foreign Population Resident in Italy, 2010*). Retrieved from www.istat.it.

communities arriving in Italy is the motivation for their mobility. Unlike many other national groups of immigrants, the Chinese “are not economic refugees who try to avoid living in poverty in their country of origin, but they should rather be considered entrepreneurs who invest in a project aimed at improving their economic conditions as well as the situation of their relatives remaining in the fatherland” (Pedone, 2008, p. 9). A recent study on Italian students’ perception of Chinese immigrants shows that the Chinese community is associated with efficiency and enterprise, which differs from the image of immigrants in general.¹⁰

The image of immigrants in Italian mass media: remarks on journalistic deontology in Italy

The image of strangers constructed and spread by the media is closely connected to the issue of journalistic deontology. An inclination to reproduce stereotypes and a certain readiness to simplify reality are two notable tendencies of the Italian mass media. The media depictions of “enemy portraits” and the “criminalization of Others” cause these images to become established in the public opinion (Maneri, 2011), which in turn causes the intensification of the feeling of insecurity and anxiety in Italian society. A study conducted by the “la Sapienza” University (*Ricerca nazionale su immigrazione...*, 2009)¹¹ focuses on the representation of immigrants in the media, especially in relation to two relevant issues: the sense of security among the population, and the so-called *cronaca nera* (literally “dark chronicles”), a magazine section dedicated to various crime news (short articles associated with crimes, mysteries, etc). The analysis of both the vocabulary used to describe immigrants and the narrative style present in the research material revealed certain distortions in the journalistic deontological code. The general results are the following: the image of

¹⁰ In a research by Chiara Volpato and Federica Durante (Volpato & Durante, 2009), 109 students of the Milano-Bicocca University were asked to evaluate 14 immigrant groups residing in Italy, using the Stereotype Content Model SCM (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007). The Chinese were located in Cluster 3 (low warmth and high competency) and were perceived as the most “competent” immigrant group among all the analyzed communities (Volpato & Durante, 2009, p. 10).

¹¹ *Ricerca nazionale su immigrazione e asilo nei media italiani*, La Sapienza, 2009; project coordinator: Mario Morcellini, <http://www.slideshare.net/fullscreen/mbinotto/sintesi-ricerca-immigrazione-e-asilo-sui-media-sapienza-v30/1>. This project was financed by the Italian Ministry of Social Solidarity. The research sample consisted of 1,084 TV news items from seven TV evening broadcast (Tg1, Tg2, Tg3, Tg4, Tg5, Studio Aperto, TgLa7), and 1,540 articles selected from six Italian newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *L’Unità il Giornale*, *Avvenire*, *Metro*) during the first week of every month from January to June 2008. This sample was analysed using the methods of content analysis and lexical-textual analysis.

strangers in the Italian mass media is not only very deformed, but it is also “frozen”: during the last twenty years there has been no noticeable change in the way of depicting immigrants (*ibid.*, p. 2). Their image is dominated by “dark”, negative elements, associated with violence. The notions which have appeared most often in relation to “immigrant” are: man, criminal and *clandestino* (“irregular”, “illegal”). In more than 75% of analyzed cases immigrants were presented in the context of criminal and unlawful acts, as perpetrators or as victims (*ibid.*).

Not only crime itself should be pointed out as the predominant issue dealt with in the newspapers and television news submitted for analysis, but also the stylistic features of journalistic texts concerning crime issues and immigrants. Most of the analyzed material presents “immigrant criminals” in a biased and very superficial way. Their alleged criminal acts are often described by an external commentator, without leaving any room for the immigrants’ own perspective. In general, people with ethnic minority backgrounds are given a rather small chance to personally express themselves about the reality which directly concerns them. The supposed immigrant criminals remain marginalized and strictly linked to their ethnic provenience (*ibid.*, pp. 10-13). This “obsession with nationality” is one of the main characteristics of Italian journalists covering migration issues. The national/ethnic provenience and geographic affiliation is often the only trait given when introducing an immigrant (*ibid.*, p. 12). Maneri interprets this as “ethnicization of anything considered to be problematic, negative or threatening” (Maneri, 2011, p. 80). This “racialised criminalisation” present in the media discourse on migration is an implication of a widespread conviction of the “(criminal) threat that is indissolubly linked to immigration as the bearer of deviant character” (*ibid.*, p. 7). However, it is not a new phenomenon. A similar interpretation can be found in a study carried out in 2002. The authors of the *Tuning into Diversity* report underline that some apparently neutral “stylistic tendencies” used by journalists can become very “heavy” and stigmatizing when “alluding to the nationality or origin of the person of ethnic minority origin as the sole identifying element (...)”. “Albanian kills the six-year-old girl” could serve as a typical example (*Tuning into Diversity...*, 2002, p. 15).

The interpretation of research results allows us to draw a general conclusion about the social role of mass media in contemporary Italy. It seems that the mediation between symbolic reality and actual experience is largely contaminated. Media, as a “social thermometer”, located between society and authorities, could work as a “carrier of change” by supporting the fight against stereotypes and misunderstanding between different minority groups, as well as by preventing discrimina-

tion. Meanwhile, they are often very resistant towards cultural changes as they consolidate existing conservative attitudes (*Ricerca nazionale su immigrazione...*, 2009, p. 30). They also tend to trivialize important social issues that emerge in modern multicultural societies. But, once again, this is a problem which has been present in the Italian public discourse for many years. The authors of *Tuning into diversity* talk about a “communicative defect” of Italian media regarding the information about immigrants and people originating from ethnic minorities (*Tuning into Diversity...*, 2002, p. 4). The media are often accused of reproducing (and producing) stereotypes as they resort to easy associations and generalizations. Comparing the 2002 and 2009 research results, the thesis about a “flat and monotonous construction of the social image of the people of ethnic minority origin” (*ibid.*, p. 16) can be sustained.

Talking about the perception of “others” in his book *Non-persone*, Alessandro Dal Lago (1999) observed that before being discriminated “in real life”, migrants and refugees are discriminated through language and the notions that society uses to represent them. The author gives some examples: *immigranti, clandestini, irregolari, extracomunitari, terzomondisti*. Language undergoes continuous changes, but these prejudiced notional divisions between “us” and “them” tend to persist (*ibid.*, pp. 43-44). This is how “ascribed characteristics inevitably turn into moral categories” (Maneri, 2011, p. 77). More than a decade after Dal Lago’s work was published, the mechanisms of linguistic discrimination remain unchanged: “The *clandestino* – explains Maneri – through the labeling process, becomes irremediably illegal (...) which opens the doors to the political slogan: *Clandestini out!*” (*ibid.*, p. 86). All these definitions of “others” are profoundly stereotyped, which means that they are stable and resist modifications.

The word “stereotype” literally means a “solid impression”. Walter Lippmann coined a popular metaphor, calling the stereotype a “picture in our heads” (Lippmann, 1956). He points out both the usefulness of stereotypes, as well as their limitations: “A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a shortcut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.” (*ibid.*, p. 96). National stereotypes can have many important social functions for a community. They usually work as a common reference system which facilitates the communica-

tion within the “in-group”. They build up the sense of belonging to the community and intensify “in-group” ties, while emphasizing the distinction between “us” and “them”. Stereotypes can also provide a “system of criteria” for taking in new members. National stereotypes may be used to demonstrate loyalty towards the group, and they may serve as a basis for creating the “scapegoat” during a period of crisis. In times of difficult social changes and challenges, we can encounter the phenomenon of “media construction of the enemy of the moment” (Maneri, 2011, p. 86). It is easier to accept the unfair treatment of immigrants, their segregation and social inequality, if they are negatively labeled and associated with criminal acts. As Maneri points out, “Once evil has been portrayed, it may be eliminated without any sense of guilt” (*ibid.*, p. 91).

The discourse on the Chinese community in Italy

Talking about the “explosion of interest” in Chinese issues in Italy, Pedone (2008) states that there has been constant growth of both interest and curiosity, but some significant doubts have appeared as well. In the second half of the 1990s, the average Italian believed that Chinese issues did not concern him- or herself personally as China was associated with something “exotic” and “far away”. Italians were mainly interested in “mysterious zodiac signs” and “impossible transcriptions of bizarre names” (Pedone, 2008, p. 5). Over the last years, questions about the Chinese have become more and more frequent and provoking, and the Italians’ attitude towards them has been frequently based on stereotypes: fierce competition, forgery, illegal practices, “slavery” of Chinese workers etc. (*Diventare Laoban*, 2011, p. 51). Today, they are still commonly perceived as unknown and mysterious: China and the Chinese “still seem to be far away from any direct experience, whereas our fantasy is full of images, prejudices, legends which often lead to some distorted conclusions, alimeted by the easy accessible ‘information lies’ (...)” (Pedone, 2008, p. 5). They are also victims of a simplified perception, in spite of the unquestionable heterogeneity of the Chinese community in Italy. Italian sinologists try to neutralize this homogeneous image promoted by the mass media: “(...) coming a little bit closer is enough to understand that our Chinese neighbor does not have much in common with the grotesque and two-dimensional representation widespread by the Italian television” (*ibid.*, p. 10).

There are some offensive clichés concerning Chinese immigrants in Italy, continuously reinforced and reproduced by the Italian mass me-

dia. Ulisse Di Corpo from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has revealed the falsity of the most popular stereotypes on the Chinese community. The first common stereotype regarding the ostensible concealment of the Chinese community members' bodies can be summarized in a simple phrase: "The Chinese never die" (Di Corpo, 2009, p. 58). The source of this stereotype is the famous bestseller *Gomorra* written by investigative journalist Roberto Saviano. The first chapter provides a bloodcurdling, sensational description of a scene taking place in the port of Naples. One of the containers carrying merchandise to be exported to China, suddenly opens up showing its terrifying content: dozens of frozen bodies of Chinese immigrants: "Men, women, even a few children, came tumbling out of the container. All dead. Frozen, stacked one on top of another, packed like sardines. These were the Chinese who never die. The eternal ones, who trade identity papers among themselves" (Saviano, 2006, p. 1).

Many Chinese complain about the negative, simplified and false image of the Chinese community created by Saviano in his *Gomorra*, which has unfortunately influenced the perception of the Chinese in Italy, among the young generation as well (Di Corpo, 2009, p. 59). A book by Raffaele Oriani and Riccardo Staglianò demonstrates just how strong this cliché is. This book, entitled *I cinesi non muoiono mai* ("The Chinese never die"), analyzes common stereotypes related to the Chinese community in Italy. The book cover displays a provocative slogan: "They work, they earn money and they change Italy. This is why we are afraid of them" (Oriani & Staglianò, 2008).

Another stereotype concerns the so-called "Chinese mafia". Di Corpo refers to a popular question posed by Italians when they talk about the Chinese residing in Italy: "They come carrying suitcases with 250,000 euro in cash inside. How is it possible to have all this liquid capital?" (Di Corpo, 2009, p. 59). For an average Italian these practices are strictly connected with criminal activities and organized crime. Yet, the author explains this rare – and "suspicious" – phenomenon using the concept of Chinese friendship and fraternity (*guanxi*) which is an important element of Chinese culture and functions as a foundation of the specific welfare system within the community. He says: "in China friendship has its strict rules such as loyalty, trust, frankness and reciprocity" (*ibid.*). The Chinese manifest a special disposition for helping each other which lasts over a long period and turns into a kind of "gratitude escalation". This characteristic of interpersonal relations between the Chinese is a kind of guarantee of success when they are abroad. The future and living conditions of a Chinese immigrant are directly linked to his family and friendship network: "This sharing of resources and wealth, which is based on

typical forms of friendship, is difficult to understand for us, people from the West”, concludes Di Corpo: “In the western collective imaginary the suitcases full of money serve to pay some illegal activities. An average Italian might easily presume that the frequent use of cash among the Chinese is an indicator of criminal practices” (*ibid.*, p. 60).

Some elements of the image of Chinese community in the Italian press

The goal of this short part of my paper is to make some general comments on the image of Chinese in the Italian press, taking into consideration two analyses carried out by Italian sinologists.

Valentina Pedone’s study (2010) focuses on the contemporary social image of Chinese immigrants in Italy as compared to the way Italian immigrants were perceived in Europe in the 20th century. Pedone indicates four recurring issues concerning the Chinese people in Italy: their settlement in specific areas of Italian cities, called “Chinatowns”; the existence of powerful Chinese criminal organizations called “Triads” in the Italian public opinion; tendency to work exploitation; tendency to isolate from the Italian society (*ibid.*, p. 464).¹² More than a half of the articles analyzed referred to at least one of the following themes: ethnic ghetto, ethnic organized crime, work exploitation, lack of integration. The “Mafia/Triads” element was the most widely represented item in all newspapers taken into consideration.

Although the term “Chinatown” does not have any negative connotation in itself, its context of occurrence very often implicated a pejorative semantic valence (“The creeping Chinatown”; “we have the Chinatown that nobody envies”); this term was frequently used in the context of criminal behaviour (“The organized crime of Roman Chinatown”; “the heart of the Roman Chinatown’s delinquency”). As Pedone observes, Chinatown may be treated as synonym of crime or degradation (“Their shops are the source of the whole district’s degradation”, “[...] one of the most deteriorated districts of the capital – Esquilino, the Roman Chinatown” (*ibid.*, pp. 467-468).

¹² Pedone analysed three Roman newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *Il Tempo* and *Il Messaggero*, from a three years’ timespan (2000-2003). She considered four issues: the ethnic ghetto (keyword: “Chinatown”, referring to different Italian cities); ethnic organized crime (keywords: “Triads”, “Chinese mafia”); work exploitation (keyword: “slavery/slave”, “human trafficking”, “forced work”, “segregation”); refusal to integrate into Italian society (keywords: “impenetrable”, “impermeable”, “silent”, “invisible”, “mysterious”, “closed community”, “hermetic community”).

Regarding the issue of ethnic organized crime, Pedone claims that the phenomenon of the so-called “Chinese Mafia” has been often described in relation to criminal organizations of Chinese origin (“Red Sun, the European branch of the Tong”, “a new Chinese Triad called Sun Len has been identified...”), without any further explanation or specification. Italian journalists tend to define Zhejiang province as “the homeland of many of the Chinese mafia members immigrated to Italy”. Pedone underlines the extreme superficiality with which these topics were approached. The terminology used for depicting the Chinese is often formulaic and does not concern the actual situation in Italy, but refers to the Chinese communities in other countries and other social contexts: “Triads”, “cho-chai/sharks”, “Red Sun”, “initiation rituals”, “yellow mafia”. Such a linguistic practice “reveals the prejudice of considering organized crime a phenomenon strictly connected to the Chinese culture and the social organization of Chinese people” (*ibid.*, pp. 471-472). There are some suggestive examples of stereotyped perception of this issue: “It is true that we experience now a real yellow invasion, but we cannot counteract it as long as it is legal”, “traffic managed by the Chinese mafia”, “workforce exploitation has always been a strong point of the Oriental mafias, the Triads”, “the Triads’ shadow”. To conclude this part of her analysis, Pedone quotes a comment from *Il Messaggero*: “Behind all this noise, so strange in the mandarins’ eternally muffled world, there would be drugs. For many years, the Chinese Mafia has prospered thanks to drug trafficking (...). Nothing is confirmed. And there are a lot of mysteries” (*ibid.*, p. 472). Regarding the “exploitation of Chinese workers”, Pedone claims there are two important categories present in the media image: patrons (members of criminal organizations) and their “slaves”, “human merchandise” (*it. merce umana*), “prisoners”. Some examples emerged during the analysis of newspapers: “They work like slaves in inhuman conditions and they never rebel”; “They work as slaves carrying tones of goods that came from the East”; “a [Chinese] tailor liberated from slavery”; “Prisoners of the black market, slaves destined for the handloom” (*ibid.*, p. 476-477).¹³

The analysis of the last phenomenon – a voluntary isolation from the host society, revealed some typical expressions frequently used by Italian newspapers. Journalists often describe the Chinese community as “prone to mystery/reserve/silence/refusal”. Pedone explains that this characteristic may be connected with the Chinese’s scarce knowledge of Italian language in comparison to other foreign communities living in Italy. She explains: “Studying Italian language (...) is not considered an urgent

¹³ In December 2007 the Italian national TV Rai broadcast a documentary called *Slaves of Luxury*, which revealed the connection between some luxury Italian brands such as Prada and Ferragamo and illegal low-paid Chinese labour (Spolar, 2009).

everyday life necessity and it is often postponed until the second generation” (*ibid.*, p. 417). The newspapers’ perception of this phenomenon is expressed by means of specific terms and expressions: “hermetic Chinese community”, “cold, indifferent and imperturbable”, “hermetic circle of the Chinese from Esquilino”, “the conspiracy of silence (*omertà*) of their community is often impenetrable”, “silent and invisible, their activities seem to be enveloped in mystery”, “quiet life, incomprehensible language and impenetrability of the Chinese community give room for many hypotheses” (*ibid.*, p. 480).

Enza Mirante’s study (2008) focuses on two common categories, or keywords used by Italian newspapers to characterize the Chinese community: “Chinatown” and “yellow mafia”. The aim of the analysis was to evaluate the frequency of use of these terms as well as to estimate how their occurrence in newspapers could create a sense of menace for Italian citizens. The expression “Chinatown” has been mostly associated with the Esquilino district as a “zone with high concentration of Chinese”. Some articles present the local inhabitants of Esquilino as “victims of robbery”, “robbed” by the Chinese of their own territory. In these cases, the presence of the Chinese is associated with the notions of decline or degradation. “Chinatown” hardly ever occurs in a positive context. An interview with a Chinese businessman answering accusations by Italian merchants is one of the few exceptions: “it is a fruit of free competition and the ability of being innovative and flexible, [the fruit] of sacrificing for work and solidarity. This is Chinatown.” However, this comment is rather an example of an auto-stereotype of the Chinese community in Italy (Mirante, 2008, p. 78).

The second item relevant for the analysis was the notion “yellow mafia”, overrepresented in various articles. Mirante defines this journalistic practice as a “persuasive bombardment comparable to a real disparaging campaign” (*ibid.*, p. 81). The results of the study show the important role of the local press in radicalizing negative stereotypes. In 50% of the articles concerning “the yellow mafia” there was no indication of any source, so it was impossible to verify the information contained in the texts (*ibid.*, p. 82). When discussing Chinese criminal organizations, Italian newspapers used such expressions as: “Cosa Nostla” (a visible reference to the Chinese way of pronouncing “r”), “Triads”, “*Cupola di Zhejiang*” (*cupola* means – head of an organized crime mafia body), “Tong”, “Little China *capitolina*” (reference to Capitoline Hill) “Dragon’s business” (*ibid.*, p. 87).

Maneri’s study (2011) shows that nowadays the concept of “otherness” is portrayed in Italy using the same media language as several years ago. We come across different notions and expressions, such as “Chinatown”, “ghetto”, “of every colour”, “casbah”, “feud”, all of which these categories

function as synonyms of “deterioration”, “danger”, “devastation”, “degradation”. While talking about ethnic districts in the Italian cities, journalists often refer to the concept of *degrado* which means “urban decay”. The presence of immigrants constitute a threat to local citizens as well as an “insult to the city’s decorum”. In the common perception, such “impure” urban zones are directly linked to violence, marginality, deviance or irregularity. “The discourse on *degrado* interconnects immigration, marginality and crime within a single universe of cross-references” (Maneri, 2011, p. 91). This is the case of Rome’s Esquilino and Milan’s Sarpi zone – both labeled as Italian Chinatowns.

Final remarks

Research conducted by Italian scholars into the media image of the Chinese community in Italy revealed some dominant elements: illegal work, work exploitation and inhuman work conditions, “job-thieves”, fierce competition and organized crime as threat to the public order (Pedone, 2008 and 2010; Mirante, 2008; Di Corpo, 2009; *Diventare Laoban*, 2011). Another important element of the way Chinese are portrayed is the danger they pose to traditional, “made in Italy” products.¹⁴ Some Chinese entrepreneurs go beyond stereotypes: instead of being “slaves of the Italian *haute couture*” they become its main actors; such an example is Xu Qiulin, the owner of Giupel textile company¹⁵ and the first foreign entrepreneur registered by Confindustria.¹⁶

There is an interesting video by Voice of America available online, entitled *Ancient Italian Towns Turn Against the Chinese*, which presents the contemporary situation in Prato.¹⁷ It shows both Chinese workers and Italian autochthons complaining about their current situation. One of the film’s protagonists, Maurizio Bonas, has founded an organization called “Made in Italy”, in order to protect local producers. He explains that every nation should protect its own culture and tradition: “We have to defend the people who are working here. We must not keep thinking of

¹⁴ As Donadio (2010) states: “enabled by Italy’s weak institutions and high tolerance for rule-bending, the Chinese have blurred the line between ‘Made in China’ and ‘Made in Italy’”.

¹⁵ The company produces leather, fur and fur products which are mainly sold in Asia and Europe. Some of its brands like Gi-Seven or Simply Vee are already well-known in Italy (www.giupel.it and *Immigrati Imprenditori*, 2009, p. 195).

¹⁶ The main organization representing Italian manufacturing and services companies (www.confindustria.it).

¹⁷ Retrieved from <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/Ancient-Italian-Town-Turns-Against-Chinese-Migrants-10597568.html> (February 21, 2012).

helping the others while not seen [sic!] what is happening in our home". The narrator's comment in the video displays the same alarmist tone that is commonly used by journalists when talking about migration issues: "In many ways Prato is a microcosm of the challenges Europe is facing: a historic place with proud traditions, now threatened by new ways in a changing world". It could be expected that the Chinese, who are starting to be perceived as the most "competent" of all the immigrant groups in Italy (Volpato & Durante, 2009), will consequently become a target of "envious prejudice" (*ibid.*, p. 10). Whether it is indeed going to be so will only be known in the following years.

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