

# Hopefully a Good Life

## Cosmopolitan Chinese Migrant Families in Urban Italy

Grazia Ting Deng

*Ca' Foscari University of Venice*

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**Abstract:** Chinese residents have grown to be one of the most prosperous migrant groups in Italy since their mass migration from China in the 1980s. Alongside their rapid upward economic mobility, parents and children within the same families have shown generational differences in their understandings of the good life. While older generations believed that the good life means economic mobility, which is achieved through their labour and migration, younger generations' definition of the good life, rooted in their negative experiences of racialization, is associated with social recognition. Such generational differences stem from the shifting tensions between the contested racial and national orders in association with Italy's economic stagnation and China's global ascendancy. Yet, both generations of these desiring subjects have manifested their own conceptions of cosmopolitan Chinese-ness to survive precarity and to aspire to a better life both economically and socially. Their family stories thus contribute to anthropological debates on how people envision their futures between hope and precarity, expectation and uncertainty, and privilege and disadvantages amid racialized class terrains, generational tensions, and geopolitical transformation of the world order.

**Keywords:** migration; racialization; hope; cosmopolitanism; Chinese diaspora; Italy

**Résumé:** Les résidents chinois sont devenus l'un des groupes de migrants les plus prospères d'Italie depuis leur migration massive de Chine dans les années 1980. Les parents et les enfants d'une même famille ont montré des différences générationnelles dans leur compréhension de ce qu'est une vie agréable, parallèlement à leur rapide ascension économique. Alors que les générations plus anciennes pensaient qu'une vie agréable était synonyme de mobilité économique, obtenue grâce à leur travail et à la migration, la définition d'une vie agréable chez les jeunes générations, enracinée dans leurs expériences

négatives de racialisation, est associée à la reconnaissance sociale. Ces différences générationnelles résultent des tensions changeantes entre les différentes races et systèmes nationaux contestés, associées à la stagnation économique de l'Italie et à l'ascension mondiale de la Chine. Pourtant, les deux générations de ces sujets aspirants ont manifesté leurs propres conceptions du cosmopolitisme chinois pour survivre à la précarité et aspirer à une vie meilleure, tant sur le plan économique que social. Leurs histoires familiales contribuent ainsi aux débats anthropologiques consacrés à la manière dont les gens envisagent leur avenir entre espoir et précarité, attente et incertitude, et privilèges et désavantages dans un contexte de classes racialisées, de tensions générationnelles et de transformation géopolitique de l'ordre mondial.

**Mots-clés :** migration ; racialisation ; espoir ; cosmopolitisme ; diaspora chinoise ; Italie

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Guobin was born in the urban periphery of Wenzhou, a city in China's southern Zhejiang province, but he had spent most of his teenage years in a coastal town in Marche, Italy. Guobin's father was a shoemaker in China before migrating to Italy in the late 1990s. His wife and two children reunited with him when his migration identity was legalized. That was in 2004, when Guobin was 11 years old. Guobin's family then started running their own small footwear manufacturing workshop—a business that native Italians often associate with a supposed mysterious *mafia cinese* or “Chinese mafia.” I met Guobin for the first time in 2014 when he was a second-year university student in psychology. He told me excitedly about his aspirations to “see the world” by going to the US or other European countries to continue his studies. He was eager to find a white-collar job and live a different life from that of his parents and the older-generation Chinese in Italy in general. When I met his parents, they seemed to be proud of their son, who was the first college student in the family, but also expressed their doubts about Guobin's white-collar career prospects. They believed that running a small business would be the right path for Chinese people to survive economic uncertainties and precarity in Italy. His parents finally closed their shoemaking workshop in 2019 and opened a large hardware store. In the meantime, Guobin received his master's degree and returned home to help manage the new family business after failing to find a job related to his major.

Guobin's family is one of the many Chinese migrant families that have achieved economic and social mobility from working as undocumented labour

to owning a micro-enterprise in a relatively short period of time. Alongside the rapid improvement of economic conditions, parents and children within the same families have shown their value transformations in understanding what the good life is. This article thus examines the changing definitions of the good life within these diasporic Chinese families in Italy and how they seek to realize it. In doing so, I incorporate a transnational perspective into the class analysis of Chinese families' migration histories. Such analysis is situated in the shifting tensions between the contested racial and national orders stemming from Italy's economic stagnation and China's global ascendancy. The tensions are two-sided: on the one hand, Chinese migrants' growing economic power, as well as that of their country of origin, has increasingly complicated their image as a racialized underclass minority; on the other hand, Italy is no longer a desirable destination for Chinese labour migration and the racialized perceptions of Italians become a counter-example for Chinese residents' pursuit of the good life in this country.

This article thus looks at how Chinese migrants and their children, as precarious but desiring subjects, cultivate the hopes that also sustain them in their enduring pursuit of a good life. In this process, hope becomes a distinct form of labour (Pedersen 2012). It works as a "unique temporal attitude" that appropriates the future as a "model for actions in a present moment" (Miyazaki 2006, 157). This temporal dimension denotes its intimate relationship with desire that presupposes human agency and moral engagement (Crapanzano 2003). But, hope is structurally and historically produced and unequally distributed (Parla 2019). It thus involves different forms of "the ethical imagination" about the future (Moore 2011). In the case of Chinese migrants in Italy, older and younger generations have their own distinct ethical imaginations about what the good life means to them and how to become hopeful by enabling their capacities and capabilities (Anderson 2006). Their understandings of subject formation are situated in changing historical contexts where different ethical issues arise and provide different conditions for the problematization of self and, thus, for value transformation (Moore 2011). Therefore, hope in this article is not only a category of experience, but also a method for understanding the relationship between morality and everyday human practices (Zigon 2009).

Yet, regardless of the different ways of hoping and the contents of their hopes, as I will show, both generations have manifested their own cosmopolitan Chinese-ness as "the capacity to aspire," although in different fashions (Appadurai 2013, 179–195). Here, I use "cosmopolitanism" as a way of life "from

below” that is “driven by the exigencies of exclusion rather than by the privileges (and ennui) of inclusion” either economically or socially (Appadurai 2013, 198). This kind of “cosmopolitanism from below” thus is closely associated with “the politics of hope;” it aims to produce a preferred global geography by strategically extending and expanding the local, the every day, and the familiar, “in order to combat its indignities and exclusions” (ibid., 198). Yet, Chinese migrants’ cosmopolitanism, in terms of how it is understood and practiced, has changed over generations. The older generation’s cosmopolitanism lies in their self-reliant labour and entrepreneurship through international migration away from “home.” The younger generations, whose life is rooted in an acute awareness of racialization, have become cosmopolitan Chinese as they embrace the ascendancy of China as a new way towards the good life, both economically and socially. This article thus contributes to anthropological debates on how people’s aspirations regarding their futures fluctuate between hope and precarity, expectation and uncertainty, and privilege and disadvantages amid racialized class terrains, generational tensions, and geopolitical transformation of the world order.

The family stories that I tell in this article are unfinished stories of “becoming,” in which older and younger generations navigated social, structural and material constraints of the transnational labour market regime in the changing historical moments for a hopeful better future (Biehl and Locke 2017). Their stories are based on my long-term ethnographic study of Chinese migration to Italy, composed of the major fieldwork for my PhD dissertation on Chinese-managed coffee bars in Bologna between 2014 and 2015, and the subsequent annual visits to Italy, virtual interviews and communications with my interlocutors, and social media follow-ups since then. My Chinese interlocutors are primarily composed of older-generation Chinese residents who migrated to Italy after the 1980s and younger-generation Chinese adults in their late teens, 20s and 30s who were born or raised in Italy. All of these interlocutors’ families own one or more enterprises, while the younger generations are not necessarily involved in the everyday running of their family businesses. My analysis has also benefited from my long-term interactions with native Italian interlocutors. Such interactions have enabled me to experience and understand first-hand the local context of migrant reception in which Chinese migrants live.

I am aware that my own intersectional positionality has also shaped my fieldwork experience in Italy and my relationship with my interlocutors

(Abu-Lughod 1990; Ong 1996; Rosaldo 1989). I encountered similar institutional and everyday racist encounters as my Chinese interlocutors due to my Chinese appearance, even if I and many of them spoke fluent Italian. In the Chinese communities, I found it much easier to connect with younger Chinese residents and participate in their everyday life, regardless of their linguistic and educational backgrounds. In contrast, it was more difficult for me to gain the trust of the older generation of Chinese residents, who tended to be more reluctant to open up. My interactions with them were mostly limited to casual conversations and informal interviews in their workplace, which I repeatedly visited unless I visited their homes or attended their family events through their children. Yet, all these ethnographic encounters reflect the complex power dynamics in terms of race, gender, age, and social class, among others, and have contributed to my ethnographic knowledge (Deng 2022).

### **From “Chinese Mafia” to “Chinese Bosses”**

“But China is like Venus for us.” At a video call when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in Italy in 2020, an Italian interlocutor used the metaphor of “Venus” to describe the remoteness of China in the Italian imaginary. The widespread theory was that the *virus cinese*, as various Italian media outlets referred to COVID-19, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, would not affect them as long as they stayed away from *i cinesi*, or the Chinese, who were assumed to have close contacts with China. The pandemic seemed to have legitimized marginalization, racism, and xenophobia against Chinese people, regardless of their actual exposure to the virus. Yet, to be fair, despite the widespread racism, many Italians have been friendly with Chinese residents on a personal level. They often use the term *orientali* to refer to Chinese people, or, more broadly, East Asians, to compliment them on their ancient civilization or distinctive culture. However, with the spread of the pandemic, the romanticized imagination of this “oriental” civilization and the people who are supposedly from there became a fear of the unknown. Like those in many other white-dominant societies, people of Chinese descent are also perpetual foreigners and unassimilable others in Italy (Zhou 2012).

The mass migration from China has further complicated Italians’ Orientalist gaze toward Chinese people. Most of the Chinese residents in Italy are the result of mass migration from China that began in the 1980s. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrant workers settled in Italy in the following three decades, and the influx did not slow down until the country’s economic

recession of 2008. Currently, there are around 300,000 registered Chinese residents in Italy. They constitute the fourth largest immigrant population in the country, following Romanians, Moroccans, and Albanians. They have also demonstrated a strong tendency to self-employment. One out of every five to six Chinese residents in Italy had a registered *impresa individuale* (individual enterprise) under their name in 2020 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2021). Unlike other European countries where Chinese migrants are from diverse regions, those in Italy are predominantly from the rural areas of Wenzhou and its neighbouring hinterlands in southern Zhejiang province on the southeast coast of China.<sup>1</sup> Their predominance was built on the transnational connections resulting from the earlier settlement of Southern Zhejiang migrants in Italy in the early twentieth century. But more importantly, it appeared to be an excellent match between the small-scale and well-networked household-based mode of production popular in the Wenzhou area and the Made-in-Italy mode of regional development that focused on small-scale family capitalism and decentralized production (Tomba 1999).

Subcontracting manufacturing, restaurants, and import-export trading became three early occupational niches where Chinese self-employed owners and labour migrants made a living in the 1980s and 1990s. The manufacturing workshops, usually clustered in peripheral *distretti industriali* (industrial districts), had recruited the majority of the Chinese newcomers to respond to Made-in-Italy's high demand for low-wage, flexible, and informal labour. In the same period, Chinese restaurants targeting local middle-class urbanities had expanded from several large cities to smaller urban areas and even provincial towns. A much smaller number of trading companies and related wholesale businesses, though, were usually concentrated in Rome, Florence, Milan, and other big cities. Regardless of the occupational niches, Chinese owners typically provide lodging and food to their co-national workers and the owners themselves eat and work together with the workers. In the cases of manufacturing workshops, their workplaces are also commonly their residence. In the cases of other businesses, their residence is usually close to the restaurants or shops and even in the same building. Both self-employed owners and their workers live their lives around their workplaces.

One of the widespread rumours about Chinese residents and their economies in Italy revolves around the mysterious *mafia cinese*. Originally used to describe racialized Southerners within Italy's national border, the notion of "mafia" represents wider anti-immigrant politics and racism in Italy (Cole 1997;

Schneider and Schneider 1994). It offers a convenient label for imagining Chinese migrants and other *stranieri* (foreigners) and interpreting their economic and social activities. Chinese businesses are often subject to more surprise inspections than their Italian counterparts, as the Italian state and local authorities assume that Chinese owners are more prone to tax evasion, making use of undocumented labour, engaging in exploitative working conditions and unlawful activities, violating human rights, as well as other mafia-related activities. Such selective inspections are particularly noticeable in Prato—a Tuscan textile city that hosts the densest Chinese population in Europe—following the tragedy of a factory fire that took the lives of seven Chinese migrants in 2013 (Krause 2018).

Chinese migrants' occupational niches have rapidly diversified in the new Millennium. The removal of the ban on new migrant entrepreneurship that lasted from 1990 to 1998 allowed many informal workshops to emerge from the shadow economy.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, those who were looking for start-up opportunities or business transformation were able to try their luck in other formal economic sectors. Food services are no longer limited to “traditional” Chinese restaurants but also include Japanese, Thai, and pan-Asian cuisines, as well as Italian restaurants and coffee bars. Other small-scale storefront businesses, such as garment shops, cheap consumer-goods shops, grocery stores, barber shops, nail salons, and massage parlours, have also attracted a large number of Chinese entrepreneurs. Only one third of Chinese residents still work in the manufacturing industry, and nearly two thirds are recruited in commerce (54.1 percent) and other service industries (9.5 percent) by 2020 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2021).

The diversification of Chinese labour and their economic niches, however, has not led to positive changes in how local Italians perceive them. Their “oriental” appearances in visibly large numbers further pose a threat to Italian economic order and national identity. A Sinophobic discourse in its Orientalist fashion fits comfortably within Italy's broader anti-immigrant and nationalist discourses that criminalize, marginalize, and racialize newcomers predominantly from the Global South. The Italian public discourses commonly perceive *i cinesi* or “the Chinese” as money grubbers who only care about working and nothing else. Chinese-run storefronts are notoriously “always open” in Italy, which appears to break the social norms of midday breaks that small Italian-run shops typically take. Many Italians I talked to believe that “the Chinese work too much,” in contrast to Italians who enjoy leisure time,

work-life balance, and quality of life. The structural inequality that is embedded in Italy's segmented labour market regime is thus reduced to some sort of insurmountable cultural differences in work ethics and further contributes to nationalist boundary-making (Morning and Maneri 2023). This workaholic stereotype also contributes to the prejudice against *i cinesi*, who are thought to cling to economic crimes, unfair competition, and unlawful activities, which are consistent with the enduring *Chinese mafia* stereotypes.

Meanwhile, Chinese migrants' economic growth over the last four decades overlaps with China's growth as a global economic power. "China's threat" is not just a geopolitical concern, but seems to have become a "real" concern that affects local Italians' everyday life. Since China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, Made-in-China products have flooded the Italian market. More and more Chinese-run storefronts have emerged in both big urban centers and small provincial towns, selling primarily what local Italians call *prodotti cinesi* (Chinese products). The term has also become synonymous with low-cost, low-quality merchandise in contrast to Made-in-Italy commodities. Moreover, Chinese transnational corporations operating in Italy and China's state capital have purchased shares of large energy companies, banks, industries, and infrastructure projects. More and more Italians have become wage workers for the *padroni cinesi*, or "Chinese bosses," and the nationalist discourses share the same concerns that "the Chinese" will become the *padrone* (boss) of the whole country. The alarmist public opinions of "China's threat" do not differentiate between Chinese migrant entrepreneurs who primarily run small family businesses and the big Chinese transnational capital, as people of Chinese descent are often equated with China in the same racialized category. While some leftist Italians are still nostalgic for a romanticized Maoist China, many others have mixed sentiments towards China's rise and Chinese people more generally, which merges admiration and resentment.

### **Labour Towards the Good Life**

Uncle Jianjun has been in Italy since 1994, when he was 29 years old. Over these nearly thirty years, he has transformed from an undocumented migrant in debt to a small migrant entrepreneur owning a coffee bar business and its property. He and his family have also bought a four-bedroom apartment in Bologna and another one in the urban area close to the mountain village where he was originally from in China. Yet, none of his family members lives there, as his wife



and three children all joined him in Italy in the late 1990s. Two of his three children received college degrees, and all of them are now married. He is now the grandfather of three children, all of whom were born in Bologna. Playing with his grandchildren has become his new favourite pastime. Over the last ten years since I met him and his family, his children regularly take several days off from work and go to the beach or travel for holidays like Italian middle-class urbanities. Yet, I am not aware of Uncle Jianjun doing so. Although his family's economic conditions have improved tremendously, Uncle Jianjun has maintained his busy life, contributing his labour to the family economy.

Uncle Jianjun is a typical industrious first-generation Chinese migrant in Italy. He told me that without adequate formal education, labour is his only recourse to pursuing the *hao rizi* (good life). He is also one of millions of rural migrants who left their villages in search of employment and economic opportunities elsewhere in post-Maoist China when the country embraced global capitalism. The Chinese state's *hukou* or "household registration" system, however, has labelled these rural populations as *nongmin* (peasants), characterized by pre-modern backwardness and back-breaking labour.<sup>3</sup> Such an inferior label could not be removed even if this person has moved to an urban area and no longer lives on agriculture. Apart from disposable labour, Uncle Jianjun emphasized, in particular, the ethos of *chuang*, "dare to venture," that his generation of Chinese migrants from Southern Zhejiang maintains. It is a kind of cosmopolitan sensitivity that is associated with migration and entrepreneurship and embedded in their regional identity. The surplus rural labour from this area is historically famous for emigration due to environmental and socioeconomic circumstances, and people from the Wenzhou area are well-known in China as merchants, traders, and artisans. Uncle Jianjun and many other Chinese interlocutors I spoke with in his generation were also aware of this regional reputation and believed that it is this cosmopolitan ethos that has allowed them to achieve economic prosperity and, thus, the good life they have aspired to.

For these Chinese migrants, their hope lies in spatial mobility, which allows them to pursue their ethical imagination for a good life somewhere else. In their stories of "becoming," both geographic destination and occupational niche become less important. Instead, self-employment appears to be an effective way of resisting exploitation by others and promises greater economic autonomy, despite the higher business risks. None of them saw any country or business as the end of the road in their entrepreneurial careers for capital accumulation.

When one business does not work out or measure up to their expectations, they often switch to another. Uncle Jianjun and many other Chinese migrants in Italy have already engaged in internal migration before settling in Italy. They quit their migrant jobs or even terminated their small businesses in China, not because of extreme poverty but rather because Europe was a land of hope that promised a better life with greater economic rewards. Through their strong transnational networks, they eventually settled in Italy and engaged in various economic activities and business ventures in an attempt to maximize their family income against the backdrop of the changing economic circumstances.

Older-generation Chinese migrants' understanding of the good life also demonstrates a family-oriented and trans-generational feature that is associated with a patriarchal family structure and reflects the nature of the kin-based mode of production. Children thus constitute important labour in their family economies. They commonly started working alongside their parents in their early teenage years by taking on some domestic work and sibling care. Reciprocally, their parents often feel the responsibility to help their sons set up a small business and to marry their daughters to someone who already has or has the possibility of starting up a small business. In this sense, their ethical imagination of the good life represents a future-oriented logic of development, revolving around both their own subject formation and the personhood cultivation of their children in regard to reproduction and the continuation of the family line. Uncle Jianjun has conflicted feelings towards his children and other younger-generation Chinese in Italy. On the one hand, he is pleased to see that his children do not need to experience the hardship that he and other older-generation Chinese migrants experienced; on the other hand, he also laments that the younger generation no longer has the same ethos of *chuang* as their parents' generation since they are already living the good life.

### **The Good Life under the Shadow of Racialization**

Younger generations of Chinese in Italy have shown considerable intragroup diversity in terms of education, which has further impacted their occupational choices. On the one hand, receiving a college degree is no longer news among younger generations of Chinese migrants who were born or at least received a complete school education in Italy. An increasing number of better-educated, middle-class Chinese aspire to or have already been recruited into the white-collar labour market. They have become lawyers, doctors, bankers, and other professionals, leaving their family business behind. On the other hand, those

who have not obtained a college degree have been excluded from the mainstream labour market. These are primarily people who directly transferred to Italian middle school or dropped out after a year or two in senior secondary schools. Several interlocutors among these drop-outs described their school experiences as “painful,” as they confronted huge language barriers that led to poor academic performance. They claimed that staying in school was just a waste of time since there was no hope for them to finish, considering that they usually had a busy schedule serving as unpaid labour in their family, especially when they were among the older children.

Nevertheless, these children of Chinese migrants have still enjoyed more occupational and entrepreneurial opportunities than their parents, as they have acquired better Italian language skills and relatively more education. They were usually able to read and speak Italian and handle daily communication more easily than their parents, having benefited from learning the language and attending Italian schools at a younger age, even if for just short periods of time. While older-generation Chinese migrants were largely hidden in peripheral sweatshops, back kitchens or other invisible workplaces, making a living by selling their manual labour or through self-exploitation, their children have become much more effective in interactive service work that requires more Italian fluency. Thus, the coming of age of these migrant children has allowed many families, who have already accumulated some economic capital, to start up or upgrade their family enterprises into less labour-intensive businesses, usually in commerce and other service industries in post-industrial cities, where they are able to interact with people and enjoy their urban lives. Those remaining in the manufacturing industry have often created and promoted their own Made-in-Italy brands in both the Italian and transnational fashion markets. Younger-generation Chinese entrepreneurs have also increasingly liberated themselves from exploiting their own manual labour. Many of them have taken over their parents’ managerial role in the family business and hire other Chinese or migrant workers to do the labour part of the job. They have developed new online business niches and introduced more modern ways of management with digital technologies.

Guobin’s brother-in-law told me: “The generation of our parents thought *wenbao* [the state of having enough food and clothing] is the good life. For us younger generations, money is no longer a thing. We are looking for something else. We are pursuing social status.” We were at Guobin’s wedding banquet in January 2023. More than 300 guests gathered in a ballroom of a Chinese-owned

hotel. There was only one white man sitting and eating quietly at another round table without any communication with other Chinese guests. The lavishness of the feast was evidenced by an entire king crab gracing the middle of each table, surrounded by thinly sliced Jamón ibérico and other appetizers. A quick Google search revealed the price of the bottles of seemingly nondescript wine at each table was approximately 150 euros per bottle. Looking around, I could easily find the logos of Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and other luxury fashion brands. The hosts also held a lottery, and prizes included a MacBook Pro, a pair of Bose Bluetooth earbuds, or at least a massive stuffed teddy bear. An interlocutor in her late twenties who also attended the wedding told me that the ostentatious display of wealth at Guobin's wedding was quite typical among the wealthier Chinese migrant families in Italy. The conspicuous consumption at the wedding by both the hosts and the guests showed off the exchange value (price) of the luxury brands on display, rather than their noneconomic qualities (good taste, refinement). This echoes Osburg's (2013) argument that for many nouveau-riche Chinese, elite social status is rooted in a notion of "recognition" rather than "distinction."

The economic and lived hardships that the older generation Chinese immigrants experienced as undocumented immigrants are largely relegated to a collective memory that their children are not familiar with. Like the nouveau riche in post-Maoist China, Chinese migrants in Italy often make correlations between their economic ability to consume goods and services and social status (Zhang 2001). Older-generation Chinese in Italy often invest in real estate by buying new urban apartments or renovating old village houses, in addition to purchasing luxurious cars, designer brands, and other expensive commodities, to show their economic mobility. For the younger-generation Chinese in Italy, conspicuous consumption is not limited to luxurious commodities, but, more importantly, to the urban middle-class lifestyle. Younger-generation adults I know often try different restaurants, take breaks from work to travel to other countries for holidays, and follow new fashions online. Some have developed photography as a hobby and bought expensive professional cameras; the young men work out regularly at the gym while many young women became knowledgeable in various cosmetics and make-overs. Several interlocutors also claimed to be more open-minded urban subjects in contrast to older generations, who still exhibit a *nongmin* mentality, considered backward, conservative, and provincial.

The improved economic situation also allowed more and more Chinese families to invest in their children's education. "We Chinese in Italy also attach

much greater importance to education now,” an Italian-born Chinese student from an Ivy League university told me. This statement claimed a changing attitude towards education within Chinese communities and between younger-generation Chinese and the older generation. More importantly, it reflects the catching-up attitude of wealthier Chinese families in Italy. Younger-generation parents, in particular, many of whom migrated to Italy in their teenage years, often regretted their own lack of educational opportunities due to both language barriers and the demand for their labour under family pressure. A restaurant owner and his wife, both in their mid-thirties, told me that their only expectation for their three children is *dushu*, which literally means “reading books,” but which, in this context, implies receiving a formal school education. Guobin and his wife, who was also a child of Chinese migrants, showed their strong desire to send their future children to top American universities no matter how much they would have to pay, as “money is not a problem.” In addition to school education, many younger parents also enroll their children in extracurricular activities and cultivate their skills, including acquiring foreign languages, learning musical instruments, playing sports, and painting. These extracurricular activities are a hallmark of the hyper-competitive neoliberal understanding of childrearing present in today’s China. Indeed, children’s education in contemporary China is strictly associated with the new definitions of good parenting among urban, middle-class parents (Kuan 2015). Providing the best education they can has become a way to show that Chinese migrant families, once *nongmin* and undocumented migrants, have also achieved urban modernity, progress, and self-development—something their families strived to achieve through international migration.

Nevertheless, the children of Chinese migrants, whose families have widely achieved a certain economic mobility, have not received the corresponding social recognition as suggested by Bourdieu’s (1987) theory about the convertible nature of different forms of capital. The racism and social exclusion they encountered in one form or another remains a lived experience that they share with their parents’ generation. Being born and raised in the same country and sharing the same language with Italians has not liberated them from racialization and discrimination.

Some younger-generation Chinese have become vocal and socio-politically engaged in fighting anti-Chinese racism. Wuming is one of them. Born in 1988 and a child of a Chinese restaurant owner, Wuming is one of the few third-generation Chinese adults I personally know in Italy. Working as a full-time

software developer, he spends most of his leisure time volunteering for an influential association for second-generation Chinese in Italy, of which he was one of the founders. He told me that he felt it was his “duty” to serve the Chinese community and speak up for Chinese people. After a virtual presentation of a documentary about anti-Chinese racism during the pandemic, he excitedly told me about how Chinese younger generations in Italy are increasingly mobilized in political engagement for racial equality and social justice. “My association was only one of the first... Now, there are many other such groups in Italy... It accelerated automatically! ... .” During the pandemic, younger activists, ambitious entrepreneurs, and ethnic associations within Chinese communities have also pushed back against Sinophobia. An open letter to “Italian friends” from a Chinese community leader, who is also a second-generation Chinese and an entrepreneur, was issued only two days after the lockdown of Wuhan. This was then followed by other efforts that included the political engagement of Prato’s first two local councillors of Chinese descent and forms of social activism such as the protest of a child of Chinese migrants with a sign “*non sono un virus* (I’m not a virus)” in the historical center of Florence. Some others were also engaged in distributing face masks on the streets or donating them to local institutions, as well as other activities aiming to show Italian society their new and positive Chinese image.

The construction of a new Chinese image has further reinforced a particular generation-specific identity that is forming among Chinese younger generations in Italy. Many seek to demonstrate their differences from the older generations who “only know working.” An association for Chinese younger generations in Italy posted their “mission” on their website. It states:

We ... [are] tired of being judged and classified for our external shell. We try to dispel clichés such as the general closure of the Chinese community in Italy. The closure exists but is limited mainly to the first generation, justifiable by linguistic problems ... and by the difficult economic conditions that leave no time to think about anything other than work. We are their children, born or raised in Italy, who have attended Italian schools, live an Italian lifestyle, speak Italian as a mother tongue, and have new needs and life perspectives. Just like anyone else born or raised in Italy, we do not need to be integrated. We second generations are not immigrants; we have always been here in this country.<sup>4</sup>

Such a manifesto-like statement shows the frustration of the younger generation of Chinese at being treated as immigrant others. It also expresses their strong desire to be socially recognized by the host society. In doing so, it draws a clear boundary between them and the older generation Chinese migrants, who came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and who need to be integrated. By using the logic of *ius culturae*, it attempts to claim that the younger-generation Chinese who have grown up in Italy and adopted Italian culture deserve a legitimate Italian identity in this country. While it pointed out the correlation between labour and ways of life from social and class perspectives, this statement has essentialized the notion of culture and internalized anti-immigrant discourses of cultural differences. It thus has paradoxically justified social exclusion and discrimination against other immigrants and ethnic minorities in Italy, including their parents' generations.

### **Towards the Good Life in the Global China**

Having grown up in Italy since the age of nine, Enning recently received her BA in law, *summa cum laude*, from the University of Bologna, and started working as an intern in a labour consulting firm. She told me that her boss recruited her with the idea of expanding their clientele to the Chinese community. She feels marginalized at her workplace, where she is the only Chinese person, and has had to deal with her toxic mentor's racial harassment. She has considered looking for another place, but wonders if the work environment would really be any different. The bigger question that she asks herself is if she should continue working as a wage worker in an Italian company and accept a miserable salary for at least ten years before she might have an opportunity to run her own firm.

Enning is not the only one who has such concerns. Italy's uncertain economic environment, its precarious mainstream labour market with its high rate of unemployment, low pay, and unpromising economic returns have already brought Guobin and many other children of Chinese migrants who had received higher education back to their family businesses. One of Uncle Jianjun's daughters, who has a BA in economics, quit her underpaid job as an assistant in an accounting firm after a year and followed her father's advice to work as a full-time barista in their family's coffee bar. Another interlocutor, who has grown up in Italy since the age of five and is a pianist who studied at a prestigious Italian conservatory, gave up his music career and opened a small fashion jewelry shop, a business niche in which his parents had been working

for years. Italy's precarious labour market thus has, to some extent, tempered the tensions between two generations of Chinese residents in Italy in terms of how to pursue a good life while navigating uncertainty and precarity.

Younger-generation Chinese' struggles for social recognition in Italy also co-exist with their diasporic nationalism and increasing ethnic consciousness. Their ethical imagination of the future and the good life lies in maintaining their cosmopolitan Chinese-ness. Rofel and Yanagisako's (2020) study of the Chinese-Italian global fashion industry also shows that the discourse of cosmopolitanism is essential to their transnational capitalism. For younger-generation Chinese in Italy, in particular, cosmopolitan Chinese-ness constitutes a form of "ethnic capital" crucial to making their hopeful bodies. In contrast to Italy's chronic economic stagnation, China has risen to become a global economic power that also plays an increasingly important role in shaping the economic and cultural lives of the diasporic Chinese populations in Italy. In this context, China is no longer just a remote imaginary "root" for Italian-born or raised Chinese who have limited or no lived experiences there, but is now also an opportunity and hope for surviving economically uncertain times in Italy and beyond.

Younger Chinese middle-class professionals in Italy often play up their Chinese identity in order to stand out in the national and transnational labour market. "Otherwise, how can we compete with Italians in this dire job market?" the earlier mentioned Ivy League student asked rhetorically. While some younger professionals still serve the Chinese communities, many others are recruited into new Chinese state-owned or private transnational corporations operating in Italy or into China-related positions in Italian enterprises. Highly educated young Chinese professionals have also increasingly joined the wider Italian emigration as skilled labour. In an interesting parallel, some have moved back to China to work for Italian or other transnational companies there, while others have left for better opportunities in the European Union or in the United States, chasing promises of a career in China-related sectors. The unifying factor in these differing trajectories is the use of their new cosmopolitan Chinese identity for personal improvement in the transnational labour market. Just like their parents who migrated to Europe, these children of Chinese immigrants also undertake a migration journey to secure upward social mobility (Torruella 2020).

Younger Chinese entrepreneurs tend to learn from business models and practices in China rather than Italian ones, as China, especially China's global



cities, represents modernity and cosmopolitanism. In contrast, Italy appears increasingly “provincial” and “narrow-minded” in their eyes. Business ideas often come from transnational networks, including Chinese international students, Chinese social media and digital platforms, or their own experiences in China. More and more prosperous small business models from urban China have been transplanted to Italy, such as milk tea shops, nail salons, new types of trendy and innovative restaurants, and many other digital micro-businesses operating on Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat or Alibaba. These businesses target both local customers and Chinese residents, advertising Chinese products that are not available on the regular Italian market or vice versa.

Mandarin Chinese, which Chinese parents did not consider to be important in the 1980s and 1990s, has therefore become a must-learn for children, according to younger Chinese parents. They commonly send their children to Mandarin language classes, and those Mandarin-speaking parents usually speak Mandarin to their children, rather than the Chinese dialect they speak with their own parents. I also know several younger Chinese in Italy who are non-Mandarin speakers but are now learning the language as adults. “Even *laowai* (whites, Italians) are learning Chinese now. After all, China is the future of the world.” A Chinese master’s student told me that the importance of Mandarin Chinese is a common understanding among Chinese residents in Italy across generations. Many parents also send their children to China for language courses, short visits, or even for all of primary school. Younger Chinese parents also increasingly send their children to international schools with the idea that English is a must-learn language which is, for some interlocutors, even more important than Italian. They are aiming to make their children trilingual speakers to ensure that they evolve with long-term transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, rather than for the purposes of obtaining a minority position in their host society, thereby responding to the changing economic and geopolitical environment (Nyíri 2014).

Not only is the Italian language devalued, younger-generation Chinese parents increasingly do not want their children to be assimilated into Italian society, as they typically regard Italians as lazy, sloppy, and less hardworking than Chinese people. My Chinese interlocutors often criticize the *razzismo* and everyday discrimination they encounter, but at the same time, internalize mainstream stereotypes and construct new forms of racialization of Italians and other migrants. This constitutes another reason that they prefer international schools over sending their children to local Italian schools, where their children

will learn the same curriculum as their Italian peers and other migrant children and where competition is not as encouraged as in China. While admiring the Italians' supposed espousal of leisure time and general enjoyment of life, my interlocutors often believe it is precisely this quality which has led to Italy's national decline (Deng 2023).

Most of my Chinese interlocutors, regardless of where they were born, have maintained their Chinese citizenship while holding Italian long-term resident permits to legally live in the country. The reasons for maintaining Chinese citizenship can be both practical and ideological. On the one hand, Italy's immigration and citizenship regime is not *ius soli*, so foreign migrants and their children need to go through the rigid naturalization process that takes up to three or four years. On the other hand, China does not recognize dual citizenship. The young pianist I mentioned earlier told me that both he and his younger brother, who was born in Italy, did not apply for Italian citizenship as they "don't feel to be Italian," while he also admitted that it is easier to go back to China with a Chinese passport. A few who went through the naturalization process claimed that it was for practical reasons, as some businesses in Italy are not open to non-citizens for ownership. "Flexible citizenship" thus constitutes a part of their cosmopolitan strategies in navigating uncertain times (Ong 1999).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Guobin and several other younger-generation Chinese have confessed to me their admiration of Chinese Americans, as they were able to achieve social mobility and become respectable professionals rather than being trapped at the social margins. They believe that in a country with a longer history of Chinese migration, Chinese Americans have a clearer idea about their pathway towards the good life, while Chinese youth in Italy do not have successful examples to follow and still wonder if and when they will eventually escape from the negative images associated with the "Chinese mafia" and enjoy a similar "model minority" success in Italy. However, the experiences from the US and other societies have shown that being a "model minority" does not liberate from the social exclusion and racial discrimination that is rooted in the long and brutal history of European colonialism and white imperialism. Meanwhile, the "model minority" stereotype has obscured intragroup differences and justifies racism and discrimination with a logic of meritocracy, thus perpetuating the existing power relations between white and non-white minorities (Chou and Feagin 2015; Lee 2015; Ong 2003).

Guobin is primarily detached from mainstream Italian society and remains indifferent to politics, like most of the younger-generation Chinese I know. However, one of the reasons that he decided to study psychology was his desire to serve the Chinese communities in Italy, where he noticed many younger Chinese have developed mental health issues presumably related to their status of being trapped in the dilemma of being economically privileged and socially disadvantaged. He often expressed regret that he and his family are trapped in Italy, and he has already designed a future for his children and nephews, who will be sent to international schools as “everyone does nowadays,” with the hope that they will have a different, better future. When I asked the Italian-born Chinese student from an Ivy League university if he would go back to Italy after graduation, he shook his head without hesitation and laughed. “Absolutely not!” he replied, as if I had asked a silly question. Enning, instead, has not yet decided between a white-collar lifestyle and the life of a migrant entrepreneur. What was clear was the desire to see her children’s generation enjoy a better life than she is able to achieve: “I hope my future children can go further than we have.” No one can predict what kind of future the next generations of Chinese in Italy will face, both economically and socially. What is more certain is that these desiring subjects will continue their stories of becoming in their enduring pursuit of hopefully a better life.

**Grazia Ting Deng**

*Ca’ Foscari University of Venice,  
graziadeng@gmail.com*

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## Notes

- 1 The later arrivals include, in much smaller numbers, people from Fujian Province starting in the late-1980s, and *Dongbei* (Northeastern China) starting in the mid-1990s, as well as people from other northern provinces more recently. They usually started their migrant lives by filling the bottom economic positions in the business niches run by people from Southern Zhejiang, and never achieved the same economic power as the latter.
- 2 Italy's immigration law in that period prohibited self-employment for new immigrants originating from countries where Italian citizens did not enjoy reciprocal agreements, China included.
- 3 In the *hukou* system, individuals hold either urban or rural *hukou* residence status, and their internal migration does not change their residence status. Rural *hukou* holders do not have the same access to social services and benefits, including housing, employment, and children's education, as urban *hukou* holders. *Nongmin* (peasant) and their rural *hukou* identity also become a socially inferior label that is associated with backwardness and incivility.
- 4 Translated from Italian by the author.

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