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Made in Italy by Chinese: fashionability and transnational Chinese entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into China's role within global capitalism through the stories of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in the Italian fashion industry. Moving beyond the state-centrism and methodological nationalism prevalent in Chinese communication studies and fashion studies, this research underscores the intertwined development paths of the Italian and Chinese fashion industries. Probing into the operations of Chinese apparel manufacturers in Prato, Italy, the article indicates how they strategically sourced from both nations and built original brands to upgrade their position within global value chains. Their position straddling two countries, however, also exposes them to a distinct set of vulnerabilities, including national and racial discrimination and a dearth of substantial external financial support. Through the lens of grassroots immigrant entrepreneurs, the article challenges the cultural essentialism tied to country-of-origin labels and presents a fresh viewpoint to scrutinize and complicate the existing narrative about global China. Situating the Chinese apparel industry in Prato in the ongoing transformation of the world economy, the article reveals how the international frictions concerning China's rise often reflect the deep-seated global economic hierarchies and the shared tribulations of late-developing countries.

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Introduction

Premiering in November 2012 on CCTV-1, China's state-owned central television station, the narrative of *Family on the Go* (*Wenzhou Yijiaren*) unfolds the transnational entrepreneurial adventures of a Wenzhounese family in China, Italy, and France during the early years of the Reform and Opening-Up period from 1980 to 2002. The series enables an understanding of not only the multifaceted influences of Europe on China's postreform fashion industry but also the pivotal role of China and grassroots Chinese diaspora in transforming the Italian fashion industry. Notably, the daughter, Ayu, migrated to Prato, Italy, at the age of 13. Beginning as a seamstress, she was involved

in nearly every development phase of the city's garment industry and eventually established her own clothing company. Diverging from other CCTV primetime "main melody" blockbusters, the series transcends the dichotomous nationalist versus Western-centric narratives of China's global economic success to underscore the mutual constitution and coevolution of China and Italy.

Coincidentally, this Sino-Italian entanglement in the fashion industry was echoed on the Italian side through the 2009 comedy film *Rags in China* (*Cenci in Cina*). Unlike many Italian films and television shows of the same period that typically depicted Italians as victims and Chinese as villains, *Rags* projected a more optimistic view of Sino-Italian collaboration in Italy (Zhang, 2019a). Also set in Prato, the film narrates the story of two Italian entrepreneurs, Vittorio Pelagatti and Armando Giachetti, who endeavored to rescue their family firm, Gobbotex, from bankruptcy. Through flashbacks, *Rags* candidly acknowledges the humble beginnings of the Made-in-Italy label. Pelagatti and Giachetti's grandparents founded Gobbotex, a small textile company that produced inexpensive "rags," through hard work and extralegal practices in the 1950s. This founding story bears striking similarities to the experiences of the Zhou family in the 1980s. The shared path towards industrialization, the movie suggests, provides a common ground for collaboration between Italian and Chinese entrepreneurs.

Following the two works' strategy of interpreting China as part of the world and their focus on the bottom-up experiences of grassroots entrepreneurs, this article analyzes the transnational entrepreneurial practices of ethnic Chinese garment entrepreneurs in Prato, where the storylines of *Family* and *Rags* intersect. We situate these practices within the intertwined history of Made in Italy and Made in China via immigration, global production networks, and industrial upgrading. Nestled in the region of Tuscany, Prato's textile industry has thrived since medieval times. In the 1980s, Chinese migrant workers started to make their mark, initially as seamsters and seamstresses. By the 1990s, some had launched their own workshops, becoming subcontractors for local firms. This upward trend continued into the 2000s, as many established autonomous final firms with design and marketing capabilities. By 2019, Chinese nationals owned 82% of Prato's garment firms (3949 in total), making it Europe's premier apparel manufacturing hub (Prato Chamber of Commerce, 2022).

Crisscrossing the economic landscapes of China and Italy, the Chinese-Italian firms in Prato are intricately woven into the economic progression of both nations. The firms' strategic location in Italy avails them of the opportunity to stay abreast of contemporary fashion trends and leverage the global acclaim of the Made-in-Italy label. Conversely, their ties with China provide access to affordable, dexterous migrant labor, as well as the procurement of fabrics and accessories from the world's largest textile producer. Moreover, they can tap into emerging Chinese talent in design and management. Owing to its unique geographical positioning between Italy and China, coupled with an atypical aggregation of Chinese entrepreneurs, Prato's fashion industry serves as a prime example for examining the ramifications of China's global expansion at the grassroots level.

Through the case of Prato, we foster a conversation between communication and fashion studies. In transcending the methodological nationalism prevalent in Chinese communication studies, which often perceive Chinese media, culture, and technologies

as territorially circumscribed, our interpretation of global China diverges from the dominant focus of mainstream communication scholarship. For nearly three decades, communication researchers have scrutinized the outward expansion of large Chinese firms. The introduction of initiatives such as the “Belt and Road Initiative” and the “Digital Silk Road” over the previous decade has led to increased attention on the undertakings of the Chinese state, state-owned enterprises, and gargantuan private digital platforms (Hong, 2017; Hong & Harwit, 2020; Keane & Yu, 2019; Wen, 2020). These analyses often portray China’s burgeoning global footprint as well-orchestrated, state-supervised enterprises. While this state-focused, top-down perspective of global China is instrumental in elucidating state policy initiatives and state-business relations, it neglects “the multitude of small- and medium-scale informal, and often (semi-)illicit forms of Chinese investment and interaction overseas” (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 40). This approach also fails to illuminate how these nonstate actors must “contend with long-standing racial, class, and gender hierarchies of power” in their local negotiations (Lee, 2022, p. 321).

This proclivity to concentrate on state policies, established businesses, and well-known brands is also discernible in fashion studies. Scholars in critical fashion studies have contested the cultural essentialism of national fashions and disclosed the evolving interactions between Chinese and Italian fashion enterprises since the 1980s (Ling & Segre-Reinach, 2021; Rofel et al., 2019). Many Chinese firms, once subcontractors, have transformed into competitors of their erstwhile Italian collaborators. Nevertheless, much attention has been allocated to the recent conspicuous “shopping spree” of Chinese capital in the global fashion industry. This includes Chinese companies’ acquisition of established Italian brands and recruitment of Italian fashion designers (Jin, 2022; Segre-Reinach, 2021). Likely due to constrained fieldwork access, these researchers have infrequently studied the comparatively smaller companies operated by Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs based in Italy who are also struggling to develop their brands and upgrade in the value chain. The experiences of these entrepreneurs embody an additional facet of the symbiosis between China and Italy and further highlight the entrenched inequalities in the global fashion industry.

A key intersection between the two disciplines is in the definition of fashion itself. Scholars from both fields agree that fashion, as a cultural and communicative industry, relies on the production of symbolic values, often highlighting global capitalism’s inherent disparities (Fung, 2021; McRobbie, 2016; Paulicelli, 2014; Segre-Reinach, 2010). From this perspective, we conceptualize fashion as both a social institution and a manufacturing industry for clothing and accessories. Within this system, values are not innate but must be ceaselessly and actively (re)constructed through the interplay of cultural, economic, and political forces within a complex web of domestic and international power dynamics. Consequently, our primary interest lies less in what is deemed fashionable and more in the entities that determine this designation. Irrespective of the geographical origins of fashion, the present-day fashion industry—largely defined by the “fashion weeks” hosted by a select few global cities, predominantly located in Europe and North America—testifies to the enduring Western hegemony in the global fashion system. Countries in the Global South and East, such as China and India, while serving as manufacturing hubs for textiles and clothing,

exert minimal influence on the formation of global fashion. Our Prato study delves into the potential of non-Western companies to disrupt this system. At its core, we attempt to open the black box of “fashionability”—*the ability of these entities to define, create, and market innately fashionable products in the global market*.

Furthermore, our work invites dialogue between China studies and scholars from cultural anthropology, economic geography, and migration studies who have observed this community’s development over nearly two decades. These scholars have dissected the community’s migratory history (Ceccagno, 2017; Lan, 2015), production networks (Dei Ottati, 2014; Lan & Zhu, 2014), transnational familial structures (Krause, 2018), and representation in both Italian and Chinese media (Pedone, 2018; Zhang, 2019a). Nonetheless, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of the increasingly intimate relations between the apparel industry in Prato and its equivalent in China, relations facilitated by Chinese migrant entrepreneurs. Inspired by the concept of simultaneous embeddedness (You & Zhou, 2019), we argue that the transnational relationships at various scales will significantly influence the future evolution of the Prato industry and, to a lesser extent, its Chinese counterpart. Simultaneously embedded in both Italian and Chinese economies, the transnational Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato occupy a peculiar position in the global value chains, making them an ideal case to investigate “the many manifestations of China in the world as resulting from material and discursive parallels and linkages.... as Chinese dynamics interact with and build on the historical legacies of the dynamic global capitalist system” (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 6).

Finally, our research disputes a predominant discourse in (Anglophone) global media. In the present conjuncture of escalating geopolitical frictions and the decoupling between the US and China, there has been an amplification of nationalist and protectionist sentiments globally. This trend, coupled with the media-propagated binary of an authoritarian Chinese state versus Western liberal democracies, tends to obscure rather than unravel the intricate interconnections between China and the global community, the actual processes and impacts of China’s global expansion, and the collective challenges and opportunities encountered by all nations within the context of a deeply uneven global capitalist system. By adopting a bottom-up approach to the study of global China, we illuminate the interconnections between nations within the global fashion system and the constructed nature of national brands. This approach highlights the role of immigrant entrepreneurs, often operating small-scale enterprises, in navigating, contesting, and reshaping nationalist and hierarchical global trade and production networks while emphasizing the persistent ethnic, racial, and national inequalities inherent in the existing regime of global trade and production.

As our study of the Sino-Italian fashion industry demonstrates, the international tensions engendered by China’s ascendancy are often not unique to China but rather indicative of some of the more fundamental contradictions of the contemporary world order. The future of the global economy will invariably be influenced by the interactions between nations, with China and Chinese agents playing pivotal roles. In essence, transcending a geographically confined conceptualization of China from a grassroots perspective provides a pathway to addressing the question of “whither China” in the current epoch.

Our article draws on 12 years of fieldwork in China and Italy. Since 2011, one author has interviewed more than 150 Chinese entrepreneurs and workers, also dedicating significant time to participant observations in two Prato-based Chinese garment workshops in 2012, 2013, and 2023. This long-term study offers a deep understanding of the evolution of the Chinese clothing industry in Prato.

In the subsequent sections, we first delineate how the Italian and Chinese fashion industries have each emerged to challenge the system's preexisting hierarchies while interacting with each other. We then investigate Chinese garment manufacturers in Prato, specifically spotlighting two Chinese-Italian companies presently upgrading their brands. We analyze the industrial connections they are forging between China and Italy and the barriers they are facing while elevating their brands. In the last section, we synthesize our empirical findings to discuss the distinct yet paradoxical role these entrepreneurs play in the global garment industry, outlining the more fundamental inequalities in global capitalism.

The intertwined history of Italian and Chinese fashion

Italy, quite possibly, was the first nation to reconfigure Western fashion. The emergence of Made-in-Italy fashion in the latter half of the twentieth century illustrates how a semi-peripheral country could enhance its standing in the global fashion industry by merging a coalition of capital and institutions, affirming its place in Western modernity, and combining this legitimacy with mass production capabilities. Although modern clothing items such as men's suits and design principles such as *sprezzatura* can indeed be traced back to Renaissance Italy (Paulicelli, 2014), "[i]t is difficult to identify an Italian fashion in the first half of the twentieth century" (Segre-Reinach, 2014, p. 239). By the 1950s, Parisian haute couture houses dominated women's fashion, while London's Savile Row established the dress codes for men (Segre-Reinach, 2014, p. 239). Devastated by the Second World War (WWII) and trailing behind its northern neighbors in terms of industrialization, Italy's textile and clothing industry lacked both the design reputation and production capacity necessary to compete in the global market.

In the following decades, two factors contributed to generating a distinct Italian fashion. First, as a crucial ally of the US in Western Europe, Italy's postwar reconstruction benefited significantly from the support of the Marshall Plan, in which the US provided Italy with substantial investments, access to the world's largest consumer market, and most crucially, international media campaigns that enabled Italy to (re) establish its place in Western modernity. The genesis of Italian fashion can be traced back to 1951, when the nobleman and entrepreneur Giovanni Battista Giorgini orchestrated the inaugural fashion show in Florence (Segre-Reinach, 2014). Initially hosted in his residence and later in Palazzo Pitti, Giorgini actively promoted his shows through major Anglophone media outlets and invited business associates and journalists from the US. Leveraging the nascent prêt-à-porter (ready-to-wear) trends emerging in France, which were more standardized and technically less complex than haute couture, Giorgini convinced his American customers that Italy could offer something similar but more cost-effective due to the nation's lower wage levels. It was also during these shows that Giorgini consciously connected Italian fashion with the

country's Renaissance heritage, exhibiting clothing against the backdrop of stylistic photos shot in ancient buildings and archaeological sites throughout Italy (Segre-Reinach, 2014, p. 241). This association between Italian fashion and the Renaissance was further affirmed to the American public during the highly publicized rescue and restoration missions in the aftermath of the Arno River flood in 1966—as the US government, media, and universities swiftly arrived in Florence, framing the city as the epicenter of Renaissance art (Krause, 2018, pp. 56–66).

While American capital and institutions helped establish Italy's reputation in fashion design, a myriad of Italian family-run small- and medium-sized enterprises turned these designs into products. These companies, mostly located in the central and northern “industrial districts” of Italy, specialized in a single production phase and collaborated with local partners (Becattini, 2001; Dunford, 2006). Although some companies claimed links to the Renaissance, most were established after WWII, fueled by inexpensive labor, flexible production, and a recovering postwar market (Segre-Reinach, 2014). An example is the textile company Gobbotex (founded by the grandfathers of our Italian protagonists in *Rags*), which accurately represents the humble beginnings of Prato's textile manufacturers in the 1950s (Becattini, 2001; Nesi, 2014).

The true “hidden heroes” of Italian fashion were these companies that established a close relationship with fashion designers and created an integrated production and distribution system (Segre-Reinach, 2014, p. 243). This intimate entrepreneur-designer relationship, coupled with intense competition, fostered a virtuous cycle of production expansion and quality improvement (Becattini, 2001). While the ready-to-wear model was born in Paris, the fusion of reproducible fashion designs and mass production distinguished Italian fashion from French. In each specific textile sector, these family-run companies were pivotal in enhancing the Made-in-Italy label's reputation and challenging the global fashion industry's existing orders (Rofel et al., 2019).

While several Italian companies had gained a reputation in high fashion by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Made-in-Italy concept as it is today was mostly a manufacturing label (Segre-Reinach, 2010, p. 204). Its rise to global prestige over the following decades was intrinsically tied to the larger production capacities Italian companies accessed in Asia, particularly in China. This marked the beginning of an intertwined history of Made-in-Italy and Made-in-China.

In the aftermath of the 1970s oil crisis, the Italian economy faced stagflation for the first time since WWII due to rising labor costs and diminished consumer demand (Becattini, 2001). This threatened one of the main strengths of Italian fashion—the ability to mass produce. Meanwhile, China was newly open to global capitalism and was actively seeking foreign direct investments to stimulate its economy. Italian companies arrived in China at this key moment, making China the manufacturing base for Italian fashion (Segre-Reinach, 2010). These Italian firms, including well-known ones, outsourced their production to joint ventures they created with Chinese partners, transforming themselves into genuine global brands (Tokatli, 2013, 2014).

These joint ventures, alongside collaborations with firms from other regions (such as Hong Kong and Taiwan), also transferred basic knowledge about modern Western fashion to their Chinese partners (Segre-Reinach, 2010). This knowledge quickly spread in the lower Yangtze River Delta, aiding individuals such as the Zhou family in *Family*

to become China's first-generation private garment entrepreneurs during the reform era. It is likely that the Wenzhou shoe factory of the show's protagonist Zhou Wanshun used designs from these joint ventures—which, as depicted in the show, were an immediate success in China's domestic market and earned Wanshun significant profits. This Sino-Italian relationship evolved throughout the 1990s and played a crucial role in shaping the Chinese fashion industry.¹

By the 2000s, China's ascension to one of the world's largest consumer markets shifted the dynamic between Italian and Chinese companies. The previously export-oriented joint ventures began to focus more on China's burgeoning middle class (Segre-Reinach, 2021). Rapid economic growth enabled China's domestic companies to acquire more capital and capabilities. To assert dominance over their Chinese partners, Italian companies often emphasized the intangible value of Italian fashion, tied to Italy's revered status in Western modernity (Rofel et al., 2019). During this period, Italian designers and businessmen often criticized their Chinese counterparts, citing their supposed lack of "taste and inventiveness" due to their Chinese "aesthetics" (Segre-Reinach, 2010). Such a strategy increasingly rankled Chinese partners, leading to tensions as both sides vied for power. Consequently, many of these joint ventures dissolved within a few years (Segre-Reinach, 2021).

From the 2010s onwards, Chinese clothing companies ceased establishing joint ventures. While some companies such as Li-Ning endeavored to establish a unique Chinese fashion through nationalist promotional campaigns, many chose to incorporate Italian fashion into their own brands. Larger corporations such as Bosideng and Anta directly employed Italian designers—offering competitive salaries, sometimes even surpassing those of Italian luxury brands (Rofel et al., 2019; Segre-Reinach, 2021). Others transitioned to equity investors, buying shares in established Italian firms or assisting emerging Italian designers to establish their businesses (Ling & Segre-Reinach, 2019). Segre-Reinach (2021, p. 939) notes, "In many ways, it is now the Chinese who are sourcing in Italy (a role reversal from times bygone)."

The rise of the Made-in-Italy label highlights the significant hurdles for any national brand seeking to upgrade in the contemporary global fashion industry. Without the first-comer advantages, one has to rely on an orchestra of media popularization and capital investment to break into the inner circles of the fashion system. While Italian companies became industry leaders through the assistance of foreign capital and manufacturing capacities, Chinese fashion brands still hold limited sway in shaping global fashion trends and still resort to appropriating the allure of Italian fashion, either through employing Italian designers or by pretending to have an Italian origin (Segre-Reinach, 2021). This conundrum confronting Chinese apparel companies is also evident in Prato.

Chinese apparel manufacturers in Prato

When Italian fashion brands began outsourcing manufacturing to China in the late 1980s, Italy's industrial districts also saw their first wave of Chinese migrant workers. In textile towns such as Prato and others in central and southern Italy, Chinese workers arrived to fill job vacancies left by young Italians unwilling to engage in low-pay,

labor-intensive manufacturing work (Ceccagno, 2017; Lan, 2015). Most of these migrants were from Wenzhou in Zhejiang province, known for a history of migration to Europe since the early twentieth century. A preexisting community in Europe, China's opening up, and accommodating Italian immigration laws in the 1990s together made Italy the top choice for Wenzhounese migrants (Lan, 2015).²

In addition to its emigration history, Wenzhou is celebrated for its entrepreneurial culture. Initially working in garment factories owned by Italians, many Wenzhounese migrants, such as Zhou Ayu in *Family*, eventually started their own garment workshops by pooling savings from family and friends within their ethnic network. Adapting to the emerging fast fashion business model in the 1990s—which required shorter delivery times and higher turnover rates compared to traditional ready-to-wear—many Italian brands began “insourcing” labor-intensive tasks such as stitching and ironing to these immigrant-run workshops to save costs (Lan, 2015; Tokatli, 2013). Much like Italian workshops played a pivotal role in the rise of Italian fashion in the 1950s and 1960s, these Chinese workshops in Italy, in tandem with their counterparts in China, supported the continuous growth of Italian fashion between the 1990s and 2000s.

Though other industrial districts, such as Carpi and Naples, also witnessed a rise in apparel manufacturing workshops owned by Chinese nationals, it was only in Prato where these businesses further expanded their sourcing and design capabilities, evolving into independent final firms (Ceccagno, 2017). The textile industry of Prato faced a protracted crisis in the 2000s due to increasing labor costs, the transition from lira to euro, a shrinking woolen fabric market—a Prato specialty—and the phasing out of the Multi-Fiber Agreement (Lan, 2015). Consequently, many Italian textile companies shut down, leaving empty warehouses and well-constructed infrastructure ripe for repurposing by Chinese apparel manufacturers.

The count of Chinese-Italian final firms saw a rapid increase from only a few in the late 1990s to around 800 in 2013 (Lan & Zhu, 2014, p. 160). While an exact figure is difficult to determine, our interviews in 2022–2023 revealed that out of 3949 Chinese-run clothing manufacturers officially registered in Prato in 2019, about 1000 were final firms. Leveraging low-cost textiles imported from China, agile production teams in Prato, and a broad distribution network across Europe, these Chinese-operated garment companies in Prato spawned a low-end Made-in-Italy fast fashion market analogous to Spain's Zara and Sweden's H&M (Lan & Zhu, 2014).

With the increasing number of final firms, competition intensified. Most final firms in Prato were original design manufacturers lacking their own brands. Their products were either sold brandlessly at weekend street stalls or under someone else's brand in boutique shops. Consequently, their profits were just a fraction of those earned by mainstream fast fashion companies. The situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as European consumers tightened their spending on apparel. Trapped in the lower segment of the fast fashion market, the Chinese-Italian firms faced a struggle for survival.

The industry was grappling with not just dwindling demand but also growing social tensions. Fueled by rising anti-immigration sentiments, local media frequently painted Chinese businesses with broad strokes of informality and illegality (Zhang, 2019b). In parallel, local governments selectively targeted Chinese garment companies with frequent police inspections (Ceccagno, 2022). Adding to their challenges, Chinese

final firms in Prato faced a labor shortage. Since the 2010s and particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Chinese migrant workers in Prato have plateaued. Rapid economic development in China means fewer young Chinese are willing to migrate to Italy for work in the garment sector. The second-generation Chinese Italians, similar to other Italian youth, are seeking less-taxing jobs in the service sector. As You and Zhou (2019) found in nail salons in New York, our interviews in 2022–23 revealed that company owners considered the labor shortage as one of their gravest concerns.

To navigate this multifaceted and multiscalar crisis, numerous final firms are attempting to elevate their standing in the value chain. Mirroring the efforts of Italian firms in the 1980s and 1990s, a select few began to establish their own brands in the 2010s. During the fieldwork in 2011, only three Chinese final firms interviewed were attempting to build their brands. That number gradually grew in the next decade. By 2023, 31 out of the 59 interviewed reported they were producing under original brands or had planned to do so in the near future. However, their Chinese origins act as both a catalyst and an impediment in brand building. On the one hand, it provides access to broader production capacities, design talent, and management skills in China. On the other hand, it impinges upon their ability to enhance their brand values, given their marginalized position in the fashion system and the negative connotations associated with Made-in-China labels in Europe. These immigrant enterprises are experiencing the same challenge that confronts Chinese brands from China in even deeper ways.

Among these enterprises, we highlight two that have been the most successful in brand development so far with reference to other companies that share similar experiences. The two brands have achieved substantial market recognition—contributing to over half of the companies' revenue, a feat that few Chinese enterprises in Prato have managed to accomplish. Additionally, their branded products command higher unit prices compared to the average in Prato's apparel industry. Despite targeting different market segments and cultivating unique capabilities, both companies pursued an upgrading strategy that leveraged the strengths of both Made-in-Italy and Made-in-China labels (see Table 1). Their experiences epitomize the broader predicament of industrial upgrading within the entire apparel industry in Prato.

Case 1: Wang's Nina

Our success in Prato can ultimately be attributed to the resources we sourced from China ... All the people, textiles, and accessories are from China. I believe that the development of Chinese businesses in Europe hinges on China's potent supply chain.

—Wang, founder of Nina, 20 December 2022

Wang, a businessman in his early 40s, is one of the most prosperous Chinese-Italian entrepreneurs in Prato. Like many of his Wenzhounese counterparts, Wang did not receive extensive formal education but, rather, was groomed in the apparel industry from a young age. Before immigrating to Italy in 2000, he had worked in his family's garment businesses in Wenzhou and Chongqing. In Italy, he first started as a grocery keeper and then opened a stitching workshop in Naples in 2002, an import-wholesaling

Table 1. Key information of the two cases.

Case	Wang's Nina*	Lu's Giovanni
Immigration year	2000	1996
First brand-building attempt	2015	2013
Main products	Women's casual clothes	Men's casual and semi-formal clothes
Brand positioning	Lower medium	Upper medium
Retail store	No	Yes
Marketing strategy	Offline wholesale plus online social media	Offline retail shops, fashion show attendance, and online social media
Source of capital	Family	Family
Design team	Chinese Italian designers in Prato plus Chinese designers in Guangzhou	Italian designers in Prato plus Chinese designers in Guangzhou
Place of production	Italy for more fashionable products and China for more standard products	Italy for more fashionable products and China for more standard products

*All personal and company names are anonymized.

shop in Rome in 2005, and then, a final firm in Prato in 2007. By the early 2010s, his final firm had grown into one of the largest in Prato, boasting an annual revenue exceeding €100 million. Spurred on by his burgeoning enterprise, Wang debuted Nina in 2015, a lower-medium brand (comparable to H&M) aimed at the young women's casual market in Europe.

Wang's prior experiences in both manufacturing and international trade proved invaluable as he rooted Nina's supply chains in both Italy and China. Like the other Chinese-Italian final firms we interviewed, Nina sourced only the trendiest products, such as shirts and skirts, in Prato, while importing more standardized products, such as T-shirts and jeans, from China. Garments produced in Prato by Chinese migrant labor under the Made-in-Italy label were of lower quality but offered quicker delivery. Conversely, the Made-in-China products took longer to arrive but ensured higher levels of technical finesse at lower costs. The superior value for money of Made in China allowed the company to maintain profitability, even after covering air freight charges for shipping goods from Guangzhou to Prato. In recent years, to counter the prevailing crisis in Prato, the proportion of Made in China in Nina's product line has seen a significant increase. What sets Nina apart from other companies is an in-house design team composed of second-generation Chinese designers in Prato, who according to the owner (20 December 2022), possess talents equal to local designers and are easier to manage because of cultural proximity.

Wang's connections with China also enriched his understanding of e-commerce. Between 2015 and 2018, Wang started a separate company in China hoping to sell Italian fashion to Chinese consumers. Although his venture in China failed, the journey was not fruitless. By interacting with the Chinese business community and attending training sessions offered by major Chinese platforms, he acquired a wealth of online marketing strategies. Applying this knowledge to the Italian market subsequently boosted Nina's revenue, as the company marketed its products *via* strategic collaborations with influencers on Instagram and TikTok. As of our last interview in January 2023, e-commerce contributed to roughly 15% of the company's overall revenue, with the rest coming from the traditional wholesaling segment.

If all his critical factors of production are either Chinese or from China, one may wonder why Wang still bothers producing in Italy. Evidently, it is not solely about the perceived reputation of the country-of-origin label. According to Wang, while his customers do still prefer Made in Italy over Made in China, they tend not to question

too much as long as the prices are favorable. Rather, the motivation to maintain production in Italy appears to stem from the allure of the place's fashionability, a subtlety so embedded yet so potent that even Wang struggles to articulate it (20 December 2022):

Every time I spend a significant time in China, I find myself adopting the Chinese taste. I buy local clothes, thinking they're fashionable. But when I return to Italy, I suddenly realize they are too rustic [*tu*]. Conversely, if I wear European clothes in China, I never feel it's inappropriate. It's a strange dynamic that I fail to comprehend.

Regardless of how efficient the supply chain is or how innovative the Chinese designers are, it is this fashion sensibility that China struggles to acquire. In a later interview, Wang confessed that it might be attributed to a certain hierarchy of cultures (28 December 2022):

I believe Europe may indeed possess a culture "superior" to East Asia, at least currently. A design is not merely a design. It emerges from a culture, guiding the selection of fabrics and styles. You need an encompassing environment for support.

For the moment, Wang acknowledges the hierarchy. As an ingenious entrepreneur, he believes he is better positioned than his Chinese counterparts in China to navigate this system and create the conditions of possibility for his brand to become fashionable. In recent years, he has sought to overcome the geographical barrier by training a design team in Guangzhou, versed in European fashion. To achieve this, he coordinates daily meetings between his teams in Prato and China, engaging both teams in every stage of production. To a certain extent, his strategy can be likened to virtually crafting an Italian environment for his designers in Guangzhou. It remains to be seen whether technology can eventually surmount the territorial barrier. However, even if it can, his method would likely serve to reinforce rather than challenge the hierarchy because, ultimately, it is his team in China that needs to be "Italianized," not the other way around.

As demonstrated by Wang and corroborated by other studies (Ostberg, 2011; Tokatli, 2007), the fashion system exhibits a clear national hierarchy. Only a handful of national clothing cultures assume the top position, being positioned to gain global acclaim and acceptance. This "fashionability" is closely tied to geographical origins, making it a formidable challenge for immigrant entrepreneurs to reshape. While some first-generation immigrant entrepreneurs we spoke with harbored hopes that their Italy-raised offspring might have a better chance at overcoming these barriers, potentially launching their own brands tailored to the Italian market, the reality remains complex. Our subsequent case exemplifies that even for those immigrants who have spent their formative years in Italy, climbing the ranks of the fashion system remains a daunting task. This is largely due to entrenched power dynamics that steadfastly preserve the national and racial hierarchies embedded within the system.

Case 2: Lu's Giovanni

Compared with Wang, Lu immigrated to Italy at a younger age and under better conditions. He was brought to Italy by parents at the age of four when the family

had already been running a successful leather workshop in Osmannoro, a town a few miles east of Prato. Like Wang, Lu was introduced to the garment industry early on. After school, he would help out in his parents' workshop until evening. Working alongside other workers, he gained hands-on experience in every production phase. However, the family business abruptly ended in 2002 when the police raided the workshop and imposed a hefty fine of €50,000, citing allegations of tax evasion and labor irregularity. Despite the prevalence of extralegal business activities across Italy, local authorities frequently pinpointed Chinese businesses for scrutiny.³ Devastated by the penalty and tired of the physically demanding work, the family closed the workshop and moved to Rome in 2003. There, they opened a trading company importing Made-in-China garments.

Lu is emblematic of the growing demographic often referred to by Chinese immigrants as the 1.5-generation Chinese Italians. This term is particularly reserved for individuals who migrated before reaching adolescence, positioning them at the confluence of two distinct cultures. There is a prevailing sentiment within the Chinese community that this 1.5 generation is better equipped to overcome the barriers tied to industrial upgrade in the garment sector because of their familiarity with both cultures, as articulated by another 1.5-generation entrepreneur on 5 January 2023:

The first generation speak poor Italian and have to navigate everything from ground zero. We, on the contrary, speak impeccable Italian and are well versed in local customs. Unlike the second generation born in Italy, who might be fully immersed in the Italian way of life, we remain tethered to the Wenzhounese tenets of industriousness and entrepreneurship. We have the best of both worlds.

Lu's reason to start a final firm also differed from older Wenzhounese entrepreneurs in Prato. He cared less about profit-making and more about realizing his personal ambition. "During the 2000s, our trading business was extremely lucrative," Lu recalled. "The demand for imports from China was immense. As long as you had a bit more knowledge [and] a slightly superior aesthetic sense and were a bit more industrious, you could easily outearn others" (3 July 2022). Bored with the routine and eager to fully actualize his entrepreneurial potential, Lu began taking EMBA courses in Chinese universities in 2011. During these courses, he networked with high-ranking executives of major apparel corporations and e-commerce platforms in China and learned modern management techniques, brand-building strategies, and marketing skills on social media. Gradually, he grew discontented with his company's position in the global value chain (3 July 2022):

Italians simply attached a brand label to our products and sold them for a much higher price. We made only one or two euros for each piece of garment, while they made five to six times more. Their customers considered it a great product but didn't know it was all made by us. That's when I began to question why I was still at the lowest end of the value chain after working so hard for so many years.

Driven by this realization, he launched a brand, Giovanni, in 2013. Unlike most other Chinese-Italian final firms that targeted the women's market, Giovanni produced upper-medium men's casual and semi-formal clothes (similar to Massimo Dutti)—which demanded more sophisticated techniques and, therefore, generated higher profit

margins. Lu's somewhat unconventional route to upgrading—that is, launching a brand without having previous experience running a final firm—also made Giovanni a unique case in Prato. Despite these differences, his approach to organizing supply chains bore a remarkable resemblance to Wang's.

Giovanni strategically structured its supply chains to exploit the advantages of locations both in Italy and China. Although the company was headquartered in Prato, Giovanni did not source many products locally apart from knitted sweaters. It manufactured its most important product line, blazers, in Naples—a city globally renowned for its *sartoria*, or menswear tailoring industry. More standardized items—such as shirts, jackets, and jeans, which accounted for over half of its stock keeping units—were made in China. What distinguished Giovanni from the competition, according to Lu, were its unique connections with Chinese suppliers that other European brands could not replicate (3 July 2022):

Our model was both efficient and resilient even during the pandemic. In the past two years, our competitors couldn't go to China and so had to seek alternatives in Bangladesh or Vietnam, where the situation was even worse. But because we had already established a large office in Guangzhou and because members of my team were Chinese citizens [during the pandemic, China suspended visa issuance], we had no problem traveling to China and had no delay in order delivery at all.

However, while Lu's ethnic background aided him in successfully overseeing the material production of fashion goods, it posed a significant barrier to his efforts to elevate the immaterial value of the Giovanni brand. During the first few years of the company's existence, Lu had to conceal his nationality to maintain the authenticity of his Made-in-Italy brand (3 July 2022):

When we started building this brand, we did have self-abasement, afraid of telling people this brand was Chinese ... How could I tell? In 2019, when the agents promoted us to their clients, to the retailers, they would intentionally hide the fact it was owned by Chinese ... Whenever there was a fashion show or promotional events, we (the founders) would step back and let our Italian employees speak for us.

The discrimination against Chinese-owned Italian brands was even more evident in Giovanni's experiences with Pitti Uomo, the world's most influential men's fashion show since the 1970s, in Florence. Giovanni first applied to participate in the show in 2016 and was promptly rejected. According to Lu, the reasoning was that his company had more ready-made goods than preordered goods, a sign that it was not reputable enough in the medium- to high-end fashion communities. Lu accepted their decision. When his company applied the second time in 2018, it had secured a large number of preorders, but its application was declined once again. This time, the organizer told Lu that they had already been fully booked. Lu began to question whether it was solely about his products.

His application to Pitti in 2021, Lu stated, finally revealed to him the “glass ceiling” for Chinese fashion brands in Italy. By that time, Giovanni had opened its flagship store in downtown Florence and had become one of the most recognized emerging men's fashion brands in Tuscany. Despite this, Pitti denied Lu's application, citing the “incompatibility of the brand's style with the show's overall theme” (author's interview on 3 July 2022). Lu was deeply angered (3 July 2022):

Their excuse was complete nonsense. It's just one step away from saying that we don't let you in because you are Chinese. We hired Italian designers and had great sales records in Italy. I almost suspected that it was our competitors who did not want us in.

In response, Lu took a bold and unconventional path to challenge these prejudices and promote his brand. He organized a large-scale event during the Pitti show near the official venue, displaying his products, and after the catwalk show, openly revealing his identity as the Chinese-Italian founder of the brand to the Italian media. This path of rebellion is not unprecedented. The Pratese textile manufacturers led by Sergio Carpini took similar steps in the 1970s to assert their place in Italian fashion (Nesi, 2014, p. 45). Marginalized by the prominent textile fairs organized by Lombardy's manufacturers, the Pratese industrialist ingeniously moored a luxury steamboat laden with Prato's finest products adjacent to the fair's venue on Lake Como, using the boat's whistle to draw the attention of potential clients. While Carpini was successful in gaining recognition for Prato's textile makers, it is yet to be seen if Lu can overcome larger national and racial discriminations in the fashion industry.

Nina and Giovanni epitomize the broader trend among the city's Wenzhounese entrepreneurs. Over a 12-year interview period, a consistent narrative emerged. Most entrepreneurs embarked on their careers within family garment enterprises in China or Italy, and a prevalent strategy involves a transnational integration of supply chains. Forty-eight of the 59 interviewees strategically sourced products from both Italy and China. They valued the Made-in-Italy label as an important intangible asset and, at the same time, benefited immensely from the expertise in manufacturing, management, and marketing that they acquired in China. Some entrepreneurs cited these transnational connections as a catalyst for pioneering e-commerce initiatives, prompting platforms such as Alibaba and ByteDance to organize regular workshops in Prato.

Still, these transnational ventures encounter limitations, notably the lack of institutional support beyond familial networks. As ethnic enterprises, they have largely been overlooked by Italian industrial policies. Despite bilateral dialogues between Zhejiang and Tuscan governments, tangible results, such as the anticipated "Tex Tech" joint research center in Prato, have failed to materialize due to divergent expectations.⁴ Business associations, while facilitating community bonding and communication with local governments, have played a limited role in aiding industrial advancement (Lan, 2015). The lack of a concerted effort and institutional backing for brand development has left many Chinese firms in Prato to fend for themselves. As one dyeing and printing company owner expressed frustration recently (13 January 2023), "[o]ur business associations focus more on social and political networking than on fostering collective brand creation, a critical oversight in our industry."

The divergent upgrading strategies of immigrant entrepreneurs, we argue, are often dictated by their target niche markets. Nina's focus on speedy delivery, aimed at competing with giants such as Zara, permitted a more experimental approach with a transnational design team and aggressive social media strategies. Conversely, Giovanni, aspiring to penetrate the high fashion market, prioritized unique designs, allocating significant resources to traditional platforms such as fashion shows to forge connections within the fashion ecosystem. Unlike Nina and Giovanni, most other Prato companies still work for the low-end fast fashion market and, therefore, linger in the

early stages of original brand manufacturing without a comprehensive strategy. The existing literature have largely overlooks these crucial, diverse operational approaches emerging among Chinese firms in Prato (Ceccagno, 2017; Rofel et al., 2019).

Examining the experiences of Nina and Giovanni reveals a pervasive challenge faced by all Chinese-Italian businesses in Prato: the global fashion system continues to hinder their fashionability in the European market. Efforts to infuse Chinese market designs into Italian collections were predominantly unsuccessful, with European buyers expressing disinterest in these blended styles. As one entrepreneur lamented (28 December 2022), “[f]or a while, I showcased a collection of top-sellers from China, but European buyers weren’t interested. They simply don’t sell here.” This reluctance further erodes the value and appeal of their brands, causing the entrepreneurs to downplay their Chinese heritage. Out of the 59 firms, only Giovanni has opted to publicly embrace the owner’s national identity.

Discussion and conclusion

Fashionability is not an inherent trait in every piece of clothing. This quality is tightly regulated, deeply rooted in territorial contexts, and currently guarded vigilantly by a coalition of Western media and industrial magnates. We argue that the national hierarchies are pertinent to Chinese enterprises, irrespective of their location in China or Italy. Operating in Europe does little to diminish these established hierarchies, as underlined by a comment from a Chinese sweater producer in Prato (6 January 2023):

European fashion houses frequently revisit their vintage designs from the 1960s or even earlier. Perhaps this is because they set the gold standard in fashion. Maybe the pinnacle of design has already been reached. We Chinese may never experience such recognition because we joined the scene late. Even the Japanese aren’t immune. Renowned Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto, for instance, operates out of Paris, not Tokyo, and remains in the shadows when compared to figures like Miuccia Prada.

Going back to the show and movie that we introduced at the outset, both *Family* and *Rags* advocate for the Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato to adhere to the extant hierarchies. In *Family*, Ayu relinquishes her aspiration of ascending to the role of a designer, a step taken to circumvent potential legal entanglements and assuage the animosity of Prato’s indigenous business community. Her concession hints at a more circumscribed avenue of upward mobility for Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato. *Rags* communicates such a sentiment in a more conspicuously orientalist and gendered manner. A Chinese businesswoman named Ms. Li, who initially attempted to acquire Gobbotex, was later persuaded to invest in the company and maintain the Italian owners in place. This conclusion aims to alleviate the anxiety pervading the Italian public sphere and proposes a version of global China that may be preferable to both nations: “[W]hereas Giachetti and Pelagatti contribute with authentic Italian creativity and masculine prowess and authority, Li brings her global business competencies trained in Chinese globalization and female cunningness” (Zhang, 2019a, pp. 130–131). In essence, the producers of *Rags* are of the conviction that while capital may originate from China, fashion should be exclusively crafted in Italy by *Italians*.

However, the immigrant entrepreneurs in this study tried to carve unique paths, challenging existing hierarchies and distinguishing themselves from their Chinese peers. Their adept utilization of resources from both nations highlights their transnational capabilities, revealing a hitherto overlooked facet of the fashion industry. Despite extensive studies on transnational Chinese entrepreneurs and their collaborations with Italian counterparts (Ling & Segre-Reinach, 2019; Rofel et al., 2019), limited attention has been given to their migration history and nuanced diversity within the Chinese diaspora. We contend that these overlooked transnational factors answer several questions crucial to the evolution of Prato's garment industry.

A notable edge for Chinese immigrants in Prato lies in their preimmigration industry experience. Unlike their South Asian and North African counterparts, many Chinese immigrants possessed substantial skills and knowledge in garment manufacturing before arriving in Italy. This prior expertise significantly contributes to their success in the apparel sector in Prato—despite the simultaneous arrival of other immigrant groups, such as Moroccans and Pakistanis. A Pakistani wholesaler's observation (23 April 2012) reaffirmed this point, "[T]he key difference between the Chinese and Pakistanis is that when we arrived in Italy, we knew nothing about apparel manufacturing, but the Chinese did." This advantage depended on a large capable workforce trained by China's textile and apparel industry during its rapid industrialization in the 1980s and 1990s.

Their transnationalism also explains the varying strategies of older and younger immigrant entrepreneurs. In Prato, it is evident that 1.5-generation entrepreneurs often enjoy superior economic and cultural resources compared to the first and second generations. This privileged positioning enables a bolder approach towards brand building, as illustrated by the case of Lu. In addition, venturing into novel sectors such as woolen fabrics and sweaters, domains traditionally held by local Italians, the 1.5-generation entrepreneurs are steadily transforming the industry landscape. While Chinese sweater manufacturers were almost unheard of during our fieldwork in 2012, they were flourishing all over the city in 2023.

Our findings resonate with recent theoretical progress in migration studies. As outlined by You and Zhou (2019, p. 5), "the economic prospects of immigrant entrepreneurs, whether they physically move across national borders, are shaped by interpersonal relations, social networks, and the politico-institutional circumstances of the home and host country." This insight, encapsulated by their concept of simultaneous embeddedness (You & Zhou, 2019, 2022), is vividly mirrored in the performance of Chinese garment enterprises in Prato. Transnational family networks, local and national politics in both Italy and China, regional markets, and the over-arching global fashion system all play a crucial role in explaining their industrial upgrading.

Straddling two countries, these immigrant firms represent a distinctive subset within the panorama of globalizing Chinese companies, a category often neglected in the global China literature (Hong & Harwit, 2020; Ling & Segre-Reinach, 2021). These scholars have often missed that the global success of the larger corporations inadvertently pushed smaller immigrant firms to a challenging juncture. Beyond facing discrimination in Europe, immigrant entrepreneurs in Prato are also confronted with mounting competitive pressures from their Chinese counterparts. As of January 2023, as Shein, bolstered by venture capital, expanded rapidly in the European market,

several of our interviewees voiced their concerns. In stark contrast to Shein's robust institutional backing, the Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato largely rely on familial ties for financial support. This leaves them potentially vulnerable in the next wave of China's economic globalization.

Finally, the trajectory of Chinese-Italian entrepreneurs, we argue, need to be contextualized within the continually evolving global economy. The rise of contemporary Italian and Chinese fashion highlights shared paths of industrial upgrading, often marred with unorthodox business strategies and the marginalization exerted by established powers. As other emerging economies continue their industrialization, these issues are likely to resurface. The eminent labor shortage within Chinese firms in Prato sparked speculation among many we interviewed about a future garment industry predominantly led by Pakistani entrepreneurs, who might also face analogous hurdles. This forecast confirms the perspective that the present-day conflicts encountered by Chinese companies are not historical anomalies. Instead, they embody the ingrained global economic hierarchies and the universal challenges of late-developing countries.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes

1. Despite the introduction of modern Western fashion to China in the late 19th century, its impact on Chinese fashion was notably curtailed from 1949 to 1979. It is conceivable that the earliest Wenzhounese immigrants in Italy might have brought European fashion back to Wenzhou. However, due to China's relative isolation between 1949 and 1979, the impact of these early introductions of Italian fashion would likely have been minimal or indistinct by the early 1980s.
2. For an in-depth multiscalar analysis of the factors driving Wenzhounese migration, we direct readers to Lan (2015).
3. Ceccagno (2022, p. 2) noted, "The Italian informal economy, accounting for over 25% of the GDP in 2001 and 2002, was the second-largest in Europe."
4. For further information on Tex Tech, we refer readers to Lan (2014).

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